

David's Outlaw Psalms

By

Daniel J. Lewis

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David's Outlaw Psalms

Within the Psalter, there are fourteen psalms containing superscriptions directly linked to episodes in David's life. Several of these psalms reflect events when David was outlawed by King Saul, hence the title, "David's Outlaw Psalms." As a poet and a prophet, David's insight into human life as well as God's divine purpose has long been a spiritual resource for those in trouble. His prayers are intimate, direct and full of vibrant faith.

The Failure at Conquest and the Beginning of the Monarchy

David was born when the national fortunes of Israel were at a low ebb. Many years earlier, Joshua had successively initiated the invasion of the land of Canaan (Josh. 11:23). Then followed the long and troubled period of the judges, a period when the Israelites were supposed to complete the conquest begun by Joshua (Jos. 13:2-7; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13, 16-18; 23:4-5). In this task, they failed terribly (Jg. 1:19, 21, 27-36), so much so, that God sentenced the Israelites to co-existence with the Canaanites (Jg. 2:1-4, 20-23; 3:1-5). This co-existence was a spiritual disaster, for the Israelites blended the worship of Yahweh with the worship of the Canaanite fertility cult (Jg. 2:10-19). Again and again they forsook the covenant to serve the Ba'als and Asherahs of their pagan neighbors (Jg. 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:33-34; 10:6; 13:1). One of their own judges led them into idolatry (Jg. 8:23-27). Another demonstrated his contempt for his Nazarite vows to God (Jg. 13:7; 14:8-9) and became enamored with foreign paramours (Jg. 14:1-2; 16:1ff.). A whole tribe, the clan of Dan, established a pagan shrine in the north (Jg. 18:27-31).

One of the factors affecting this uneasy co-existence between Israel and her Canaanite neighbors was the technological shift from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. A new emigrant people had also entered Canaan about the same time as the Israelites. These Aegeans, the Philistines, brought with them the technology of smelting iron, a metal quite superior to the standard bronze alloy of copper and tin. The Philistines settled in the southwest plain of Canaan, a relatively level area where they could use their iron sheathed chariots to great advantage (Jg. 1:19). In fact, although the Israelites seemed to fare well in the hill country, they were at a

significant technological disadvantage in the lowlands (Jg. 1:34; 4:3).

Of course, it always must be remembered that victory for Israel was in no way dependent on technology. In fact, it seemed to be God's intentional practice to put the Israelites at a technological disadvantage precisely in order that they might realize their dependency upon him. Thus, they were forbidden by Torah to import great numbers of horses, the primary motive power for chariotry (Dt. 17:16). One of the ancient poems puts this dependency in stark language: *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God* (Ps. 20:7). At times, God demonstrated his power over the Canaanite technology by foiling the Canaanite chariotry, as he did in the Battle of the Kishon River (Jg. 4:12-16). At other times, God deliberately reduced the numbers of the Israelite army so that only a miracle would suffice for victory (Jg. 7:2-8, 17-22; 1 Sa. 7:7-13)!

Nevertheless, the basic outcome of the period of the judges was failure, not success. This failure reached its apex when the wayward sons of Eli lost the ark of God to the Philistines in a pitched battle (1 Sa. 4:1-11). As the Philistines continued to press the Israelites, the clans came to Samuel asking for a leader to rally their defenses (1 Sa. 8). To be sure, part of their impetus was the moral failure of Samuel's sons (1 Sa. 8:1-5). Part, also, was due no doubt to the ideal that kingship was anticipated by the Torah (Dt. 17:14-20). More than any other thing, however, the desire of the Israelites was to form a monarchy like the surrounding nations, especially in view of the encroaching Canaanites (1 Sa. 8:5b, 19-20; 12:12). Saul of Benjamin was chosen as Israel's first king.

Israel's First King and the Rise of David

As Israel's first king, Saul had a single commission—to direct Israel's war with the Philistines and the Canaanites, thus completing the conquest begun by Joshua several generations earlier (1 Sa. 13:2-4). The challenge of facing superior technology continued. The Philistines dominated the coastal plains with chariotry and a huge infantry (1 Sa. 13:5). They held a monopoly on the iron industry, so that blacksmiths were not allowed among the Israelites (1 Sa. 13:19-22). This monopoly, in turn, limited Israel's production of both farming tools and weaponry. Once again, it was Israel's lot to depend upon God rather than themselves, and God fought for his people who were now under the leadership of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sa. 14:15). Saul, however, was impatient, and twice he violated the laws of Yahweh war. The first time, he refused to wait for Samuel to initiate the battle (1 Sa. 13:7-14), a clear violation of the Torah (Dt. 20:2-4). The second time, he saved alive a Canaanite king and many animals from a Canaanite battle (1 Sa. 15:7-9, 13-26), all of which were to be under the ban of execution (Dt. 7:1-2, 16; 13:12-18; 20:16-18). Because of his cavalier attitude toward Yahweh's command, God rejected him as king (1 Sa. 15:22-

26).

It was this divine rejection of Saul that set the stage for the rise of David. Saul's lack of heart for Yahweh's purpose contrasts sharply with David's eagerness to fulfill God's call (1 Sa. 13:14). Where Saul seemed cavalier in his attitude toward the laws of holy war, David demonstrated his deep dependence upon God by facing the champion of the Philistines alone in hand-to-hand combat (1 Sa. 17). What Saul could not seem to understand, David voiced in the clearest possible way when he declared to the giant, *You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me...and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands* (1 Sa. 17:45-47).

David's victory over Goliath, coming as it did on the heels of Saul's rejection by God, set up a fierce opposition driven by Saul's jealousy and suspicion. Saul knew from Samuel's pronounced judgment that God would replace him. Although David's anointing as the next king was performed by Samuel with utmost secrecy (1 Sa. 16:1-3), David's popularity after the contest with Goliath immediately raised Saul's suspicions (1 Sa. 18:6-9). The very next day he tried to impale David twice (1 Sa. 18:10-11). Failing that, he tried to end David's life by promoting him as an officer and putting him in the Philistine wars, doubtless hoping that the inexperienced youth would die in the campaigns (1 Sa. 18:12-16). To his chagrin, David was highly successful, which in turn drove Saul's insecurity to even deeper levels. He even promised David his own daughter in marriage if David would continue in the Philistine campaigns, but his deeper motive all along was that David should die at the hands of Israel's enemies (1 Sa. 18:17-19). When David did not succumb, Saul reneged on his promise. He continued to see David as the primary threat to his throne, and sought every avenue to have David killed (1 Sa. 18:29). At the same time, David's growing popularity made it impossible for Saul to attack him outright (1 Sa. 18:16, 30). All these events, then, become the background for David's outlaw years. Soon, Saul would declare David an outlaw, and the hue and cry would be raised against David throughout all Judah.

One of the bright spots in David's early career was his deep friendship with Jonathan. That David should form such a friendship with the son of his enemy (1 Sa. 18:29) was, of course, a great irony. Nevertheless, Jonathan seemed to have had much more in common with David than with his father. The one notable victory in Saul's kingship had been due almost entirely to the bravery of Jonathan, a victory that was marred only by Saul's narrowmindedness (1 Sam. 14). However, when David joined Saul's court after the episode with Goliath, David and Jonathan

“became one in spirit,” and each loved the other as himself (1 Sam. 18:1-4). This friendship would save David’s life.

Saul informed his court, including Jonathan, that David should be killed on sight (1 Sam. 19:1). Jonathan, for his part, warned David of the danger, promising to speak to his father in David’s behalf (1 Sam. 19:2-7). When it became apparent that Saul was without mercy in his hatred for David, David made his escape under cover of darkness (1 Sam. 19:8-10).

To complicate matters even more, David had married Saul’s daughter, Michal. Earlier, Saul had promised one of his daughters to the soldier who would slay Goliath (1 Sam. 17:25). Subsequently, however, he added further requirements, and when David successfully completed them, too, Saul reneged on his promise (1 Sam. 18:17-19). Later, David was allowed to marry Michal, another daughter, but only because Saul felt he could exploit her family loyalty and use it against David (1 Sam. 18:20-28). In this, however, Saul did not reckon with the love and loyalty of Michal to her new husband!

After Saul had tried to impale David with a javelin, David fled to his home in the early darkness. Saul sent his henchmen to watch the house, hoping to surprise David when he emerged in the morning. Michal, however, knew the treachery of her father, and she helped David escape through a window, substituting in his bed a contrived dummy which fooled the attackers just long enough for David to make good his escape (1 Sam. 19:11-17). This crude attempt at assassination sets up the first of David’s outlaw psalms.

When Saul Sent to the House to Have David Killed (Psalm 59)

The superscription at the head of the psalm identifies the historical context as stated above. That the psalm was composed for the choirmaster suggests that it was intended to be used in public worship at the temple, though if it was composed near the time of the event in the superscription, this liturgical purpose was determined later. The notation, “Do Not Destroy,” is possibly the indication of a musical tune (it also appears in Psalms 57, 58 and 75). In Isaiah 65:8, this phrase seems to have been a popular one and may derive from a popular song, probably an invocation that the sufferer would not be destroyed by his trial. The term *miktam* is obscure. If it is related to the Akkadian word *katamu* (= to cover), it may refer to a covering of the lips and so indicate a “silent prayer,”¹ though this is only one of several suggestions.

Structurally, the psalm has two *selahs* (59:5, 13). This word is the most common interjection in the psalms, and while we do not know its meaning (it may indicate an interlude or a change in the music), it obviously serves as a structural

¹ D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), p. 38.

marker dividing the psalm into three parts. In both cases, the lines immediately following the *selah* are identical (59:6, 14), thus reinforcing this tripartite division.

The opening line of the psalm is a desperate cry for God's help (59:1-2). The conceptual movement of the psalm starts with the immediate situation of David's imminent danger from Saul's henchmen (59:3-4). It progresses to the much bigger question of universal justice (59:5). David's personal predicament is a paradigm for the world's predicament. Saul's hit-men lie in wait to murder David, even though he is innocent, just as the wicked continually attack the weak and innocent all over the world. What is true for individuals is equally true for nations in the pull-and-tug of power politics. Hence, David's prayer moves from his desperate, "Arise to help me; look upon my plight" (59:4b) to "Rouse yourself [O God] to punish all the nations" (59:5)! What Saul was doing to David was no more than the Philistines and Canaanites were doing to Israel. The same vicious scenario repeats itself throughout the world with no end in view. It is the way of fallen humans to exploit the weaknesses of each other, both personally and corporately.

In both the second and third sections, David describes this will to power with the simile of the vicious dog packs that scavenge over the city at night searching for prey (59:6, 14-15). Their intent is murder, and under the cover of darkness, they fear no consequences (59:7). But Yahweh sees, and in his judgment, he will make sport of such brigands who destroy the innocent (59:8; cf. 2:4). Thus, David puts his faith in the certainty of God's ultimate justice. He does not see it yet, but he believes it will come as surely as God is the sovereign Lord!

In the meantime, he must be content to wait. Hence, he prays, "I watch for you" (59:9a). This enduring faith in God's final justice—that God is the Lord of history and reaches beyond the present circumstances to guarantee judgment—holds the sufferer steady (59:9b). He knows, "God will go before me" (59:10)! In the end, regardless of what is happening now, David will triumph over those who accuse him falsely. For the present, he must be content to find in God his strength and spiritual fortitude and to remember that God loves him (59:9a).

Then comes a surprise! Because justice is ultimate, not immediate, David realizes that the postponement of justice is God's way of calling his people to a life of trust. Thus, David prays, "Do not kill them, O Lord...or my people will forget" (59:11a)! At the same time, allowing the wicked to continue without immediate death means that they will be exposed and reduced in the course of time until at last their sins are apparent to all (59:11b-12). Then they will be consumed by God, the Judge of all, and their downfall will be a sign to the whole world that God reigns (59:13)!

The final stanza recapitulates the themes of the first two. The wicked, like dogs, prowl the night streets, snarling for prey (59:14-15). Rather than resigning himself to a preoccupation with the designs of the wicked, however, David

consciously turns his thoughts to God. God is his strength! God is his refuge and fortress! In spite of what happens all around him, David sings of God's love for him (59:16-17; cf. 59:9)!

Jesus Echoes David's Faith in God's Justice

In the New Testament, Jesus reaffirms this basic faith in God's ultimate justice. At the end of the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, he asks, "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Lk. 18:7-8).

Hence, the prayer of the early church: *maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus (Rv. 22:20)!

The Philistine threat that had endured from the time of Samson and throughout the lifetimes of Eli, Samuel and Saul showed no signs of abatement. Samson's victories had been too spasmodic to be effective. During Eli's priesthood, the Israelites were on the verge of being eliminated entirely (1 Sa. 4). Though there had been some relief during the days of Samuel (1 Sa. 7), during the period of Saul's kingship the threat deepened even more. David's notable victory over Goliath of Gath (1 Sa. 17) gained a short reprieve, but Saul seemed incapable of effectively following up this advantage.

Now David, the young military hero, was truly outlawed. After Saul's attempt at assassination failed, David fled for his life with Saul in hot pursuit (1 Sa. 19:18-24). Jonathan had agreed to warn David if his father's obsession seemed implacable (1 Sa. 20), and the bowshot signal by this, David's closest friend, heralded the end of his days as a free man.

It was both ironic and ingenious that David fled to Gath, one of the five Philistine fortress cities in the coastal plain. Certainly Gath was a place where Saul would never seek him! It had been the city of Goliath, his great antagonist (cf. 1 Sa. 17). The Philistines, for their part, were thoroughly militaristic, and it is not unlikely that they employed mercenaries as well as their own professional soldiers.² Perhaps David thought he could pass unnoticed. Nevertheless, he was soon recognized (1 Sa. 21:10-12). Realizing that he was in the most precarious of situations, David resorted to playing the part of an insane fool, writing graffiti on the gates and slobbering in his beard (1 Sa. 21:13). In this way, he hoped to pass himself off as a harmless lunatic. The ploy worked! When he was seized and brought before Achish, the Philistine overlord at Gath, his antics convinced Achish that he was a madman, embarrassing to be sure, but hardly a threat (1 Sa. 21:14-15).

² David, himself, would later serve as a mercenary for the Philistines (cf. 1 Sa. 27).

When David was Seized in Gath by the Philistines (Psalm 56)

The superscription of Psalm 56 ties the prayer to David's moment of terror when he was discovered and seized by the Philistines in Gath. The notation "Dove on Distant Oaks" may be a tune designation, but like the designation *miktam*, there is no certainty (see comments regarding Psalm 59).

The themes of the psalm are fear and trust. Truly, every man's hand was against David now, and fear was a constant reality. He was barred from his home in Judah, because of Saul's hot pursuit (56:1, 6). Shortly, in the presence of his retainers, Saul would accuse David of lying in ambush to kill him, so David's complaint about false accusations was hardly idle (56:2, 5; 1 Sa. 22:8). That David sought refuge in a Philistine city suggests the extremity to which he was pressed. Yet, in spite of fear, David determined to trust in God, whose promises were sure (56:3-4). The back-to-back statements, "When I am afraid..." and "I am not afraid," demonstrate a realistic paradox. Fear is conquered by the sure word of God and the certain knowledge that human treachery is limited to harm in this life only (cf. Lk. 21:16-19; Phil. 1:20). This is the thrust of the rhetorical question, "What can man do to me?" (56:4b, 11; cf. Ps. 118:6; He. 13:6).

As in Psalm 56, David prays for justice, and his plea for justice extends beyond his own predicament to the predicament of the world (56:7). He offers his prayer as a testimony for God's record (56:8).³ He fully expects that God will save him from his dilemma (56:9; cf. Phil. 1:19; 2:19-24), and he determines to trust in God's assurance rather than submit to the terror of human threats (56:10-11).

In his extremity, David, like many others before him, has made a vow to God that he will serve him if only God allows him to escape his dire circumstances (56:12). Some disparagingly call such vows "fox-hole religion," but so long as one follows through on the vows one makes, such vows can be genuine. It was customary to fulfil a vow with an offering to God. In fact, such vows were a constituent part of ancient Near Eastern religion, both Israelite and Canaanite. Such vows were intended as tangible assurances of sincerity. Archaeologists use the term votive offerings to describe gifts brought to conclude a vow.⁴ The Torah contains extensive legislation regulating votive gifts (Lv. 27). Here, David has promised God one of the five levitical offerings, the *shelamim* (= peace, fellowship, well-being offering, cf. Lv. 7:11-21).

³ The word *n'od* (= animal skin) is usually understood to refer to a container, such as, a wineskin or bottle (so RSV, NEB, NAB, NASB, KJV), although due to the parallelism with word *sepher* (= document, record, writing), the NIV has taken it to refer to a scroll.

⁴ Ancient Near Eastern texts describing such vows are to be found in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite, Ugaritic and Phoenician cultures, as well as Israel, cf. *ISBE* (1988) IV.998.

The final verse shifts from the imperfect tense and imperative mood of prayer to the perfect tense (56:13). It is unclear whether this shift is the so-called “prophetic perfect” (i.e., where the perfect tense denotes something still future but so sure of happening it can be phrased in the perfect) or denotes that the crisis is finally over and the worshiper is now completing his vow.⁵ If the latter, then the psalm was composed and offered at the same time the vow was fulfilled. David considers his deliverance to be a true rescue from the realm of death that enables him to live to the glory of God.

When David Feigned Insanity Before Abimelech (Psalm 34)

Relating to the very same period as Psalm 56 is Psalm 34, according to the superscription. The name Abimelech in the superscription raises an immediate question, since in the narrative account (1 Sa. 21:10ff.) the king is Achish. However, Abimelech (= my father is king) may be no more than a court name or royal title.⁶ Also, the Hebrew reader will notice that the poem is an acrostic, based on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁷

The style of this poem is didactic rather than intercessory, that is, it is written to teach others rather than directed toward God as a prayer. Some psalms are prayers, while others are testimonials; this psalm is the latter. If composed by David, it appears to arise, not out of the moment of crisis, but as a later reflection about the crisis so that others may gain wisdom from the experience.

The opening affirmation, “I will praise the LORD at all times,” is especially significant given the circumstance of David in Gath. Pressured to flee to the city of Goliath, the giant antagonist he had killed earlier, David is hardly in a conventional situation that calls for praise. Rather, he faces dire extremity, with his life in mortal danger. Yet, much as did St. Paul many centuries later (Phil. 4:4), he refused to let imprisonment and the imminence of death squelch his exaltation of God (34:1-2a). All who were in similar dire straits are encouraged to hear this testimony and rejoice (34:2b)! He says, “This is my testimony; it can be yours, too!”

In David’s case, God rescued him from the threat of death. His prayers were answered (34:4-6)! The expression *zeh ‘aniy* (= this poor man) suggests a poverty of resources for help, and it anticipates Jesus’ reference to the “poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3), those who are without any spiritual resources. While there is no mention of it in the

⁵ A. Anderson, *Psalms (1-72) [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 424.

⁶ Other persons in the Old Testament have the title Abimelech, including a couple of ancient Philistine rulers in the patriarchal period (Ge. 20, 26) and a son of Gideon (Jg. 9), cf. *ISBE* (1979) I.9-10.

⁷ There is an anomaly here, however, in that the Hebrew letter *waw* is omitted and an extra verse at the end beginning with *peh*. Psalm 25, another acrostic, has the same odd characteristic.

record of 1 Samuel, David attributes his escape to the Angel of Yahweh,⁸ who protects those that fear the Lord. Since the Angel of Yahweh is also depicted as the “commander of the army of Yahweh” (Jos. 5:14), perhaps this verse envisions the hosts of the Lord as well (cf. 2 Kg. 6:17).

Shifting to the metaphor of taste,⁹ David challenges his listeners to try out the Lord and see for themselves his goodness (34:8).¹⁰ He urges them to reverence Yahweh in order to demonstrate that God supplies everything one needs (34:9-10; cf. Phil. 4:19). The desert lions may do without, but God will see to it that his people survive! Because of the expression “taste...that the Lord is good,” the ancient church employed this psalm in the celebration of communion.¹¹

In keeping with the didactic character of the psalm, David invites his readers, addressed as children listening to a parent, to be instructed in the reverence of Yahweh (34:11). The metaphor of children recalls the commandment from the Decalog about honoring one’s parents “that you may live long in the land” (34:12; cf. Ex. 20:12; Dt. 5:16; Ep. 6:1-3). The primary virtue is personal integrity, which consists of honesty, uprightness and the pursuit of peace (34:13-14). God sees; God hears (34:15)! He will hear the prayers of those who reverence him, but he will turn against those who defy him by their flippant lifestyles (34:16). This advice was quoted in full by Peter, when he called upon Christians to live in harmony, sympathy, compassion and humility, refusing to repay evil in kind, but rather, offering blessing in the face of adversity (1 Pe.3:8-12). The vivid use of anthropomorphisms to describe God’s attention are typical of the Old Testament, where the full range of emotion and personality are concentrated in Yahweh’s face. The face of God is the presence of God without reservation.¹² When God’s face is turned away, it signals divine abandonment.

Those whom God hears, however, are the righteous, the brokenhearted and those whose spirits are crushed (34:17-18). Jesus’ beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount recall the same virtues (cf. Mt. 5:3-12). There is no guarantee, of course, that

⁸ In most Old Testament contexts, the Angel of Yahweh refers to a theophany of God. There is a fluidity in this figure so that sometimes the Angel of Yahweh serves as a spokesman for God and at others times he speaks as God himself, cf. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. A. Heathcote & P. Allcock (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 75-77.

⁹ The Hebrew verb *ta’am* (= v. taste, perceive; n. insanity) may be a play on words, given its range of nuance. In the original story in 1 Samuel, a homonym of this verb is used in 21:14 to refer to the insanity that David feigned. Here, it is used to refer to the perception that God is good! The two uses produce an irony in that David feigned *ta’am*, but later he urges his listeners to “taste” (also *ta’am*) that the Lord is good.

¹⁰ In the New Testament, Peter will allude to this passage in describing the blessing of coming to faith in Christ (1 Pe. 2:3).

¹¹ A. Weiser, *The Psalms [OTL]*, trans. H. Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 296.

¹² Jacob, pp. 77-79.

righteous folk will be spared the trials of life any more than David was spared trials when he was outlawed by Saul. To be sure, those who look to the Lord will have radiant faces, and they will not be left in shame (cf. 34:5). In their reverence for God, they will lack nothing (34:10). At the same time it is still true that the righteous person may have “many troubles” (34:19a), though the Lord will deliver him from them all (3:19b). Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33)!

The breaking of bones seems to have been an ancient way of describing ultimate distress (cf. Is. 38:13; Ps. 51:8), especially in times of war. Such a description would have its maximum value for one in combat, since a broken leg would altogether prevent flight. To be protected so that one’s bones are not broken means that one can always see the present danger in light of the hope of escape. Of course, this passage was quoted in John’s Gospel to describe Jesus’ crucifixion in which the Roman guard did not perform on him the *crurifragium*, the shattering of the victim’s lower thighs (Jn. 19:36). In terms of Jesus’ crucifixion, the metaphorical value of protection so that his bones were not broken foreshadows the reality that his crucifixion was not the end of the story. Rather, just as in the psalm, there was always the light of hope, even in the midst of danger. For Christ, that hope was to reach its fulfillment on Easter morning!¹³

In the end, justice would prevail! The wicked would be caught in the coils of their own evil ways, suffering final condemnation (34:21). The servants of the Lord, on the other hand, would be redeemed from condemnation (34:22). St. Paul would later echo this conclusion in his famous line, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” (Ro. 8:1)!

Whether David was expelled from Gath or chose to leave because he feared a longer stay might endanger his life the reader is not told, but when he left he fled to the cave of Adullam (1 Sa. 22:1). The Hebrew name *adullam* means “refuge”, and it appears several times in Old Testament lists (cf. Jos. 12:15; 15:35; 2 Chr. 11:7; Mic. 1:15; Ne. 11:30). Apparently, it was in Judah’s *shephelah* (i.e., the western foothills),

¹³ The Fourth Gospel may also assume a connection between Ps. 34:20 and Ex. 12:46; Nu. 9:12, in which the Passover lambs should not have any bones broken. John is quite intent in pointing out that Jesus would be executed on the day the Passover lambs were being slaughtered (Jn. 18:28). The fulfillment statement in 19:36 ties together both of these concepts, that Jesus, the true Passover Lamb, would not have his bones broken, and that this protection by God anticipated his final escape from trouble, as Psalm 34 teaches. As such, the term “fulfillment” is not so much along the lines of a simple prediction/verification model, but rather, along midrashic lines that seek to explain hidden meanings not necessarily in the scope of the original text, cf. R. Longenecker, “‘Who is the Prophet Talking About?’ Some Reflections on the New Testament’s Use of the Old,” *Themelios* (Oct/Nov 1987) pp. 4-8. Jesus of Nazareth, of course, is the righteous man *par excellence* whom God saves and redeems from death. This sort of *sensus plenior* (i.e., fuller meaning) is typical of New Testament applications of Old Testament texts, cf. W. LaSor, “The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation,” *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Gasque and S. LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 260-277.

and in each of the foregoing references, Adullam is listed as a town. The cave where David fled must have been near the village of Adullam, a site that tentatively has been identified by archaeologists but as yet unexcavated. The general region does have numerous limestone caves that would have made suitable hideouts.

While he was there, David's family heard about his present hiding place and joined him, along with various other malcontents, fugitives, political refugees and those otherwise distressed. Eventually, the band grew to about four hundred strong, and out of them, David molded a tough fighting force (1 Sa. 22:2).

When David Was in the Cave (Psalm 142)

The superscription to this psalm connects it with David's cave hideout, presumably Adullam. The term *maskil* is related to the verb *sakal* (= to have understanding, insight); hence, it may refer to a wisdom song put to music.¹⁴ Also, the psalm is titled as a prayer.¹⁵

It may be that the psalm reflects David's initial period in the cave before his whereabouts became known to his relatives and supporters. At least the expression in 142:4, "No one is concerned for me—no one cares for my life," suggests that David was alone at the time. Isolation, a state that God himself judged to be "not good" (Ge. 2:18), weighed heavily on David's mind. In his distress, he cried aloud to Yahweh (142:1). His desperate plight did not merit a silent prayer, but he voiced his agony with a powerful voice!¹⁶ Praying aloud when alone—pouring out one's trouble to God with vigorous voice (142:2)—was practiced not only by the ancients but also by Jesus himself when in Gethsemane (cf. He. 5:7). This was the kind of crying with which Bartimaeus urged Jesus' attention (Mk. 10:46-48). No one supposes, of course, that God must be clamored after like a reluctant benefactor. Still, desperate times call for desperate measures, and David was not timid about his plea. He needed God's help, and he needed it quickly!

His resilience was nearly gone,¹⁷ his enemies were constantly trying to trap him, and no one seemed to care (142:3-4)! Only God knew the full extremity to which David was pressed; only Yahweh knew David's difficult pathway. Yet like Job, who affirmed, "He knows the way I take" (Job 23:10), David prayed, "It is you who know my way!" (142:3b). God's awareness suggests that in the end he will

¹⁴ *Maskil* is a participle of the hiphil verb *sakal*.

¹⁵ Four other psalms are titled "a prayer" (17, 86, 90 and 102).

¹⁶ To be sure, the Hebrew verb *za'aq* (= to cry out) can be used figuratively, as in the blood of Abel "crying out" from the ground (Ge. 4:10). Nevertheless, the frequent use of this word as describing a desperate prayer during acute distress seems to justify the adverb "aloud" (so NIV, NEB, NASB, NEB), cf. G. Hasel, *TDOT* (1980) IV.120-122.

¹⁷ The TEV renders the opening of 142:3 as "When I am ready to give up..."

balance the score and give justice!

So, David cried aloud! He fully realized that his refuge in Adullam was vulnerable at best. His only enduring refuge must be in Yahweh himself, not in his own resources (142:5). Several times one encounters the term “portion” in the psalms, the Hebrew *heleq* (= share, allotment, inheritance). Metaphorically, it has the nuance of destiny, that is, life that is determined by God. Like the priests who had no portion of land allotted to them but for whom Yahweh was their portion (Nu. 18:20), so the righteous person must look to God’s sovereign will as his or her possession in life.¹⁸ It is of this that St. Paul spoke when he said that the widow left alone “puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and ask God for help” (1 Ti. 5:5). Survival does not depend upon human ability but on divine grace. The opponents are too strong, and the situation is too precarious (142:6)!

For David, his outlaw circumstances had become a prison from which God alone could free him (142:7a). Still, the future was bright with praise for the God who would rescue him. The day would come when David would not be alone but surrounded by the people of God who would share his testimony of deliverance (142:7b).

Some time prior to David’s outlaw period, Saul successfully subdued the Moabite nation in the transjordan east of Judah (1 Sa. 14:47-48). The exact relationship between the Moabites and Judahites is unclear, but the fact that David’s great grandparents had lived there for about ten years during a drought in Judah (Ru. 1:3-5) suggests that there was some social interchange other than antagonism. In fact, David’s grandmother, Ruth, was herself a native Moabite (Ru. 4:13, 21).

The Moabites lived to the east of the Dead Sea south of the Arnon Gorge. Fearing for the safety of his relatives, David approached the Moabite King in Mizpah to ask for asylum for his family (2 Sa. 22:3).¹⁹ The Moabite ruler agreed, so David moved his family to the safety of Moab all the time he was staying at the *matsudah* (= stronghold, fortress).²⁰ Whether this site was modern Masada or some other desert

¹⁸ M. Tsevat, *TDOT* (1980) IV. 448-451. The expression “land of the living” is an implicit contrast with the place of the dead.

¹⁹ There are several biblical locations named Mizpah (= look out, watch tower). Mizpah of Moab has not been precisely located, but it is likely that David reached it by traveling around the southern end of the Dead Sea, cf. *ISBE* (1986) III.388.

²⁰ It is unclear whether the Hebrew term *matsudah* refers to the large escarpment on the west of the Dead Sea, now known as Masada, or some other place. Several times during his outlaw period, David escaped to some stronghold in Judah that seems to have been a well known but impregnable hideout (1 Sa. 24:22; 2 Sa. 5:17; 23:14). On one occasion the verb “to ascend” is used (1 Sa. 24:22), while on another occasion, the verb “to go down” is used (2 Sa. 5:17), though sometimes this same verb also means “to go up,” W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 143. Either verb is appropriate for Masada. This flat-topped plateau rises from the western shore of the Dead Sea about 1300’ above the surrounding landscape. Thus, to reach the summit one must “ascend.” On the other hand, the surrounding landscape is the lowest elevation

hideout, the prophet Gad urged David to leave his isolated fortress and return to Judah. David obeyed, and he went to the forest of Hereth (1 Sa. 22:5), once more an unidentified location.

With David back in the mainstream of Judah's population, his whereabouts became known to Saul (1 Sa. 23:6). The narrative graphically describes Saul, spear in hand, suspicious of his retainers, complaining about Jonathan's friendship with David, and spewing out accusations of treason against David (1 Sa. 23:7-8). Clearly, Saul was at the brink of insanity in his obsession. One of Saul's mercenaries, an Edomite retainer and the head of his shepherds, had been at Nob the day David fled from Saul to Ahimelech, the priest (1 Sa. 21:1, 7). He observed the priest's assistance to David, both food and a weapon, and now he offered this information to Saul (1 Sa. 22:9-10). Saul promptly summoned Ahimelech, accusing him of collusion and conspiracy (1 Sa. 22:11-13). At the time David came to Nob, the priest was clearly unaware that David was now fleeing for his life or that he soon would be outlawed by Saul, but Saul's bitterness and obsession were now so overpowering, he commanded the execution of Ahimelech and all the other priests with him (1 Sa. 22:14-17b). By this time, Saul had come a long way from the day when he hid from public acclaim because of humility (1 Sa. 10:21-22; cf. 15:17).

Saul's soldiers, loyal though they were, could not stomach a cold-blooded massacre of unarmed priests (1 Sa. 22:17b). So, Saul ordered Doeg to do the job, and the king's chief shepherd responded with alacrity, butchering eighty-five priests along with the citizens of Nob, including men, women, children and livestock (1 Sa. 22:18-19). It was one of the blackest days in Israelite history. One of Ahimelech's sons, Abiathar, escaped with his life and fled to David's stronghold, reporting the massacre (21:20-23). This, then, is the setting for Psalm 52.

Psalm 52

As before, the superscription makes the historical connection.²¹ This Psalm is no faint cry for help. It is a strident denunciation of the human butcher, Doeg. The psalm is punctuated by two *selahs*. The opening sections before the second *selah* are written as a direct address to Doeg, and the lines are replete with second person singular masculine pronouns. With biting sarcasm, David chides the self-absorption and sadistic opportunism of Doeg, the "mighty man" who stooped to slaughtering

on earth, so to reach the foot of the escarpment one must "go down." To be sure, the term *matsudah* can refer to citadels or fortresses that certainly are not modern Masada, one of which is in Jerusalem itself (cf. 2 Sa. 5:7, 9; 1 Chr. 11:5, 7). Some scholars prefer that Adullam itself was the stronghold, cf. P. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 357. Nevertheless, the most likely candidate for David's stronghold must surely be modern Masada, which had only a single access, the precarious "trail of the serpent," that ascends the eastern cliff, cf. Y Aharoni et al., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 73.

²¹ For the term *maskil*, see comments on Psalm 142.

unarmed clergymen and children (52:1a). His boasts about his own degrading actions were absolutely incompatible with any kind of reverence or trust in God. David's denunciation is a vehement declaration of what is properly termed "righteous anger." Doeg's report to Saul and his implicit accusation that Ahimelech was guilty of treachery were the worst sort of lies (52:2). Doeg "loved" evil and falsehood (52:3-4). He delighted in the very thing that God hates.

But as the old preacher said, "Pay day, someday!" Doeg would get his just desert, and his rise among Saul's loyalists would be short-lived. David offers three verbal metaphors for Doeg's judgment (52:5). God would break him down! The verb *natats* means to tear down, demolish or break up. In the Hebrew Bible it is used of the demolition of cities, buildings and pagan cultic sites. God would scoop Doeg from his very tent like refuse. The rare verb *hathah* means to take away, and elsewhere is used of scooping coals (cf. Is. 30:14; Pr. 6:27). God would root him up like a sucker. The verb *sheres*, related to the Hebrew noun for root or sucker, means to pull up by the roots.

The sure judgment of Doeg becomes a lesson for the righteous, and here the language shifts from direct address to didactic ridicule. When Doeg falls, the righteous will deride him, because he scorned God while trusting in his own resources. He built his position of power by crushing others (52:7).

At the close, the psalm turns inward to David himself. He is still pursued by the insane king. His situation is still precarious in the extreme. Unlike Doeg, however, David was determined to trust in God's faithful love, his covenantal promise.²² In spite of his extremity, David flourished like an olive tree in the house of God. Olive trees, which are evergreens, live to be several hundred years old, hence suggesting "forever and ever." The fact that David mentions olive trees in the court of the "house of God" seems unusual though certainly not impossible. It is unclear whether he is talking about the Tent of Meeting at Nob²³ or his hopes for a future temple, a symbol of permanence, yet to be built (cf. Dt. 12). In sharp contrast to the arrogance of Doeg, David praises God for what he has done and remains firm in his hope for what God will yet do (52:9a). God is as good as his name, and David is confident that at last this divine goodness will be apparent to all "in the presence of the saints" (52:9b).

Early on, David's military service under Saul seemed to keep in check the encroachment of the Philistines (1 Sa. 18:5, 13-14, 27, 30; 19:8). With David

²² *Hesed*, here rendered as "unfailing love" (NIV), is the word in the psalms that most often is used to describe the covenantal love of Yahweh, cf. N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), pp. 118ff.

²³ Presumably the Tent of Meeting had been moved to Nob after the destruction of Shiloh, since Nob is where the priests lived. That the Tent of Meeting could be called a "house" is corroborated in 1 Samuel 1:7, 24: 3:15.

outlawed, however, the Philistines seized their opportunity to push once more into the foothills of Judah. Keilah, an Israelite walled town in the shephelah on the frontier between the Philistine plain and the Judean central hill-lands, lay squarely in the path of this encroachment.²⁴ The Philistines looted Keilah's threshing-floors, and since Saul was offering no aid, David sought Yahweh's direction, presumably through Abiathar, the priest, who had joined his band (1 Sa. 23:1-2; cf. 22:20-23). When Abiathar escaped the bloodbath at Nob, he brought with him the sacred ephod of the priestly clothes, probably with the attached pouch containing the Urim and Thummim, the two mysterious implements for "the means of making decisions" (1 Sa. 23:6; cf. Ex. 28:6-30; Lv. 8:5-9).²⁵ Yahweh's answer was that David should indeed defend Keilah against the Philistines, and with God's help he led his band to a crushing victory (23:2-5).

When Saul heard that David had rescued Keilah, he quickly moved to trap David inside the walled fortress, intending to put it to siege (23:7-8). David's informants learned of the plot in advance, however, and once more David sought Yahweh's direction through Abiathar (23:9-12). The message from God again was clear: yes, Saul was coming, and yes, David could expect the citizens of Keilah to deliver him up in spite of his war effort to save them from the Philistines! By this time, David's band numbered about 600, and they fled from Keilah, moving back and forth to throw off their pursuers (23:13). Finally, David ended up in the Desert of Ziph, once more in the easternmost region of Judah's hill country at the edge of the desolate region that slopes downward toward the Dead Sea (23:14).²⁶ Back and forth David dodged, each day barely escaping the pursuing Saul. Though Saul was unable to find David, Jonathan did find him, and he came to offer David encouragement (23:15-18). So far as we know, this was the last occasion on which the two friends would see each other before Jonathan's untimely death at Gilboa (1 Sa. 31:6).

The clan of the Ziphites, who lived in the Desert of Ziph, now joined Saul's plot to exterminate David, and they betrayed David's location to Saul. They even offered to capture David and give him up to his enemy (23:19-24a). David, for his

²⁴ Keilah also is known to us from the 14th century Amarna letters, a set of diplomatic correspondences between the Canaanite kings of Jerusalem, Gaza and Hebron and the Egyptian Pharaohs Amenhotep III and Akhenaton. In them, Keilah appears as a fortress somewhere roughly between Hebron and Jerusalem, cf. J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958), pp. 268, 274 (Tablets 280, 289, 290).

²⁵ The exact nature of the Urim and Thummim is obscure, but the two implements obviously were small sacred objects. The fact that they seem to have provided "yes" or "no" answers to direct questions (cf. 1 Sa. 23:9-12; 30:7-8) implies that they may have been sacred stones or similar objects bearing symbols so that when they were cast, they could offer affirmative or negative answers, depending upon which way the symbols matched, cf. I. Mendelsohn, *IDB* (1962) IV.739-740.

²⁶ Ziph is almost certainly to be identified with Tel Zif, an unexcavated mound about 4 miles southeast of Hebron.

part, kept weaving back and forth among the waste area hideouts south of Jeshimon, a desolate region with chalky hills and cliffs and filled with numerous caves (23:24b).

When David was Betrayed by the Ziphites (Psalm 54)

Betrayal is one of the most devastating human acts anyone can experience—the treacherous action of a person or group who is trusted but turns out to be untrustworthy. The superscription of Psalm 54, once again a *maskil* (see comments on Psalm 142), ties this psalm to David’s betrayal by his fellow clan members. When David was betrayed by Doeg, it was hardly a surprise. It was much more disillusioning to be threatened with betrayal by the citizens of Keilah, for whom David had risked his very life. But to be betrayed by people in his own beloved Judah not far from his birthplace must have been bitter indeed! The psalm was composed for choir with stringed instruments, implying that it was not written at the time of the event, but later, after David had arranged the musical choirs for Mt. Zion (cf. 1 Chr. 25).

The opening line, which pleads for salvation by God’s name, is a synecdoche. God’s name stands for God’s character and power. A person’s name in the ancient Near East was far more than just an identity tag. It was the revelation of his character, personality and reputation, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad (Ge. 27:36; 1 Sa. 25:25). In the case of God, the divine name Yahweh revealed God’s sovereign self-existence (Ex. 3:13-15), and especially, his character of compassion, love, faithfulness and justice (Ex. 34:6-7). It is to these essential attributes that David appeals (54:1-2). The verb *da’n* (= to redress a wrong, to vindicate, to bring justice) is not merely a cry for safety, but a cry for justice!

As for his clansmen of Ziph, David now sees their true character. They are “strangers,” not friends (54:3a)! Their true character is ruthlessness and defiance toward God (54:3b).²⁷

David instinctively knows that God is his only true resource. Those whom he once trusted he can trust no longer (54:4). So, he prays for God’s justice, not only to vindicate him, but also, to execute judgment on his attackers (54:5). David worships the God who extends compassion and forgiveness, but also the God who does not allow the guilty to go unpunished. As a pledge toward his faith in God’s justice, David promises to offer a *n’debah* (= voluntary offering). Such offerings were to be from the best of one’s herds, an animal without defect (Lv. 22:17-25; Nu. 15:1-12). In this sacrifice, David promise to praise the name of Yahweh (54:6), the name upon which he had called for salvation (cf. 54:1). Such offerings were not required, so

²⁷ For *selah*, see comments on Psalm 59.

David was not bargaining with God. Rather, his response to God's salvation was out of his deep sense of thankfulness rather than obligation.

The final verse changes from the imperfect to the perfect tense, once again suggesting that the song reached its final form after the event (54:7). Yahweh had indeed delivered David, and he had indeed executed justice upon David's enemies!

When the Ziphites betrayed David's presence to Saul (1 Sa. 23:19ff.), Saul and his men at arms quickly moved to the Arabah, the rift valley containing the Dead Sea. Here, an intensive search began for David (1 Sa. 23:25a). The geography for this part of David's outlaw career can be identified generally. Maon (modern Tell Ma'in) is named with Carmel and Ziph in Joshua 15:55, and it lay on a high, isolated elevation west of the Dead Sea in southern Judah a few miles south of Hebron.²⁸ The crag where David hid apparently was well known in ancient times, given the explanatory name of *Sela Hammahlekoth* (= crag of parting, crag of dissension or crag of slipperiness),²⁹ though today the exact location is uncertain. At one point, the proximity of David and his band was so near Saul and the Judean army that the only thing separating the two was a single ridge. Just as Saul had David cornered, a runner arrived to report to the king that the Philistines had invaded, forcing him to break off his pursuit of David and return to defend his border (1 Sa. 23:25b-28). David, meanwhile, moved farther north to En Gedi, an elevated spring just to the west of the Dead Sea (1 Sa. 23:29).

After his skirmish with the Philistines, Saul returned to search for David near En Gedi, a wild area where the ibex proliferated (1 Sa. 24:1-2). (Incidentally, the ibex may still be seen on the cliffs above the modern road skirting the Dead Sea near En Gedi.) The area is full of rugged cliffs, wadis and caves, and Saul entered one of the caves to relieve himself.³⁰ The cave happened to be the very place where David and his men were hiding, and while Saul was isolated and unprotected, David's men suggested that Saul's vulnerability was the direct fulfillment of a prophetic word (1 Sa. 24:3-4).³¹ David, however, refused to take advantage of the situation, even under

²⁸ F. Young, *ISBE* (1986) III.242.

²⁹ R. Klein, *1 Samuel [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 232.

³⁰ The older English translations, which are unnecessarily wooden, are that Saul went into the cave "to cover his feet" (1 Sa. 24:3, KJV). This translation, in turn, gave rise to the mistaken idea that he entered the cave to take a nap. Today, it is generally accepted by Hebrew scholars that the expression "to cover the feet" is a euphemism for defecating, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 332.

³¹ This prophetic word is not recounted in the Hebrew Bible. Some have speculated that the oracle might have been given at the time of David's anointing, when the transfer of office from Saul to David was secretly effected by Samuel (1 Sa. 16:13), but while such a suggestion is plausible, the actual oracle about David's "enemy" is general enough that it need not have referred directly to Saul. One should also remember that the prophet Gad had contact with David during his outlaw period (cf. 1 Sa. 22:5), so the oracle may have come from him.

the guise of fulfilled prophecy. Even prophecies did not legitimate personal vengeance, and unlike Jehu many years later (cf. 2 Kg. 9-10), David refused to lay his hand on Saul. Saul was the one chosen by God; it would be up to God to remove him from office. So, David merely cut off a small portion of Saul's battle kilt, feeling somewhat guilty about even such a small affront to Yahweh's "anointed" (1 Sa. 24:4b-7).

When David discovered himself to Saul, he graciously gave Saul the benefit of the doubt as though Saul were the victim of false information (1 Sa. 24:8-9). The army had been hunting David thinking he was a violent fugitive bent on assassinating the king, but David's refusal to harm Saul, even though opportunity clearly presented itself, nullified any such suggestion. Furthermore, it had been Saul himself who had concocted the false story (cf. 1 Sa. 22:7-8, 13). David's display of the fragment of Saul's kilt, in full view of the army, proved that he meant Saul no harm, and it left the vengeful king in a most awkward position before his men. David publicly called for Yahweh's justice in the presence of hundreds of witnesses (1 Sa. 24:10-15), and Saul could do little but acknowledge David's innocence. Whether or not Saul's tears of repentance were sincere (and there is substantial reason for doubting that they were), he at least acknowledged David's righteousness. Even more, he acknowledged that David would succeed him as the king of Israel (1 Sa. 24:16-20). To Saul's request, David gave his oath that when he became king he would not take vengeance on Saul's family, a promise that David kept (1 Sa. 24:21-22a; cf. 2 Sa. 9). So, Saul returned to Gibeah, while David and his men went back to the escarpment at Masada (1 Sa. 24:22b).

When David Fled from Saul to the Cave (Psalm 57)

The superscription for this psalm identifies it with the unexplained title, a *miktam* (see comments regarding Psalm 59). Also as in Psalm 59 and others (58 and 75), the notation "Do Not Destroy" possibly indicates a musical tune to inform the choirmaster. The composition is divided into three parts by the two *selahs*. The repeating couplet, "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth" (57:5, 11), emphasizes that David's highest concern was not his own success or even survival, but rather, the greater vision that God's glory would be revealed in the whole world. The refrain is echoed in the New Testament by St. Paul. When faced with execution, he wrote, "I eagerly expect and hope...that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).

The opening line offers the most basic of all intercessions, "Lord, have mercy!" The ancient liturgical prayer of the church in the *Kyrie eleison* (= Lord, have mercy) derives from this and the many repetitions of this prayer in the Psalter. For most fugitives, the cave itself would have been the refuge. For David, the cave, as

important as it may have been, was not the true refuge; rather, God was the true refuge! The metaphor of protection under the shadow of God's wings may depict God as a mother bird, protecting her young (cf. Dt. 32:11), or perhaps, as Weiser suggests, it is an allusion to the wings of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place, where Yahweh was enthroned.³² In any case, David was wise enough not to depend on Saul's apparent change of heart. He knew that the present danger was not over, and he determined to rely wholly upon *Elyon*, God Most High.

It is significant that in the midst of all his trouble, David confidently saw God's purpose for himself being fulfilled (57:2).³³ How much easier, in times of difficulty, to seek an alternative explanation. God's ultimate purpose, of course, is not that his people experience defeat. Rather, as the next lines assert, God's purpose is to save, vindicate and love his people (57:3). Hard times become part of the formula by which God reveals himself, however. Such times are as threatening as being in a lion's den. Humans, especially by their words, can tear at the soul as much as wild animals tear at the flesh (57:4). Like hunters who use nets and pits to trap game, so David's enemies were trying to trap him (57:6).³⁴ In spite of their evil intent, David's heart for God would not waver. "My heart is fixed," he cried, and in the midst of enemies, he refused to allow their threats to extinguish his song of praise (57:7). The beautiful figure of speech, "I will awaken the dawn," should be taken to mean that David would arise before the sunrise to "awaken" it with his music of thanksgiving (57:8).

The final crescendo of praise exalts God's unfailing love and faithfulness that towers up until it is piled into the heavens (57:9-11).

After the incident at the cave, no more psalms bear titles relating to David's outlaw period until the death of Saul.³⁵ A number of incidents are recounted by the historian in 1 Samuel that fill in the details for the remainder of David's outlaw career, however. David was prevented from avenging himself by the wise woman, Abigail, who was the wife of the rich sheep rancher, Nabal. Upon Nabal's apoplectic

³² A. Weiser, *The Psalms [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 40-41, 73, 426-427. The psalms use this same metaphor a number of times (cf. Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4).

³³ There is some question as to the translation of this verse, since there is no object to the Hebrew description of God as "the one who fulfills for me." The NIV, RSV and NEB offer "his purpose" as the implied object, while the older English versions offer "all things" (KJV, ASV).

³⁴ Nets were often used to catch birds, while pits were used to catch larger animals. Sometimes nets were thrown over animals trapped in a pit to control them, cf. A. van Selms, *ISBE* (1982) II.783.

³⁵ The only possible exception might be Psalm 63, which contains the superscription "When David was in the desert of Judah." However, the mention of "the king" in verse 11 suggests that this psalm belongs to the period of the Absalom rebellion, after David had been established as the ruler of Israel, rather than during David's outlaw years. A few other psalms, also, have superscriptions connecting them with events in David's life beyond his outlaw period (Psalms 60, 51, 7, 3, 63 and 30).

death, Abigail married David (1 Sa. 25). David's first wife, Michal, had been remarried by her father to someone else, though eventually, David would retrieve her, too (cf. 2 Sa. 3:12-16). Saul, for his part, did not give up the search for David. His apparent turn of heart at the cave was merely a face-saving ploy. Once more, David had the opportunity to kill his enemy, but as before, he refused (1 Sa. 26). The game of "cat and mouse" was becoming too risky, however, and David knew that eventually he would be caught by Saul if things continued as they were. Consequently, David offered himself and his retinue to the Philistines as vassal warriors. He went to Achish, the warlord over Gath, the town farthest east of the Philistine military cities and the one closest to Judah in the Shephelah. Achish gave David the city of Ziklag for a military base (1 Sa. 27:1-6).

This move was dangerous, to say the least. David might very well be suspected by his fellow Israelites as a traitor to the covenant cause. How far he could trust Achish was moot. So, David carefully avoided any hostilities with Judah, and his raids, which were against various Canaanite enclaves in the Negev to the south of Judah, were always carefully carried out with no survivors. In this way, David managed to deceive Achish into thinking that the war booty was from Judah when in actuality David was furthering the Israelite cause by campaigning against the Canaanites (1 Sa. 27:8-11).

David's mercenary skirmishes lasted nearly a year and a half (cf. 1 Sa. 27:7), but finally, the Philistines mustered their troops for one decisive blow against Israel. While Achish trusted David (cf. 1 Sa. 27:12), the other Philistine warlords were uneasy about him (1 Sa. 29). Certainly they did not want a Hebrew battalion serving as their rear guard in an action against the Israelites! Thus, David and his men were forbidden to accompany the Philistine army in its march up the coastal plain. Instead, he and his men returned to find that Ziklag had been sacked by the Amalekites during his absence. He and his men hurried to rescue the prisoners of war, and they successfully defeated the marauders and recovered the spoils (1 Sa. 30).

Saul, meanwhile, had bivouacked the Israelite army in the territory of Issachar near Mt. Gilboa to face the Philistine offensive. When the battle was joined, Saul's sons, including Jonathan, were killed, while Saul was mortally wounded and resorted to suicide (1 Sa. 31).³⁶ The Philistines found his corpse on the field, and after decapitating it, they exposed the headless body on the wall at Beth Shan (1 Sa. 31:9-10).

Shortly, the news of the Israelite defeat and the death of Saul and his sons reached David in Ziklag (2 Sa. 1:1-16). David was grief-stricken, especially over the

³⁶ There is a second account of Saul's death in which he expired at the hands of an Amalekite (2 Sa. 1:1-16). However, it is unclear whether the story was concocted to impress David or happened as reported.

loss of his closest friend, Jonathan. In honor of Saul, even though Saul was his enemy, and in honor of Jonathan, David composed an elegy that was to be taught throughout all Judah.

The Lament of the Bow (2 Samuel 1:19-27)³⁷

The Hebrew *qinah* (= lament, dirge) is a form of Hebrew poetry dealing with the event of death and often addressing the deceased in the second person. Similar to the modern eulogy, the setting for the Hebrew dirge is usually the house of mourning or the funeral procession. This particular elegy was incorporated into the ancient anthology of the Book of Jashar (= Book of the Upright), a collection of literary pieces that presumably dealt with heroic exploits of the Israelites (cf. Jos. 10:12-13).

The “bow” in this poem is possibly a metaphor for either Saul or Jonathan (cf. Ho. 1:5; Zec. 10:4), while the “weapons of war [that] have perished” may refer to them as well (1:27). The elegy was composed in three strophes, each commencing with the majestic exclamation, “How the mighty have fallen!” (1:19b, 25a, 27a).

The first strophe begins with the horrible truth—Israel’s *tseviy* (= ornament, glory, gazelle) is dead (1:19). Since the common response to victory over a slain enemy was to hurl taunt-songs heaping scorn upon the fallen, David calls for silence so that the news of Saul’s and Jonathan’s deaths will not be gloated over in the towns of the Philistines (1:20). The “uncircumcised” is the common designation for the Philistines, since they were the only people group in Canaan not practicing circumcision (cf. Jg. 14:3; 15:8; 1 Sa. 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4).³⁸

David pronounces a curse upon Mt. Gilboa, the scene of the battle (1:21a). There in the field lay the great shield of Saul, no longer to be rubbed with oil to preserve its leather (1:21b). Jonathan, too, paid the ultimate price for his heroism. He died facing his enemies (1:22a). Even though Saul died also, his sword added to the death toll of the Philistines (1:22b). The king and his son, though estranged in life because of divided loyalties over David, were united in death by bravery and valiance (1:23). The booty from Saul’s wars with the Canaanites that once graced the homes of Israel’s women were now symbols of grief (1:24).

David’s personal grief over the loss of Jonathan is poignant and visceral. In direct address, David speaks to his deceased friend about his deep and abiding affection (1:25). Jonathan’s loyalty and faithfulness surpassed even the love of a wife for a husband or a mother for a child.³⁹

³⁷ Actually, the Hebrew text simply reads “bow,” with the words “the lament of” being drawn from the context.

³⁸ Circumcision was not unique to the Israelites. It was practiced by the Egyptians, most of the Semitic peoples, and the various nations of Canaan, cf. J. Hyatt, *IDB* (1962) I.629.

³⁹ The notion that this love was homosexual is an interpretation increasingly popular among defenders of the gay

The elegy ends with the third repetition of the refrain, “How the mighty have fallen!”

The death of Saul did not end David’s struggle, though the nature of the struggle changed. The king’s death left a political vacuum, since there was no precedent for the transition of power. Leadership during the period of the judges had been charismatic, that is, leaders were chosen because they were singled out by the Spirit of God (cf. Jg. 3:15; 4:4; 6:11ff.; 11:29; 13:2ff.; 1 Sa. 1). The surrounding nations, however, had dynastic rules, and Saul clearly envisioned a family dynasty, too (1 Sa. 20:30-31). Thus, the Israelites were left with an uncertain future and a politically unstable circumstance that erupted into civil war. For over seven years (1 Sa. 2:10-11), the family of Saul and the family of David struggled for political supremacy. Even though Samuel had anointed David much earlier (1 Sa. 16:1-13), this claim to kingship had been secretive and was not widely known. David’s own tribe, the people of Judah, were eager to accept their favorite son as the new king, and they promptly did so (2 Sa. 2:1-4a). The other tribes, however, remained loyal to Saul’s family (2 Sa. 2:8-9).

Gradually, the family of David gained strength while the family of Saul weakened (2 Sa. 3:1). When Abner, the foremost military leader of Saul’s family, defected to David (2 Sa. 3:12ff.), and after, Ishbosheth, Saul’s son, was assassinated by his own men (3:5-12), the rest of the tribes quickly aligned themselves behind David’s claim to the throne (2 Sa. 5:1-5).

With his kingship firmly established, David finally could turn his attention to the more pressing need of Israel’s conquest of the Canaanites. The conquest, which had begun under Joshua many years earlier,⁴⁰ had languished far too long already. David quickly mobilized the army to attack the Jebusite fortress at Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:6ff.). With this central Canaanite stronghold subdued, David turned to his western border and pushed the Philistines back onto the coastal plain (2 Sa. 5:17ff.; 8:1). In time, he secured his eastern borders in the transjordan (2 Sa. 8:2), his northern borders in Galilee (2 Sa. 8:3-8), and his southern borders south of the Dead Sea (2 Sa. 8:13-14). The kingdom was now secure from outside invasion. What had been envisioned long ago by Moses was now an accomplished fact (Dt. 31:1-6).

lifestyle, cf. T. Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978). However, such a construction is only possible with special pleading. David certainly was heterosexual, as all other testimonies about his life attest.

⁴⁰ The exact length of time is debated. If one takes the majority opinion, based on archaeological considerations, that the exodus was in about 1290 BC, then the conquest would have begun in about 1250 BC, making the length of time between Joshua and David about two centuries. If an earlier date for the exodus is adopted, based on 1 Kg. 6:1 and Jg. 11:26 (c. 1450 BC), then the intervening time would have been about four centuries.

When David was Delivered from Saul and His Enemies (Psalm 18)

Apart from a few minor variations, Psalm 18 also appears in 2 Samuel 22. The superscription in the psalm relates it to the completion of David's victories.

The opening stanzas depict Yahweh as David's true refuge, much as in Psalm 57:1. Though David alludes to the various fortresses he used while hiding out from Saul, the *sela* (= rock, cf. 1 Sa. 23:25), *masadah* (= fortress, stronghold, cf. 1 Sa. 22:4-5; 24:22) and *tsur* (= rock, crag, cf. 1 Sa. 24:2), he reflects on the truth that no fortress is sufficient apart from Yahweh. Yahweh was his true stronghold (18:1-3), just as the ancient Torah describes (cf. Dt. 32:4, 30-31).

David's experience during his outlaw years had been terrifying. Every day he faced death, and the metaphors of the "cords of death" and "breakers of Belial" are vivid portrayals of the extremity to which he was pushed (18:4).⁴¹ Similarly, the "cords of *sheol*" depict the hunted animal hopelessly entangled in traps or snares (18:5).⁴² Only by God's answer to his desperate prayers was David able to survive (18:6).

God's intervention to save David now is depicted in the exalted language of theophany (18:7-15).⁴³ The whole earth recoils from the revelation of the mighty God, who appears in smoke and fire, thunder and lightning, darkness and light! He rides the clouds on cherubim, shooting divine arrows at the enemy. Such descriptions, of course, are poetic, not literal. They magnify the awesome splendor and power of God's presence as he descends from heaven to rescue David (18:16-19).

Such deliverance was in accord with the ancient covenant. The covenant established at Sinai clearly stipulated that deliverance and success were predicated on covenant faithfulness and obedience (cf. Dt. 28:1, 7, 13-14). David, for his part, demonstrated such covenant faithfulness.⁴⁴ His "cleanness of hands" (18:20, 24)⁴⁵ and careful observance of God's "ways", "laws" and "decrees" (18:21-23) were signs of

⁴¹ Belial is an ancient Hebrew word that more or less equates to the English word scoundrel—someone who is base, godless or abominable. Though the precise etymology of the word is uncertain, it eventually came to be a synonym for Satan by the intertestamental period and is so used in the New Testament (cf. 2 Co. 6:15), cf. B. Otzen, *TDOT* (1975) II.131-136.

⁴² *Sheol* refers to the place of the dead, and alternatively it can mean the grave or the state of death in the underworld, cf. D. Innes, *IDB* (1962) IV.1103.

⁴³ Calvin rightly noted that this type of language does not so much express what kind of being God is as it accommodates the description of God to the ways in which humans denote power and greatness. "In so doing, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height," cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 13:1.

⁴⁴ The term *tsedeqah* (= righteousness) especially denotes faithfulness to the norms of the covenant, cf. D. Lewis "Righteousness—the Old Testament Norm for Relationships," (Unpublished paper: William Tyndale College, 1982).

⁴⁵ "Clean hands" reflect personal integrity (cf. Ps. 24:4).

his covenant loyalty.⁴⁶

Divine reciprocity is the basic premise of the Sinai covenant (18:15-26), and Yahweh's response in kind to the faithful, the blameless, the pure and the crooked is no more than the ancient covenant describes (18:25-26; cf. Ex. 34:6-7; Dt. 11:13-28). The covenant also speaks of Yahweh's favoritism toward the disadvantaged (18:27; cf. Dt. 10:17-19). David surely has experienced weakness and helplessness, and his dependence upon Yahweh's strength has kept his "lamp burning," preserved his life and enabled him to advance against his enemies (18:28-29). This entire passage anticipates St. Paul's majestic acclamation, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Co. 12:9-10). David's success depended entirely upon Yahweh's purpose and strength, not his own ability. Every facet of war, from weaponry (18:30, 35a) to skill (18:34) to endurance (18:32-33, 35b, 39a) to protection (18:31), are credited to Yahweh. Victory lay entirely in God's will (18:37-42). At last, David's final deliverance, ascension to the throne and the extension of his sovereignty over neighboring lands was ascribed wholly to God (18:43-45).

The psalm ends with a doxology. The exultant "Yahweh lives" is analogous to the frequent Old Testament description of Yahweh as "the living God" (18:46). This divine quality sets him apart from humans, whose lives are temporal, but also differentiates him from pagan deities, either because they are lifeless idols or because their worshippers conceived of them as dying and resurrecting annually.⁴⁷ In contrast, Yahweh lives! He avenges and subdues and rescues and triumphs (18:47-48)! He is worthy to be praised (18:49)! The closing lines repeat the acclamation that Yahweh is the covenant-maker who chose David and his descendants forever (18:50).

As is true so often, the early Christians saw in this triumphant psalm overtones that stretched far beyond David himself to the coming of Jesus. Paul quotes verse 49 as the first in a collage of passages anticipating the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles (Ro. 15:9). No doubt the expression of God's unfailing kindness to "his messiah" (18:50), the descendants of David, called to mind the genealogy of Jesus, the Son of David (Mt. 1:1). What was said of the victories and ascension of David surely applied to the victory and kingship of Christ! David's persecution and eventual rise to the throne anticipated Christ's passion and ascension to the right hand of the Father. Thus, while everything in the psalm applied to David, everything equally applies in a fuller sense to Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

⁴⁶ The combined expression "laws (statutes) and decrees" is a common designation for the Mosaic Torah, cf. D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72 [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), p. 93.

⁴⁷ E. Jacob, pp. 38ff.