2021 Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

Psalm 2 and the Dispensational Worldview

For several semesters, I taught an undergraduate course called "dispensational premillennialism." The first few times it was offered, my students arrived ignorant and confused, and all I had to do was explain what dispensational premillennialism is and show that it is biblical. The last time, however, the class was different. From the first day, most of the students assumed that the subject was a waste of their time and sat silently daring me to make them care. One, however, issued an overt challenge: "Prof, does this teaching makes any difference in the real world?" This paper is an attempt to show that it does.

In it, I contend that dispensationalism provides clear and reliable insight into the biblical worldview and has practical implications for all aspects of life. I attempt to justify this conclusion by establishing two truths. The first is that dispensationalism is truly biblical. Contrary to the assumptions of some (including some of my students), it is not a system imposed upon the Scriptures, but a perspective inherent in them. The second truth is a corollary of the first. Dispensationalism offers more than explanations and charts; it supplies real answers to the real questions that real people struggle with.

Of course, no thirty-minute presentation could ever accomplish such a task. Therefore, instead of attempting the impossible, this paper addresses one specific issue, the messianic interpretation of Psalm 2. While not providing definitive proof, it does support of my broader contention by showing that a consistent, "literal" understanding of the psalm leads inevitably to a dispensational perspective not only of the psalm and its New Testament citations, but also of life

and history and, thereby, supplies crucial insight into the perpetual tension between the nations and God.

Interpretation

Any defense of dispensationalism must begin with an explanation of the hermeneutic behind it because, as I say elsewhere, "normative dispensationalism stands or falls on its consistent use of 'literal' interpretation."[1] Because the term "literal" is often misunderstood, even by some who claim to be dispensationalist, Ryrie prefers to call it "normal" or plain hermeneutics, and explains it as "interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize."[2] Specifically, it involves the use of the words and grammar of the passage in their textual and situational context to identify "the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text."[3] The literal hermeneutic is not exclusive to dispensationalism; non-dispensationalists also use it particularly in historical portions of the Bible. Dispensationalism, however, is distinct in that it uses the hermeneutic consistently—when interpreting every portion of Scripture—including both Psalm 2 and the New Testament passages that quote it.

Psalm 2 is quoted more often in the New Testament than any other psalm. Verses 1 and 2 are quoted in Acts 4:25—26; verse 7 in Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5; verse 9 in Revelation 2:26–27.[2] In each case, the speaker or writer applies his quotation to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Normally, this would present no problem. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies of a coming Messiah, and the New Testament simply attests to their accuracy. With Psalm 2, however, the situation is not so simple. To see why, we need only consider the first of these quotations. In Acts 4:25–26, the church is reacting to its first experience of persecution, threats

---

[1] Joel T. Williamson, "You Don't Say: Interpreting Author-intended Inference" (paper presented at the 9th meeting of the Council on Dispensational Hermenutics, Winona Lake, IN, September 14–15, 2016), 1.

[2] The quotations in Acts and Hebrews are word for word from the Septuagint. That in Revelation involves a change of subject from second to third person to make the quotation fit the New Testament context.

made by the high priest and his council at Jerusalem. While praying for boldness to persevere, Peter quotes the psalm:

> Why did the nations rage,
> And the people plot vain things?
> The kings of the earth took their stand,
> And the rulers were gathered together
> Against the LORD and against his Christ.[3]

There is no problem with the quotation itself; after all. it is God's inerrant word, quoted verbatim from the Old Testament. The problem is with how Peter seems to understand it: "Truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do what whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done" (4:27–28). Taken at face value, this seems to say that Psalm was fulfilled by Calvary. Certainly, that is the way many church fathers and scholars down to the present have understood it.

Some go further, and argue that the (unnamed) psalmist consciously predicted the trials and condemnation of Jesus Christ. For example, Terry understands the psalm as whole to be the product of a prophetic ecstasy in which the prophet was "rapt away into visions of the Almighty and made cognizant of words and things which no mortal could naturally perceive."[4] In this state, "the substance of Nathan's prophecy [2 Samuel 7:14] takes a new and higher form, transcending all earthly royalty and power."[5] In short, writing by the Spirit of God, David knowingly predicts the future Messiah. To make this interpretation work, he allows Peter to understand "the kings of

---

[3] Unless otherwise specified, all quotations in this study come from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

[4] Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise of the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Phillip & Hunt, 1883; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 399.

[5] Ibid.

the earth" as "such kings as Herod and Pontius Pilate."[6] This directly messianic interpretation has the advantage of long tradition. It even even antedates the New Testament, being attested among the Jews at least fifty years before Christ.[7] Unfortunately, it also has one glaring disadvantage.

Putting it bluntly, Acts 4:27–28 cannot mean what Psalm 2 means. Whatever the psalm is describing, it is not the collaboration of Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas. There is, of course, a general similarity, and the psalm does speak of the Lord's "anointed one"— in Hebrew, *messiah*; in Greek, *christos*. Still, the details are different.[8] The psalm speaks of a worldwide rebellion that involves the "kings of the earth." Pontius Pilate, however, was no king, just a prefect over one small Roman province. Despite his title, "King" Herod had no more authority than Pilate. Furthermore, in the psalm, the enemies are identified by two apparently synonymous terms: "nations" (גּוֹיִם) and "peoples" (לְאֻמִּים), Hebrew terms, whose plural form refers almost exclusively to Gentiles.[9] The gospels, however, are very clear, it was the Jewish leadership, not the Romans, that hounded Christ to the cross. The only Gentile involved was Pilate, and he was a reluctant participant (See Matt 27:15–26). Furthermore, the psalm goes on to speak of a king that the Lord has set on "My holy hill of Zion" (v. 6), but there was no king reigning from Jerusalem at that time nor has there been one since. In short, interpreting both the psalm and the gospels

---

[6] Ibid., 479, n. 1.

[7] The pseudepigraphal Psalms of Solomon, 17:21–25 quotes Psalm 2:9 in an explicit cry for the Lord to raise up the Messiah for Israel. For the dating, see R. B. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:640–1.

[8] See J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 4th ed. (1896; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), 1:114.

[9] While there are passages where the plural form of גּוֹיִם may refer to Israel (e.g., Gen 17:4, 5, 6, and 16), every one of the 54 other occurences of the term in the Psalms refers to non-Jewish people. Furthermore, the term also appears i Psa 2:8, where it clearly does so: "Ask of Me, and I will give *You* The nations *for* Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession." As for לְאֻמִּים, there are four occurences in the Proverbs 11:26; 14:28, 34; 24:24), in which the term has the generic sense "people." All 23 of the other occurences refer the Gentile nations in general. Notably, almost half (11) of them are found in messianic passages in Isaiah: 17:12, 13; 34:1; 41:1; 43:4, 9; 49:1; 51:4; 55:7 (twice); and 60:2.

literally shows that Psalm 2 must refer to something other than the cross—and therein lies the problem.

Acts 4 is as much the word of God as Psalm 2. Both texts are inspired. Both are inerrant. How then are we to reconcile this apparent contradiction? Of course, the problem is not new, and the struggle of many generations of biblical scholars have paved the way to its solution. Unfortunately, they did not pave one way; they paved two. The first way, which I will call the New-to-Old approach, functions as a kind of reverse engineering. It gives precedence to the New Testament and works backwards to show how the psalm came to have its real or ultimate meaning in Acts 4. The second, or Old-to-New, approach functions in the opposite way; it begins by interpreting the psalm in its Old Testament context (i.e., literally) and treats the resulting sense as normative. It then interprets Acts 4 in the same way and attempts to reconcile any apparent contradictions. These approaches are like Frost's "roads in a yellow wood"; they diverge. The first leads to covenant theology or some other non-dispensational system; the second leads to dispensationalism. Thus, like Frost's roads, the one you choose makes "all the difference."

New-to-Old Approach. Throughout church history, the New-to-Old approach has been quite popular. Many of the church fathers used it when constructing the core traditions of the church. Later, when the reformers rejected many of those traditions, they continued to use the same method, at least when interpreting Old Testament poetry and prophecy. Even today, in keeping with their reformed roots, covenant theologians make use of it when confronting certain portions of the Old Testament. Applied to Psalm 2, it treats the New Testament understanding of the psalm is definitive and adjusts its hermeneutic in some way to resolve the problem that results.

While some, such as Terry, treat Psalm 2:1–2 as an intentional messianic prophecy which was fulfilled by Jesus' trials.[10] Ever since Gunkel and Mowinkle, however, most scholars consider it a coronation psalm for a historical Judean king.[11] Some, such as Waltke, understand the messianic sense to have developed over time: "After the first temple was destroyed and no king sat on David's throne, the royal psalms—and that is most of them—became prophecies of Messiah's rule."[12] The operative word is "became." It would seem to teach that the Bible changes meaning over time. Waltke uses a canonical hermeneutic to escape, or at least blunt, this charge. As he sees it, Psalm 2 dealt with the coronation of a Davidic king, and the Davidic covenant implicily anticipated the Messiah. In pre-exilic Judah, the psalm referred to the king who was being installed in office.[13] After 586 B.C., when that identification became impossible, the Jews began to apply to the hope of an idealized future Davidic king. Finally, with the coming of Christ, it becomes about Jesus Christ![14]

Waltke himself summarizes his position as follows:

> The psalm has a dual reference. During the existence of the first temple (960–586 B.C.) the psalm was used in the coronation of David's successors tohis throne. . . . But in the second temple period they referred to the Messiah, who in the New Testament is identified as the

[10] For example, although Berkhof does not adopt Terry's psychological understanding of prophecy, he also classifies Psalm 2 as directly messianic, apparently because of Peter's statement in Acts 4. See Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 156–7.

[11] Joseph Lam, "Psalm 2 and the Disinheritance of Earthly Rulers: New Light from the Ugaritic Legal Text RS 94.2168," *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014): 34. Gunkel posits a coronation ceremony (Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner, Facet Books, Biblical Series 19 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967], 23–24). Mowinkel, however, argues for an annual celebration of the king's coronation (Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas [New York: Abingdon, 1962], 1:62–67). He is adamant that Psalm 2 and the other royal psalms refer "not to a future king, the 'Messiah,' but to the reigning king, who is the contemporary of the poet" (Ibid., 1:48).

[12] Bruce K. Waltke, "Ask of Me, My Son: Exposition of Psalm 2," *Crux* 43 (2007): 4.

[13] "In the Psalms, 'anointed one' designate the heirs to David's throne (Ps 18:50 [51]; passim)" (Ibid., 5).

[14] Ibid., 16.

> Son of God both by virgin birth in Matthean theology (Matt 2:8–25) and by his being the second person of the Trinity in Johanine theology (Jn 17).[15]

Intellectually, Waltke's approach has its appeal. It does preserve the Old Testament sense while accounting for New Testament differences. On the one hand, he can prove exegically that Psalm 2 uses the term "peoples" only of foreign peoples, not of the Jews. On the other, he can explain (and even celebrate) Peter and John's assigning it to the people of Israel as a means of establishing "dramatic irony."[16] Still, Waltke's canonical approach has an even greater problem than that of Terry. It suggests that the sense of Scripture is maleable, but how maleable is it? How do we know when the changes stop? Why not go on adjusting the meaning to fit changing as circumstances in the world? Some (professed) evangelicals do this very thing,[17] Operating with no objective way to keep the interpreter from ascribing biblical authority to his own prejudices and opinions. To be fair, Waltke refuses to go this far. He finds interpretive permanence and stability in the completed canon. As he sees it, the changes stop when the canon stops growing. That is when the ultimate sense becomes clear.[18] Even assuming (correctly) that the canon is complete does not really settle the mater, however. It still leaves Old Testament saints adrift in a text whose meaning is in flux.

There are, of course, other explanations. For example, Kraus totally separates the Old and the New Testament sense. He understands the messianic sense of Psalm 2 to be truth hidden until the coming of Christ. The New Testament does not change the Old Testament sense; it unveils a

---

[15] Ibid., 16.

[16] Ibid.

[17] For a glaring example, see William J. Webb, *Slaves Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

[18] According to Glenny, "the key distinguishing characteristic of Waltke's approach is his desire to allow the NT to determine so thoroughly the meaning of the OT" (W. E. Glenny, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 38 [1995]: 483).

new sense—better, but different. Therefore, any attempt to trace a connection between the two is a waste of time:

> Who rightly understood the royal psalms, the New Testament and the messianic-Christological exegesis that is found in NT texts, or those modern interpretations which, with pre-mature history-of-religions deductions derived from the similarity of the conventionalized figurative speech, have robbed the OT psalms of their real witness and, in a sense, completely emptied them?[19]

While there are any number of other similar New-to-Old explanations, but they are mere variations on a theme. They, like the ones shown, struggle with the same problem. They begin with their conclusion. While such circular reasoning does not guarantee error, it does little to protect against it. The question is whether the Old-to-New approach offers anything better.

Old-to-New Approach. Unlike the first one, the Old-to-New approach uses the Old Testament as the context in which to understand the New and to reconcile any difficulties that exist. It has the intuitive advantage of following the order of progressive revelation. The reformers and their successors in covenant theology also use this approach,[20] but only to a limited degree. Often, especially when dealing with prophecy and poetry, they will revert to the first approach. Dispensationalists, however, always use the second approach when interpreting any portion of the Bible—at least they do when they are true to their system. Applied to the second psalm, it avoids much of the difficulty associated with the messianic interpretation.

The Old-to-New approach begins where Peter and John did, with the Psalm itself, and use it to identify what it means. Since this study is limited to the messianic sense of Psalm 2:1–2, we only need to answer one question: what situation is described in verses 1 and 2? Specifically, is it

---

[19] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 128.

[20] Calvin himself insists that Psalm 2 applied primarily to David: "David was begotten by God when the choice of him was clearly manifested" (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845], 1:18.).

the trial of Jesus Christ or something else? To answer this question, we must first establish what kind of situation verses 1 and 2 describe—a specific event or a characteristic pattern in history. Several expositors choose the former and propose various possible scenarios contingent on the king: David, Solomon, Uzziah, Hezekiah, or Ahaz. Unfortunately, as Delitzsch notes, "all historical indications which might support the one supposition or the other are wanting."[21] In short, guesses don't help. To find our answer, we must consider actual evidence such as the grammar.

While most English versions use simple past tense forms, in Hebrew the four verbs in these verses are an amalgam of perfect and imperfect verb forms. As the following layout shows, the sense and arrangement of these forms is not random and so may have help to offer:

v. 1	A	"rage" [literally, "are in tumult"] (perfect verb, expressing a state of affairs)
	B	"plot" (imperfect verb, expressing an on-going process)
v. 2	B'	"took their stand" (imperfect verb, expressing an on-going process)
	A'	"gathered themselves together" (perfect verb, expressing a state of affairs)

The verbs constitute a grammatical chiasm and bind the two verses into one unit—a unit probably governed by the interrogative "why" (לָמָּה). Taken as a whole, this pattern seems to describe a characteristic pattern of action and attitude rather than a specific historical confrontation.

To confirm and amplify this insight, we also need to establish whether verse 2 refers to local kings and rulers or to kings and rulers more generally. In this case, it is the terminology rather than the grammar that is definitive. The term in question here is "the kings of the earth." To whom does it refer? In Deuteronomy and Joshua, the phrase מַלְכֵי־אֶרֶץ has the sense "kings of the land" and refer to rulers in Canaan.[22] Everywhere else, however, it refers to rulers anywhere on earth.[23]

---

[21] Delitzsch (*Psalms*, 1:90) suggests three, but ultimately concludes that

[22] Deut 3:8; Josh 10:40; 12:1, 7.

[23] 1 Kings 5:14; 10:23; 2 Chron 9:22, 23; Ps 76:11; 89:27 [28]; 102:15 [15]; 138:4; 148:11; Lam 4:12; Ezek 27:33.

This sense corresponds to the general sense of the verbs. Furthermore, the later context supports this interpretation. Verse 8 makes a clear reference to the world as a whole when the LORD promises to give to his anointed "the ends of the earth," Outting ths two lines of evidence together, we must conclude with Craigie that "the language reflects primarily all—or any—nations that do not acknowledge the primacy of Israel's God, and therefore Israel's king."[24] Having established that these verses refer to the characteristic attitude and actions of peoples and rulers everywhere, we are ready to consider the messianic question.

While not irrelevant to our specific question, the occasion of the psalm is not essential it either. Some commentators such as Perowne assume that Psalm 2 was composed "at a time when Jerusalem was threatened by a confederation of hostile powers, and perhaps on the accession of a new monarch."[25] Others assume that it is a coronation hymn for some (or every) Davidic king. Either way, we are left with only two possiblities. It is either direct prophecy or indirect prophecy. If Psalm 2 is a direct messianic prophecy, the psalmist is consciously predicting facts about the future Messiah. If it is indirect, the Davidic king of the psalm functions as a type of the greater King to come. Either way, our interpretation, while governed by the Old Testament text, has to explain the New Testament usage. Bringing the evidence together, we can now answer the basic question: either directly or indirectly, does Psalm 2:1–2 refer to the trial and condemnation of Jesus? As suggested at the beginning of the study, the answer must be no. The conspiracy described in the psalm involves the kings of the earth and is not limited to a specific event. Neither fact corresponds to Jesus' trial before Pilate.

---

[24] Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco: Word, 1983), 66.

[25] Perowne, *Psalms*, 1:112.

To sum up, we know that the text is messianic; Acts 4 shows that. We also know that the psalm itself, however, does not really describe Jesus' trial; its grammar and terminology show that. Finally, we know that both Psalm 2 and Acts 4 are right; inspiration guarantees that. At first glance, this may appear a hopeless conundrum, but do not despair. We are right where we need to be. As the great sleuth once said, "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." If the psalm is messianic and does not refer to the trial of Jesus, it must refer to something else—something that is still relevant to Peter and John's use of the passage in Acts 4.

While they do not describe the trial of Christ, Psalm 2:1 and 2 do describe something else relevant to that trial—and to the persecution that the church had just experienced. They describe the characteristic attitude and action of the fallen world toward God, his Son, and anyone associated with them. These characteristics are at work in the trial of Jesus and the harassment of the Jerusalem church. Because they are characteristic, they are at work in the church now and will continue until they are eliminated in the new heavens and the new earth.[26]

Application

Thus, the dispensationalist's Old-to-New approach reconciles the two passages better than the New-to-Old, often used by non-dispensationalists. So what? How does this make a difference in the real world? To answer to my student's challenge, we must first identify what it is that makes the world "real" to him. Philosophically, I could argue (correctly) that biblical truth is inherently relevant and real since it represents the perspective of the Being that craeted and understands what

[26] Although he is not a dispensationalist, Perowne summarizes the situation well: the psalm "may be said to have an ever-repeating fulfillment in the history of the church … And so it shall be to the end" (Perowne, *Psalms*, 1:114). (To clarify, I am using his words, but limiting them to the fulfillment of Psalm 2:1–2. Perowne is speaking more generally of the entire psalm.)

is real. The rest of us are mere blind men feeling out an elephant. I suspect, however, that such an argument would fall on deaf ears. Therefore, I choose to show that the dispensational perspective on Psalm 2:1–2 has direct and vital relevance to the political and social unrest of our day.

All Scripture has implications for life in our fallen world, but those implications are only as sound as the interpretation that inspires them. The danger is that we will read our own ideas into the text and treat them as divine writ. For example, Brueggemann argues that Psalm 2 is characterized by "political resolve." As members of Messiah's kingdom, we are to take "action action against those who control a social monopoly and who thereby deny and deprive others."[27] These are sentiments based on a presupposed theology; they do not come from the second psalm. The psalm focuses on the Messiah, not his people. The rebels are not a specific political or social group; they are mankind as a whole. And human government is not the solution; it is the problem. The last three verses of the psalm give the real solution: submit to the Son and seek refuge in him or else be broken like a piece of pottery.

Our study, however, is restricted to verses 1 and 2. In them, we see the dirty truth about mankind and their leaders. Paul points it out in Romans 5:10: before we submitted to Christ and sought refuge in him, we were God's enemies. Paul said it, but he did not say it first. We find it clearly stated in Psalm 2:1–2 —once we understood the actual messianic connection with Acts 4. If it is true that everyone outside of Christ is God's enemy, then our goal is not to reform government, but to evangelize people. We can, and should, vote, but we shouldn't depend on the officials we elect to advance God's purpose. We should pray for those officials, but our prayer

[27] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 125.

should be direced to establishing a stable society in which to live "in all godliness and reverence" that we may help men "to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"[28]

Does dispensationalism matter in the real world? I guess my ultimate response to my student, and to you, is that only through Scripture can we even know the real world. But we can only know Scripture if we interpret it correctly. Knowing the perversity of our old nature, a dispensational approach to Scripture cannot keep us from ever falling into error, but it does provide more, and more consistent, safeguards.

[28] 1 Tim 2:1–4.