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Timothy M. Willis
timothy.willis@pepperdine.edu

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Reading the Psalms as Prophecy: The Example of Psalm 16

TIMOTHY M. WILLIS

More passages from the book of Psalms are said to be “fulfilled” in the NT than from any other book of the OT. Many believers over the years have asserted, therefore, that the Psalms are prophetic and contain numerous predictions. In other words, we assume that every OT passage that is “fulfilled” in the NT was a predictive passage in the OT. This reflects an interpretive perspective known as “direct fulfillment,” in which one assumes that “prophecy” = “prediction” and that the sole purpose of the OT passage was to predict something of the NT. There are at least two reasons to question this assumption:

1. *Some OT passages that are “fulfilled” in the NT are not predictive.* Hosea 11.1 is a typical example of this fact. The context of Hosea 11 shows that the prophet is talking about Israel as God’s son, whom he had called out of Egypt in the exodus (see Exod 4.21–23). Hosea was referring to a past event, rather than predicting something that would happen in the future; yet Matthew declares that the words of Hosea are “fulfilled” when Joseph and Mary bring Jesus out of Egypt (Matt 2.15). Matthew must have had something other than “direct fulfillment” in mind when he applied Hosea’s prophecy to Jesus.
2. *Some OT prophecies have multiple fulfillments in the NT.* A good example of this arises from Isaiah 6.9–10. Isaiah is describing his own immediate audience in the passage (see the use of “this people” in Isaiah 6), plus there are at least three occasions when NT writers/speakers say that Isaiah’s prophecy was “fulfilled” in their own day (Matt 13.14–15; John 12.39–41; Acts 28.26–27). It is clear that Isaiah was not predicting one isolated event in the NT when he proclaimed his prophecy.

I realize that challenging the popular perspective on biblical prophecy threatens to undermine a pillar erected by modern Christian apologists, who contend that a primary purpose of prophecy is to establish the reliability of the biblical witnesses. They regard prophecies as “signs” and declare that dozens—if not hundreds—of examples of fulfilled prophecies in scripture prove through statistics and probabilities that God must be behind the Bible. I too believe that the fulfillment of prophecy points to the unified divine inspiration of the Bible, but I question the way these apologists use the evidence. Their line of reasoning holds only if we assume that God’s intent in prophecy was to show his divine foreknowledge and power by predicting specific future events.¹

1. For example, Herbert Lockyer, *All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); John M. Oakes, *Reasons for Belief: A Handbook on Christian Evidence* (Spring, TX: Illumination Publishers International, 2005). Some apologists acknowledge that certain prophecies do not appear to be predictive, but because a NT writer declares a prophecy is “fulfilled” in a NT event, they argue the Holy Spirit must have revealed to the NT writer the predictive nature of the prophecy.

I believe the biblical witnesses call us to reevaluate our assumptions in this regard and consider other ways to understand the dynamic at work between OT passages and their “fulfillment” in the NT. Some passages have divine confirmation of the witness as one of their functions, but the phenomenon of “fulfillment” is much more complex than that. To illustrate this complexity, we will briefly consider an OT passage (Ps 16.8–11) cited by both Peter and Paul in their first recorded sermons (Acts 2.25–31; 13.35–37).

A LOOK AT PSALM 16 AND ACTS 2

For the sake of space, I will limit my discussion to Psalm 16.10 and its fulfillment in Acts 2.25–31. The verse is mentioned in the middle of Peter’s sermon, and it is the only verse from Psalm 16 that Paul quotes and expounds on in Acts 13. A rather literal rendering of the statement that the psalmist makes here is:

You will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
you will not give your loyal one to see the Pit.

It seems prudent to talk about a couple of matters of translation first. The term “my soul” in the first half of the verse is not used in the sense of soul vs. body or spirit vs. flesh. It is a common way of referring to oneself in the OT. Slightly more significant is the translation “your loyal one.” The usual rendering is “your Holy One,” which reflects an ancient tradition of translation; but the Hebrew root is *chasid*, not *qadosh*; and the Greek root is ‘*osios*, not ‘*agios*. The Hebrew term *chasid* is the adjective cognate of the noun *chesed*, typically translated “steadfast love, loving-kindness.” It evokes thoughts of love and faithfulness “in spite of.” Psalm 12.1 presents the term as synonymous with “faithful,” and Psalm 86.2 equates it with “true” or “trustworthy.” The Greek term (‘*osios*) can be translated “holy,” but it is holy in the sense of piety or devotion, not in the sense of moral perfection. So, the Greek term is a good translation of the Hebrew term, but the English translation of both can be misleading.

Much more significant is the translation of the final term in the verse. The Hebrew term is *shachat*, and the Greek translation is *diaphthora*. The term *shachat* comes from the Hebrew root, *shuach*, meaning “sink down, lower.” The use of this Hebrew term in the OT shows that it denotes something that is dug, something into which one is lowered or falls, and—metaphorically—the place of death. One can easily see how the term “grave” or “tomb” might fit here, which works nicely as a synonym for *Sheol*. Most commentators say that the Greek translation (*diaphthora*) means “decay, corruption,” which carries a different connotation. It is a term used to denote physical decay into dust and moral decay (as in general moral depravity). The usual contention is that the use of *diaphthora* shows that Greek translators interpreted the Hebrew term rather than give a precise translation of it. Commentators often see a vast difference between these terms, with the Hebrew term referring to a place—an actual grave—and the Greek term referring to a physical state—decay of the flesh. These commentators contend that the Greek translation understands a different root for the Hebrew term, a root that means “destroy” rather than “sink down.” Some go on to say that Peter bases his argument on the Greek translation, but that the Hebrew text would not support his line of argument. The usual thinking is that Psalm 16 refers to rescue from an untimely death, but that the Septuagint—quoted in Acts 2—refers to rescue from the physical decomposition that takes place following death.²

This line of argument is not without its problems. The Greek term *diaphthora* could be used in the same way that the Hebrew term based on “sink down” is used—to denote a hole that is dug in the ground (see Pss 9.15; 35.7). There is not necessarily a significant difference between the Hebrew term at the end of Psalm 16.10b and the Greek term used to translate it. Both can denote a grave into which a body is placed, but both can also imply the physical state of decay that sets in once a body has been placed there.

2. The traditional Jewish interpretation of this verse sees David or one of his offspring being rescued from a premature death. There is evidence that some Jewish interpreters read the Greek translation as a declaration of David’s incorruptibility, and they asserted that David’s body was in his grave but not decomposing.

In Acts 2 Peter makes it clear that he is reading the line from Psalm 16 as a reference to resurrection. He explicitly applies Psalm 16.10 to Jesus in Acts 2.31—"he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his flesh see decay." It is probably not inconsequential that Peter takes the word "flesh" from Psalm 16.9 and places it in this secondary citation of Psalm 16.10. What is important to him is that, even though Jesus was placed in a grave, he did not decay. Christian interpreters accept the validity of Peter's interpretation, yet many wrestle with whether or not the psalmist was thinking of resurrection when he wrote Psalm 16. There are at least seven types of conclusions about the nature of fulfillment here that interpreters have defended:³

1. Peter's interpretation is inaccurate, based on a misreading by Greek translators (but see above).
2. Peter shows how the words of Psalm 16 are fulfilled precisely and directly by the resurrection of Jesus.⁴
3. Peter employs Jewish midrashic tools of the day and shows how the hopes of a known messianic psalm become historical reality in Jesus.⁵
4. The Holy Spirit revealed to Peter a deeper meaning (*sensus plenior*) to Psalm 16 than had previously been recognized.⁶
5. The original meaning of Psalm 16 cannot be fathomed in itself, but must be interpreted in the light of the entire canon, including Acts 2.⁷
6. Peter reads the psalm typologically, meaning the ideal of the psalm is made real in an action of Jesus.⁸
7. David speaks of resurrection, even though the proof for resurrection does not exist until Jesus rises from the tomb, as Peter points out.

My own inclination is to accept a typological understanding of fulfillment in this case. I come to this conclusion after going through a few basic steps: (1) determine the intended message of the OT passage in its original context, (2) determine the message of the NT passage and how it incorporates the OT passage to achieve that message, and (3) reconsider (and adjust, if warranted) one's understanding of the message in the OT passage in light of the NT's interpretation. Very quickly, then, here is how I arrive at my understanding of the relationship between Psalm 16 and Acts 2.

Psalm 16.10 has parallels in several OT passages. These express the thoughts and feelings of people who face stressful—perhaps life-threatening—situations. Psalm 49.8–9 says it is impossible that one "never see the Pit." Two writers speak of God rescuing someone from "the Pit" (Job 33.28; Jonah 2.6), yet it is clear that neither of these means that the person will be like Enoch and never die. Instead, each expresses his gratitude for a temporary reprieve from an inevitable fate. So it seems that Psalm 16.10b intends to convey the same message, as the writer rejoices that God has spared him—for the time being—from death.

Peter presents this in a new way in response to the resurrection of Jesus. Peter's purpose is not to use OT scripture to prove that Jesus has been resurrected. Nor is Peter referencing the resurrection merely as a "sign" that the messianic age has come. He has two goals in mind. The first is to show that Jesus is the Messiah, and the second is to begin to unfold the idea that the messianic kingdom is something more than what the Jews had been anticipating.

3. For documentation and discussion of these views, see Gregory V. Trull, "Views on Peter's Use of Psalm 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–32," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (April-June 2004): 194–214.

4. See Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961), 36–45.

5. See Donald Juel, "Social Dimensions of Exegesis: The Use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 543–556.

6. See H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1974), 42–43; Anthony L. Ash, *The Acts of the Apostles, Part I—1:1–12:25* (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 51.

7. See Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Approach to the Psalms," *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 3–18.

8. See David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1896), 41–42.

It seems fairly certain that the Jews read Psalm 16 as a messianic psalm, based on connections to other recognized messianic texts. They linked the reference to God's "right hand" (Ps 16.11) to Psalm 110.1. Psalm 110 was generally regarded as a messianic psalm, and it begins, "The LORD said to my lord, sit at my right hand . . ." Similarly, the designation "your loyal one" (Ps 16.10) would have been linked to Psalm 86.2, where the same term follows the petition, "Preserve my life" (see Ps 16.1) and is parallel to the important messianic designation, "your servant" (a designation often applied to David). The use of "your servant" (twice) in Psalm 86 caused it to be regarded as a messianic psalm. There is a particularly strong link to Psalm 86.13, where the writer says, "You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol." These clues established the messianic nature of Psalm 16 long before Christians appeared on the scene. Their goal was to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, and Psalm 16 provided them with the means to use the resurrection to do just that.

Jesus had been placed in a grave (Sheol), but he was not "abandoned" there. This allows for a reading of the psalm that is actually more literal than originally intended. It would have been read as a petition to be rescued from mortal danger, but Jesus died and yet he was not abandoned to death. The second line speaks of one "seeing the Pit," but they obviously mean by this physical decay rather than viewing the inside of a grave. At a literal level, Jesus did "see the Pit," but in the fullest meaning of that expression, Jesus did not see the decay/corruption that naturally accompanies being lowered into a grave. Thus, unlike David, Jesus did not "see the Pit," in the fullest meaning of that expression.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MEANING OF "FULFILL"

If we return to where we started with popular assumptions, we see that there are equally important assumptions to evaluate about the meaning of the word "fulfill." Just as many readers assume that "prophecy" = "prediction," they assume that "fulfill" refers to the occurrence of a predicted event. There is some biblical precedent for this (see 1 Kgs 8.24), but this does not exhaust the possible meanings of "fulfill." There are many non-predictive statements that are "fulfilled." For example, the psalmist asks that God "fulfill your petitions" (Ps 20.4–5). "Fulfill" here involves a move from spoken word to action, but a petition is not predictive. Paul tells Archippus to "fulfill his ministry" (Col 4.17); Jesus says that his baptism will "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3.15); and both Jesus and Paul speak of fulfilling the law (Matt 5.17; Rom 13.8). There is nothing predictive about ministry, righteousness, or the law, yet people's actions can "fulfill" them. James says that Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac "fulfills" the scripture about God crediting Abraham with righteousness (James 2.23; see Gen 15.6). The verse from Genesis is not predictive; it describes Abraham's state of being at the time, yet James says that Abraham "fulfilled" it. These examples show that a prediction is not the automatic antecedent to something that is "fulfilled."

This brings us back to where we began, when we remarked that more passages from the Psalms are "fulfilled" in the NT than from any other OT book. I would contend that the words in Psalm 16.8–11 are not predictive—of Jesus, or of anybody else. Jesus "fulfilled" the passage, as Peter proclaims, but he did not fulfill those words by doing something that David had predicted. Rather than predicting, David was describing an aspect of his relationship with God. Over the course of many years, Psalm 16 had come to hold special messianic significance. For that reason, David's words could function as descriptors of a messiah, and so Peter cites David's words to provide scriptural testimony of the identification of Jesus as Messiah.

We should also notice that Jesus did more than what David's words originally intended, but what the words could imply. He fully fills more than one possible meaning of the words. David speaks of someone who is "as good as dead" and says that God will not abandon him to death. Jesus goes beyond that and actually dies, but God still does not abandon him. David speaks of a postponement of the inevitable, but Jesus shows that the inevitability of death does not apply to him. William Bellinger says it this way: "One who reads the psalm will see that the text stands between the promise of God and the fulfillment of that

promise . . . While the psalm did not initially speak of resurrection, the text does speak of life in communion with God and of an unshakeable belief in the life-giving power of God. The view of life is fuller than simple present existence. Acts 2 deepens that affirmation by proclaiming the dawn of a new age.” Earlier Bellinger spoke of this “new age,” which has been inaugurated but still awaits completion.⁹

Bellinger’s mention of a new age brings me to my final comment. There commonly are two mistaken assumptions about prophecy and fulfillment. One is that prophecy refers to something predictive, and I hope I have shown that many things fulfilled in the NT were not predictive in nature in the OT. The second misconception is that a prophecy has one and only one fulfillment. There can be multiple fulfillments. It should be obvious to us how that applies to resurrection. When David speaks of God not abandoning “his loyal one” to death, he is not talking about Jesus alone. The resurrection is not limited to Jesus. The NT scriptures make it clear that Jesus’ resurrection is the guarantee of our own resurrection. What is more, they show that resurrection does not apply simply to resurrection from physical death. Paul tells us that, in baptism, we share in both the death and the resurrection of Christ (Rom 6.3–4). That means the resurrection has already happened for Christians. That means that David’s words are “fulfilled” not only in Jesus, but also in all Christians, who are one with Jesus. And so with David we say, “In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

TIMOTHY M. WILLIS IS CHAIRPERSON OF THE RELIGION DIVISION AND PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.



9. W. H. Bellinger Jr., “The Psalms and Acts: Reading and Rereading,” *With Steadfast Purpose: Essays in Honor of Henry Jackson Flanders, Jr.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1990), 136.