

Luke's (Peter's) use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2

Texts:

Greek NT (NA27) Acts 2:24-28 (cited OT portion in brown)	LXX of cited text Psalm 16:8-11 (LXX = Psa 15:8-11)	Hebrew Masoretic Text
<p>24 ὃν ὁ θεὸς ἀνέστησεν λύσας τὰς ὠδῖνας τοῦ θανάτου, καθότι οὐκ ἦν δυνατὸν κρατεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ. 25 Δαυὶδ γὰρ λέγει εἰς αὐτόν·</p> <p>προορώμην τὸν κύριον ἐνώπιόν μου διὰ παντός, ὅτι ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἐστὶν ἵνα μὴ σαλευθῶ.</p> <p>26 διὰ τοῦτο ἠὺφράνθη ἡ καρδία μου καὶ ἠγαλλιάσατο ἡ γλῶσσά μου, ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἡ σὰρξ μου κατασκηνώσει ἐπ' ἐλπίδι,</p> <p>27 ὅτι οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχὴν μου εἰς ἄδην οὐδὲ δώσεις τὸν ὄσιόν σου ἰδεῖν διαφθοράν.</p> <p>28 ἐγνώρισάς μοι ὁδοὺς ζωῆς, πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου.</p>	<p><sup>8</sup> προορώμην τὸν κύριον ἐνώπιόν μου διὰ παντός, ὅτι ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἐστὶν, ἵνα μὴ σαλευθῶ.</p> <p><sup>9</sup> διὰ τοῦτο ἠὺφράνθη ἡ καρδία μου, καὶ ἠγαλλιάσατο ἡ γλῶσσά μου, ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἡ σὰρξ μου κατασκηνώσει ἐπ' ἐλπίδι,</p> <p><sup>10</sup> ὅτι οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχὴν μου εἰς ἄδην οὐδὲ δώσεις τὸν ὄσιόν σου ἰδεῖν διαφθοράν.</p> <p><sup>11</sup> ἐγνώρισάς μοι ὁδοὺς ζωῆς, πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου, τερπνότητες ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ σου εἰς τέλος.</p>	<p>8 שׁוֹיְתִי יְהוָה לְנִגְדִי תִמְּיֵד כִּי מִיְמֵינִי בְּלֹא־מֶזֶט:</p> <p>9 לָכֵן   שָׂמַח לְבִי וַיִּגַּל כְּבוֹדִי אֶף-בְּשָׁרִי יִשְׁכֵּן לְבַטַּח:</p> <p>10 כִּי   לֹא-תַעֲזֹב נַפְשִׁי לְשֹׂאֵל לֹא-תִתֵּן חֲסִידֶיךָ לְרֵאוֹת שְׁחָת:</p> <p>11 תּוֹדִיעֵנִי אֶרֶח חַיִּים שְׁבַע שְׁמָחוֹת אֶת-פְּגִיךָ נְעֻמֹת בְּיְמֵינֶךָ נִצַּח:</p>

## Acts 2:24–28

Having described the way in which God showed his approval of Jesus by giving him the ability to do mighty works and then deliberately let him be put to death, Peter states that God raised him from the dead. This simple statement (*anestēsen*) is then expanded by the phrase “freeing him from the agony of death”—literally, “by loosening the pangs of death” (*lysas tas ōdinas tou thanatou*). The word “pangs” normally refers literally to the pains of childbirth, which may seem to be a strange metaphor to use of death (even a death as painful as crucifixion), and the choice of verb also is unusual. There is a parallel phrase in Job 39:2 LXX: “Have you counted their months filled with bringing forth [i.e., until the time of gestation is complete], have you loosened their pangs?” The point seems to be that Job is unable to count up the days of gestation for mountain goats and then cause their birth pangs to start or act as midwife and bring their pangs to an end. The nineteenth-century scholar F. Field noted that the verb *lyō* can mean “to bring to an end.” So the metaphor as used by Peter would refer to God bringing the pains of death to an end, but he uses it because out of the death comes a kind of rebirth to life for Jesus. Reese (1969: 105–7) is skeptical of this explanation because in his view there is no evidence for the concept of a birth out of death and for a corresponding interpretation of resurrection.

Luke has used an expression that occurs in the LXX, but without reference to the particular passage where it occurs. He may have been guided to it by the use of *ōdines* in Ps. 17:5–6 LXX (18:4–5 ET [cf. 2 Sam. 22:6]). There the MT has “cords” (cf. NIV, NRSV); an unvocalized Hebrew *ḥbl* could have been read in the LXX as *ḥēbel* (“pang”) instead of as *ḥebel* (“cord, bond” [for this meaning, see 1QH<sup>a</sup> XI, 28]). However, there is no need for the explanation given by some scholars that Luke was misled by this confusion, nor do we need the elaboration of this view by Lindars (1961: 39–40), that Ps. 18:4–5 has been reinterpreted in the light of Ps. 16:6 and then misunderstood by Luke. Barrett (1994–1998: 143–44) thinks that Luke followed Ps. 17:6 LXX (or Ps. 114:3 LXX [116:3 ET]), where, despite the use of “pangs,” the verbs are appropriate for “cords,” and this led Luke to use a verb appropriate for “cords.” Hanson (1980: 150–55) argues that Luke used verbs that are more appropriate to cords than to pangs, and this indicates that underlying the Greek is a Semitic source that conceived of Christ being delivered from the realm of death by God. Bock (1987: 171–72) argues for the use of a mixed metaphor, with the elements of pain and distress associated with death encircling the psalmist already present in the MT, and the idea of travail leading to birth not being present. The Greek word *ōdin* has a broader meaning of pain in general (Exod. 15:14; Deut. 2:25; Job 21:17), but the Hebrew *ḥēbel* is used only of travail.

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<sup>1</sup>G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 536.

In any case, Jesus could not be held captive by death for long. Why not? Peter answers by citing what David said about him. Again we have a lengthy quotation, from Ps. 16:8–11 (15:8–11 LXX), following the wording of the LXX precisely but omitting the last line of the psalm (“pleasures at your right hand forever”). **But the LXX is not identical with the MT.**

**MT**

I have set Yahweh before me continually;  
because he is at my right hand,  
I shall not be moved.  
Therefore my heart was glad,  
and my glory rejoiced;  
also my flesh will rest in confidence.  
For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
you will not give your holy one to see the  
pit/destruction.  
You will show me the path of life;  
there is fullness of joy with your face,  
pleasures at your right hand forever.

**LXX/Acts**

I saw the Lord before me continually;  
because he is at my right hand,  
so that I may not be moved.  
Therefore my heart was glad,  
and my tongue rejoiced;  
also my flesh will dwell in hope.  
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
nor will you give your holy one to see  
corruption.  
You have made known to me paths of life;  
you will fill me with joy with your face,  
pleasures in your right hand forever.

In the MT Ps. 16 (15 LXX) is ascribed to David. It is a prayer for help from God (16:1) that is based upon David’s relationship with God and an affirmation of his commitment to God (16:2–6). This becomes a statement of praise to God and confidence in him (16:7–11), and it is this latter section that is cited here. The psalmist has placed Yahweh before himself; the LXX “I saw” (*proorōmēn*) is an interpretation of the Hebrew “I set.” The implication is that he continually trusts in God and obeys him. With a shift of metaphor, he declares that Yahweh is at *his* right hand, the place where a helper would be (cf. expressions about God giving help with his right hand). (More commonly we hear of sitting at the right hand of Yahweh; the thought of the privileges enjoyed by a person sitting at the right hand of a king is used in 16:11b, but is not in mind at this point.) Consequently, he can be confident that he will not be affected by any opposition. According to the usual interpretation, David here is speaking not in his own person, but rather as the Messiah, who refers to the help that God will give him (throughout his life and not simply in relation to his death [see Pesch 1986: 1:122]). A different interpretation is offered by Moessner (1998: 223–29), who argues that the “Lord” who is at David’s right hand to help him in his distress is none other than the Messiah. On this view, the citation is of David speaking in his own person (see further commentary on Acts 2:27 below).

Such a person can be glad and rejoice (16:9). Here the MT has “my glory” (*kēbôdî*), a term that can be used for a person’s inner being (cf. Ps. 7:5: “me” [NIV], “my soul” [NRSV]); consequently, the suggestion that originally the very similar “my liver” (*kēbēdî*) may have stood here (cf. Lam. 2:11 MT; and see the LXX) is unnecessary. The

NIV here follows the LXX's "my tongue" (*hē glōssa mou*) without indicating that this differs from the MT. In poetic parallelism David then declares that his body (lit., "flesh") will rest secure (note the change of tense). The Hebrew *lābetah* is rendered "in hope" (*ep' elpidi*) in the LXX, but both forms may imply trust in Yahweh, who raises the dead (see Rese 1969: 56–57). David will not fear what can happen to him in the future.

By way of explication he adds that God will not abandon his life (*nepeš*) to Sheol; he will not let his faithful one (i.e., the psalmist) experience corruption (*šahat*; this normally means "grave, pit," but it also can have the abstract sense of "destruction"). Taken in its context, this need be no more than an expression of assurance that Yahweh will preserve him from dying, at least for the time being (the idea of never dying was not entertained). In the LXX "Sheol" is naturally rendered by *hadēs*, and *šahat* is rendered by *diaphthora*, "corruption" (Haenchen [1971: 182n1] unnecessarily claimed that the LXX misread Heb. *šahat* as *šihēt*). Hence it has been argued that whereas the MT refers only to deliverance from premature death, the LXX envisages deliverance from the corruption that follows death (Barrett 1994–1998: 147, following Benoit). Consequently, an interpretation in terms of resurrection is possible only on the basis of the LXX (and therefore could not have been made by Aramaic-speaking early believers [see Rese 1969: 57–58]). However, it may be fairer to say that this rendering simply made it marginally easier to interpret the psalm as referring to the actual destruction of the human body in the grave (see Bock 1987: 175–76).

Finally, Yahweh will make known to him a path that consists in life (16:11)—that is, fullness of life and enjoyment (Bock [1987: 176–77] notes that the MT might be expected to mean the kind of life required by God that leads to eternal life). He will experience joy in the presence of Yahweh, and for the person at Yahweh's right hand there are pleasures forever. (This final clause is not included in the citation in Acts; Rese [1969: 55–56] accounts for this by suggesting that the Holy Spirit is one of the "pleasures," but it is poured out by Jesus rather than remaining at Yahweh's right hand!) All of this, then, can be understood to refer to a long life in which the psalmist experiences the goodness of God.

But let us see how the psalm is understood here. Peter starts from the acknowledged facts: (1) David did indeed die; (2) David knew that one of his descendants would be enthroned by God because God had sworn that this would happen (there is a clear verbal allusion to Ps. 132:11–12; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Ps. 89:3–4, 35–37). The fact that David had prophetic knowledge (Acts 2:30a) presumably applies not to his knowledge about his descendant (2:30b), but rather to his own statement about the Messiah (2:31). Therefore, Ps. 16 seems to be understood as a statement by this descendant that is voiced by David. Since David could not be talking about himself in these verses (because he himself died and suffered corruption), he must have been speaking prophetically in the first person on behalf of somebody else. Following Goppelt (1982: 122–23), Rese (1979: 76) holds that the usage is not so much prophetic (promise and fulfillment) as typological in that in what David says he is stating a pattern that is true in the case of the Messiah (although it

was not true of himself); the psalm thus provides the authoritative language for explaining the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But is it appropriate to use the term “typological” of a statement that was not true of the “type” himself?

An alternative explanation is that the psalm is being understood of David speaking of himself and saying that the Lord (= the Messiah) is there to help him (2:25); he lives in hope because God will not abandon his soul to death (2:27a) nor let his Holy One (= the Messiah) suffer corruption (2:27b). David suffers in solidarity with the Messiah and rests his hopes on him (Moessner 1998: 226). This attractive proposal faces some problems. There is the question whether non-Greek-speaking Christians would have interpreted Yahweh as a reference to the Messiah (2:25): would this interpretation be possible only on the basis of the Greek text? And there is the difficulty that Hebrew poetic parallelism would strongly suggest that “my soul” and “your holy one” (2:27) must refer to the same person rather than to David and the Messiah respectively. Certainly by 2:31 it would seem that both parts of the verse are understood to refer to Jesus (as Moessner [1998: 228] agrees).

It is implicit in Peter’s argument that when Jesus was seen by his followers as raised from the dead, it was his actual physical body that had been raised (so that his tomb was left empty) and exempted from physical decay. That is to say, what the psalm said is seen to fit what was known about Jesus by actual observation: he came alive after dying, and his body evidently had not decayed.

For what purpose has Peter used this psalm? One result is to explain why it was impossible for Jesus to be held prisoner by death. Jesus had the promise of God that he would not let his faithful one decay in the grave. But the other result, and the more significant one, is to claim that if what happened to Jesus fits what David prophesied in the psalm, then Jesus must be the Messiah. Dupont (1979: 109) expresses the point precisely:

It is often asserted that Peter desires to prove that Jesus has really risen from the dead, but that is obviously inaccurate, for Peter presupposes the resurrection as a datum of faith. What Peter wishes to establish is rather the fact that Jesus, having really risen from the dead, is truly the Messiah of which the psalm speaks.... The resurrection owes its value as a sign precisely to the oracle of the psalm which announced that the Christ would rise.

The inevitable modern question is, Does this use of the psalm “work”? (1) So far as first-century people were concerned, the Davidic authorship of the psalm was unquestioned (cf. the psalm’s heading: “A Miktam of David”). (2) The psalm appears to say “You will not let me die,” but Peter takes it to mean something more like “You will not let me remain dead once I have died.” The psalm is thus understood to refer to a person, once dead, not being left in death and suffering the consequent decay of the body. In favor of this interpretation is the way that the last verse of the psalm appears to refer to experiences in the presence of God that follow death, unless we take the reference to be a metaphorical one to the experience of joy in the period that follows deliverance from premature death. (3) The former interpretation of the psalm would be consistent with

David's own experience. Only the latter requires that it be applied to somebody else who was resurrected. (4) The promises of an enthroned descendant of David appear to refer to one of his immediate offspring, Solomon, rather than to a distant descendant or ruler (the Davidic descent of Jesus is not in fact brought into the discussion here). However, it is obvious that Solomon and all David's subsequent descendants had died like David himself (2:29), so the argument about David's descendants is in fact concerned with the continuation of his line beyond his immediate descendants, and therefore Peter's interpretation in a wide sense in 2:30 is sufficiently plausible.