

PAUL'S USE OF PSALM 68:18 IN EPHESIANS 4:8

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The use of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers continues to be one of the most difficult areas in the field of hermeneutics. Theological overtones of Messianic interpretations frequently make this area of exegesis problematic for those who seek to follow the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. Many of these problems of interpretation are due to an inability to understand the methods of exegesis used in the New Testament.¹

Since the discovery of the Qumran material, the *peshet* approach has become a popular method of handling difficult New Testament quotations. This is especially true in Matthew.² It is tempting to automatically find a *peshet* treatment being used where textual deviation, or a "this is that" type of treatment is given to an Old Testament text. In the present discussion of Paul's hermeneutical principles, we shall look at: (a) the problems raised by Paul's use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8; (b) the meaning of Psalm 68:18; and (c) the exegetical principles used by Paul when quoting Psalm 68:18.

I. PROBLEMS RAISED BY PAUL'S USE OF PSALM 68:18 IN EPHESIANS 4:8

Paul's background in Judaism naturally leads one to expect Jewish exegetical methods in his writings. The interpretations and teachings of Christ and the early church also influenced his thinking. As Paul wrote, an Old Testament text which seemed relevant to the subject under consideration would be remembered. If he were taught or had seen the allegorical method used by the early church preachers, apologists, and interpreters, his mind from time to time would recall the method used and the interpretation. If a passage was Messianic, he would use it in that way. Paul's genius and the inspiration he received through the Holy Spirit also brought to his consciousness new relationships between the

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¹For a treatment of the exegetical patterns used in the New Testament and the Jewish contemporaries of Christ and Paul see R. N. Longenecker, "Can we Reproduce the Exegesis of the NT?", *Tyndale Bulletin*, 21 (1970) 3-38 and E. E. Ellis, "Midrash, Targum and the New Testament," *Noetestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of M. Black* (1969), pp. 61-69.

²K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew*, 1954; R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1967.

Scripture of his day and what he was writing.

Paul's awareness of the word "gifts" in Psalm 68:18, for some reason, caused him to use this verse as a proof of his statement in Ephesians 4:7 that "each one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." Earle Ellis states that Paul, for exegetical purposes, gave a free rendering of his Hebrew text. He classifies this as a *midrash peshet*.³ Barnabas Lindars, after comparing other passages dealing with the giving of the Spirit,⁴ concludes that there is an "interpretive motive" behind the modification of the text, and classifies Paul's quotation as a *midrash peshet*.⁵ The observation of C. H. Dodd that, "Paul in the main tries to start from an understanding of the biblical text just as it stands in its context,"⁶ cautions us against any hasty acceptance of the use of the *peshet* method by Paul. Although certain of the Jewish Christians may have been influenced by the examples of their contemporaries at Qumran, Paul's exegesis shows quite strongly the influence of his Pharisaic education. The examination of the variants found in the quotation of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 will enable us to see the approach and methodology used by Paul in this passage.

The Problem of the Text: The citation of Psalm 68:18 does not correspond exactly to the Massoretic text or the Septuagint. The Hebrew text of Psalm 68:19a reads, "You ascended to the heights, You led captive captives, You received gifts among men." The last half of the verse, "even among the rebellious also, that the Lord might dwell among them," is not quoted by Paul in Ephesians 4:8. The Greek translation of Psalm 67:19a translates the Hebrew very literally.⁷ The quotation in Ephesians 4:8 is altered to read, "When He ascended to the heights, He led captive captives, and He gave gifts to men."⁸ The major problem which needs clarification is the change of *elabes* "You received" to *edoke* "He gave."

Various attempts have been made to solve this problem. Chrysostom says that it is no problem, "this (meaning the word 'receive') is the same as that (meaning the word 'gave')."⁹ Thackeray¹⁰ and

³E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 14, 144.

⁴Acts 2:33; 5:31; I Thess. 4:8; I Cor. 12:7, etc.

⁵B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (Westminster, 1961), p. 53.

⁶C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scripture* (Nisbet, 1952), p. 23.

⁷A. Ralphs, *Septuaginta*, Vol. II. p. 69.

⁸The variants in the Greek text of the Psalm of *anabas* in Vaticanus (*anabe* in Sinaiticus) and *exmaloteusen* and *anthropois* in Sinaiticus may explain some of the minor alterations.

⁹J. Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh, 1883), p. 282. This was also the view of Ambrosiaster, Beza, Bengel, and others.

¹⁰H. St. J. Thackeray, *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Judaism* (London, 1900), p. 182.

Abbott¹¹ follow the suggestion of Hitzig, that the thought of God receiving gifts is not consistent with the character of God. This led to the mental rearrangement of the letters of *laqah* "he took, received" to *halaq* "he divided, gave a portion." H. Meyer¹² and J. Eadie¹³ claim for *laqah* a proleptic sense which includes the idea of taking for the purpose of giving.

The textual evidence of the Targum¹⁴ to Psalm 68:18, "thou didst give gifts to the sons of men," and the reading of the Peshitta, *weyahabte* "you gave," are used by some to explain the reading in Ephesians. Paul is said to have used a variant text popular among the Jewish interpreters of his day. F. W. Beare concludes that Paul "first adopts a form of text which was current among them, and then follows it by an arbitrary midrashic interpretation ... the true sense of the Psalm ... is completely disregarded."¹⁵ In contrast to this solution, the grammatical-historical exegete uses the "true sense of the Psalm" as a control factor to help him understand its usage in the New Testament. If Paul's method was to use the Scripture in light of its historical context, then the text of Ephesians does not disregard the meaning the Psalmist was trying to communicate.

The Problem of Meaning: Expositors and exegetes disagree concerning the meaning of "He led captive captives" and "He gave gifts to men." Theodoret, Justin Martyr, Jerome, etc. interpret the reference to captives, as being a description of redeemed men who are taken by Christ out of the devil's grasp. Others go to the opposite extreme and identify the captives as the enemies of Christ who were destroyed at the cross; namely, Satan, sin, and death.¹⁶

Commentators have equal difficulty in understanding the "gifts" mentioned. Are these spiritual gifts related to one's calling (I Corinthians 12), are the gifts men who are redeemed, or is the gift singular, that is, the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33)? The meaning that these phrases have in Psalm 68:18 will aid in the proper interpretation of Ephesians 4:8. If it does not clarify the meaning we are left with the possibility that Paul used the *peshet* approach, or that he disregarded the original context and left us with no control factor to aid us in our interpretation.

The Problem of Hermeneutics: Why and how does Paul use Psalm

¹¹T. K. Abbott, *The Epistle to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, (I.C.C.) (New York, 1905), p. 113.

¹²H. A. W. Meyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Hand Book of the Epistle Ephesians* (New York, 1884), p. 445.

¹³Eadie, *loc. cit.* Also supported by Ellicott, Macpherson, Hodge, etc.

¹⁴G. B. Caird, "The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4, 7-11," *Studia Evangelica*, II, ed. F. L. Cross (1964), p. 540-45.

¹⁵F. W. Beare and T. O. Wedel, *The Epistle to the Ephesians (The Interpreter's Bible)* Vol. X (New York, 1953), p. 688.

¹⁶The view of Chrysostom, Calvin, Bengel, Eadie, and Hodge. See also Col. 2:15.

68:18? Can we say that "the Psalm, and especially verse 18, had a Messianic reference, and bore within it a further, fuller, and deeper meaning,"¹⁷ or that "the passage is plainly Messianic"?¹⁸ Is the Psalmist giving us a prophecy of what Christ would do, or what God had done? Beare finds the clue to Paul's hermeneutics in the traditional association of Psalm 68 in Judaism to the festival of Pentecost which commemorated the giving of the Torah. When the church received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, it was quite natural to transfer the application of this Psalm to Christ, who gave the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Lindars suggests that there may be an allusion to Jesus as the New Moses.²⁰ Although it has been said that Paul gives us a *midrash pesher*, a reinterpretation of Pentecost, and a misinterpretation of Psalm 68:18 which completely disregards the sense of the original, a great deal of the confusion is caused by an inadequate understanding of the Psalm quoted. If its meaning is not clear, there is no justification for any conclusion concerning Paul's hermeneutics.

II. THE MEANING OF PSALM 68:18

The history of the interpretation of Psalm 68 is very complex and contradictory. Almost all the commentaries complain of the corrupt and confused nature of the text, which contains several words and forms which are found only in this Psalm. The unique spellings are made more difficult by the abrupt shifts in the thought pattern, and the inclusion of several different styles of expression. Although the Psalm was once ascribed to a Maccabean period,²¹ the use of the Ugaritic material by Albright and others has pushed the date of this Psalm back to the days of David and Solomon.²² The shifts in thought led Hans Schmidt to find sixteen independent short songs collected into a series for liturgical purposes.²³ Albright, on the basis of Sumerian and Akkadian models which were known to the biblical writers,²⁴ identifies thirty *incipits* or

¹⁷C. J. Ellicott, *A Commentary, Critical and Grammatical on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Andover, 1862), p. 90.

¹⁸R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Columbus, 1946), p. 518.

¹⁹Beare, *op. cit.*, p. 689.

²⁰Lindars, *op. cit.*, p. 59. n1; A. T. Hanson, *Studies in Paul's Technique and Theology* (London, 1974), p. 152.

²¹Paul Von Haupt, "Der Achtundsechzigste Psalm," *AJSL*, 23 (1906-7), 220-40; B. Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (Tübingen, 1922), 174; W. R. Taylor, *The Book of Psalms, (Interpreter's Bible)* (Abingdon, 1955), p. 354.

²²W. F. Albright, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems (Ps. LXVIII)," *HUCA*, XXIII (1950-51), 1-39.

²³Hans Schmidt, *Die Psalmen (Handb. Z. A. T.)* (Tübingen, 1934), pp. 125-31.

²⁴Albright cites Ex. 15:21; I Sam. 18:7; Is. 23:16; Ps. 68:2 *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8 n. 17. For Sumerian catalogues see note 19 and S. N. Kramer, "Two Sumerian Catalogues," *BASOR*, 88 (1942), 1-19.

beginnings of poems. Because there are several seemingly diverse songs within the Psalm, exegetes were enabled to find the historical context and purpose of the Psalm in quite different situations. Generally these can be put into four categories. The Psalm is (a) an eschatological vision of hope for man's future;²⁵ (b) a song of triumph after some great military victory;²⁶ (c) a song to celebrate the kingship of God at the covenant festival when God was enthroned;²⁷ and, (d) a direct prophecy of Christ and his coming kingdom.²⁸

The Psalm itself can be divided into two sections: 1-19 reminisces concerning God's triumphs in the past, while 20-35 reveals His greatness and expected triumphs in the future. When the structure and words of the Psalm are analyzed, the centrality of the theophany is discovered. The militaristic language is a frequent poetic metaphor which should not be taken too literally. The scope is much broader and the imagery is robbed of its focal point (the entrance of God into his sanctuary in Zion) if the Psalm is interpreted merely as a hymn of praise concerning a military victory.²⁹ The presence of God prior to His dwelling in His sanctuary in Zion is pictured first by repeating the call connected with the lifting up of the ark (Numbers 10:35—although the ark is not mentioned).³⁰ The fact that this configuration of God precedes the history of the exodus and wilderness wanderings (7-10), is additional warning to let the poetic thought of God's presence, not the ark, be found in the historicized images employed. Psalm 68:1-2, which is similar to Micah 1:2-4, is a revelation of a theophany which is attended by singing and praise to God who is in His holy habitation (68:6).

The praises of God are naturally associated with His acts and the fact that He "went before His people" (68:7). From the exodus and wilderness period of Israel's history, the Psalmist chooses His appearance at Sinai where the heavens dropped and the earth quaked (68:8). God's hand defeated the Canaanites and He chose to put His sanctuary in Zion. Accompanied by myriads of heavenly hosts, the theophany ascended to the heights, led captive captives, received gifts among men, even from the rebellious also, that the Lord God might

²⁵H. Gunkel-Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1933), p. 345.

²⁶The most popular view, but there is no unanimity as to which battle.

²⁷Hans Schmidt, T. Gaster, A. A. Anderson, A. Weiser, S. Mowinckel, etc.

²⁸Many of the early Church Fathers. J. J. S. Perowne, *The Book of Psalms* (Andover, 1891), pp. 472-474 gives an orderly presentation of many of these views.

²⁹Holidays set aside to celebrate democracy, do so by recounting past victories at war, include services around significant historical sites, and usually are capped off by speeches about the great future which lies ahead. But the focal point is the achievement of democracy, and to understand the imagery literally would be an error. Taking the imagery of Psalm 68 literally as a hymn of military victory is to see the picture, but to be ignorant of its meaning.

³⁰This omission weakens considerably the view that this Psalm celebrates the dramatic processional of the ark into the Temple.

dwell among them (Ps. 68:18). This concluding verse is followed by a hymn of praise, "Bless the Lord" (19a) which parallels verse 35, the final stich of the second half of the Psalm.

Verses 19b-23, which give praise to God the present Saviour and Deliverer, are followed by what is often believed to be a cultic procession of the ark and the people of Israel at the annual enthronement festival where God as King enters His sanctuary.³¹ This is partially due to the translation of *halikoteka* (68:24) as "Your procession." The verb does not refer to a procession but to the movement and presence of God in past and present history which is revealed in acts of mercy (68:19-20, 28), judgment (68:21), and particularly the theophany (68:1, 8, 16-18, 35). The description of the singers, musicians, and maidens is that of an anthem being alternately sung and played on instruments to the beat of tambourines. The final section foresees the eschatological period in which God is in His temple in Jerusalem and has universal dominion over all kings and kingdoms.

The specific occasion for the Psalm is not obvious. It may be a song of praise which was used after the ark was placed in the inner sanctuary of Solomon's temple (II Chronicles 5-6). At the feast celebrated in the seventh month the ark was placed by the Levites in the Holy of Holies (5:7). The Levitical singers and musicians praised God (5:12), and suddenly "the glory of the Lord filled the house of God" (5:14). Although Psalm 68 is not identical to Psalm 132 which appears to have been used at this occasion, its focal point, is the same.³²

The present interpretation of Psalm 68:18 is based on the following considerations: (a) God's stay at His sanctuary is preceded by His ascension and the taking captive of certain persons (18a). (b) The gifts received made it possible for God to remain in His sanctuary among His rebellious people (18b). Logically (a) comes before (b). Who are the captives mentioned in 18a? Those whom God captured for Himself are Israelites who were often rebellious (68:5-6, 18b).³³ The captives can be more specifically identified, as a group of Israelites who had something to do with His ascension up on high and His continued residence there. The following reference to the Levites in Numbers 8 verifies that the Psalmist was thinking of them. The Levites were taken from among the sons of Israel (Num. 8:6), they were separated from among the sons of Israel (8:14), for "the Levites shall be mine" (3:45, 8:14). The purpose for which the Levites were taken captive and ordained were: "that they might be able to perform the service of the Lord" (8:11) and "to make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel" (8:19) so that the Lord God might dwell among them. When Israel rebelled against her God, and her

³¹G. H. Davies, "The Ark in the Psalms," *Promise and Fulfilment* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), pp. 56-57.

³²Compare Psalm 132:8 with II Chron. 6:41.

³³The term rebellious or stubborn characterizes much of Israel's history. Deut. 21:18; Ps. 78:8; Is. 30:1; 65:2; Jer. 5:23; Hos. 4:16. Albright says, "I have no idea what to do with them:", referring to Psalm 68:18b. *op. cit.*, p. 26. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 358 concludes that the rebellious are the Jebusites.

people and priest no longer came to Him for forgiveness, He departed from His dwelling place (II Chron. 7:19-20).

The identification of the gifts received in 18b is dependent on how *ba'adam* "among men" is rendered. M. Dahood reconstructs the phrase on the basis of T. Gaster's suggestion, and reads "from their hands."³⁴ In Ugaritic and Hebrew, *b* can mean "from", but the Septuagint and Psalm 68:17, ("among them") are against this option. It is certainly not appropriate to suggest that gifts of tribute from captured enemies would influence God's stay in His abode.³⁵ The objection frequently raised, that the gifts cannot be men, is contrary to Isaiah 66:20-21: "Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the Lord ... I will also receive some of them for priests and for Levites says the Lord." The Levites were taken or received from among the sons of Israel as captives for his service, (Numbers 8:6, 16, 18) and are even referred to as "gifts" in Numbers 8:19a: "And I have *given* the Levites as *gifts* to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation, and to make an atonement for the children of Israel." The Levites are referred to as gifts taken and given in Numbers 18:6, "And behold, I have *taken* your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; to you they are *given* as a *gift* for the Lord, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation." The captives are the gifts. Captives are taken and gifts given, but both the captives and the gifts are the Levites.³⁶

III. THE EXEGETICAL PRINCIPLES USED BY PAUL IN EPHESIANS 4:8

Our approach to the Scriptures today is quite different from Paul's. This is not only due to the rise of rationalism and the wide use of the critical method, but also the existence of the second or New Testament. Paul did not know of the "Old" Testament, for the "Old" was living reality, the basis of much of what he wrote and preached. Paul did know of Christ, and this new dimension added to his understanding of his Scriptures because it enabled him to see the fulfilment of prophecy. But Paul's writings which are an expression of his training and faith, demonstrate that his use of Scripture is much broader than just a prophecy-fulfilment concern.

Ephesians 4:8 demonstrates Paul's ability to use analogy as an effective principle of teaching. The principle of analogy is the heart of poetry and many prophetic utterances. (It has for too long been

³⁴M. Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100 (Anchor Bible)* (New York, 1968), p. 143.

³⁵U. Cassuto, "Psalm LXVIII," *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, Vol. I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973) p. 266. Cassuto makes the point that the Rabbis as well as the text ("You went up" instead of "you returned") are against the military interpretation.

³⁶J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians: Baptism and Pentecost* (Montreal, McGill U. Press, 1968), p. 146. Kirby sees a relationship between Num. 18 and Eph. 4:8 and wonders if the Numbers passage has influenced Paul.

overshadowed by the confusing term typology.)³⁷ The symbols of biblical wisdom express the various aspects of reality through the analogy of movement, size, shape, sound, etc. An analogy is used to express the new on the basis of the known. The power of poetry is often due to its use of illusive analogies which presuppose a psychological appreciation of the author's connotations. These images subtly carry emotional overtones and create moods which frequently lie beyond the scope of those socialized in a foreign context. Yet the enculturated, in a flash, comprehend the intentions of the author.

When the meaning of Psalm 68:18 becomes clear, we then begin to see that Paul's use of this quotation goes beyond the fact that both verses use the word "gave." Paul wants his readers to understand that God has, throughout history, chosen special men as leaders of the community of believers. The grace given to fulfill functional responsibilities, correspondingly fluctuates. Those responsible for teaching, preaching, and other spiritual duties received the necessary gifts from God to meet the needs of those served. These servants were "gifts" of God given to mankind for the purpose of bringing mankind into a relationship in which God dwells in him. Some equipped the saints by building up the body of believers (Ephesians 4:12), some promoted unity, and others were involved with informing the unbeliever of God's Son (Ephesians 4:13). The Levites, in an analogous manner, were taken captive by God as a special group. They were given privileges and responsibilities in order that God might dwell among the Israelites. They are gifts given to minister to the needs of men at the temple. God, in a special way ordained both the Levites and the New Testament preachers, teachers, etc. to be mediators that would bridge the gap between God and man.

The exegesis is not midrashic.³⁸ It does not go beyond the literal sense in an attempt to arrive at a deeper meaning and thus derive an interpretation which is not open to the literal interpreter. The assumption on the part of many, that Paul relied on contemporary texts which used "gave" instead of "received" in Psalm 68:18, is extremely weak. Although the Jacobite recension of the Peshitta does read "gave" the New Testament reading probably has had some influence on that text. The Nestorian MSS do not agree with this reading.³⁹ It is equally vain to suggest that the targum to Psalm 68:18 has influenced Paul's understanding of the verse in Ephesians 4:8. It would be rather tenuous to suggest that the single word "gave" would have been accepted by Paul

³⁷See the discussion of typology in R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, (Inter-Varsity, 1971), pp. 38-43. If one can accept his definition that typology is not predictive, then it is merely the use of a "model, pattern, image" (or analogy) by the New Testament writers to show the correspondence between God's activity in the past and present.

³⁸R. H. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 124-125. He seems to classify it as midrashic. This recent work gives an excellent comprehensive study of New Testament exegesis.

³⁹W. E. Barnes in his edition of the Peshitta Psalms discusses the pros and cons for this reading in his introduction.

since the rest was rejected. Paul's textual deviation is not the *peshet* type of treatment either, but a remoulding of the thought of Psalm 68:18 on the basis of the Scriptural commentary in Numbers 8:6-19; 18:6 which the Psalmist used. The Levites are described as taken from among the sons of Israel and given as a gift to the sons of Israel. Paul takes his quote from the Psalm which he interprets historically, and applies analogously the thought of Numbers 8:19; 18:8 in the words of Psalm 68:18. Paul explains the gifts given to the church by using the example of the Levites who were given to Israel. No messianic arm-twisting or accusations of a complete disregard for the context of the Psalm are in place. The understanding of this text and the hermeneutical methods used are securely linked to the controlling factor of a grammatical-historical understanding of the text quoted.