

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 385

The Psalms and Eschatology

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### Episode Summary

Many Bible readers have wondered, and perhaps suspected, that there is a logic to the ordering of the Psalter, the Book of Psalms. Surely the material cannot be random. In this episode of the podcast we discuss this topic with Dr. David C. Mitchell. Our conversation serves to introduce listeners to Dr. Mitchell's scholarly work that argues that the Psalter is arranged to tell the story of a "once and future" king of Israel, opposition to that king (and his people) by the nations, the death of that king, the king's subsequent rise in victory over the nations, the redemption of Israel, and the re-gathering of the nations to worship Yahweh on Zion at the Feast of Tabernacles.

Book:

David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*. JSOTSup 252; Sheffield Academic Press, 1997; now republished (self-published and available on Amazon)

### Transcript

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 385: The Psalms and Eschatology. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What's going on?

**MH:** Well, not a whole lot in terms of an update as far as our "over/under" bets. [laughs]

**TS:** Uh oh.

**MH:** There's been no movement on either one. So we'll give the "over/under" update here, which is, "Hey, nothing happened."

**TS:** Oh, okay. Well, good. Well, hey, I forgot to ask you last week, y'all had a hurricane. So how did y'all fare during that?

**MH:** You know, Jacksonville basically got passed over. I mean, there were parts that took some damage. But in terms of where I work and where we live, it was pretty much a yawner, which is good. You don't want to have a lot to report on for something like that. So we were okay.

**TS:** Yeah. Well, Mike, I love these types of episodes (interviews), of course, but I feel like this one you found, like, a diamond in the rough. I don't know why, but Dr. David Mitchell doesn't seem to be well known over here, or to the layman, that is.

**MH:** Mm hmm.

**TS:** So I'm kind of excited to see what y'all talk about. So what in the world are we going to be talking about today?

**MH:** We're going to be talking about how the book of Psalms itself structurally (the way it's put together) actually is eschatological. And what we mean by that is, it tells the story of Israel and a messiah being cut off, and then coming back to life, and the salvation of Israel, and the nations being brought back into the fold and worshipping the Lord on Zion. So basically, this whole salvation history retold in very compact form is something that you can discern from the book of Psalms from sort of a birds-eye view. And I'm sure David's going to point out that scholars have thought for a long time that the book of Psalms had a deliberate arrangement. But his work is arguing that it really tells the eschatological story of the messiah that we find in the New Testament. And that's quite unique—his take on it is quite unique. We're going to be talking about his scholarly work. And you're right, there are a lot of people who don't know about it. And I think it's high time that we get some of this material onto the podcast so our listeners know that this kind of material exists, and where to find it.

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**MH:** Well, we're pleased to have Dr. David Mitchell on the podcast. As we've just noted a few minutes ago, our topic is going to be the message of the Psalter, basically eschatology and the book of Psalms. So before we get into the actual questions, David, what we typically do here is, I will ask you to introduce yourself. I mean, you're going to be new to the audience. And frankly, what we do here... Our audience is growing all the time, and there are going to be a lot of people who are new. But for our discussion today, it's really going to focus on one of David's books. And I'll tell the audience which one that is. And then we'll just get into our topic. So David, why don't you just introduce yourself? Who is David Mitchell? All the standard stuff: Where did you get your degrees? What have you done in ministry or scholarship? And just give our audience an idea of who you are.

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5:00

**DM:** Right. Well, here I am. My name's David Mitchell. I'm Scottish, as you maybe hear. And my doctorate in Hebrew Bible is from New College, Edinburgh University. And there I was very capably supervised by Iain Provan, who is now professor in Vancouver, and by professors John Gibson and Peter Hayman and John O'Neill. Apart from that, I have a degree in English Literature and Music, and a Masters in Biblical Interpretation from London School of Theology. Yet, for all this, I haven't done much work as an academic theologian. In fact, for most of my life, I've been a pastoral musician in one way or another, though I was also a schoolteacher for eight years. The reason why is that at the end of my PhD, I looked to the book of Psalms and I said, "What is this teaching me to do?" And everywhere I looked, I saw the director of music. So that was the way I went, not only by choice, just that these were the doors that opened. It's fair to say I did turn down a postdoctoral post, which in retrospect maybe I shouldn't have done. I don't know. But I enjoy being a musical director. I feel incomplete without being able to work with music.

**MH:** Hmm.

**DM:** So for the last 15 years, I've been Director of Music at Holy Trinity Brussels, which is the Anglican Cathedral of the Dioceses of Europe. And in non-Covid times, I am pretty busy there with singers and choirs and orchestras and instruments and music scores and recordings. And I have the great joy of leading big choral orchestral events many times a year. You know, Bach, Handel's Messiah, Mozart masses, Haydn masses, and big Christmas carol services with orchestra. But since Covid struck, live music has basically been reduced to a single instrument (organ or piano) and a cantor or a worship leader. But we hope it's beginning to open out again here in Europe. But that remains to be seen how long that will continue.

**MH:** Wow. Well, boy, I'm not going to rabbit trail here, but you mentioned Peter Hayman. I didn't know that he was one of your professors. He wrote an article that was really helpful and I think influential for my thinking when I was in graduate school. It was the one on "Is Monotheism a Misused Term in Jewish Studies?" or Biblical Studies, or something like that. So I do a lot with Divine Council, divine plurality material. And so that was an important article. I guess the best thing I can say about it is, it was honest. [laughs] It was honest about what you get after the presumed evolution to monotheism. It's like there are a lot of people that just didn't get that memo, and what do we do with that?

**DM:** Yeah. There's a lot of that stuff in the kabalistic literature. Plurality of the Godhead, Metatron...

**MH:** Oh yeah. Yeah, I ran into all that.

**DM:** Peter was very strong on kabala. But he's also the one who helped me to start translating Byzantine period midrashim, so I owe him for that, huh?

**MH:** Yeah. Yeah. That's just a real interesting connection. I did not know that. Wow. Well, what we want to talk about with you today is the Psalms and eschatology, or the eschatology of the Psalter. And really, this is your major academic work, for those in the audience who might want to pick it up. You know, you would get the most out of it if you had some Hebrew, but even if you don't, there's still going to be a lot of really fascinating insights in the book. Do you know if it's available just generally, or is it now you have to get it used?

**DM:** No, no. It's available in paperback.

**MH:** Good.

**DM:** On Amazon. I was actually trying to put up another version today with just...

**MH:** Oh, that's right! Yeah, you took it back and republished it.

**DM:** I republished it myself, yeah. The copyright came back to me in 2003. I realized there was a double page at the beginning and I tried to fix that, and now I'm not getting it uploaded. [MH laughs] But I think the former version is still for sale. And having a double page at the beginning won't hurt you.

**MH:** Sure.

**DM:** So it's still there.

**MH:** Yeah. So the book is David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*. And this was originally published as part of the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* by Sheffield Academic Press back in 1997. And as David just reminded me, he owns the copyright now. He got that back, and so he's republished it. And so it is available on Amazon.

**DM:** There are copies selling for \$2,000. [MH laughs] You don't need to pay that. There's still somebody trying to sell one there for \$900. But I'm also selling the hardback copy if anybody wants it. I think it's £60 or something.

**MH:** Uh huh. That happens to me. You get things that go out of print or change publishers, and then there are these people that either see the old ones as a collector's item, or maybe I signed one or something, and now it's \$1,000 on Amazon. Yeah, don't do that. [laughter] You don't need to do that.

10:00

Alright, so let's just get into this topic. I mean, when I came across this book, I'll admit, in graduate school I didn't spend a lot of time in the Psalter. I did in Psalm 82, obviously, and a few scattered other things. But I never had a course that sort of systematically approached the Psalter at all. And when I saw the title of your book, I thought, "Boy, that sounds interesting." And it really is quite interesting. people in this audience have probably heard that there's some sort of structural logic to the Psalter. That idea is out there, that it's not a random thing that was put together. There's actually some (if you'll pardon the expression) intelligent design behind the thing. And here you go, offering one version of that.

**DM:** Well, yeah, this idea that there is intelligent design is around, but it wasn't always there until, I would say... Well, let's talk about the history. About seven years before I began my research, a U.S. scholar, Gerald Wilson, published a book called *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. And Wilson did two things. He devoted a lot of attention to the layout of the Psalms and he showed that the Psalms collection was not just random, but carefully structured. Now he wasn't the first person to do this. Delitzsch had made some comments along this line, and one or two others, and Westermann. They talked about concatenation—how similar psalms are together. But Wilson was the first person to say, "No, the whole book is a big metanarrative." And then he concluded that the big story was actually that the house of David had failed and was finished and Israel must trust in God alone. And Wilson concluded that the Psalms were a kind of historical oratorio, like Elijah. Now I agreed with Wilson's first point. I was already seeing something of the careful structure of the Psalms. And Wilson's evidence confirmed it to me. And I agreed it was like an oratorio, which is, you know, a complete work composed out of small sections. But I disagreed completely with his view that the house of David was finished. It was at odds with the Bible. It was at odds with all early Jewish literature. It was at odds with all early Christian literature. Nobody ever said the house of David was finished. They all said, "The son of David is coming."

**MH:** Mm hmm.

**DM:** And when I looked at the narrative of the Psalms, I saw exactly the same thing. The Psalms narrative moves through a sequence of troubles and reverses until the appearance of a hero like David, who comes to set up his throne on Zion and to gather Israel and receive the homage of the nations. So I agreed with Wilson that the book of Psalms was an oratorio, but unlike Wilson, I said it was an oratorio like messiah, not like Elijah. So I saw it as future; he saw it as past—as retrospective. I saw it as prospective.

**MH:** Yeah. Well that... Boy. That feels so idiosyncratic on his part, as you pointed out, to have the dynasty of David just, "Well, we're done now." [laughs]

**DM:** Yeah.

**MH:** You know? “Wasn’t that a depressing failure?” You know?

**DM:** Exactly. And the really interesting thing is that his own tutor, Brevard Childs, had already made some comments about the book of Psalms being prophetic. But he (Wilson) decided to ignore what Childs had said and went his own way on it.

**MH:** It feels like he’s out there on an island with that conclusion—not just in academia, but what do you do with all the Second Temple period expectation?

**DM:** Yeah, yeah.

**MH:** That seems really odd. So obviously, this is going to go completely in a different direction and be a corrective. So for our audience, I do want to have you define eschatology and maybe you just did it. But when you talk about an eschatological program, is this at the core of what you’re talking about—the Davidic dynasty and its future? Or is it something else? So can you define that term and how it gets used in academic discourse?

**DM:** Yeah. You know, eschatology means “the study of the last things.” But it can mean different things to different people. Some people of an Augustinian background (Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics) might use it for the question of where we go at the end of our mortal life. But I think that is not how most biblical theologians use it. That is certainly not how I use it. I think we should use it to refer to the things that will happen at the end of the age—that is the wars and the conflicts that will come at the end of the age, and the place of Israel and the nations within this scenario, and the coming of the messiah and his kingdom. That’s what I mean by eschatology. And that is what I think most biblical scholars mean by eschatology.

15:00

**MH:** Okay. That’s a good, succinct definition. What’s your basic argument, then? What do you mean by saying that there’s an eschatological program or some eschatological orientation or logic to the Psalms? Just in general terms, how would you describe what it is you’re seeing or trying to get after?

**DM:** Well, I think this deals with the whole question of messianism in the Old Testament, and there are several points here. Old Testament messianism is indeed about the messiah, the righteous king. But there is more to it than that. It always involves a sequence of events. And this isn’t just my idea. I mean, even C.H. Dodd was saying this back in the 1960s, that some of the prophets begin to contain a messianic timetable. And there’s a sequence of events associated with the king, both before and after his appearing. And these events will include the scattering and gathering of Israel, an attack on Israel by foreign nations, the messiah setting up his throne on Zion, and so on. It’s also important to note that this story develops over time, from its beginnings in the book of Moses, through

the major prophets, right down to Zechariah, who is in many ways the sum and the climax of the prophets' message about the messiah. And yet, we can also even say that it has deep, deep roots. Because even the Baal Cycle contains something very similar. I mean, the Baal Cycle is not just one event. It's a whole sequence of events, where Baal has to fight for his holy mountain, and he's dethroned, and he has to fight against death and chaos, and then he finally gains his holy mountain and rules. And the messianic timetable in the Psalms is not dissimilar.

**MH:** Hmm. Now are you saying that... Well, let me ask the question this way. Do you think that the Psalter (the overall book of Psalms) A) presents all these elements sort of randomly or disparately? Or B) presents all these elements in a coherent order? Which of the two?

**DM:** Oh, I think it's a coherent order. I even say that in the abstract of the book, that there's the king and a bridegroom messiah appears and Israel is gathered in, the nations gather for war, the king is cut off, and then Israel is scattered in the wilderness. And then the king reappears from the heavens and there are chants of victory and all the nations go up to worship at the feast of Tabernacles. This is the sequence we see in the book of Psalms.

**MH:** Can you walk us through that? Maybe pick one psalm for each of those elements, or the core elements? Walk us through how this looks.

**DM:** Okay. So the bridegroom king would be Psalm 45, which has some parallels to Zechariah 9—the appearance of the messiah there. And then the king reappears again in Psalm 72, which again has parallels to Zechariah 9. But in between that, yeah, then in Psalm 50, the messiah begins to gather Israel. And then in Psalm 73 to 83 (the Psalms of Asaph), the nations are gathering together for war against Israel. And in Psalm 88 and 89, the king has been cut off. In Psalm 88 he's a man in Sheol and in Psalm 89 there's a lament for the messiah and for the breach of the divine promise in the fact that the messiah has been cut off. In Psalm 90 we get the psalm of Moses, which speaks of Israel in the wilderness. And this develops. There are very important things I could say about Psalm 91 and 92, but I don't think we have the time. The details would be complicated. But finally, in Psalm 110, we have a heavenly king appearing who comes to conquer the earth. And then we have all these cries of triumph in Psalms 111 through to 118. And then there's this long psalm of repentance, Psalm 119, where Israel who has strayed like a lost sheep returns to the Law. And then Psalm in 120 to 134, the Psalms of Ascent are about an ascent to the feast of Tabernacles on Mount Zion, just as we see in Zechariah 14, where all the nations will go up to worship at the feast of Tabernacles on Mount Zion.

20:00

**MH:** Wow. Now since they're all there, all these elements, is this sort of an assistance to dating the Psalms in any way? Or is it just an issue of, you could

have psalms written at disparate times, but somewhere at some point in the history of the collection, you had an editor or an editorial team that was intentionally crafting the book and they just kept adding things in where they belonged? Is that how we should look at it? And there's no way to really construct a chronology as far as composition, but there is a coherent effort once these psalms are collected and put in proper place.

**DM:** I would date the Psalms from... I think the earliest psalm is perhaps Psalm 136. And the latest one is almost certainly Psalm 137. I would say Psalm 136 is perhaps from the time of Joshua, or just afterwards, but before David's kingdom. And Psalm 137 is pretty certainly from the time of the Babylonian exile. So the Psalms are not in chronological order in any sense. We've got the oldest psalm and the youngest psalm shoulder to shoulder. Now, have I lost the question somewhere?

**MH:** Well, what I was wondering... Let's use that as an example. Because if you have a psalm written around the time of Joshua, it's in this final section of these Ascents, going up to Zion to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. You could see thematically that it belongs there. In other words, if thematically it bears a relationship to the other psalms around it...

**DM:** Yes. Exactly.

**MH:** ... it doesn't really matter when it was composed, but the editor is intelligently putting it in its place.

**DM:** Mm hmm. Yes. I mean, it's the hand of the redactor that puts this in order. I mean, some of the Psalms... If I should happen to say that Psalm 136 is the oldest, I'm probably wrong. I think Psalm 90, which is attributed to Moses, looks like it's by Moses. So I'm happy to make that one older. It's the hand of the redactor who puts it all together. And you know, the redactor's important. There were collections of some kind before the redactor ever came along. The Songs of Ascents was a complete collection. That's absolutely clear.

**MH:** Mm hmm. For our audience, the redactor is the person who gave the Psalter its final arrangement.

**DM:** That's right—the editor. And there were probably collections of Asaph's psalms and the sons of Korah psalms. But the one who wove all this into one book was a redactor, and he placed the psalms one after the other to narrate the story. And this probably took place in the early Second Temple period in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., probably in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, but certainly before the Septuagint was translated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., because the Septuagint book of Psalms is pretty much the same as the Hebrew book of Psalms. So we're



dealing with an early thing. I know people have tried to late-date it, and Wilson was one who wanted to date it right into the first century of the Christian period.

**MH:** Oh, wow. Isn't that interesting? [laughs]

**DM:** Yeah. We have so much evidence for the antiquity of the Septuagint. So yeah, I would say 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., certainly by the 3<sup>rd</sup>. So the story of the book of Psalms is bigger than its parts. You can treat each psalm individually. You can read, "The Lord is my shepherd," and it can speak to your soul. You can read, "He will bear you up, and he will command his angels concerning you, to bear you up on their wings," and it will speak to your soul, but the whole story of the book of Psalms is bigger than its parts. And we must recognize that in just the same way the Holy Spirit inspired the psalmists, he also inspired the redactor who took the separate psalms and made them into one book.

**MH:** Yeah. I talk a lot about inspiration in different lectures I do. And you know, the way I typically say this is, every hand who ever touched this thing is operating under the providence of God, the process of inspiration to do the job.

**DM:** Yep.

25:00

**MH:** And whether we can pinpoint, "Oh, well, let's stick a flag here in our timeline and say everything's done now," that's far less important than recognizing that most of the people who touched the text that we have, we'll never know their names, but God used them. He raised them up and he used them to give us this product. And we need to do what we're essentially talking about here: we have to try to look at the text and discern what the point was, what they were trying to communicate—not just in the content of the Psalms, but in this case, the whole structure. You were supposed to be able to detect this. It's not designed to be cryptic. You were supposed to have enough of a command of the Psalter that you could read it through and detect the flow of the story. And somebody had to do that.

**DM:** I think the wise were expected to do that. I don't think everybody was expected to do that.

**MH:** Well, we bear the burden here. [laughs] Because we're a literate society.

**DM:** We're trying to be wise, yeah. Just a little more on the redactor is this business of redactor intent—what the redactor wanted that justifies us taking the Psalms as a prophetic text. You know, someone can say, "The Psalms are not prophetic. Some of them referred to the events of Israel's history. Some of them refer to things that David did or things that Solomon did. But because the redactor gathered all the separate psalms into one book, speaking about the messianic times, that is the basis on which we can interpret each separate psalm

within the book as pointing to that time. On that basis, we can read the whole book of Psalms as a sequence of events, speaking about the messiah and the times of the end. And of course these days, the idea of a messianic metanarrative in the Psalms is pretty widely accepted. But you know, it was when I was faced with Wilson that I had to find the hermeneutical rationale for this interpretation based on redactor intent. So that's how I got there.

**MH:** Let's drill down into one of those elements: the messiah being cut off or stricken. And you referenced Psalm 88 and Psalm 89. Now it is quite fashionable today in academia, and even in what we might call Bible-believing or evangelical... I don't know which term is a good term, but people who take the text seriously for faith and practice. You go out into a Bible college or a seminary and it's very fashionable, even in the believing community, to hear that the idea of a dying and rising messiah is foreign to the Old Testament. And I'll confess, it's one of the most irritating things that I keep running across, obviously because I read this material. But let's take Psalm 88 and Psalm 89. Why would we not read those psalms as a messiah figure being cut off or killed or done away with? I mean, what's your argument there? How would you argue against the trendy, "Oh, the Old Testament doesn't teach this idea?"

**DM:** Well, I would start with places where the death of the messiah is clear. I would think of obviously Isaiah 53, which speaks of an exalted royal figure who is pierced through and buried, who is certainly dead. I mean, he's buried.

**MH:** [laughs] Well, there's *that*. [laughter]

**DM:** And then there's Daniel 9:26, he speaks of the prince messiah. You know? These are his words—the *mashiach nasikh*.

**MH:** And he's cut off.

**DM:** And he's cut off. And likewise, in Zechariah 12 we have this exalted royal figure who is pierced through. So I think there is no question. Of course, people will say, "Well, we can't say Zechariah 12 is a messiah because the word "messiah" is not there." But that seems a bit obtuse. I mean, this is a royal figure. It's in the future. He seems to come from David's line. If he's not... He's some kind of savior. If you don't want to use the word "messiah," use the word "hero." But he is an exalted hero who is pierced through for the sins of Israel.

**MH:** It's actually a... I think it's a... I'll use the word: I think it's kind of a dishonest objection. Because it assumes that, oh, to be talking about a messiah, we have to have that word in every passage.

**DM:** Exactly.

**MH:** Never mind the fact that *mashiach* is going to be connected with other terms (terms of royalty, servant, and whatnot). Like why do we have to have all the terms in every passage? What other point of biblical theology works that way? And the answer would be, “Well, really nothing.” So to me it’s a bit of a disingenuous objection. But yeah, please continue.

30:00

**DM:** No, I agree. And in Genesis 49:24, he’s called the Shepherd Rock, but it’s still about the messiah.

**MH:** Mm hmm.

**DM:** The other passage... We could begin to talk about other passages where the messiah suffers and dies. And for me, one of the big ones is Deuteronomy 33:17. But I think that’s a little bit tricky to bring up here. That’s the one... We’ll be talking about Messiah ben Joseph by and by.

**MH:** Yeah.

**DM:** And we could talk about that there. But that’s the one with the two oxen. And the one is a suffering ox destined to sacrifice, and the other one is a triumphant ox, which is destined to freedom. So that’s the *shor* and the *ra-em*, the sacrificial ox and the wild ox. And I mean, if anybody wants more evidence, there is a dying messiah in Judaism. He is well covered up, but he is undoubtedly there. But again, I think we need to leave that for the Messiah ben Joseph.

**MH:** Yeah, we’ll do that. We’ll have another conversation about that. But let’s go to Psalm 88 and 89. What do you see specifically in these psalms that would echo or be congruent with Isaiah 53 and Daniel 9 and the Zechariah passage?

**DM:** What we see there is, in Psalm 86, we see the messiah (David) surrounded by enemies who are seeking his life. And it’s actually quite a desperate psalm. And he’s surrounded and he sees no way of escape. And then suddenly we jump to Psalm 87, which totally changes the scene. And there’s a picture of all the nations worshiping in Zion. And then we come back to Psalm 88, and here’s this cry of this man who is in Sheol. He has fallen into the world of the dead. And he’s wandering there, God-forsaken. And then, at the end... Then this is followed by Psalm 89 and somebody is crying out to God. He starts by rehearsing God’s promises and his faithfulness and how he said he would never desert the house of David, “and yet you have rejected and cut off your messiah!” And the word “messiah” is perfectly clear there. And the question is, who is he speaking about? And if you want to look for a historical context for it, I think it may be about the situation of Rehoboam, after Shishak’s invasion. But I think the redactor certainly intends it to point to the messiah—the future messiah.

**MH:** Yeah, in Psalm 89, it starts off with reiterating the promise... Again, the verse is right after the Davidic figure is in Sheol.

**DM:** Yep.

**MH:** And so you get to verse 3, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one. I have sworn to David my servant, ‘I will establish your offspring forever.’” So Psalm 89 begins with that. And then, like you said, you get down, and David, “I have found David my servant,” verse 20, “I have anointed him. My hand will be established with him.” And then you keep going on, and David is referred to as Elyon. Okay? He’s going to be set above all the other kings of the earth. And “I will establish his offspring forever,” verse 29. And it’s all this positive stuff, but then it sort of reverts. And now “you have cast off and rejected. You are full of wrath against your anointed.” There you have the *mashiach*.

**DM:** Yeah.

**MH:** “You’ve rejected him.” So it’s almost like there’s this tension of, “Is it over or not? It doesn’t seem like it is, because of these promises,” and so on and so forth. I mean, as a Jew, it would seem to me that it would be very difficult to read that and not see the faithfulness of God elements in the covenantal talk. You know? “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, by which your faithfulness you swore to David,” toward the end of the psalm. Why do you think people resist seeing in this psalm and some of these other passages a dying messiah? And also a rising messiah. What’s the resistance here, academically, do you think? Why?

**DM:** It’s interesting, this. One of the things I think we’re noticing now is that, you know, people, especially people like Boyarin, they’re pointing more and more to how Christianity and Judaism were fundamentally much more similar than we’re being led to believe. And Boyarin now seems willing to admit that some people in Israel believed the messiah would die.

35:00

**MH:** [laughs] That’s nice of him.

**DM:** Yeah.

**MH:** Do you think it’s really as simple as that—that we want to talk about how closely related these two things are? And this dying messiah thing is going to mess it up. It’s going to create friction.

**DM:** Well, I think... Classical Judaism has to reject everything that Christians believe. And therefore, if we say the messiah is going to die, then surely they have to deny that. Because yeah, you know, there’s this wonderful passage in the dialogue with Trypho, where Justin [Martyr] tells Trypho from the Scriptures

that the messiah must die, and Trypho says, “Well, we understand that the messiah has to suffer, and perhaps even die. But we cannot believe that he could ever die a death as shameful as that.”[MH laughs] And I think this is the issue. I think the cross, as Paul says, was just such a scandal to those who couldn’t accept it that they had to deny the sufferings of the messiah altogether. But clearly, in Trypho’s time (or the 2<sup>nd</sup> century), there were Jews who were still willing to admit that the messiah might die. And there’s this wonderful text, *Pesikta Rabbati*. And there we find the messiah hidden under God’s throne, before his Reformation on earth. And he discusses with the Almighty what is going to happen to him when he comes down. And it’s explained to him how he will have to suffer torments and tortures. His death is not explicitly referred to, but I think it’s certainly implied. And this is a Jewish text through and through and through and through. Because throughout *Pesikta Rabbati*, it is full of anti-Christian polemic. It can’t possibly be a Christian text. So this view did continue in Judaism. We know it did. And of course, it continues absolutely in the figure of Messiah ben Joseph. But that’s more than we can discuss here.

**MH:** Let’s say I’m a graduate student and I’m walking into a class on the Psalms or biblical theology or something oriented to messianic profile, or whatever. Why does my professor, who’s a Gentile, speaking to a room full of Gentiles... Why are those sorts of academics prone to deny this? Is it because they want to keep some academic standing with their fellow Jewish colleagues? Or is it something else? Because I just think some of these passages...

**DM:** I think that’s part of it.

**MH:** That’s where I’m driven to. Because I just don’t understand why... Well, let me put it this way. I can understand why they would want to resist being “dogmatic” about some of these Old Testament passages. “Oh, there’s wiggle room here for some other interpretation.” Okay, well, fine. But then when you get into some of this external literature and you have this stream of tradition that, as you just said, it never goes away... How they can sort of pretend that it doesn’t exist and use these categorical statements, like “Second Temple Judaism (or Judaism) never would have taught this idea?” That just seems really bizarre.

**DM:** Yeah.

**MH:** I mean, I don't know any other way to put it.

**DM:** I completely agree. I mean, it’s a denial of the evidence. There is so much evidence that Israel believed the messiah would die. There is so much, that to assert otherwise I think they simply cannot know the evidence. Anybody who looks at the Messiah ben Joseph tradition cannot possibly deny that Judaism believed in a dying messiah. It’s right there in the Talmud. “When messiah ben

David shall see that messiah ben Joseph is dead..." You know? Sukkot 52b. It's there.

40:00

**MH:** Mm hmm. Yeah. Well, we'll need to pick that up at a different conversation. I have one last question on your work in the Psalter. Does your work exist in any other short form? Because you take a lot of the Josephite messiah material that you have published in scholarly journals and then you created a book out of that material, or at least to operate alongside. Do you have your work on the Psalter in any layman's form or a short form where people can access that? We obviously still recommend the book in *this* audience, whether people have Hebrew or not. There are so many insights you can get from the existing book on the Psalter that I highly recommend getting it. Because let's be honest, you're going to look far and wide to find anything else like this. Because most of academia just doesn't want to acknowledge these data. They just don't want to acknowledge them. So we do recommend it. But can people access it in any other form?

**DM:** Just one other comment there. A number of researchers have followed me in this business of there being an eschatological timetable in the Psalms. But the one thing that many of them do seem to drop out on is the question of the death of the messiah. [MH laughs] So there we go.

**MH:** Oh. Oops. It slipped through the net. [laughter]

**DM:** But some follow me a bit closer. Others say I'm reading my Christian suppositions into it. But that's nonsense. I mean, it's already implied in the Baal Cycle. That doesn't mean I'm a pagan. It does mean that Israel saw a sequence of events like the Baal Cycle leading up to the end of the age.

**MH:** Well, for my audience, that's going to warm their heart. Because the serious people in my audience, in book form... *Unseen Realm* is the book I'm known for, but I have a few journal articles where I argue that the vice regency of the Baal Cycle was brought over or adapted in Israel, where you have Yahweh occupying both slots (both the El and the Baal slots). And so you have the deity in human form as being a co-regent that is the same but yet is different than the one at the top. And if you're going to do that with the Baal Cycle, then look at what gets attracted or drawn on with it. You get this whole story about the rise to kingship and becoming lord of the nations (that's a Baal title).

**DM:** Absolutely.

**MH:** So you have all this sort of glommed onto this second figure, who just happens to be God in human form—God as man in the Old Testament, this mysterious figure. And you tie that second person (the second Yahweh, so to speak) back to the Angel of the Lord. And then you see what the New Testament

does with all this. And lo and behold, how did we get to Jesus? There he is. All these things sort of work in tandem. They're a matrix of ideas. And you're just giving it more ammunition here with the Psalter. And so the Baal connection (Baal Cycle), my audience who has read my journal material and the stuff I do in *Unseen Realm*, they're going to have two thumbs up for that. They're going to understand why you're referencing that. Because that becomes part of... It's part of a polemic, sure, but it also helps transmit a set of ideas originally to a Canaanite/Israelite audience. And then it just gets carried through. It just gets carried through. Because you have people in the Second Temple period who... Guess what they're doing? They're reading the Hebrew Bible and they're thinking about it and writing about it. And the New Testament, of course, is part of that. And then when you have Jesus show up, it's, "Okay, this just fills in all the gaps. This gives us our hermeneutic now." So that's a coherent thing for this audience to hear. They're going to understand that and they're going to see how it relates to high Christology. And it's not an elevation of paganism; it's a vehicle through which we can understand how we got to high Christology. So I'm glad to hear that. But I don't want to go on too much of a rabbit trail there. But just to reaffirm for you, you're preaching to the choir here [laughter] when it comes to this sort of thing.

**DM:** Good. You asked me where people should go if they want a bit more information. It's best to go to my website, which is [brightmorningstar.org](http://brightmorningstar.org).

**MH:** That's appropriately name.

**DM:** Yeah. And when they get there, they should find the Message of the Psalter page, under the Publication stamp. There they can find a bit about the book. They can read the front chapter, all of the first chapter. They can download the appendices. It's fair to say that I wrote this book 25 years ago now. And my original hypothesis is unchanged, but I've rethought some details. And these have been published in scholarly papers. And these are also available on my site and in my more recent books. My interpretation of Psalm 110 has changed quite significantly. I spend about 20,000 words on it in my most recent book, *Jesus, the Incarnation of the Word*. I'm also writing on that in a new book, edited by David Howard, which is coming out soon. And that chapter will probably appear on my website.

45:00

**MH:** Is that the David Howard over here at Bethel Seminary?

**DM:** That's right. That's right.

**MH:** Okay. I know him.

**DM:** So there's quite a lot of my work around, just to get a flavor of it. But start with my website.

**MH:** Okay. Well, that's great. So I just want to thank you for being here and spending some time talking with us about the Psalter. Like I said, I don't have a whole lot of experience in it except for some isolated psalms. So it's nice to find somebody who not only has thought deeply in general about the Psalter, but with a specific eye toward how this helps us do biblical theology and helps us think through the metanarrative—the story—and connects the dots between the Hebrew Bible and the Second Temple period and wider Judaism on into the New Testament. So that's sort of the sweet spot here, to help people connect dots and just appreciate the text for what it's trying to get people to think and try to get away from the text as artifact. But getting the nuggets, getting the data points, and being able to connect them. So this is really something that does that. So thanks for sharing your time with us.

**DM:** Thank you for inviting me. It's been a pleasure.

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**TS:** Alright, Mike. Yeah, that is a great interview. I really do love when you do find these scholars and kind of... When you vet a book for us and bring it to us, I think it's fantastic.

**MH:** Yeah. I mean, we're obviously not opposed here to devotional reading of the Psalms. So that ought to be obvious. But that's typically all we think about when it comes to the Psalms. "Oh, this is something I'm going to read when I get up in the morning. And it's a little poetry. It inspires me." And so on and so forth. And the Psalms do all that, and they're supposed to do all that. But to be able to realize that someone put this together intelligently to telegraph the story of messiah. I mean, that's just a next-level way to think about this whole book (the whole book of Psalms). So I'm just hopeful that this exposes just the idea to people, and then they can go up to David's website or perhaps get his book and really do a much deeper dive in it.

**TS:** Absolutely. And we'll have links to his book and website at [NakedBiblePodcast.com](http://NakedBiblePodcast.com). Again, his website is [brightmorningstar.org](http://brightmorningstar.org). But I'll just... Another book that I've got to add to my growing list of stuff that I'll probably never ever read, but at least I'll have it. [laughter] Alright.

**MH:** I've got one of those too. [laughs]

**TS:** I bet. Alright, well, that's a great conversation. And we look forward to having another conversation with Dr. David Mitchell next week. And with that, I want to thank Dr. David Mitchell for coming on, and everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.

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