

## Psalms 49-52, Trial before God

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#### Overview (Figure 1, chart)

The despair of Psalms 42-44 finds its answer in the messianic king of 45 and the divine power demonstrated in 46-48. Now people must answer to this authority (49-52).

#### 49-50, The Summons

Two Levitical psalms (one by the sons of Korah, one by Asaph) summon all peopleS in 49, Israel in 50. Then David's Psalms through 60 deal with those who must give account, starting with David himself.

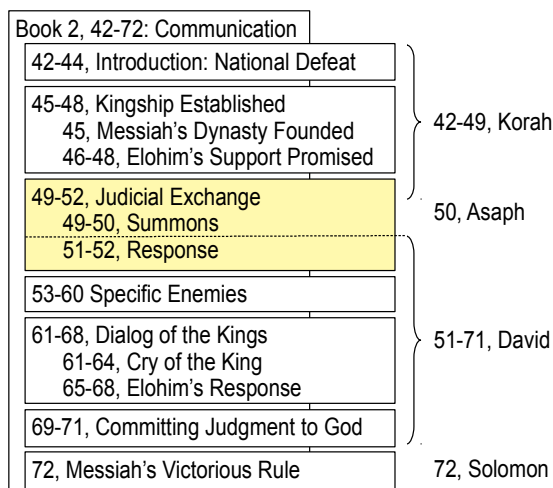


Figure 1: Analysis of Book 2

#### Psalm 49, A Riddle about Life

##### 49:1 A Psalm מזמור (cf. v. 4) for the sons of Korah.

The structure (Figure 2, chart) is dominated by the refrain in vv. 12, 20. This refrain marks the ends of two stanzas, each of which begins with a statement about fear and laments the futility of wealth.

Recognizing these stanzas leaves two paragraphs. The first summons "all peoples" (plural) to hear a "dark saying," or riddle, contained in the refrain: Why is man, in spite of all his glory, in the end no better than a beast? The answer comes in the central paragraph.

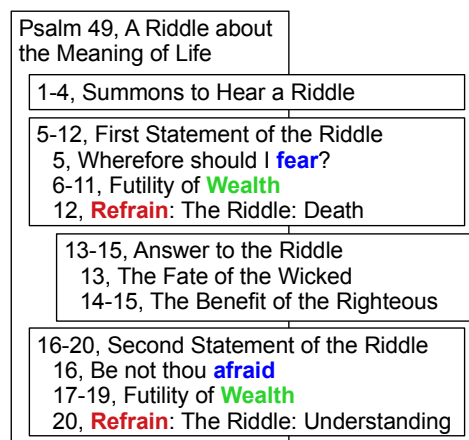


Figure 2: Structure of Psalm 49

#### 1-4, Summons to Hear the Riddle

**Hear this, all ye peoples; give ear, all ye inhabitants of the world: 2 Both low and high, rich and poor, together.**--Note the plural. Like Psalms 45-48, which establishes Messiah's dominion over all the earth, this Psalm reaches beyond Israel to all nations, cultures, and classes.

**3 My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding. 4 I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp.**--He describes what he has to say as a "parable" and a "dark saying."

"Parable" מַשַּׁל is related to a verb that means "to compare," and often describes a saying (like our Lord's parables) that uses one domain (say, a sower and his seed) to illustrate another (preaching the gospel). "Dark saying" חִידָה Strong 2420 describes the riddle that Samson gives his guests:

Jdg 14:14 Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.

In 1 Kings 10:1 the term describes the hard questions that the queen of Sheba brought to challenge Solomon. In both cases, it is an enigmatic saying that the hearer must figure out.

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So the Psalmist offers us a riddle (a “dark saying”) that involves a comparison (a “parable”). We find this riddle in the refrain to the two stanzas, while the answer comes between them. We’ll consider the two outer paragraphs first, then turn to the answer.

### 5-12, First Presentation of the Riddle

**5 Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil, when the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about?**--“Iniquity of my heels” describes wicked people who are following him to attack him. The next verses describe these enemies as the greedy rich.

**6 They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;**--Throughout the Psalms, “trust” בטח Strong 982 is the attitude that the righteous have toward God, but the people in focus here make wealth their God. How effective is this deity?

**7 None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: 8 (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever:) 9 That he should still live for ever, and not see corruption.**--Wealth does not redeem from the inevitability of death. In v. 15, we will learn what does.

**10 For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. 11 Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names.**--In a vain grasp for immortality, they endow their offspring, hoping to survive in their descendants.

**12 Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish.**--“Abide” literally means to spend the night. V. 14 anticipates the morning that awaits the upright, which worshippers of wealth never see. In spite of his wealth and prestige, at the end of the day such a man is no better than a beast, for they both perish. Here is the parable (comparing man and beast), and also the riddle: how can men with all their attainments be no better than animals?

### 16-20, Second Presentation of the Riddle

**16 Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased;**--Again, the stanza starts with fear, rejected even more confidently than in v. 5.

**17 For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him. 18 Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself. 19 He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light.**--Vv. 5-12 described how the rich vainly looks to the *future*, hoping to survive in his children. Here he is doomed to join the *past*, “the generation of his fathers,” who have vainly died before him.

**20 Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.**--V. 12 noted that in spite of his honor, man does not abide, but dies, and thus is like the beasts that perish. Here, in spite of his honor, he has no understanding. Not only does he die, but he doesn’t realize, from the inevitable cycle of death in human experience, the futility of his trust in riches.

Both verses are parables as well as riddles: they compare people with beasts. Both verses use the same word to describe the beasts, but that word can have multiple meanings.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it means “to die,” but in other cases it means “to be silent.” We should probably understand the

<sup>1</sup> Raabe, JBL 110/2 (1991) 213-227.

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first sense in v. 12, and the second in v. 20. Man, in spite of his honor and wealth, is like the beasts. Just as they perish, he cannot abide. Just as they are dumb, he is without understanding. This dual meaning is echoed in 2 Peter, which may have this Psalm in mind.

2Pe 2:9 The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: ... 12 But these, **as natural brute beasts**, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things **that they understand not** (v. 20); and shall **utterly perish** (v. 12) in their own corruption;

So the riddle is: why is man, for all his apparent superiority to the beasts, at the end of the day no better than them, either in his ability to survive death, or in his understanding?

### 13-15, Solution

The repetitions between the two stanzas set these three verses off, and the chiasm structure focuses our attention on them. I suggest that they contain the answer to the riddle. The two instances of “Selah” divide this short paragraph into two parts.

**13 This their way is their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings. Selah.**--First, he condemns the attitude of the wicked as “folly,” the character of the “fool,” the prototypical opposite of the wise man in Proverbs. It is folly to think that the wealth of my descendants can make up for my own decease, especially when I consider the fate of my ancestors.

The next verses contrast these fools twice with another kind of person, Table 1 (chart) who holds the answer to the riddle. Each panel begins with the death of the wicked, but ends with the victory of the upright (14b), those who trust God rather than their wealth to redeem them (15, contrast 7-8). Such people are better than beasts.

	<b>The doom of the godless</b>	<b>The blessing of the righteous</b>
First Cycle	14a Like sheep they are <b>laid in the grave</b> ; death shall <del>feed</del> <b>feed</b> <del>on</del> shepherd them;	14b and the <b>upright</b> shall have dominion over them <b>in the morning</b> ;
Second Cycle	14c and their beauty shall <b>consume in the grave</b> from their dwelling. (contrast v. 11)	15 But God will <b>redeem my soul from the power of the grave</b> : for he shall receive me.

*Table 1: Parallelism in vv. 14-15*

### **Psalm 50**

**Psa 50:1 A Psalm of Asaph.**--Asaph, like the sons of Korah, is a Levite, whom David dedicated to sacred music:

1Ch 15:16 And David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers ... 19 So the singers, Heman, **Asaph**, and Ethan, were appointed to sound with cymbals of brass;

He wrote twelve Psalms: this one, and eleven in Book 3, Psalms 73-83. Many of them have a prophetic character, which is in keeping with the title by which he was later remembered:

2Ch 29:30 Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of David, and of **Asaph the seer**.

Here he prophesies a coming time of judgment for God’s people. In vv. 1-6 he summons those who have made a covenant by sacrifice (v. 5), to correct two errors, a misunderstanding of

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sacrifice (7-15), and presumption on the covenant (16-23) (Figure 3, chart). Each warning ends with an exhortation to praise God.

### 1-6, Declaration of the Lawsuit

**The mighty God, even the LORD, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof. 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.**--This rare word for a theophany appears first in connection with God's coming to Sinai to give the law:

Deu 33:2 And he said, The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; **he shined forth** from mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand went a fiery law for them.

There, he appeared to the people from Sinai, on their way from Egypt to the promised land. Here, he comes out of Zion, having established his kingdom, as we have seen in Psalms 46-48, and challenges their obedience to the covenant he gave them on Sinai.

**3 Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him.**--The imagery recalls the theophany of Psalm 18:

Ps 18:12 At the brightness that was before him his thick clouds passed, hail stones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice; hail stones and coals of fire. 14 Yea, he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings, and discomfited them.

There, he came to deliver David from his enemies. The image anticipates judgment.

**4 He shall call to the heavens from above,<sup>2</sup> and to the earth, that he may judge his people.**--

The appeal to heaven and earth as witnesses (cf. Deut 32:1 and Isa 1:2) is characteristic of the *rib*, the covenant lawsuit brought by a king against a rebellious vassal. This is judgment, not against the peopleS (Psalm 49), but the nation Israel.

1Pe 4:17 For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

**5 Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.**--This is not an invitation to a worship service, but a summons to God's court. He focuses on two words that recur in the accusations to follow: the covenant by which the people are bound to God, and the sacrificial system that was at the heart of their worship (Table 2, chart).

Psalm 50, God Judges his People
1-6, Declaration of the Lawsuit 5, <b>Covenant</b> and <b>Sacrifice</b>
7-14, To the faithful: worship is ... 7-13, ... not <b>sacrifice</b> ... 14-15, ... but thanksgiving and praise
16-23, To the wicked: need to obey 16-21, Presuming on the <b>covenant</b> 22-23, Offer praise and obey

*Figure 3: Structure of Psalm 50*

	7-15	16-23
5 A <b>covenant</b> by <b>sacrifice</b>	8 <b>sacrifices</b> , burnt offerings	16 my <b>covenant</b>
Reproof?	8 I <b>will not reprove</b> thee	21 I <b>will reprove</b> thee
Relation to decalogue	Commandments 1-4 (Love God)	Commandments 5-10 (Love Neighbor)

*Table 2: The Two Charges of Psalm 50*

<sup>2</sup> See note for sense of מעל.

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**6 And the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself. Selah.**--Once again, the cosmic witnesses confirm the justice of God's dealings. Compare

Eph 3:10 To the intent that now **unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places** might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

### 7-15, The Right Attitude toward Sacrifice

**7 Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am God, even thy God. 8 I will not reprove thee<sup>3</sup> for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings, to have been continually before me.**--God acknowledges that they have done their duty with respect to the physical offerings, but they misunderstand the importance of these gifts.

**9 I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. 10 For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. 11 I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. 12 If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. 13 Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?**--They are right to bring the sacrifices, but wrong to think that God needs them. Israel's God is not like the pagan gods, who depended on sacrifices for their sustenance.<sup>4</sup>

The attitude of the carnal Israelites is with us today. Some people think there is some intrinsic merit in attending meetings of the church, or reading the Bible, or participating in the breaking of bread. These are all good things, but not because God needs them. Their value is in what they express about our heart toward the Lord. His final exhortation gives three examples.

**14 Offer unto God thanksgiving;**--"Offer" זָבַח Strong 2076 is the verb from which the word "sacrifices" in v. 8 is derived. Some sacrifices were thank offerings (Lev 7:12), offered to express gratitude to God for his blessings. The gratitude must come first, then the sacrifice.

**and pay thy vows unto the most High;**--Other sacrifices fulfilled vows (Lev 7:16; 22:21). We have several examples: Jacob promises to tithe to the Lord if the Lord will bring him home safely (Gen 28:20-22); Hannah promises to dedicate her son to the Lord if the Lord will grant her a son (1 Sam 1:11); Jephthah tragically promises to offer to the Lord the first thing that comes out of his house if the Lord grants him victory over the Ammonites (Judg 11:30-31). Again, the point of the sacrifice is not the ritual, but the relation between the worshipper and God.

**15 And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.**--The Lord desires that his people call on him, and thank him when he answers them.

### 16-23, The Right Attitude toward Covenant

The second part of the judgment is more serious. To the superficial worshippers, God says, "I will not reprove thee" (v. 8), but to this group, he says "I will reprove thee" (v. 21).

**16 But unto the wicked God saith,**--Who are these "wicked"? According to v. 5, they are among God's "saints," who "have made a covenant with" him "by sacrifice." Yet they are distinct from "my people" who "hear" him in v. 7.

3 Here and v. 20 are the only instances of זָבַח C in book 2, and two out of only seven instances in the entire Psalter. The contrast appears deliberate.

4 Contrast the Babylonian flood epic (e.g., Gilgamesh, Tablet XI), where the gods, deprived of sacrifice after destroying humanity, swarm like hungry flies over the sacrifice that Utnapishtim offers after his deliverance.



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**What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?**--The first exhortation dealt with misunderstanding of sacrifice. The second deals with misappropriation of covenant. There were Israelites who thought that because they were members of the covenant people, they were all set, no matter how they lived. There are people today who think that because they have prayed to receive the Lord, they are saved.

**17 Seeing thou hatest instruction [מוֹסֵר Strong 4148], and castest my words behind thee.**--A warning sign of such a defective attitude is a disregard for God's instruction—not just the doctrines that we believe, but the Lord's chastening hand seeking to guide us into godly lives. This attitude shows itself in their disregard for God's law.

**18 When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers.**--They might not steal or commit adultery, but they excuse those who do.

**19 Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit.**--The tongue is the organ most prone to sin (James 3:2), and they bear false witness.

**20 Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son.**--They disregard family loyalty, violating the fifth commandment.

**21 These things hast thou done, and I kept silence;**--Often God does not immediately punish people for their sin. But now the silence is over (v. 3).

**thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself:**--The consequence is that people think he doesn't care about their sin.

**but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes.**--Now God brings judgment upon them, not to destroy them, but to make them aware of their own sin and lead them to repentance.

Like the correction of the faithful, the correction of the wicked ends with an exhortation.

**22 Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver.**--This caution to those who presume on God's grace anticipates our Lord's warning,

Mat 7:21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

We live in an age when “easy believism” is rampant, when people who have no interest in being saved from their sin hope to be delivered from its just punishment. God will not be mocked, but he warns those who are careless of their risk.

**23 Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me:**--This repeats the exhortation in 7-15. Heb 13:15-16 says that good works as well as praise form acceptable sacrifice to God.

**and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.**--To order one's conversation is literally to set one's path (see notes). Salvation does not depend on good works, but as our Savior and his apostles defined the gospel, it does depend on repentance, a rejection of our sin and turning to God. Simply claiming to be under God's covenant is of no avail, unless we have come there to be delivered from our sin.

**To the chief Musician**

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## 51-52, The Respondents

The summons were addressed first to the peopleS (49), then to those who claimed God’s covenant (50); the respondents come in inverse order, David and Doeg the Edomite.

### **Psalm 51, David**

**51:1 A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.**--The history is in 2 Samuel 11-12 (Figure 4, chart). This Psalm joins Psalm 38 (which described his physical discomfort during the period that he kept silent) and Psalm 32 (the joy he experienced after being assured of God’s forgiveness).

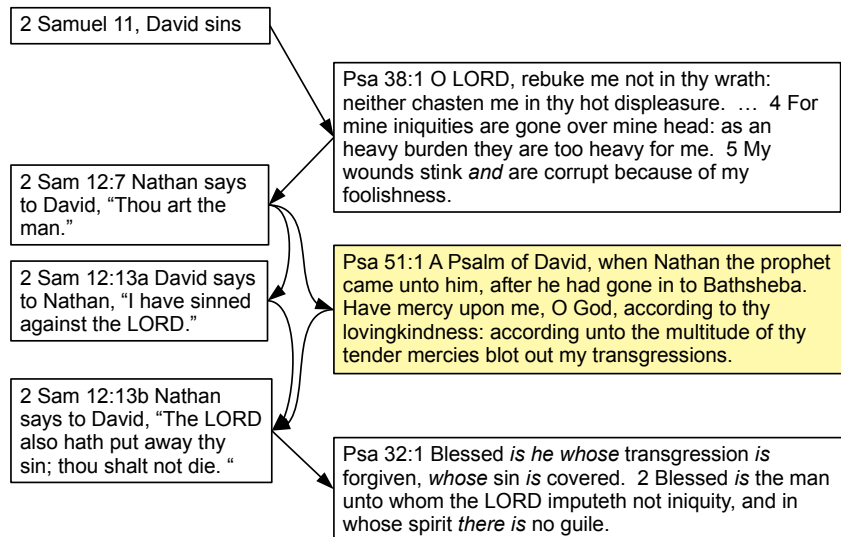


Figure 4: The Psalms of David's Sin

The structure is marked by alternation between requests and statements, by the temporal shift in the statements from past to future, and by a change in the scope of the requests from personal to national (Figure 5, chart).

### **1-6, Plea for mercy, because of past offenses**

**Have mercy הנין upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness חסד: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies רחם blot out my transgressions פשע. 2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity עון, and cleanse me from my sin חטאה. 3 **For** I acknowledge my transgressions פשע: and my sin חטאה is ever before me.**

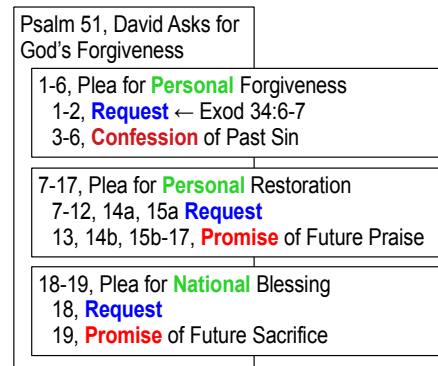


Figure 5: Structure of Psalm 51

--David basis his bold request on God’s description of himself in Exodus 34 (chart).

Exo 34:6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful רחום and gracious חנון, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness חסד and truth, 7 Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity עון and transgression פשע and sin חטאה, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity עון of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

**4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight:**--David dishonored Bathsheba, murdered Uriah, and betrayed his faithful counsellor Ahithophel, the grandfather of Bathsheba. How can his sin be only against God? Compare some other examples (chart):

Gen 39:7 And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. 8 But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, ... 9 ... how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin **against God**?

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Le 6:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 If a soul sin, and commit a trespass **against the LORD**, and lie unto his neighbour in that which was delivered him to keep, or in fellowship, or in a thing taken away by violence, or hath deceived his neighbour; 3 Or have found that which was lost, and lieth concerning it, and sweareth falsely; ...

Luk 15:17 And when he came to himself, he said, ... 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned **against heaven**, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

Compare also Ex 16:2-8; Acts 5:1-4. The reason is that it is his law that we have offended. What makes sin sin, is that it violates God's standards. If there is no God, there is no moral standard, and all becomes pragmatism.

**that thou mightest be justified צדק when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.--**

What is the syntax of this verse? "That" למען is a particle indicating purpose, "in order that."<sup>5</sup> But surely David isn't saying, "I have sinned in order to give you a clear case to demonstrate your righteousness in condemning and judging me." And assigning the purpose to God is oblique, since he hasn't done anything in the context.

4a is a quotation, introduced by 3: "I acknowledge my transgressions: 'Against thee, thee only ...'" 4b modifies "acknowledge" in v. 3. Hearing Nathan's rebuke, David confesses in order to justify צדק God, showing his righteousness צדקה (v. 14) in rebuking David. Cf. Rom 3:4.

Now he calls his hearers' attention to two important facts that they should learn from his fall.

**5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.--**The first fact is the utter sinfulness of man, even a man after God's own heart.

**6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.--**The second is God's purpose to restore and instruct his people.

### 7-17, Plea for restoration, with promise of praise

This section amplifies the restorative purpose announced in v. 6. Now the indicative sections are *promising future* praise rather than (as in 1-6) *confessing past* sin.

**7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. 9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. 12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.--**Where the requests of vv. 1-2 focused on the removal of his guilt, the emphasis here is on a restoration to joy and fellowship.

**13 Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.--**

David fulfills this promise in Psalm 32: After praising God for deliverance, David turns to others:

Psa 32:8 I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye. 9 Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose

5 See notes for extended discussion and some dissenting opinions, but the default meaning should be accepted if possible.



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mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee. 10 Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about.

**14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness** **הקדש**.--We usually see God's righteousness and forgiveness in tension (cf. Rom 3:26). Of all the divine attributes, why concentrate on God's righteousness?<sup>6</sup>

In v. 4, he was motivated to confess by the desire to declare God's righteousness in judging him. "Thy righteousness" here leads, not to forgiveness,<sup>7</sup> but to judgment. If God spares him, he will remind others of God's righteousness in judging sin. He fulfills this promise by speaking openly about his sin and God's chastisement in other Psalms (cf. 6, 13, 30-32, 38-41). In addition, he dedicates these Psalms to the chief musician more often than other Psalms.<sup>8</sup>

All of us sin, and experience God's chastening hand. How many of us are willing, like David, to share our experience with others so that they can learn from us? How different this King of Israel is from modern politicians, who seek to hide their sin.

In sharing with one another in this way, one caution is important. Sometimes people go into such lurid detail in their testimony that their words are a stumbling block to others. David says almost nothing about the details of his sin, only that he has sinned and that God has corrected him. We know from Samuel of David's two great sins: his adultery/murder with Bathsheba and Uriah, and his numbering of the people.<sup>9</sup> But without the historical headings, we would be hard pressed to fill in the details. Let us be open with one another, but avoid sensationalism.

**15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.**--Before Nathan came, David "kept silence" (Ps 32:3). By announcing his sin through Nathan, God has made it possible for David to speak openly in praise of God's forgiveness.

**16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.**--He rightly rejects the idea that he can buy God's forgiveness with sacrifice.

**17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.**--As in 50:8-15, acceptable sacrifice depends on a correct spiritual attitude.

### 18-19, Plea for the Nation

These final two verses move from David's personal condition to the nation. The key to understanding them is to recognize that as the anointed king, David is not just a private person, but a representative of the nation.<sup>10</sup> When he sins, it has implications for the nation (as in his numbering of the people, when a plague came upon all the nation because of his sinful decision).

**18 Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem.**--This verse anticipates the extensions of Jerusalem by Solomon (1 Ki 3:1). David is not concerned just with architecture, but with the continuity of the dynasty that would support this future blessing.

6 The note shows that "thy righteousness" is closely associated with many other divine attributes, including his covenant mercy. But it seems the least likely one for which to praise God as a result of forgiveness.

7 *Contra* Tate, who understands the word here "in a salvific sense."

8 "To the Chief Musician" is on 36% of all Psalms and 52% of David's psalms, but 62% of David's psalms of confession.

9 So far, the only Psalm I can associate with this event is Psalm 30.

10 We saw this contrast in Psalm 35, where David as a private individual expresses forgiveness to the wicked, while as the king he must declare God's judgment on them.

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**19 Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.**--He rejected sacrifice in v. 16, not absolutely, but as a work of merit that could buy God's forgiveness. But if God will forgive him and bless the nation, it will be appropriate for such sacrifices to be offered, in particular the sacrifices of worship, which Ezekiel shows will resume during the Millennium.

**To the chief Musician**—As David has promised, he memorializes his experience publicly.

### ***Psalm 52, Doeg the Edomite***

David's confession in Psalm 51 responds to God's judgment of his people in Psalm 50. Now a rebuke to Doeg the Edomite recalls the warning to all nations in Psalm 49.

**52:1 Maschil, A Psalm of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said unto him, David is come to the house of Ahimelech.**--The episode is in 1 Samuel 21-22, which is also the background to Psalm 34. There, we saw David's deceitfulness toward both Ahimelech in Nob and Achish in Gath, as he exhorted his hearers to "keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile" (v. 13). Now he focuses on the other character in the story, Doeg.

In 1 Samuel 21, David, fleeing from Saul, comes to the tabernacle at Nob, where he asks Ahimelech the priest for food and a weapon. Ahimelech gives him the shewbread and the sword of Goliath. In the middle of the conversation between David and Ahimelech, the narrator observes ominously (chart),

1Sa 21:7 Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD; and his name was Doeg, an Edomite, the chiefest of the herdmen that belonged to Saul.

Note two things about Doeg. First, he is an Edomite, a Gentile, but not one of the nations devoted to destruction (Deut 23:7). So it is not surprising to find him in Saul's service. Second, he is "detained before the Lord." We don't know why, but the verb is the one used to describe Jeremiah's imprisonment, and it is possible that he is under some discipline.

We next hear about Doeg when Saul is bemoaning David's rise:

1Sa 22:8 there is none of you that is sorry for me, or sheweth unto me that my son hath stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day? 9 Then answered Doeg the Edomite, which was set over the servants of Saul, and said, I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. 10 And he enquired of the LORD for him, and gave him victuals, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.

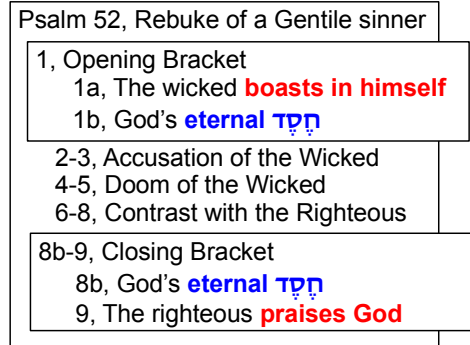
Doeg is clearly trying to curry favor with Saul by providing information about David and revealing those who are supporting him.

Commentators disagree as to which of the people in the title, Doeg and Saul, is the Psalm's villain.<sup>11</sup> Some (Hengstenberg, Alexander) think that the reference to the villain as a "mighty man" (v. 1) and to deception (v. 2) does not fit Doeg. We will argue (with Delitzsch, Maclaren, Longman, and Kidner) that in fact Doeg is in view, and that his identity as an Edomite makes him a good partner for David standing in the dock before the divine court, a position confirmed by parallels between this Psalm and 49. Appropriately to the courtroom scene, the genre is a judgment oracle, similar to Isa 22:15-19 (Tate, following Kraus).

<sup>11</sup> Perowne and Tate don't think that the Psalm fits either one very well. Thirtle thinks it is Goliath, see on v. 9.

## Psalms 49-52, Trial before God

The Psalm's chiasmic inclusio (1, 8b-9) emphasizes God's eternal  $\text{דָּוָן}$  and contrasts Doeg's self-centered boasting with David's focus on the Lord. In between are three short stanzas: the accusation of the wicked, his doom, and his contrast with the righteous (Figure 6). Both the doom and the contrast link closely to Psalm 49 (Table 3, chart).



### 1, Opening Bracket

#### Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man?--

Some find the description of the enemy as a "mighty man" or warrior inconsistent with Doeg the herdsman. But the expression is sarcastic. In 1 Samuel 22, he is among the courtiers of Saul, and clearly pandering for recognition as a faithful supporter of the king. David pictures him as trying to pose proudly as a warrior, but in fact all he does is mischief.

"Boastest thyself"<sup>12</sup> takes us back to the description of the wicked in 49:6 (Table 3).

#### the goodness $\text{דָּוָן}$ of God endureth continually.--

Whatever "mighty men" proudly

oppose us with their "mischief," our confidence is in God's covenant faithfulness (here translated "goodness"), which endures constantly—a common theme in Israel's worship, expressed in later Psalms (106ff) in the words, "for his mercy endureth forever" (40x in the Bible, 32 in Psalms, 25 in Psalm 136; 1 Chr 16:34, 41; 2 Chr 5:13; 7:3, 6; Ezr 3:11; Jer 33:11).

Figure 6: Structure of Psalm 52

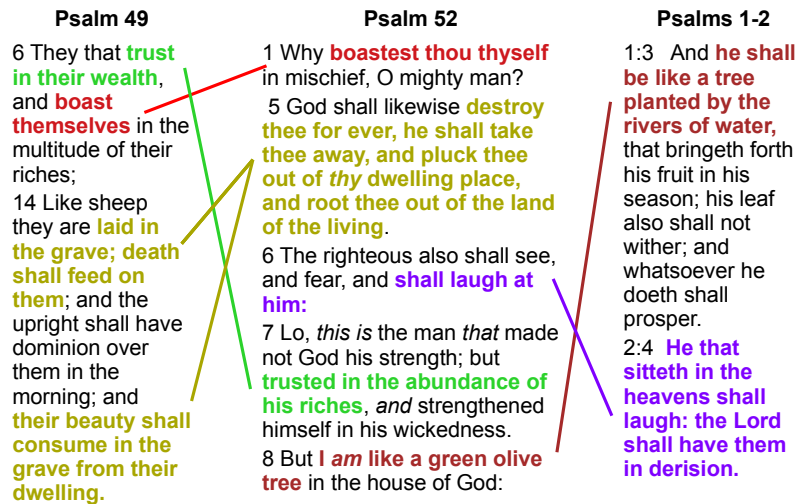


Table 3: Links between Psalm 52 and Psalms 1, 2, and 49

### 2-3, Condemnation of the enemy

**2 Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully. 3 Thou lovest evil more than good; and lying rather than to speak righteousness. Selah.--**The specific offense of which David accuses his enemy is deception. This is another detail that some think rules out Doeg. The report that he offers Saul in 1 Samuel 22 is factual. How does he fit this description?

To understand his sin, note what he does *not* say. He does not tell Saul that David represented himself as on "the king's business" (1 Sam 21:2, 8), and that Ahimelech was completely ignorant of the rift between David and Saul. One can deceive by saying something that is false, but also by making factually true statements in a way that misleads the hearer.

<sup>12</sup>  $\text{דָּוָן}$  Dt, only 8x in the Psalms, 4x in Book 2. These instances are negative, while 63:12 and 64:11 (MT) have a positive sense.

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Notice also his motivations (“thou lovest,” 3, 4). We don’t know why he was “detained” before the Lord in 21:7, but the verb indicates involuntary confinement, and he may have been bitter against Ahimelech. In addition, Saul has just declared, “there is none . . . that is sorry for me” (22:8), and Doeg wants to ingratiate himself with Saul. His statements are not neutral, but motivated by animosity toward the priests and a pandering attitude toward Saul.

Against this background, we have no difficulty in seeing Doeg in vv. 2-3.

### 4-5, His coming doom

**4 Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue.<sup>13</sup> 5 God shall likewise<sup>14</sup> destroy thee for ever,**--The grammar (placing the subject before the verb) emphasizes it: “You seek to destroy with your words, but God, for his part, will show you what real destruction is like.”

**he shall take thee away, and pluck thee out of thy dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living. Selah.**--The editor probably heard in this verse an echo of 49:14, leading him to group them together.

### 6-8, Contrast with David

In contrasting himself with the wicked, David takes us back to the opening Psalms of the Psalter:

**6 The righteous also shall see, and fear, and shall laugh at him:**--They are echoing God’s response to the behavior of the wicked in Psalm 2 (Table 3).

**7 Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted בטח in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness.**--Another link to Psalm 49 (Table 3).

**8 But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God:**--Compare Psalm 1 (Table 3).

### 9, Closing Bracket

These two verses finish off the Psalm by recalling v. 1.

**I trust בטח in the mercy חסד of God for ever and ever.**--By way of transition, David’s trust in God’s loyal love is contrasted with the trust that the wicked places in his riches (v. 7). As in v. 1, he draws our attention to God’s loyal love, and its eternal character.

**9 I will praise thee for ever, because thou hast done it: and I will wait on thy name; for it is good before thy saints.**--The wicked in v. 1, like the wealthy in 49:6, boasts in himself, but David’s focus is entirely on God’s glory.

**To the chief Musician upon Mahalath**—Only here and at the end of Psalm 87. The word as pointed in the Hebrew text has no meaning. See notes for some suggestions.

13 v. 4 is marked as the start of a new paragraph by the Selah at the end of v. 3, and the vocative, “O thou deceitful tongue.” Vocatives often mark paragraph breaks. This verse is a linked keyword back to vv. 2-3.

14 A disjunctive clause, SV

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### Notes

#### 50:4 “from above”

Modern translations render מַעַל as simply “above,” rather than “from above,” which the AV apparently derives from parsing the form as מִן עַל. Many times it is followed by a noun or pronoun, and in these cases this parsing makes sense. But the form in phrase-final position, as here and Gn 27:39, Psalm 50:4, makes less sense this way. The opposite form מִתַּחַת in Ex 20:4 clearly means simply “below,” not “from below”:

Exo 20:4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above מַמְעַל, or that is in the earth beneath מִתַּחַת

BDB sees מעל as a poetic form for ממעל, which seems to make sense.

#### 50:23 שִׁים דֶּרֶךְ

What is being required here as a precondition for God’s salvation? Is the verse teaching a works standard?

The combination of שִׁים and דֶּרֶךְ appears in these verses:

	Direct object	Through preposition
דֶּרֶךְ with genitive	Ps. 50:23 Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that <b>ordereth</b> his <b>conversation</b> aright will I shew the salvation of God.	Ps. 85:13 Righteousness shall go before him; and shall <b>set us in the way</b> לְדֶרֶךְ of his steps. Hag. 1:5, 7 Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; <b>Consider</b> your <b>ways</b> . שִׁים-לֵב עַל-דֶּרֶךְ
No genitive	Gen. 30:36 And he <b>set</b> three days' <b>journey</b> betwixt himself and Jacob: and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks. Isa. 43:19 Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even <b>make a way</b> in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. Isa. 49:11 And I will <b>make</b> all my mountains a <b>way</b> , and my highways shall be exalted. Isa. 51:10 Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath <b>made</b> the depths of the sea a <b>way</b> for the ransomed to pass over? Ezek. 21:19 Also, thou son of man, <b>appoint</b> thee two <b>ways</b> , that the sword of the king of Babylon may come: both twain shall come forth out of one land: and choose thou a place, choose it at the head of the way to the city. Ezek. 21:20 <b>Appoint</b> a <b>way</b> , that the sword may come to Rabbath of the Ammonites, and to Judah in Jerusalem the defenced.	



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To “set a way” is to plan a journey. The expression emphasizes intention, an emphasis that Haggai spells out by making the role of the heart clear. The requirement to “order your conversation” is not a demand to earn one’s salvation, but a statement of the intention that leads to salvation, the hungering and thirsting after righteousness that our Lord declared blessed.

### **References to Exod 34:6-7**

Exod. 34:6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,

Neh 9:17 And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.

Ps. 51:1 <To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

Ps. 86:15 But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.

Ps. 103:8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

Ps. 145:8 The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.

Joel 2:13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Jon. 4:2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

### **51:4 (MT 6) למען**

There is disagreement whether to understand the particle in its usual strict sense as expressing purpose, or whether it can have a weakened sense of consequence. Those who take it to mean purpose differ on the syntactical connection.

**Consequence:** This position is held by Tate and Perowne. Perowne argues, based on Winer, that the distinction is largely foreign to the Hebrew mind; all things are part of the divine design. Waltke-O’Connor cite H. A. Brongers, "Die Partikel למען in der biblisch-hebräischen Sprache," *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 18 (1973) 84–96, who suggests that the particle indicates result rather than purpose in Lev 20:3, 2 Kgs 22:17, Amos 2:7. They also discern an emphasis on result rather than purpose in Ezek 19:9. Jouon-Muraoka §169g also allow the meaning of result rather than purpose in many cases. Many of the examples cited are of the form, “you have sinned למען you might be punished,” e.g., Mic 6:16 and Brongers’ examples, and the argument appears to be that people would not purposefully pursue their own destruction. But this is begging the question of the extent of the divine purpose.

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**Purpose, w.r.t. v. 3:** Perowne reports that this is the reading of Ibn Ezra: “I acknowledge my transgressions ... in order that ...” Compare Waltke’s explanation (in class, ca. 1970), that we should supply “I say this ...” (but he may be thinking more along the lines of Delitzsch, below).

**Purpose, immediate:** Alexander, Hengstenberg This view bites the bullet and recognizes God as the ultimate cause of all sin.

Alexander: *To the intent that* may have reference to the divine purpose in permitting David's sin to take this aggravated form, so that there could be neither doubt nor transfer nor participation of his guilt, and so that when God spoke in condemnation of it, he might not only be, but appear to be, entirely just.

Hengstenberg: It is from the consideration of sin in this point of view, that David proceeds, when, in 1 Sam. xxvi. 19, he derives the hatred of Saul from the Lord's having stirred him up, and when, in 2 Sam. xvi. 10, ss. he says of Shimei, "the Lord has said to him, Curse David, and who will say, Wherefore hast thou done so? Let him curse, for the Lord has bidden him." So also elsewhere was such a concealed influence maintained upon David, as linked the sinful inclination already existing in him to a determinate object, comp. 2 Sam. xxiv. 1, "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah."

Delitzsch also refuses to soften the purpose clause, but with a useful observation as to its focus:

This must not be weakened by understanding it to refer to the result instead of to the aim or purpose. If, however, it is intended to express intention, it follows close upon the moral relationship of man to God expressed in לך לבדך and הרע בעיניך, —a relationship, the aim of which is, that God, when He now condemns the sinner, may appear as the just and holy One, who, as the sinner is obliged himself to acknowledge, cannot do otherwise than pronounce a condemnatory decision concerning him. When sin becomes manifest to a man as such, he must himself say Amen to the divine sentence, just as David does to that passed upon him by Nathan. And it is just the nature of penitence so to confess one's self to be in the wrong in order that God may be in the right and gain His cause. If, however, the sinner's self-accusation justifies the divine righteousness or justice, just as, on the other hand, all self-justification on the part of the sinner (which, however, sooner or later will be undeceived) accuses God of unrighteousness or injustice (Job xi. 8): then all human sin must in the end tend towards the glorifying of God.

A challenge for the purpose interpretation is identifying *whose* purpose is in view. In general, when we say, “X did this in order that Y,” the understanding is that it is X's purpose to achieve Y. But the subject of v. 4 is David: “I have sinned.” Thus the purpose interpretation reduces David to saying, “When I sinned, I was motivated by the desire to give you a clear example of sin to judge,” which seems nonsensical. Alexander, Hengstenberg, and Delitzsch seem to be appealing to God's purpose, though the previous verse does not refer to anything that God has done.

While it is unlikely that David was motivated by God's justice in deciding to sin, it makes excellent sense that he was so motivated in his confession in v. 3 (Ibn Ezra's interpretation), and that seems the best understanding.

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### **Ps 51:14 “Thy Righteousness”**

How would God’s forgiveness of David’s sin show his righteousness?

The expression צדכתך appears 20x in Psalms, five of these in Psalm 71. Many of these are in parallel with other attributes:

	אמונה	אמת	דרך	חסד	טוב	משפט	פלא	פקוד	שם	תורה	תשועה	
	Faithfulness, 530	Truth, 571	Way, 1870	Mercy, 2617	Goodness, 2898	Judgments, 4941	Wonders, 6382	Precepts, 6490	Name, 8034	Law, 8451	Salvation, 8668	
5:8			X									1
36:5, 6	X			X		X						3
36:10				X								1
40:10	X	X		X							X	4
71:15											X	1
72:1						X						1
88:12							X					1
89:16									X			1
119:40								X				1
119:42										X		1
143:1	X											1
143:11									X			1
145:7					X							1
	3	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	
	11	13	11	46	3	20	3	20	50	25	5	

Last row is total instances of parallel + 2ms suffix in Psalms.

Two good examples:

Psa 36:5 Thy mercy חסד, O LORD, is in the heavens; and thy faithfulness אמונה reacheth unto the clouds. 6 Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments משפט are a great deep: O LORD, thou preservest man and beast.

Ps. 40:10 I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness אמונה and thy salvation תשועה: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness חסד and thy truth אמת from the great congregation.

Instances with no parallels:

Ps. 31:1 A Psalm of David. In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness.

Ps. 51:14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.

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Ps. 69:27 Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. *The opposite of what David is asking for himself.*

Ps. 71:2 Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape: incline thine ear unto me, and save me. *cf. 31:1*

Ps. 71:16 I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only. *Maybe parallel with strength גְבוּרָה?*

Ps. 71:19 Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee! *Maybe parallel with זרוע and גְבוּרָה in v. 18?*

Ps. 71:24 My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt.

### **52 dedication, “upon Mahalath”**

Aquila’s Greek translation (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) reads this word as מְהֵלֶת, meaning “dancings.” On this basis, Thirtle links it to the greeting that David received on his return from smiting Goliath and the Philistines in 1 Sam 18:6, an episode that led to Saul’s animosity and David’s eventual flight and encounter with Doeg.

On this basis, Thirtle understands the adversary in the Psalm to be Goliath. This interpretation not only discards the testimony of the heading (far clearer than the obscure term in the dedication), but also seems less appropriate to the malicious and deceitful attitude described in the Psalm than the conduct of Doeg.