INTERPRETATION OF PSALM 2 IN 4QFLORILEGIUM
AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Interpretation of texts from the Jewish Scriptures was vitally important both in the non-biblical writings found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the books of the Christian New Testament. Even a cursory examination of both corpora reveals that their respective authors drew a disproportionate number of their citations or allusions from a handful of scriptural books, with Psalms a preeminent source in both cases.1 As is to be expected, however, the ways these texts were utilized could vary significantly in the DSS and in the NT, and consideration of interpretation of Ps 2 provides an interesting example. As will be evident below, both Qumran and early Christian interpreters were attracted to the Davidic nature of the psalm and to its promise of divine retribution against those who opposed God’s “anointed.” The text was interpreted as speaking of Jesus as God’s messiah by a number of New Testament authors, and it also was addressed in a Qumran pesher. The latter, however, provides a rather unexpected interpretation of the “anointed” of Ps 2:2.

This paper addresses that surprising issue and unfolds as follows. First, attention is given to Ps 2 as it stands in the Hebrew Bible. Next, the discussion departs from the expected chronological order and considers how this psalm is utilized in the New Testament, with emphasis on its use in Acts and Hebrews. Then focus turns to the textual evidence and use of Ps 2 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Finally, a proposal is offered for why the text was interpreted in 4QFlorilegium as it was.

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1 The significance of Psalms for the Qumran community is also demonstrated by the extant biblical scrolls, as noted by Peter Flint: “Among the Dead Sea Scrolls the Book of Psalms is represented more frequently than any other work, which is indicative of the importance of the Psalter for the Qumran community.” See Peter Flint, “Psalms, Book of,” EDSS 2:702–07, esp. 702.
I. Psalm 2 in the Hebrew Bible

Psalm 2 normally is classified among the “royal psalms” (along with Pss 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144), and it is positioned along with Ps 1 as a double introduction to the canonical arrangement of the book.² The psalm itself consists of twelve verses as preserved in the MT, structured in four strophes of three verses each with a final line later attached for liturgical use. The first addresses the revolt of the nations against Yahweh and his anointed one; the second gives the divine response of derision toward these helpless foes; the third proclaims God’s selection and empowerment of the king in Zion; and the fourth offers words of warning to any who might oppose God and God’s king. A macarism was appended to the final stanza at some point, and scholars debate its appropriateness. Briggs calls it a “liturgical addition”; Terrien more forcefully decries it as “a note of piety that seems to jar with its royal liturgy.”³ Kraus identifies the last line of verse 2—which includes the reference to Yahweh’s “anointed one”—as a secondary insertion intended in part to explain the plural possessive suffix of “their cords” in v. 3.⁴

In 1990 John T. Willis could survey three major approaches to understanding the origins of this particular psalm. One approach is to understand the psalm in what Willis called “the fully eschatological and Christian sense,” i.e., as originally intended as a text about Jesus as the messiah.⁵ This approach particularly appealed to Christian interpreters of earlier generations because of the frequent citations of the psalm in the NT. Willis rightfully notes that the approach “will not bear the scrutiny of critical exegetical examination.”⁶

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² Hermann Gunkel is usually credited with “recognition of a distinct class of bona fide royal psalms,” though a number of earlier scholars had identified various psalms as such. See Scott R.A. Starbuck, Court Oracles in the Psalms: The So-Called Royal Psalms in their Ancient Near Eastern Context (SBLDS 172; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 2. See Starbuck, Court Oracles, 19–66 for a survey of scholarly discussion of the royal psalms since the nineteenth century. On the position of Ps 2, see James Limburg, “Psalms, Book of,” ABD 5:522–36, esp. 533.
⁶ Willis, “Cry of Defiance,” 34.