

## ‘Everything Written...in the Psalms About Me’ (Luke 24:44)

7–9 minutes

by David Flusser<sup>[\*]</sup>

Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς· οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι μου οὓς ἐλάλησα πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἔτι ὢν σὺν ὑμῖν, ὅτι δεῖ πληρωθῆναι πάντα τὰ γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ νόμῳ Μωϋσέως καὶ τοῖς προφήταις καὶ ψαλμοῖς περὶ ἐμοῦ

But he [i.e., Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that it is necessary to fulfill all the things written in the Law of Moses and the prophets and Psalms concerning me. (Luke 24:44)

This verse in Luke has lately acquired new significance in light of the discoveries at Qumran, especially the so-called *Halakhic Letter* (4QMMT).<sup>[1]</sup>

According to Luke 24:44, the risen Jesus told his disciples that everything written about him in the Law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the Psalms had to be fulfilled. Jesus then revealed to them the meaning of the Scriptures. Such exposition is often referred to as a “christological” [exegesis](#) of the Old Testament. But how did the Psalms come into it? Luke 24:44 is the only passage in the

New Testament in which, in addition to Moses and the prophets, a book of the *Ketuvim* (“Writings”) appears. But while they are a part of the *Ketuvim*, the Psalms are probably mentioned here in their own right, on account of their usefulness as scriptural proof texting, and not merely as representative of all books of the “Writings.”<sup>[2]</sup> The Psalms are mentioned yet again in the Gospels, once more in Luke, in a similar context: “David himself says in the Book of Psalms...” (Luke 20:42), after which follows a quotation of the beginning of Ps. 110—also with a supposedly “christological” interpretation. The Markan and Matthean parallels do not mention the Psalms explicitly. Rather, according to Mark and Matthew, David spoke “in the Holy Spirit” (Mark 12:36 || Matt. 22:43). This phrase expresses the prophetic inspiration of the Psalms of David (cf. Acts 4:25). By the way, I assume that in this case, where it is a saying of Jesus, the reference to the Holy Spirit is original.

Since the publication of the *Halakhic Letter* from [Qumran](#) (4QMMT), it is certain that in Luke 24:44 the Psalms are a third witness alongside Moses and the prophets, and do not serve merely as a *pars pro toto* for all the *Ketuvim*. In other words, the reference is to the Book of Psalms in particular. The new Qumran document, called 4QMMT, is a letter written by a leader of the Qumran community. The letter is addressed to a political leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem.<sup>[3]</sup> Toward the end of his remarks, the Essene author from Qumran admonishes his addressee to observe the words of the Scriptures in order not to stumble, because “this is the end of days” (4QMMT<sup>e</sup> [4Q398] 11-13 I, 4). The writer begins with the words: “And we have written to you that you may understand the book of Moses, the books of

the prophets, and David” (4QMMT<sup>d</sup> [4Q397] 14-21 I, 10).



A synagogue mosaic discovered in Gaza, Palestine, depicting King David playing on a harp. Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

It should not be surprising that many regarded King David as a prophet (cf. Acts 2:30; Jos., *Ant.* 6:166).<sup>[4]</sup> His reputation is partly due to the Book of Psalms, in which there are many passages whose supposedly hidden meaning was believed to point to the later history of salvation. Both Jews and Christians understood the Psalms in this manner. It is explicitly stated in one of the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) that the LORD gave the Spirit to David so that he spoke all the Psalms—the canonical and the non-canonical—in the spirit of prophecy bestowed upon him by the Most High (11QPs<sup>a</sup> [11Q5] XXII, 11).<sup>[5]</sup>

Jews and Christians tended to update especially those parts of Scripture that were suitable for this purpose. They related these Scriptures to the history of salvation and to calamities of the past and present. Especially suited for this purpose were the Psalms, the words of the prophets, and also the poetic and prophetic passages in the five books of Moses. The Essenes were special masters in this field: “There are some among them who profess to foretell the future,” reported [Josephus](#) Flavius, “being versed from their early years in holy books, various forms of purifications and apophthegms of the prophets; and seldom, if ever, do they err in their predictions” (*Bel.* 2:159; Loeb).<sup>[6]</sup> From the Dead Sea Scrolls, we have learned that the Essenes developed a peculiar technique by which they forced the wording of Scripture to bear witness to their sect’s history of salvation, a technique they employed with great skill. We call the writings in which the Essenes “updated” the Scriptures *Pesharim* (singular: *Pesher*). *Pesharim* were not only composed for the prophets (e.g., *Pesher Nahum*, *Pesher Habakkuk*), but also for the Psalms.<sup>[7]</sup> Even in Luke 24:44, the Psalms are not considered to be a specifically christological book.<sup>[8]</sup> Rather, it was appropriate for Jesus to cite the Psalms together with Moses and the prophets because they were about to be “updated” in a pesher-like manner. The newly discovered Essene letter (4QMMT), with its trio of Moses-prophets-Psalms, is an important proof of this interpretation: All three were cited as witnesses of the history of salvation.

Uncovering a previously hidden part of a mosaic often makes the meaning and contents of the previously exposed portions comprehensible. Something similar was accomplished in our case through the publication of the previously known Qumran text



4QMMT. Not only in Luke 24:44, but also in this Essene document, reference is made to the books of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms of David in support of their interpretations of salvation history. It follows, *inter alia*, that such references in the New Testament were not primarily invented for christological reasons, as was commonly argued among other Jews. However, my reasoning does not permit a restrictive conclusion: The fact that, apart from Luke 24:44, the trio of Moses-Prophet-Psalms is only among the Essenes does not mean that Luke 24:44 therefore betrays Essene influence.

## Notes

[\*] This article originally appeared as: David Flusser, “‘Wie in den Psalmen über mich geschrieben steht’ (Lk 24,44),” *Judaica: Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums* 48 (1992): 40-42.

[1] In order for me to report on this *Halakhic Letter*, however, it was necessary to wait for a curious pirated edition of the text. See Zdzislaw J. Kapera, “An Anonymously Received Pre-Publication of the 4Q MMT,” *The Qumran Chronicle* 1.2 (1990): Appendix A, 1-11.

[2] E. Klostermann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Tübingen, 1975), 241; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, 1979), 905.

[3] For this, see E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halachic Letter from Qumran,” *Israel Museum Journal* 4 (1985): 9-12.

[4] See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia, 1947), 5:15.414; 6:5.249f.

[5] J. A. Sanders, *The Psalm Scroll of Qumran 11* (Oxford, 1965),

**[6]** What Josephus wrote about Judah the Essene is particularly instructive, namely that his disciples gathered around him “for the purpose of receiving instruction in foretelling the future” (*Ant.* 13:311; Loeb). This information is not supplied in the earlier parallel (*Bel.* 1:78).

**[7]** Such an early Christian Peshar on Ps 2:1f. is preserved in Acts 4:24-28. See David Flusser, “Die Auslegung der Bibel in Neuen Testament” in his *Entdeckungen im Neuen Testament* (2 vols.; Neukirchener, 1987-1999), 1:32-39, esp. 34f. [See also, idem, “An Early Jewish-Christian Document in the Tiburtine Sibyl,” in his *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 359-389, esp. 376—JNT.]

**[8]** See Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1924), 28 n. 1.