

# Could David Have Written Psalm 5?

by

Dr Kevin Smith<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Psalm 5 is one of a number of Davidic Psalms that allude to the Lord's "house" and "temple." Since Solomon's Temple was built after David's death, critical scholars consider these allusions to the temple as conclusive proof that David could not have authored these psalms. This article demonstrates that, prior to the construction of Solomon's Temple, the terms "house" (בַּיִת) and "temple" (הַיְקָל) were acceptable terms for alluding to the Tabernacle. Therefore, the conclusion that David could not have written Psalm 5 is unwarranted.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Smith is the Vice-Principal and Academic Head of the South African Theological Seminary. He holds an MA in New Testament from Global University and a DLitt in Biblical Languages from Stellenbosch University.

## 1. Introduction

Is it plausible that David might of have written Psalm 5? Taken at face value, the Hebrew text attributes authorship of Psalm 5 to the pen of David by way of the inscription “of David” (לְדָוִד, hereafter *lědāwid*) in the heading. Nineteenth century critics claimed that David could not have written a psalm that alludes to worshipping in the Lord’s “house” and at His “temple.” In spite of able counters by evangelical scholars (e.g., Keil and Delitzsch 2002), the critics won the day. As a legacy of their influence, almost every major commentary on the Book of Psalms since 1900 has virtually presupposed that David could not have written Psalm 5 (and other *lědāwid* psalms that refer to the temple).<sup>2</sup>

However, the claim that David could not have written a psalm in which the author vows to worship at the Lord’s “house” and “temple” proves unconvincing when we analyse the usage of those terms prior to the construction of Solomon’s temple. In this article, I hope to show that it remains plausible for a modern student of Scripture to believe in the Davidic authorship of Psalm 5.

## 2. What does the inscription “of David” mean?

Although they seem to be early in origin, there is little doubt that the psalm headings are editorial additions to the text of certain psalms. As individual psalms were collected for corporate use, the editors of collections added superscriptions to indicate such things as the source, setting, genre, collection, tune and musical accompaniment.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Briggs and Briggs 1906, Weiser 1962, Dahood 1966, Allen 1998, Craigie 1998, Tate 1998, Broyles 1999, Wilson 2002 and Terrien 2003.

Seventy-three psalms bear the heading “of David” (*lědāwid*) in the MT; the LXX raises the count to 85 (Greek, τῷ Δαυιδ).<sup>3</sup> Similar ascriptions to individuals are made to Jeduthun (לִידְיֹתָן, Pss 39; cf. 62 and 77), Solomon (לְשֹׁלֹמֹה, Pss 72 and 127), Heman (לְהֵמָן, Psa 88) and Moses (לְמֹשֶׁה, Psa 90). In each case, the Hebrew inscription consists of the preposition לְ (hereafter, *lě*) plus the name of the person.

The first question we must consider is whether the preposition *lě*, when used with a person’s name in the psalm headings, is intended to denote authorship. The preposition has a broad range of meanings. Usually the context indicates which meaning is intended, but in the psalm headings there are no contextual clues. Thus, *lědāwid* could denote: (a) authorship, “by David”; (b) dedication, “to David”; (c) ownership, “of David” or “belonging to the Davidic collection”; (d) subject, “about David”; or (e) user, “for David,” meaning, “for [the use of] David.”

Within the psalm headings, *lě* often denotes things other than authorship. For example, לְמַנְצֵחַ (55 times in psalm headings) clearly means “for the director [of music],” denoting the user of the psalm. לְלִמּוֹד denotes purpose, “for teaching” (Psa 60), though this is due force of the infinitive construct more than the preposition. לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת (Psa 92) denotes occasion, “for [use on] the Sabbath day.” לְהוֹדָה (Psa 100) states the purpose for which the psalm should be used, namely, “for giving thanks.” The meaning of לְבְנֵי־קֹרַח, usually translated “of the sons of Korah,” is unclear: authorship, ownership, usage—each is possible.

This range of usage has led many scholars to suggest that even when attached to a person’s name, the preposition *lě* in psalm headings was not intended to denote authorship. For example, Craigie (1998) translates *lědāwid* in the headings of Psalms 27 and 32 as “for David.” Weiser (1962:96) believes *lědāwid* always means “for the Davidic ruler ... to recite in the festival cult of the Temple.” Earlier, Briggs and Briggs (1906:lxix) argued that it “indicates,

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<sup>3</sup> As compared with the MT, the LXX adds allusions to Davidic authorship to Psalms 33, 43, 71, 91, 93-99, 104 and 137, but omits the MT allusions to David in Psalms 122 and 124.

not authorship, but, with few exceptions, the first of the minor Psalters, gathered under the name of David in the late Persian period, from which these Psalms were taken by later editors.”

Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the inscription *lědāwid* was intended to identify David as the author of the psalms to which it was appended. Let us consider three main arguments.

First, two psalms outside the Psalter use the construction *lě* + *name* to identify the author. In Isaiah 38:9, a poem by Hezekiah is introduced using the words “a writing of Hezekiah” (מִכְתָּב לְהֵזְקִיָּהוּ). Similarly, the famous prayer of Habakkuk is titled “a prayer of Habakkuk” (תְּפִלָּה לְחַבְבְּקִיּוּן). In both cases, the name of the composer is prefixed with the preposition *lě*, suggesting that this was an established convention for identifying the author of a poem.

Second, thirteen psalms bearing the inscription *lědāwid* also contain descriptions of the historical circumstances in David’s life.<sup>4</sup> In 11 of the 13, the inscription “of David” is immediately followed by a subordinate temporal clause “when ...” (the Hebrew construction always consists of the preposition *bě* + *infinitive construct*), describing the occasion for the writing of the psalm. In each case, the temporal clause is closely connected to *lědāwid*, leaving little doubt that the intent is to indicate the circumstances under which David wrote the psalm.<sup>5</sup> The heading of Psalm 3, a typical example of this construction, could fittingly be translated, “A psalm *by* David *when* he fled from Absalom, his son.” The remaining two psalms use an even clearer construction to describe the historical circumstances of writing. They both elaborate on *lědāwid* by means of a relative clause. The example in Psalm 18 leaves no doubt that the relative clause describes the circumstances under which David wrote the psalm:

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<sup>4</sup> The thirteen psalms with historical details are Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63 and 142.

<sup>5</sup> In seven of the eleven instances, the temporal clause follows immediately after *lědāwid* (see Pss 3, 34, 51, 52, 54, 63 and 142). In the remaining four, the temporal clause is separated from *lědāwid* by a single word, מִכְתָּב (“a poem,” see Swanson 1997:§4846) in Psalms 56, 57 and 59 and לְלִמּוֹד (“for teaching”) in Psalm 60.

A *Psalm* of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul (Psalm 18:0, NASB).

Thus, in the thirteen *lēdāwid* psalms that contain historical information, it is clear that *lēdāwid* means “by David.” If the same editors added both the ascription *lēdāwid* and the historical information, then they clearly intended the former as an attribution of authorship. If the historical information was added after *lēdāwid*, then the later editors interpreted *lēdāwid* as a marker of authorship. If *lēdāwid* was intended to mean “by David” in all thirteen psalms that bear historical descriptions, then its most likely meaning in the sixty where it stands alone is also “by David.” I concur with James Limburg’s (1992, 5:528) conclusion that “since the 13 psalms associated biographically with David point to David as an author, it would seem that authorship is the intent of the expression in many cases.”<sup>6</sup>

The final line of evidence is that in ancient Jewish tradition David was universally considered the primary author of the Book of Psalms. The tendency of the Septuagint to attribute more psalms to David suggests that its translators considered him the author of the psalms that bear his name. “The Talmud thinks of him as the author of the psalms, just as Moses was author of the Pentateuch” (Limburg 1992, 5:528). Finally, Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament authors all regarded David as the author of the psalms that bear his name (and of some that bear no name).

These factors are so persuasive that even James Crenshaw, who rejects Davidic authorship of most psalms and considers occurrences of *lēdāwid* in the headings as postexilic additions reflecting the trend of the period to identify Scriptural writings with major historical figures, concedes that its primary intent was to denote authorship. “Although the Hebrew *ledāwid* (pertaining to David) does not necessarily mean Davidic authorship, its intent does seem to have been that in many instances” (Crenshaw 2001:5).

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<sup>6</sup> Limburg does not defend the Davidic authorship of the *lēdāwid* psalms, but he does acknowledge that authorship was the intent of the inscription.

While recognising that the preposition *l'š* is ambiguous and that it is used with a variety of meanings in the psalm headings, overwhelming evidence suggests the phrase *l'š dāwid* it is intended to identify David as the author of the psalms to which it was added.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Is Davidic authorship plausible?

If my argument thus far is valid, the superscription of Psalm 5 names David as its author. However, the psalmist speaks of worshipping at the temple, which was not built until after David's death. Therefore, either the superscription erred in naming David as the author or the references to the "temple" must refer to something other than Solomon's temple. Before we hastily conclude that the superscription is inaccurate, we should seriously consider the second possibility. We should give the text the benefit of the doubt, allowing it to be innocent until proven guilty. I shall now analyse the terminology in Psalm 5:7 to see if it could plausibly have referred to the tabernacle in Zion where the Ark of the Covenant was kept during much of David's reign.

#### 3.1 The Problem

Psalm 5:7 reads, "But I, by your great mercy will come into *your house*; in reverence will I bow down toward *your holy temple*" (italics mine). If there were no superscription, the most natural interpretation of "your house" and "your holy temple" would be as references to the temple of Solomon or, if there were reason to date the psalm in the postexilic period, to the second temple.

If Psalm 5 predates the building of the first temple, then the references to Yahweh's "house" and "temple" would need to be acceptable terminology for referring to the tabernacle in Zion that served as Yahweh's dwelling place among his people and as the centre of Israel's worship before the construction

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 39 is the only instance in the psalm headings in which the construction *l'š + person's name* would not be consistent with an ascription of authorship. The reason in Psalm 39 is that we find both לִידִיתוּן, "for Jeduthun," and לְדָוִד, "of David." Presumably only one of them could have been the author.

of Solomon's temple. Is there any evidence to support this possibility? Is there any evidence to indicate that the terms "house" and "temple" could have been applied to such a tabernacle? Let us scrutinise each term.

### 3.2 "Your House"

The word translated "house" (בַּיִת: *bayit*, 2045 times in MT) primarily denotes a dwelling, a place of habitation (Goldberg 1999:105), "a building in which a family lives" (Baker and Carpenter 1993: s.v. בַּיִת). When referring to a physical house, it usually refers to solid construction, but does occasionally describe a tent or a hut (see BDB 2000: s.v. 1.a; e.g., Gen 27:15 and 33:17).

By extension, the place of Yahweh's dwelling amongst his people came to be known as "the house of God" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים or בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים), "the house of the Lord" (בֵּית יְהוָה) or simply "your house" (בֵּיתְךָ). After the construction of Solomon's temple, these terms referred to it. However, prior to the construction of the temple, they were used with reference to whatever facility housed the Ark of the Covenant, that is, whatever structure served as the habitation of Yahweh.

Jacob referred to the place at which the Lord appeared to him as "the house of God" (בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, Gen 28:17) because he realised that "the Lord is in this place" (v. 16), even though it was out in the open with no structure. Before leaving the place, he set up a single stone as a memorial to his meeting with the Lord, declaring that "this stone ... will be God's house" (v. 22).

Shortly before the construction of the tabernacle, God commanded the Israelites to "bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God" (Exod 23:19). This amounts to calling the tabernacle "the house of the Lord" (בֵּית יְהוָה). Similarly, Deuteronomy 23:18 prohibits bringing the earrings of a prostitute "into the house of the Lord your God to pay any vow."

The reference to "the treasury of the Lord's house" in Joshua 6:24 is problematic on both textual grounds (the LXX reads "the Lord's treasury") and historical grounds (we do not know of a treasury attached to the tabernacle

at that time in the conquest), so it carries no weight. Butler (1998:68) believes it reflects a later editorial amendment to the Hebrew text.

There are several references to the house of the Lord in Shiloh. The first mentions “all the time the house of God was in Shiloh” (Jdg 18:31). In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah worshipped at “the house of the Lord in Shiloh” (v. 7, 24). This was where Eli ministered and where Samuel grew up. 1 Samuel 3:15 again refers to this place as “the house of the Lord.” Since “the house of the Lord in Shiloh” had doors and doorposts (1 Sam 1:9 and 3:15), some believe it was a temple rather than the Mosaic tabernacle, but this is unlikely (see below).

Finally, 1 Chronicles calls the tabernacle David established in Zion “the house of the Lord.” In reviewing how David set in order the worship of Yahweh, the chronicler reports ...

These are the men David put in charge of the music in the house of the LORD after the ark came to rest there. They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, until Solomon built the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. (1 Chr 6:31-32).

Later, 1 Samuel 12:20 reports that David “went into the house of the LORD and worshipped.” The chronicler also describes how David appointed the gatekeepers to guard the gates of the tabernacle in Zion.

The gatekeepers had been assigned to their positions of trust by David and Samuel the seer. They and their descendants were in charge of guarding the gates of the house of the LORD—the house called the Tent (1 Chr 9:22-23).

The evidence conclusively suggests that prior to the erection of Solomon’s temple, whatever facility housed the Ark of the Covenant could be referred to as “the house of the Lord.” The Mosaic tabernacle, the structure at Shiloh and the tent in Zion are all referred to as “the house of the Lord.” Even after the construction of the temple, the chronicler used the word “house” to describe the tabernacle of David. Thus there is no reason why David himself could not have referred to the Zion tabernacle as “your house” (Psa 5:7).

But what about “your holy temple”? Is there any grounds for believing that the tabernacle of David could be labelled “your temple”? Let us examine the evidence.

### 3.3 “Your Temple”

The word translated “temple” (הֵיכָל: *hêkāl*, 80 times in MT) “essentially represents a king’s dwelling quarters, i.e., a palace” (Coppes 1999:214). When denoting a royal palace, *hêkāl* could refer either the entire palace or a main room of the palace. By extension, in Israel it came to be a standard term for “a palace of God considered as King” (BDB 2000: s.v. 2), that is, the temple. Sometimes it denoted the entire temple, but it was often used to denote specifically “the holy place (as distinguished from the דְּבִיר [dēbîr] the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies)” (BDB 2000: s.v. 2.b). When juxtaposed, the following three terms may denote differing parts of the temple:

בַּיִת	<i>bayit</i>	the entire temple
הֵיכָל	<i>hêkāl</i>	the holy place
דְּבִיר	<i>dēbîr</i>	the holy of holies

These distinctions are evident in Psalm 5:7, for the psalmist declares that he will “enter your house,” but he will only “bow down *toward* your holy temple.” This is consistent with the psalm being written by a non-priest, such as David, who could enter the outer courts but not the inner sanctuaries.

The crucial question with reference to Psalm 5:7 is whether there is any precedent for using *hêkāl* to refer the tabernacle. Probably because it was only adopted into common usage in Hebrew after the coronation of the first king, *hêkāl* does not occur in the Old Testament until 1 Samuel (a book written after

Israel became a kingdom), for which reason it was never used of the Mosaic tabernacle prior to the period of the judges.<sup>8</sup>

The house of the Lord in Shiloh is called a “temple” (*hêkāl*, 1 Sam 1:9 and 3:3). On account of the fact that it had “doors” (1 Sam 3:15) and “doorposts” (1 Sam 1:9), many believe the “temple” in Shiloh in the days of Eli and Samuel was no longer a “tent” or a “tabernacle,” but a proper “temple” (e.g., Cundall 1988:2019). Therefore, the reference to this structure as a *hêkāl* does not offer any precedent for calling a mere tent a *hêkāl*. However, this argument does not bear up under scrutiny.

2 Samuel 2:22 calls the Shiloh “temple” (*hêkāl*) “the Tent of Meeting” (Hebrew, אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד). “The Tent of Meeting”<sup>9</sup> is positively identified with the Mosaic tabernacle throughout the Old Testament.

The tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the desert, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place at Gibeon (1 Chr 21:29).

Solomon and the whole assembly went to the high place at Gibeon, for God’s Tent of Meeting was there, which Moses the LORD’s servant had made in the desert (2 Chr 1:3).

Although it moved from place to place throughout its lifespan, the Tent of Meeting was still in use until the time Solomon’s temple was built.

They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, *until* Solomon built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem (1 Chr 6:32, italics mine).

Since the *hêkāl* in Shiloh was equated “the Tent of Meeting,” the claim that it was a permanent temple seems unlikely. The Mosaic tabernacle was first set

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<sup>8</sup> In the Pentateuch, the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, the holy place, was designated as either מִקְדָּשׁ קָדֵשׁ or מִקְדָּשׁ.

<sup>9</sup> This term occurs 146 times in the Old Testament (NASB), always with reference to the Mosaic Tabernacle.

up in Shiloh in the days of Joshua (see Josh 18:1 and 19:51; cf. Josh 22:19, 29 and Jdg 18:31). During the period of Eli and Samuel, it was semi-permanently erected in Shiloh and, it seems, somewhat reinforced with doors and doorposts. Later, after the destruction of Shiloh, it reappeared in Gibeon where it remained in active use until the completion of Solomon's temple.

If the preceding reconstruction is accurate, then it seems likely that the two allusions to the "temple" (*hêkāl*) in Shiloh were indeed allusions to the tabernacle, probably with special reference to its "holy place." Since we know David used the word *hêkāl* with respect to God's heavenly dwelling (see 2 Sam 22:7), it is not a far stretch to believe he might have used it with reference to God's earthly dwelling.

Psalm 27:4-6 corroborates the plausibility of David calling the tabernacle the Lord's "house" and "temple" (so Coppes 1999; cf. Kidner 1973). In one breath, the psalmist uses four synonyms for Yahweh's dwelling place: (a) "house" (בַּיִת), (b) "temple" (הַיְקָל), (c) "dwelling" (דָּוָן) and (d) "tabernacle" (אֹהֶל, "tent").

One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in *the house of the Lord* all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in *his temple*. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in *his dwelling*; he will hide me in the shelter of *his tabernacle* and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at *his tabernacle* will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord (Psalm 27:4-6, italics mine).

At first glance, the allusions to "his dwelling" and "his tabernacle" (or "tent") in verse 5 appear to be purely metaphorical, not alluding to any earthly realities, but only to what such realities would represent. However, the pledge in verse 6, "at his tabernacle will I sacrifice," clearly refers to a physical, earthly sanctuary. This implies that all five references in Psalm 27:4-6 refer to the earthly sanctuary as the visible symbol of God's dwelling and presence among his people. Thus the terms "house" (v. 4), "temple" (v. 4) and "tabernacle" (v. 6) all denote *the same sanctuary*.

But which sanctuary—the tabernacle or the temple? Did the psalmist call the temple a “tent” (לִּטְאָה, v. 6) or did he call the tabernacle a “temple” (לְבַיִת, v. 4)? Craigie<sup>10</sup> assumes the former, simply declaring without any corroborating argument that “the sacrifices about to be offered ‘in his tent’ [is] a poetic description of the temple, rather than an indication that the psalm was composed prior to the construction of the temple” (1998:233). This is a most unnatural interpretation of verse 6. The Old Testament never calls Solomon’s temple a “tent”; there is no precedent for such a “poetic description of the temple.” Furthermore, verse 6 is the fuller, clearer statement; sound exegesis should interpret the obscure in the light of the clear. Therefore, verse 6 should serve as the yardstick for interpreting verse 4. This is further supported by the fact that *hêkāl*, as a term denoting “the holy place,” would be a perfectly natural choice to describe the tabernacle, whereas *’ōhel* (“tent”) is a most unsuitable term to describe the temple or any part of it. It is likelier that David would have called the tabernacle “his temple” than that a later liturgist would have referred to the temple as “his tent.”

Before summarising my conclusions, I need to say a few words about why we need to defend the plausibility of David having authored Psalm 5.

#### 4. Conclusion

Many modern scholars deem it implausible that a psalm in which the author vows to worship at the Lords “house” and “temple” could have emanated from the pen of King David. They reserve these terms, especially “temple,” for reference to Solomon’s temple. Therefore, they assume that such psalms must be dated after David’s death and conclude that the editors who added *lēdāwid* to the headings either (a) erred in naming David as the author or (b) did not intend it to indicate authorship.

However, close scrutiny of the Hebrew terms for “house” and “temple” indicates that it is plausible that David may have used these terms with reference to the Tabernacle. The term “house” has a long history of usage with

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<sup>10</sup> So too Weiser (1962), Dahood (1966), Bratcher and Reyburn (1991), Terrien (2003) and, implicitly, Broyles (1999) and Wilson (2002).

reference to the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place. "Temple" (*hêkāl*) did not enter into common usage until the kingdom period, but its usage with reference to the house of the Lord at Shiloh suggests that it was used to refer to the Holy Place of the Tabernacle.

Therefore, it remains plausible that the editor who identified David as the author of Psalm 5 did not err. David could have referred to the Tabernacle as the Lord's "house" and "temple." We may never be able to prove whether or not David wrote Psalm 5, but to claim confidently that he could not have written it is to go beyond what the evidence will support. Such a bold conclusion is unsound.

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