

“I Believe the Children Are the Future” – But Who Are the True Children of Israel?

Exegesis of Matthew 21:1 – 11, 15 – 17

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Introduction: Christian Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of Matthew

In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Richard B. Hays explores the ethical issue of “Anti-Judaism and Ethnic Conflict.”¹ Given the role of Christian anti-semitism in history, and especially the horror of the Nazi regime and the inaction of much of the world towards the plight of the Jewish community in central Europe, this is a subject of much Christian self-reflection, appropriately so. Hays, as a New Testament scholar, surveys the various authors of the New Testament to examine how each contributed towards Christians’ caricature of Jewish people, towards the theological position of supersessionism where the Church replaced Israel (and in what sense), and towards a general hostility between Christians and Jews.

When Hays engages with the Gospel of Matthew, he astutely points out material that Matthew shares with Mark and Luke, along with unique material not found in the other two Synoptic Gospels. It is true that Matthew intensifies language of God rejecting certain aspects of the Judaism of Jesus’ day. I will return to Hays’ comments below. Hays does not, however, point out the theme of children in Matthew’s Gospel, which is also unique to Matthew. I will explore Matthew 21:1 – 17 in this regard. For this has a bearing on how we interpret Matthew on “Judaism.”

The Second Generation of Israelites Under Moses, Out of Egypt: The Prototype

When God sent Moses back to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage, a series of events began where the first generation of Israelites failed to trust God, but the second generation of Israelites succeeded. Although God worked mighty wonders through Moses, the first generation refused to believe that God would enable them to enter the new garden land and defeat the fierce Canaanites (Num.13 – 14). The first generation had to nurture their children – the second generation of Israelites – in hope and faith-filled trust in YHWH while wandering in the wilderness.

Curiously, the Israelite parents had to remember that they had turned their children into bargaining chips against God. When they heard the report of the twelve spies, they said, “Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” (Num.14:3). Of course, God did not take sympathetically to this rebelliousness. He said, “How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?” (Num.14:11). God rejected them, offering Moses to start a nation over with him. But Moses interceded for them, and God accepted His intercession, nevertheless asking aloud, “How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me?” (Num.14:27). Significantly, God reversed their attempt to use their children as ammunition against Him. He promised again to lead them into the land, but waited for the first generation to die of natural causes in the wilderness. “Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey—I will bring them in, and they will know the land which you have rejected” (Num.14:31).

In effect, the first generation had to have faith in God, and teach faith in God, for the sake of their children to inherit the garden land. They had to participate in the undoing of their faithlessness, to prepare their children to do what they could not. For they would not benefit in the same way as their children. While God continued to protect the whole people of Israel in the wilderness, and provide them with food, water, and provision by His presence, the parents would not be able to enter the new garden land for which they had hoped. Instead, God called them to instill that hope and faith in their children, so that their children would not make the same mistake they did.

This had the effect of turning Israel’s “Song of the Sea,” which the first generation of Israelites sang on the far shores of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1 – 18), into a bittersweet song. On the one hand, the Song was of course a reminder of God’s strength and faithfulness to Israel. Yet, on the other hand, the Song was also filled with the startling reminder that Israel’s adults failed, and that the mighty events of God in Egypt were somehow not enough to stimulate sufficient faith in the first generation of Israelites. The Song of the Sea, and the Exodus deliverance as a

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament – Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), ch.17

whole, was laced with both ironic sadness and poignant hope. That hope reached forward to “the children” in such a way that God’s love for them, and their potential faithfulness as an improvement over the faithlessness of their parents, necessarily came into the horizon of the text of the Pentateuch itself as the narrative frame for the Song of the Sea.

If my argument is correct, this nuanced association in Israel’s history would become for Jesus the basis for bringing biblical texts together in such a way that “the elders” and “the children” of his own day reproduced Israel’s failure and promise. As Jesus interpreted it, the children’s praise of him in the temple served to remind the adults of God’s goodness and faithfulness to Israel, while also serving as a stinging rebuke to their parents and elders. Specifically, it serves as the precedent for Jesus to use Psalm 8 for the “children” but against the “parents” who were in that moment, in the words of Psalm 8:3, “adversaries” of the Lord.

Exodus and New Exodus in Song: Exodus 15 and Psalm 118

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, he engaged in a duel with the chief priests and elders of the city about the correct theological interpretation of his own actions. Prominent in that duel was the deployment of Psalm 118 and Psalm 8. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkeys, presenting himself as the messianic king from the house of David, and dropping the “messianic secrecy” in which he had cloaked himself since the rejection he had faced in Matthew 12, the crowds cry out in the voice of Psalm 118:14. Then, when Jesus goes into the temple, cleanses the court and heals the people, the children cry out again in the same voice, repeating Psalm 118:14.

Psalm 118 had a pre-existing literary and thematic relationship with the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:1 – 18. That relationship is rooted in a larger relationship that the Hebrew prophets saw between Egypt and the exile: the latter would be like the former, the new exodus deliverance from the Gentile powers would be like the first deliverance from the earlier Gentile power, Pharaoh (Isa.40 – 55; Zech.9 – 14; Ps.107 – 150; etc.). Hence, Psalm 118 weaves into itself concerns, words, and entire phrases from Exodus 15:1 – 18. Psalm 118 takes up the Song of the Sea’s celebration of God’s strength, salvation of His people from enemies, covenant name, and majesty. See Appendix A, below, for more exegetical details about the relationship between Psalm 118 and Exodus 15:1 – 18.

Jesus, of course, called forth and encouraged his contemporaries to shout, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps.118:14) when he marched into Jerusalem. In so doing, he identified himself as that messianic king hoped-for by the Psalm, who would restore Israel from exile. Jesus did this by making use of the donkey and colt called for by the LXX translation of Zechariah 9:9, and riding into the city. It was both a royal messianic and prophetic claim. For their part, the crowds laid down palm branches before Jesus in recognition of his claim to the king, and they said to the city inhabitants who were stirred that Jesus was a “prophet” from Nazareth in Galilee, who was now, based on his Davidic heritage, coming to claim the kingship. Implied is that Jesus is God’s deliverer who has entered “the gates of righteousness” (Ps.118:19 – 21), or the gates of Jerusalem, as “the righteous” spoken of by the Psalm.

The Second Generation of Israelites Under Jesus, Out of Sin: The Antitype

Jesus’ claim to be the great king who would deliver Israel from her greatest enemy, the root cause of Israel’s exile, was enhanced by more than simply the invocation of Psalm 118:26. Throughout the narrative, Matthew presents Jesus as a new and greater Moses, because Jesus would be a deliverer, mediate the covenant, and establish a community around that covenant. The literary allusions and parallels are too numerous to count here, but yet another strong connection is made between Jesus and Moses by the word “meek” in the Zechariah 9:9 invocation, which Matthew makes sure we as readers understand. Jesus is the “meek” king (Mt.11:28 – 30). The only other figure in Scripture who was described as “meek” is Moses, from LXX Numbers 12:3, when Moses’ leadership and authority were challenged by his own brother and sister. Moses was “meek” in the sense of not personally defending his own authority, but rather letting God do so.

This association between Jesus and Moses, by way of Zechariah’s prophecy and the key word “meek,” is no accident. The association is not only a reference establishing once more the parallel between Jesus and Moses. It is not only an anticipatory marker that Jesus’ “kin” would reject his authority. It comes from the very place in the narrative of Numbers where Israel’s first generation was about to reject their inheritance and receive God’s word of doom, that they will perish (Num.13 – 14). God would then maintain His offer of inheritance, but *to their children*. This parallels the circumstance of Jesus. The chief priests and elders, and in fact the adult “crowd,” will reject

Jesus. But the “children” in the temple honor Jesus, praise him, and signify God’s goodness and God’s continuing offer of Jesus to Israel as the inheritance of Israel despite their initial rejection.

Matthew has prepared his readers to interpret matters this way by his narration of Jesus’ interactions with actual children, and his use of “children” as a metaphor to establish a conceptual category of people who were responding to him favorably. Jesus uses the terms “little children/infants” (νηπίοις) and “children” (παιδιά) as endearing terms for “disciples” and especially “new believers” in Mt.11:25 (νηπίοις); 18:1 – 6 (παιδιά); 19:13 – 15 (παιδιά); 19:29 (τέκνα). The term νηπίοις appears to be a subset of παιδιά when used with reference to actual children. Prior to his entry to Jerusalem, Jesus used the term νηπίοις in only one place: Matthew 11:25, with reference to the disciples being humble enough to perceive that the Son reveals the Father. Now that Jesus receives praise from actual νηπίοις, he names them as such. From a lexical point of view, it is possible that Matthew is including some adults in the designation of “children” in Mt.21:15 – 16 based on Mt.11:25. But in any case, it is not a coincidence that these νηπίοις are humble enough to perceive him as the messianic king “who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps.118:14). They continue to praise Jesus using Psalm 118 even after Jesus takes controversial steps to clear the temple (Mt.21:12 – 14). They also appear to celebrate Jesus’ healing miracles with earnestness (Mt.21:15).

Early Christian and Byzantine commentators noticed Matthew’s literary treatment of “children.” Saint Romanos the Melodist, in the *Kontakion* of “On the Entry to Jerusalem,” structures the hymn around the constant refrain, “Thou art the blessed One who comest to call up Adam.” This phrase occurs first in the Prooimion with the introduction that it is “the praise of the angels and the song of the children crying out to Thee.” Subsequently, it appears at the close of each of the 16 strophes. Strophe 13 is astute in portraying the bitter irony between the “elders” and the “children.” “The hymn of the children terrified all of his enemies.” Jesus then, also in Strophe 13, calls Jerusalem to mourn because her children have become “teachers of their fathers.” Jerusalem is, ironically, young in the sense of being evil, and old in the sense of being weary of doing well. The children’s refrain makes them “better” than “their fathers.”

Fascinatingly, Jesus in Strophe 14 refers to the Exodus from Egypt as his own personal act on Israel’s behalf. When he wonders why the city’s leaders and adult inhabitants reject him, Jesus asks:

“Was it in return for the fact that for them I broke through the sea as though it were a cloak with my staff?
Do they quarry a tomb for me in return for my offering them a cloud as shelter?”

This shows Romanos’ acquaintance with how Jesus’ “new exodus” out from slavery to sin and death takes its conceptual model from the first exodus out from slavery to Pharaoh. The questions Jesus asks aloud are laced with irony, for in the first exodus and even more in the greater exodus, he did them good. They do him evil, however. But this was not entirely unexpected. Romanos seems to be sensitive to the fact that the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt did in fact reject God and His messenger Moses, most notably in Numbers 13 – 14. In Strophe 15, Jesus says that, through his death and resurrection, he, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, go to “prepare a home for the weak, the goal of those who faithfully cry out to me: “Thou art the blessed One who comest to call up Adam.”” Since Romanos praised the children in the Prooimion for crying out precisely that, it is clear what his intention and understanding are. He praises the children and criticizes the adults.

The Children and the Enemies in Psalm 8

But Jesus does not simply praise the children and rebuke the adults in his own voice. He does so using Scripture. He introduces another Psalm into the debate, setting off an incredible series of resonances. Jesus deploys LXX Ps.8:3 (MT Psalm 8:2) and brings this text in to further demarcate the “children” vs. the “adults.”

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou perfected praise,
ἐκ στόματος νηπίων καὶ θηλαζόντων κατηρτίσω αἶνον

because of thine enemies; that thou mightest put down the enemy and avenger.
ἕνεκα τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου τοῦ καταλύσαι ἐχθρὸν καὶ ἐκδικητήν.

Jesus quotes the first half of the verse, but not the second. I maintain, however, that Jesus intended the second half of the verse to “be heard” also. By deploying LXX Psalm 8:3, Jesus asserts that *two* elements of Psalm 8:3 – not simply one – are now concretely before him and apparent for all to see. Jesus applies the mention of “infants and

nursing babes” in the Psalm to the children who cried Hosanna. And, he applies the phrase, “thine enemies... the enemy and the revengeful” to as the chief priests and elders. Both elements of the Psalm are at play. This is demonstrably the case in many, if not all, the quotations of the quotations of the Old Testament by Jesus.

A helpful example of Jesus’ deployment of Old Testament material which parallels his use of LXX Psalm 8:3 is his quotation of Daniel’s “Son of Man” vision-prophecy while he was on trial. Jesus says that he is the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Father, coming, or having come, to his enthronement on the clouds of heaven (Dan.7:13 – 14; Mt.26:64). By quoting this vision-prophecy of Daniel, Jesus not only makes a claim about his own identity, he makes an assertion about the chief priests and council leaders surrounding him (Mt.26:59 – 67): They are the grotesque, deformed beasts (Dan.7:1 – 8) surrounding that “one like a Son of Man,” who will be subdued by him like the earthly beasts were subdued by Adam (Gen.1:26 – 28). This is a powerplay of textual material. The high priest did not miss the point: He tore his robes, outraged by the blasphemy and the accusation that he was aligned with adversaries of God and God’s true people (Mt.26:65 – 67). Something very similar is happening here in Mt.21:15 – 16.

Donald Hagner² and R.T. France³ both find in Jesus’ words a challenge to his opponents. Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215 AD) detects in Jesus’ quotation of LXX Psalm 8:3 a rebuke to the adults:

“The prophetic spirit also distinguishes us as children. Plucking, it is said, branches of olives or palms, the children went forth to meet the Lord, and cried, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord” ... And the Scripture appears to me, in allusion to the prophecy just mentioned, reproachfully to upbraid the thoughtless: Have you never read, “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings You have perfected praise?””⁴

Clement says “the thoughtless” are the adults, especially the leaders of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ visitation. In fact, to make his point more concisely, Clement does not mention the fact that “the crowd,” too, cried out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Mt.21:9) He sees fit to only mention that the children cried out the words of Psalm 118. Since Clement is making a thematic point about the Scriptures portraying disciples as “children,” it does not suit his editorial purpose to mention the adults. Nevertheless, he could have easily added “with the crowd.” Clement attests, therefore, to a Christian tradition which noted in Matthew’s Gospel that the children and the adults were responding quite differently to Jesus, in principle. John Chrysostom also noted this,⁵ but applied the “children” as a figure of “the Gentiles,” and not the “next generation” of Jews as I argue here. Chrysostom’s application might be eventually relevant as well, but not before and not to the exclusion of, the next generation of Jews, who were the “children” during Jesus’ arrival as Jerusalem’s king and Israel’s deliverer.

Furthermore, two modern commentators also detect in Jesus’ quotation of LXX Psalm 8:3 a resonance or connection with Exodus 15:1 – 18. John Nolland notes:

² Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, edited by Ralph P. Martin, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), p.602 says, “Matthew’s Greek agrees exactly with that of the LXX of Ps 8:3. The LXX continues with *ἐνεκα τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου*, “for the sake of your enemies,” which words, if in Jesus’ mind, would have made the text all the more relevant to the situation.” As I argue in this paper, these words are without a doubt in Jesus’ mind, and Jesus expected them to be in the minds of his detractors as well.

³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, edited by Stonehouse, Bruce, and Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p.789 – 790, says, “But the fact that the children in the psalm vindicated God *against his enemies* remains strongly suggestive, particularly when this quotation follows an action of Jesus which could be seen as “the LORD” coming to his temple (Mal.3:1).” Italics mine. France therefore positions Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 8 as coming between “the children” and “his enemies” to distinguish them.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogos* I.5

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily 67*, Mt 21:12 – 13, says, “Their voices were a prototype of the lisping of the Gentiles of the gospel... The apostles found consolation in this. For they had already been perplexed as to how even the unlearned should be able to publish the gospel. But now they were already finding that the children were anticipating them. The children removed all their anxiety, teaching them that God would grant them utterance, who made even these little ones to sing praise.”

“Despite the dependence on LXX language here, the link with the Exodus marvels noted above raises the question of whether a Jewish tradition that connected Ps.8:3 with Ex.15:2 on the basis of the shared use of ‘z (‘strength,’ ‘protection,’ etc.) lies behind the choice of the psalm text. A little extra support for this possibility may be claimed from the observation that the relevant part of Ex.15:2 is identical to Ps.118:14, the psalm to which the children’s acclamation relates, which was used in Mt.21:9 and will be used again in v.41 and 23:38. The significance of a connection with this Jewish tradition would be to identify the children’s praise as a repetition of the contribution of the children to the song of Moses and the Israelites in Ex.15. In any case, God is the one addressed in the psalm. The ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ of the children is their recognition and affirmation of what God is doing and is thus fitting praise to God.”⁶

Nolland argues that the key idea of God’s “strength” links Exodus 15:2 and 13, Psalm 8:3, and Psalm 118:14. France explains this further.⁷ Unfortunately, Nolland appears to not consider the difference between the second and the first generation of Israelites after the exodus. He seems to instead group them together for the purpose of saying that both children and parents sang the Song of the Sea at the time that all Israel passed through the Red Sea. True as that may be, the subsequent failure of the parents is still indelibly part of the story, and highly relevant to Jesus in the moment of his entry into the temple (Mt.21:15 – 16).

Ulrich Luz also discerns an association between Psalm 8 and the Song of the Sea:

“Thus it is not Israel’s leaders who represent the true Israel but its sick, its “children,” and its poor. To the remonstrances of the hostile leaders who reject him Jesus responds with a word from Ps.8:3 that speaks of the praise of God from babes and infants and that in Jewish exegesis is primarily connected with Israel’s song of praise at the Red Sea (Ex.15:1 – 18). Jesus’ opponents have nothing to say in response. They oppose not only Jesus but also their own Bible.”⁸

Luz also sees Jesus’ affirmation of the “children” as a rebuke of the “adults,” especially “Israel’s leaders.” He agrees with Nolland that there already exists a connection between Exodus 15 and Psalm 8 because the “strength” of God is a shared concern and semantic link between them. I argue for three more:

1. *God’s majesty.* Psalm 8 begins and ends with a declaration of how “majestic” God is. “O Lord, YHWH, how majestic is Your name in all the earth” (Ps.8:1, 9). The Song of the Sea also demonstrates a concern that God be considered “majestic.” It says that God’s right hand is “majestic in power” (Ex.15:6).
2. *God’s covenantal name.* Psalm 8 specifically declares majestic “the name of YHWH” (Ps.8:1, 9). The Song of the Sea shows a concern to identify God’s name in a covenantal sense: “YHWH is His name” (Ex.15:3). Psalm 118 makes much of the “name” of the Lord. Three times, the Psalmist says, “In the name of YHWH, I will surely cut them off” (Ps.118:10, 11, 12). And finally, a fourth mention is found in the great benediction: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of YHWH” (Ps.118:26).
3. *Victory and dominion, including over those in the sea.* In Psalm 8, God puts all creation and His enemies under the feet of His true humanity, including “whatever passes through the paths of the sea” (Ps.8:8). Although Psalm 8 is describing sea creatures crawling or swimming through their ordinary routine, reference to “the sea” is highly suggestive. In the Song of the Sea, Israel’s enemies were “cast into the sea... drowned in the Red Sea” (Ex.15:4 – 5). Psalm 118 has no reference to “the sea,” but shares ample concerns with the Song of the Sea about the defeat of adversaries, as well as the direct quotation of its main theme: “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation” (Ps.118:14; Ex.2).

Jesus, therefore, *either* surfaces the pre-existing relationship between Psalm 8 and the other two biblical texts, *or* brings Psalm 8 into an even closer relationship with them. By doing this, Jesus brings the narrative of the passing of

⁶ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p.848

⁷ R.T. France, p.789, says, “‘Strength’ is often ascribed to God in a formula of praise (e.g. Pss.29:1; 59:16 – 17; 68:34 – 35), and when that “strength” issues from mouths it is not hard to see why LXX translated it as “praise.” The LXX version makes the underlying sense of the Hebrew also is of vindication by what children say, and it is that sense on which Jesus’ quotation here depends.”

⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Hermeneia: Matthew 21 – 28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), p.13

God's blessing from the first to the second generation of Israelites into his interpretation of what is happening in his own time. The current generation of Israelite adults have positioned themselves as God's "adversaries" (Ps.8:3b). God therefore offers His covenant promises to "children" (Ps.8:3a; Mt.21:15 – 16). The "children" of Psalm 8 wind up being the beneficiaries of God's covenant-forming and covenant-fulfilling action to bring about a "new humanity" who exercises dominion like Adam had dominion in the creation, originally (Gen.1:28). The "enemies" of Psalm 8 wind up being their "parents" or the "adults" because of their resistance to Jesus!

Christianity and Judaism in Dialogue

When Pilate offers to crucify Jesus, the Jewish "crowd" (Mt.27:54) cries out, "His blood shall be on us *and on our children!*" (Mt.27:25). This verse has been infamously used by medieval Christians to blame the death of Jesus on Jews categorically and for all time, often to justify their own marginalization of Jews and complicity in their suffering. Implicit in that way of using the verse was a "closed supercessionism" where the Church "replaced" Israel in such a way that virtually foreclosed individual Jews from becoming members in the Church. I distinguish this variety of "supercessionism" from the "open supercessionism" expressed by both the Qumran community and the early Christian community (especially articulated by Paul) where a "messianic" community makes claims about itself by claiming biblical promises intended for "all Israel" and simultaneously inviting, calling, pleading with, and urging Jews to join it.

What my exegesis above strongly suggests is that Mt.27:25 needs to be *conditioned* by the prior material on "children," especially Mt.21:15 – 16. Matthew himself might intend for Mt.27:54 to be taken positively and ironically, where "the blood of Jesus" really "ought" to be "on" the Jews in a salvific sense, much like Caiaphas "prophesied" unknowingly and with a favorable, positive meaning he did not intend (Jn.11:47 – 53)! Matthew might intend for "the blood" as in "the responsibility" for Jesus' death to be "on us and on our children" in the limited sense that Jerusalem's uprising and defeat in 70 AD would be pegged to their rejection of Jesus, the one non-violent, and non-nationalist, messianic option. Or, as I suspect, Matthew might intend that the phrase "on us" be separated out, in principle, from "and on our children" because of how "parents" are rendered "enemies" by their own posture in the moment, whereas "children" are rendered as invited into, and claimed by, Jesus and what he offered as the inheritance of the covenant.

Particular Christians in church history must bear their own responsibility for Christian anti-semitism, and rightly so. But if my exegesis of Matthew 21:15 – 16 and its textual substrata can be maintained, then the Gospel of Matthew itself might be further vindicated from the charge.

Appendix A: Psalm 118 and Exodus 15:1 – 18

Psalm 118 had a pre-existing literary and thematic relationship with the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:1 – 18. That relationship is rooted in a larger relationship that the Hebrew prophets saw between Egypt and the exile: the latter would be like the former, the new exodus deliverance from the Gentile powers would be like the first deliverance from the earlier Gentile power, Pharaoh (Isa.40 – 55; Zech.9 – 14; Ps.107 – 150; etc.).

The Song of the Sea (Ex.15:1 – 18) celebrated God's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage to Egypt. Therefore, Psalm 118 repeats and transposes key elements of that Song to anticipate the new exodus. Both call God's act an act of "salvation": "The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation" (Exodus 15:2). Psalm 118 repeats this refrain verbatim (Psalm 118:14). A callback of this sort is akin to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoting, "That all men are created equal" in the Civil Rights Movement to evoke the white American pursuit of liberty from the American Revolution, and using it to make a new claim. In fact, Psalm 118 doubles and triples the reference to God's salvation. The Psalm describes people recognizing and celebrating God's act as an act of "salvation": "The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous" (Ps.118:15). Then the Psalm makes a third mention, as the reference to God's salvation is individualized and personalized: "And You have become my salvation" (Ps.118:21).

Both the Song of the Sea and Psalm 118 make three references to the "right hand" of God as God's active power to bring about that salvation and deliverance for Israel. "Your right hand is majestic in power, Your right hand shatters the enemy" (Ex.15:6) which is vitally important because God's hand thwarts the enemy's hand, as the enemy says, "my hand will destroy them" (Ex.15:9). Indeed, God stretched forth His right hand (Ex.15:12) to cause the earthly elements to swallow up the enemy. Psalm 118, mirroring its poetic predecessor, refers three times in quick succession to "Your right hand" (Ps.118:15 – 16). This numerical parallel cannot be accidental, or trivial. It indicates the Psalmist's invocation of the first exodus event and the Song of the Sea in particular as the poetic antecedent.

God's motivation to redeem Israel is named in Exodus 15 as "lovingkindness" (Exodus 15:13). Psalm 118 praises God for His "lovingkindness" five times (Psalm 118:1, 2, 3, 4, 29), operating as bookends to call forth praise of God in the beginning, and closing on praise at the end.

Enemies, meanwhile, in the Song of the Sea, were "cast into the sea, drowned in the Red Sea" (Ex.15:4 – 5), while Israel escaped through the sea (Ex.15:8 – 10), and fear grips the nations roundabout (Ex.15:14 – 16). Likewise, in Psalm 118, "All nations surrounded me" but "in the name of the Lord, I will surely cut them off" (Ps.118:10 – 13), ushering in the refrain of the Song of Sea (Ps.118:14).

In both the Song of the Sea and Psalm 118, there is reference to God's presence. The Exodus Song refers to God's "holy habitation" (Ex.15:13) and then makes a triple reference to the holy sanctuary of God's presence: "You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance; the place, O Lord, which You have made for Your dwelling; the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established." (Ex.15:17). The Song of the Sea anticipates God leading Israel into the garden land, and inhabiting a mountain like Eden and Sinai. Psalm 118 knows this as Mount Zion. Hence, the "gates of righteousness" (Ps.118:19 – 21) is a reference to the gates of Jerusalem; the "stone" is a reference to the temple of Jerusalem on Zion (Ps.118:22); the "altar" is the altar in that sanctuary (Ps.118:27). And the phrase, "We have blessed you from the house of the Lord" (Ps.118:26) refers to the full reestablishment of the worship of YHWH in the sanctuary when God restored Israel from exile, which was a renewal of what the Song of the Sea anticipated in its own day.

Both the Song of the Sea and Psalm 118 have a concern for "the name of the Lord" being magnified. "The Lord is His name" (Ex.15:3) introduces this theme and gives it a minor place of emphasis. But Psalm 118 expands greatly on it, making a triple reference to this "name" as part of the battle: "In the name of the Lord, I will surely cut them off" (Ps.118:10, 11, 12). When the messianic king, apparently, comes to Israel and Jerusalem, he will invoke the "name of the Lord": "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps.118:26).