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## Psalm 16: A Miktam of David

Walter E. Keller

*Valparaíso University*

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**Psalm 16**  
**A Miktam of David.**  
(Revised Common Lectionary) (RSV)

**Introduction to Psalm 16**

No one really knows what a Miktam is. Some have speculated that it may refer to the type of prayer here offered; others suggest it may be a musical or liturgical term. The true meaning is simply unknown.

It is traditional to attribute this Psalm to David. Peter quotes verses 8-11b in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25-28). There he makes a point of saying that, since David had died and was quite evidently still in the Pit of death, the speaker of these words had to be another, one who had actually come out of the Pit, out of Sheol. That other was Christ who rose from the tomb. That is the basis for employing Psalm 16 in the Easter season. We may think of David, first of all, as speaking this Psalm; but then we also have to think of Christ as praying this Psalm. And that gives us also the courage to pray this Psalm in and with Christ.

Psalm 16 can be divided into two halves. The first half (verses 1-6) is a prayer of thanksgiving and personal dedication to the one and only God, the LORD of the Covenant. Because the LORD shows Himself to be so gracious, He thereby reveals Himself to be our highest and only Good. Verse 1 suggests a situation of danger. Verse 2 points to the LORD alone as our refuge. Verse 3 places us in the company of the other saints in the church in whom we find our delight. Verse 4 leads us to declare that we will never worship any other god, because, as verses 5-6 lead us in saying, the LORD has given us such a goodly heritage. The second half of this Psalm then blesses the LORD because He is the One who so faithfully instructs, guards, warns, and leads me (verses 7-8), and He does so in the face of my temptation to seek help from other gods. That faithfulness of the LORD extends right up to the moment of my death (verses 9-10), and indeed, beyond it (verse 11), to the eternal pleasures of the resurrection.

**<sup>1</sup> Preserve (protect) me, O God, for in thee I take refuge.**

I find it instructive for prayer life that the Psalms, as here, frequently picture human life as a "being chased" or as a "being hunted." Nothing in this Psalm suggests that the Psalmist is being pursued by enemies, yet he asks God for protection and solemnly avers that he is taking refuge in God. But from what does he ask protection and against what does he need refuge? The best answer to this question lies in verse 10. We may perhaps conjecture that the Psalmist had had a narrow escape from an untimely death. Certainly Jesus during the course of his public ministry, and climactically in his Passion, had ample cause to speak this prayer. And if we will be instructed by the New Testament, there is need for us also to pray this Psalm. Look at 1 Peter 5:8-9:

**"Keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith."**

The devil is here pictured as a roaring lion, always on the prowl to devour someone. That reality gives me the sense that my life is in danger; I am a soul chased, a being hunted. The resistance which Peter counsels may well include a continual praying of Psalm 16:1: Preserve me, O God, from the devil, author of the ever-present evil, for in thee and thee alone I take refuge from the prowling lion.

**2a I say to the LORD** (Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel and the Father of Jesus),  
**"Thou art my Lord** (my Master, in a relational sense);  
**2b I have no good apart from thee."**

Note how the English word "Lord" is used in a double sense in this verse. "I say" in verse 2a has the force of a solemn declaration, like a formal confession of faith: "I solemnly declare to Yahweh, 'You - and you alone - do I acknowledge as my Lord and Master.'"

While the Hebrew of verse 2b is somewhat uncertain, the general meaning is quite clear. Without Yahweh all that is otherwise called good is really not good at all. The covenant God is not only the highest among many good things, He is the only Good. Everything else is good only because at the beginning as the Creator, He declared of what He had made that it was good. And we may call our goods "good" only as we receive them as a gift from His generous hand.

**3 As for the saints** (holy ones) **in the land,**  
**they are the noble** (mighty, glorious), **in whom is all my delight.**

The "saints" are the people whom God has chosen and set aside for His own redemptive purposes. In verse 2 we confess our faith in Yahweh, and acknowledge Him as our sole Master. Part of the joy and the strength of such a commitment is that there is a whole family of those who also confess their allegiance to Yahweh. They are the family of Yahweh, the saints whom He has called. Such an understanding is a rebuke of those who claim to love the LORD but have no use for His People, who love God but will have nothing to do with the children of God, who call Jesus Lord but avoid the congregation of Jesus' brothers and sisters.

**4 Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;**  
**their libations of blood I will not pour out** (I will not engage in the religious ritual of pouring out the blood of animals sacrificed to other gods.)  
**or take their names upon my lips.** (I will not take the name of false gods to my lips in an act of invocation and worship; or perhaps even, I will not even speak the names of the false gods at any time.)

In Exodus 23:13, as part of an expansion of the Sinaitic Law, God had said,

**"Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips."**

In Hosea 2:16-17 the LORD consoles His People, who have behaved toward Him, as it were, like a faithless wife with these words:

**"On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Baal." For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more."**

In this passage God is consoling His People, who have been so culpably faithless, with a vision of the future. In that Day all her faithlessness shall have been forgotten, her flings with the Baals shall have become a thing of the past, and the names of the Baals shall no longer even be found in her mouth. Then the Baals shall no longer be worshipped, and God's People shall no longer call upon the name of the false gods.

In verse 4 the Psalmist makes just that kind of commitment. So Jesus also rebuked Satan when he said in Matthew 4:10, "**Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'**" Where the LORD alone is my Lord, it is axiomatic that to choose any other god leads to sorrow. Those who like to think that a Canaanite convert wrote this Psalm can also think that the Psalmist speaks from bitter personal experience. If, as we have been saying, David wrote this Psalm, then such a corollary may come from witnessing the sorrows which idol worshipers incur from their idolatry. And indeed David had been the agent of God in warring against idolatrous nations. Or, it may simply be the necessary inference from the revelation of the jealous Yahweh's command to worship Him, and Him alone in passages like Exodus 20:5, 34:14, and Deuteronomy 4:24.

The LORD demands exclusive worship and He sets forth the terms of that devotion. But throughout the Bible it is always -- sadly -- possible to choose another god. For the Israelite to choose another god always meant to reject the God into whose community and care he had been received through circumcision. For the baptized Christian to choose another master also means to reject the God into whose community and care you have been received through Holy Baptism.

**5a The LORD is my chosen** (my allocated) **portion and my cup** (destiny);  
**5b thou holdest my lot** (the outcome of the roll of the dice).  
**6a The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;**  
**6b yea** (indeed!), **I have a goodly heritage.**

The necessary background for these verses is Deuteronomy 10:8-9. There reference is made to the fact that all the tribes of Israel received an allocated portion in the Promised Land, except the tribe of Levi. They were set aside to be ministers to the LORD. The Levites had no landed portion in the Promised Land; but they had the LORD as their portion. Is the Psalmist therefore a Levite? Probably not. But that Levitical arrangement provides an image for the Psalmist who wants to say that Yahweh is all he has, he really has no land or other possessions; but to have the LORD as your share suffices. It is in this sense a restatement of verse 2b.

Verse 5b refers to the custom of casting lots for determining the will of God. It was also the method for allocating the land to the tribes of Israel (cf. Numbers 26:55-56). What the Psalmist is saying therefore is that whatever will happen to me lies in God's roll of my dice, or, less colorfully, my future is in God's hands.

The allocation of the Land to the tribes continues to be the running metaphor in verse 6a. "The lines" are the measuring ropes and, by extension, the parcel of land so measured out. Thus the Psalm is leading us in blessing God for assigning us so pleasant a "place," understood metaphorically. To pun a bit, the "plot" of my life is a good one, because its author is God.

There is an interesting suggestion in verse 6b. The word translated "heritage" normally refers to an inheritance received at the death of one's father. The same word is used of the land of Canaan, Israel's heritage from the LORD, as that which the Israelites had received from God as a gift. It is impossible for a Christian to pray this Psalm and not to think of our eternal inheritance as a gift of the crucified God, that because Christ died for us we have entry into *the* Promised Land.

**7 I bless the LORD who gives me** (spiritual and moral) **counsel;**  
**in the night also my heart instructs** (disciplines, corrects) **me.**

Actually the word translated "heart" should (in a literal translation) read "kidneys." In Old Testament thought, the kidneys (KJV = reins) were regarded as the center of feelings and desires; we today would use the word "conscience." If we observe Hebrew parallelism, "the LORD" is paralleled by "my kidneys:" the LORD gives counsel, my kidneys instruct me. This works only so long as the LORD and my conscience are parallel. We do not want to be instructed by our own autonomous conscience, because that leads to eating forbidden apples from trees that are to be left alone! Thus we need to think here of how my God-counseled conscience instructs me. Luther gave us a good example when he said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." That is the force of the following verse 8; my conscience is a reliable guide only as I keep the LORD always before me.

**8a I keep the LORD always before me;**  
**8b because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.**

Verse 8a invites us to think of the LORD as always in front of us. The LORD faces us, so that we may always be aware of Who it is with Whom we have to do. He is ahead of us, so that we are always mindful of Whom we are following into the future. Notice that it was with verse 8 that Saint Peter began his citation of this Psalm in his sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:25-28).

Verse 8b invites us to think of the LORD as at my right hand. This means, in the first place, that the LORD is always near, He is always present, and He is always available to help me in time of need. But the right hand is also, secondly, the place of honor. We are to give the LORD, publicly and visibly, the honored place in our lives; we are not to be ashamed of our Lord. And it is finally instructive to note that, according to Psalm 109:31, the right hand was the place where the defense attorney would stand in a trial. Thus the LORD is also my defense against all those who would accuse me.

*Because* the LORD is with me, I am secure. Our sense of security is, and is to be, always grounded in the gracious presence of God. The same thought lies in the "therefore" of the following verse 9.

**9 Therefore my heart is glad,**  
**and my soul** (my tongue {Septuagint, Acts 2:26}) **rejoices;**  
**my body also dwells secure.**

Heart, soul and body denote the totality of my being rather than three different parts of my "self." These are three different ways of saying I am glad, I rejoice, I rest secure.

**10 For thou dost not give me up to Sheol,**  
**or let thy godly one** (your faithful one) **see the Pit** (or **corruption**).  
(cf. Acts 2:25-32; 13:35-37)

This is the heart of the Easter proclamation. On the day of Pentecost, Peter argued that since David was well known still to be dead in his tomb in Jerusalem, he must have been speaking prophetically of the event that had just taken place 50 days ago; namely, the resurrection of Jesus

Christ from the dead. And again, the Apostle Paul uses the same text in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey. There he asserts that since David's body assuredly saw corruption, the Psalm was obvious referring to someone else, one who saw no corruption. That is the case with Christ, for he rose from the dead. And if Jesus was raised from the dead, then that is the destiny also for all those who are "in Christ." It is the destiny of all those of us who have by baptism shared Christ's death and therefore have the promise of being raised with Christ. Each baptized Christian therefore should put his/her own name into the place of the Psalmist's "me:" Thou, O LORD, dost not give me, (Walter Keller), up to Sheol. My burial will not be God's final disposition of my body and being. What more is there? The Psalmist speaks of that already in the Old Testament in verse 11; and Christians have the further and final New Testament revelation in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

**<sup>11</sup> Thou dost show (reveal to) me the path of (the path which leads to) life;  
in thy presence there is fullness of joy,  
in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.**

This is a good, succinct definition of heaven. It is heaven to be in the Presence of the LORD. Perhaps a better way of saying it is to say that where the LORD is, there is heaven. And in heaven the cup of joy flows over, and pleasures are everlasting. Sadness and sorrow and separation are no more. We pray this Psalm at Easter, when we celebrate the victory of Jesus over death, because by his death Jesus destroyed the power of sin to bar our way back into Eden. Nothing in all the world can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 16:**

Lord Jesus, uphold those who hope in you, and give us your counsel, so that we may know the joy of your resurrection and share the pleasures of the saints at your right hand, where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**Nugget**

(Taken from Martin E. Marty's *Context*.)

We think these are decisive days to deal with that central act of believing communities (namely, worship). I paid close attention to Calvin College's John D. Witvliet, on worship:

"Analyzing a subject as profound and many-sided as worship requires a concept or image that is at once apt and startling. The image of worship as a game is certainly not the last word. It may suggest something altogether too casual, trivial, or shallow. At the same time, with a healthy sense of its potential pitfalls, the image provides at least a provocative first word.

“Like a game – or a good novel – worship enfolds us for a time into a way of seeing the world. It is the one hour in the week when an entire community acknowledges a world where God rules, where evil is named, where hope abounds, where the Spirit is on the move.

“Like a game, worship can only be learned by doing. A long afternoon of reading the baseball rulebook will not help you execute a well-placed bunt. So too, hours of catechetical instruction cannot fully prepare you for the joy and mystery of participation at the Lord’s Table.

“Finally, like a good game, worship is joyful business. As Romano Guardini has observed, worship at its best features ‘a sublime mingling of profound earnestness and divine joyfulness.’”

After those several bulleted items, let him talk at paragraph length again. “Ironically, the new openness to popular culture is perhaps most evident in the self-styled evangelical or ‘non-denominational’ churches that consider themselves conservative on the theological spectrum. To be certain, many of these newer churches were founded not so much with a conscious intent of accommodating religion to popular culture, but with a conscious attempt to reject well-established forms of religious faith without thinking through what would replace them. That may have been a strategic oversight, considering the vacuum created when tradition is not carefully preserved, a vacuum that popular culture is more than anxious to fill. As Lendol Calder put it: ‘Refusing tradition, (self-styled evangelical churches) refuse to nurture a culture of their own, and the unintended result has been, and continues to be, the uncritical adoption of the dominant culture of their host society, which in the case of the Americans would be the culture of consumption.’

Inevitably, the topic of music comes up in a context such as this. Dr. Paul L. Lusher, a church musician who directs the Center for Church Music in Grand Haven, Michigan, believes the sheer ease of appropriating forms of popular culture in worship helps explain their very success. The more traditional approach to worship and music, he claims, requires far more preparation and training on the part of both leaders and participants: ‘Just as a fast-food outlet can deliver a meal at less cost and effort than a five-star restaurant, a contemporary church can order a freshly minted service without near the kind of aesthetic awareness and musical expertise that more traditional public worship demands.’”

Some last words: “Whatever factors have brought about the popularization of American worship, the net effect has robbed many American families of precisely what they need to counter the assault of popular culture: dignity, reverence, beauty, learning, tradition, and a sense of the numinous, in the words of historian Thomas Reeves. Lacking a sense of transcendence, the popular church comes across as hip, as a church of the here and now. The gravity of an inherited faith-community larger than the present reality that is connected with the past, rooted in a living tradition, and anticipating the future, is often obscured.”

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*Walter E. Keller*

April 11, 1999 – **The Second Sunday of Easter**