



The Royal Psalms and Jesus Messiah: Preparing to Preach on a Royal Psalm

DELMAR L. JACOBSON

Trinity Lutheran Church, Mason City, Iowa

Those psalms which are commonly called the royal psalms occupy a special place in the Psalter and in the Bible as a whole.¹ They are special in themselves, conveying as they do the theology of the Davidic Kingdom (c. 1000-587 B.C.). But clearly they took on a special new meaning for the Jewish community which survived the collapse of the Davidic Kingdom (587 B.C.) and they retained that special meaning for the early Christian community, which interpreted them in the light of Jesus Messiah.

In preparing to preach on a royal psalm, then, or on any text which refers to a royal psalm, the Christian exegete must consider each of three perspectives: 1. the original purpose of the psalm in the days of the Davidic Kingdom; 2. the messianic interpretation of the psalm following the demise of the Davidic Kingdom; and 3. the New Testament interpretation of the psalm in the light of the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Messiah.

I. ROYAL PSALMS IN DAVIDIC CONTEXT

In their original setting the royal psalms depict the unique place of King David and his successors in the faith and life of the people of Israel. Each Davidic king is understood to be anointed as the earthly viceroy of Israel's true king, Yahweh, the Lord of hosts. Or to put it in slightly different words, the Davidic monarch is understood to be the royal mediator of the covenant between God the king and the people of Israel.

The Lord God was proclaimed as Israel's king from the beginning of Israel's existence as a people.² Certainly the covenant at Sinai was a kingly cove-

¹It is generally agreed that the royal psalms include Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144:1-11. A strong case can be made for including Psalms 61, 63, and 118. In addition to these, Mowinckel includes Psalms 28, 44, 60, 66, 68, 80, 83, and 84 in his list of royal psalms: S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

²Old Testament scholars such as Walter Eichrodt, Gerhard von Rad, and Albrecht Alt would not agree that Yahweh was proclaimed as Israel's king "from the beginning of Israel's existence as a people." Others such as Bernhard W. Anderson and H. J. Kraus do support this thesis; and Martin Buber gives what I consider to be a convincing argument for the antiquity of Israel's acceptance of Yahweh as king: M. Buber, *Kingship of God*, third edition (New York: Harper, 1967).

nant in which the several tribes accepted Yahweh as their king for ever and ever (Exod 15:18).³ Why such an obviously political arrangement as "king and subject"? Why not simply a religious relationship of "god and worshipper"? Perhaps because Yahweh is not merely a god in the

religious sense. Perhaps because the political designation “king” speaks of Yahweh’s leadership in the total life of the people.

In any case, for the first two hundred years, the form of God’s relationship with Israel was a covenant between God the king and each tribe of Israel; one covenant, but extended to each tribe, clan, and family. It was a form well suited for unifying independent, semi-nomadic tribes with their king and with each other.

The covenant form changed about the year 1000 B.C. The tribes could no longer maintain their independence. Threatened by the nations round about them, they were forced to become a monarchy of twelve tribes united under King David.⁴ In this covenant form the people related to God through their earthly monarch, who was anointed as regent of God the king and as trustee of the people.

The theology inherent in this covenant form is preserved primarily in the oracle of Nathan (2 Sam 7:4-16), in the ancient poem 2 Samuel 23:1-7, and in the royal psalms. The oracle of Nathan presents this theology succinctly:

Yahweh initiated and sustains the covenant and has personally chosen the earthly king (vv. 8, 11b, 12c, 13b, 15a, 16);

The king is to be prince (mediator) “over my people Israel” (v. 8);

The king is to be given a unique father-son relationship with Yahweh (v. 14a);

The king’s duty is to rule justly in Israel (implication of v. 14b; cf. 2 Sam 23:3 and Ps 72) and will be chastised by Yahweh if he does not;

The outcome of just rule will be peace in Israel (vv.10-11);

The king will be given a great name among the nations and victory over his enemies (vv. 9, 11b);

Yahweh will accept the house built “for my name” by David’s successor (v. 13a);

Yahweh’s covenant with David is eternal (v. 16).

The royal psalms recount each element of the Davidic covenant theology presented in the oracle of Nathan. Three elements are given particular attention in the psalms: 1. the unique, enduring father-son relationship between Yahweh

³George E. Mendenhall has shown that the form of the Sinai Covenant has the characteristics of the Hittite suzerainty treaties of the second millennium B.C., with God relating to the tribes of Israel as did the Hittite king to the nations subject to him. G. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Presbyterian Board of Colportage, 1955).

⁴There were those who opposed the new arrangement, for both political and religious reasons (1 Sam 8:4-18; 10:17-19). They were afraid the monarchy would lead Israel astray, believing as they did that Yahweh alone should rule over Israel (cf. Judg 8:22-23).

and the Davidic king (Pss 2:7; 72:1; 89:3-4, 19-37; 132:11-12);⁵ 2. the king’s mediatorial role in ruling God’s people justly and rightly (Pss 72; 101; cf. Pss 18:20-24; 45:4); and 3. Yahweh’s choice of Zion as an eternal dwelling place (Ps 132; cf. Pss 78:68b-69; 2:6, 110:2).

Each royal psalm seems to have been composed and used in the First Temple for a royal occasion:

For the coronation of a new Davidic king (Pss 2 & 110);
As a song of thanksgiving for a royal military victory (Ps 18);
As a prayer for royal military victory (Pss 20 & 144:1-11);
For the anniversary of the king's coronation (Ps 21);
For a royal wedding (Ps 45);
As a prayer for a royal reign of justice and prosperity (Pss 72; 101; Ps 101 could be the king's vow to rule justly);
As a prayer of lament for or by the king (Ps 89; cf. Pss 61; 63);
As a prayer of liturgical thanksgiving led by the king (Ps 118);
As a prayer for the king at a festival of Zion (Ps 132).

II. MESSIANIC INTERPRETATION

The messianic reinterpretation of the royal psalm developed as a response to the failure of the Davidic monarchy. As John Bright has stated so concisely,

The kingly ideal (Psalm 72) lay beyond the capabilities of the Davidic dynasty, or any of its representatives: it was never remotely reality. In time there developed (and first with Isaiah himself: 9:1-7; 11:1-9) the expectation of an ideal king of David's line...under whose just and beneficent rule all the promises would be fulfilled. But that hope, too, was disappointed: no such ideal Davidide appeared; the dynasty ended, and the temple lay in ruins. Yet hope was not abandoned. Ever it looked ahead, beyond tragedy, frustration, and despair, for the coming of a King, the Anointed One, the Messiah, who, endowed with God's power, would bring victory and peace to his people and establish God's kingdom on earth.⁶

The evidence for this persevering messianic hope is two-fold: 1. the writings of the exilic and post-exilic prophets; and 2. the retention of the royal psalms in the Psalter, "the hymnbook of the Second Temple."⁷

The prophets in particular could not imagine that God would fail to fulfil the promises given through the Davidic covenant. Therefore, in spite of the

⁵Though the Davidic king was called God's son in this covenant arrangement, he was never considered divine in Israel. He was God's son by adoption (Ps 2:7); chosen to serve God for the sake of the people (cf. Ps 72).

⁶John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967) 223.

⁷In its present form the Psalter dates from the late sixth century B.C. The Psalter is often called "the hymnbook of the Second Temple," the temple built under the influence of Zerubbabel in the years 520-515 B.C.

shortcomings of each Davidic king and the total collapse of the monarchy, they announced that God would restore a remnant of Israel to worship God on Mt. Zion,⁸ and that God would raise up a new descendant of David who would faithfully "execute justice and righteousness in the land."⁹

There can be little question that the royal psalms were included in the Psalter because they were understood to be messianic. The very structure of the final form of the Psalter supports this thesis. As Bernhard W. Anderson has written,

It is not accidental that the Psalter in its present form opens with two key psalms: Psalm 1, which extols the virtue of meditating on the Law (Torah); and Psalm 2, which was regarded in the late Old Testament period as referring to the Messiah (literally, “the Anointed One”). These two themes—the revelation of God’s will in the Torah and the hope for the coming of the Messiah to inaugurate God’s kingdom—constituted the two cardinal beliefs of the Jewish people at the time the Psalter was given its final form.¹⁰

Indeed, the evidence suggests that these themes were “cardinal beliefs of the Jewish people” even before the final form of the Psalter. Claus Westermann has shown that an earlier edition of the Psalter began with Psalm 1 (a Torah psalm) and ended with Psalm 119 (a Torah psalm).¹¹ If we identify Psalm 118 as a royal psalm, along with Mowinckel and others, it means that earlier edition of the Psalter was bracketed by the twin themes of “studying God’s will through the Torah” and “looking for God’s redemption through the Messiah” (Psalms 1 and 2—Psalms 118 and 119).¹²

III. NEW TESTAMENT REINTERPRETATION

It is clear that Jesus refused to apply to himself the common understanding of Messiah as a powerful warrior king who would reestablish the glory of Israel with the sword. He avoided using the title Messiah. When Peter confessed him to be the Messiah, he urged his disciples to speak of it to no one. According to the synoptic Gospels, when otherworldly spirits recognized him as God’s Anointed One, he commanded them to keep silence. And according to the Fourth Gospel, when he had fed the five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish and they attempted to make him king, “Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself” (John 6:15).

Certainly Jesus did not measure up to the messianic expectations of the religious leaders of his day. Nor, according to Matthew’s Gospel, did he conduct himself as John the Baptist expected the Messiah to act (Matt 11:2-3). As Millar

⁸Jeremiah 31:6, 12; 50:4-5; Ezekiel 34:26; 37:26-28.

⁹Jeremiah 23:5-8; 33:14ff; Ezekiel 34:22ff; 37:24-28; Zechariah 9:9-10; cf. Micah 5:1-7.

¹⁰Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 22-23.

¹¹Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 252-253.

¹²It is interesting to observe that certain royal psalms are placed ‘in the seams’ of the final edition of the Psalter. Two royal psalms stand last in ‘books’ of the Psalter: Psalm 72 at the end of Book II; Psalm 89 at the end of Book III. Two royal psalms stand between earlier collections of psalms: Psalm 101 between Psalms of Yahweh’s Kingdom (Pss 92-99) and a collection of praise psalms (Pss 103-107); Psalm 110 between two collections of praise psalms (Pss 103-107) and (Pss 111-117). It is almost as if the last editors of the Psalter had a messianic strategy for placing these psalms as they did. In any case, the final form of the Psalter does have a messianic outlook.

Burrows has put it, “Jesus was so unlike what all Jews expected the son of David to be that his own disciples found it almost impossible to connect the idea of Messiah with him.”¹³ On top of all that he died a shameful death on a cross.

Why, then, do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the other New Testament authors identify Jesus as the Messiah? Because of the Resurrection, no doubt. Because, looking back from the perspective of the Resurrection, they understood the ministry of Jesus to be a fulfilment of the

essential work of the Messiah: defending the poor, undergirding the weak, delivering the needy (cf. Ps 72). Because, as Luke's Gospel testifies, the resurrected Messiah enabled his followers to see that his suffering and death were just what the scriptures should have led them to expect (Luke 24:26-27).

The authors of the New Testament have an eschatological viewpoint, of course. They understand that all things are not yet as they should be. They announce that the New Age has been inaugurated through Jesus Messiah, and that he now rules at God's right hand (cf. Ps 110:1), but that the New Age will be completed only when the Messiah returns as victorious Lord of all.

This remains the faith of the Church to this day. And, at the same time, this remains the scandal of the Church's proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. The Crucified One is "a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling" (Isa 8:14) to good Jews and Gentiles alike. But to those who believe, "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (Ps 118:22).

IV. REINTERPRETING PSALM 2

Several royal psalms are interpreted as messianic in the New Testament.¹⁴ One of the more prominent of these is Psalm 2. The following comments are based on a study of Psalm 2 from the threefold perspective of: 1. its original purpose during the Davidic Kingdom; 2. its retention in the Psalter as a messianic psalm; and 3. its New Testament usage in the light of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.' Psalm 2:7

1. The term "sons of God" (plural) is used in the Old Testament to refer to: a. angelic beings; b. all the people of Israel; or c. some of the people of Israel. In its singular form, the term is used almost always as God's personal expression "my son," and always to refer either to the whole people of Israel, or to David's descendant, the anointed king of Judah.

¹³Millar Burrow, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1958) 68.

¹⁴Royal psalms treated as messianic in the New Testament are: Psalm 2:1-2 (Acts 4:25-26); 2:1, 5 (Rev 11:18); 2:7 (Mark 1:11 and parallels; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; 2 Peter 1:17); 2:8-9 (Rev 2:26-27; 12:5; 19:15). Psalm 18:49 (Rom 15:9). Psalm 45:6-7 (Heb 1:8-9). Psalm 89:3-4 (cf. Acts 2:30); 89:19-20 (cf. Acts 13:22); 89:26-27 (cf. Heb 1:5; Rev 1:5). Psalm 110:1 (Mark 12:36 and parallels; Acts 2:34-35; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2); 110:4 (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 17, 21). Psalm 118:22-23 (Mark 12:10 and parallels; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7); 118:25-26 (Mark 11:9 and parallel); 118:26 (Matt 23:39; Luke 13:35; 19:38). Psalm 132:1-5 (cf. Acts 7:46); 132:11 (cf. Acts 2:30); 132:17 (cf. Luke 1:69).

Referring to the whole people of Israel, God is quoted as saying: "Israel is my first-born son" (Ex 4:22), and again, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1), and again, "I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born son" (Jer 31:9). Speaking of the anointed descendant of David, God says: "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam 7:14), and again, "He shall cry to me: 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation,' and I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps 89:26-27), and in the words of Psalm 2, "You are my son, today I have begotten you."

This means Israel is chosen to be God's special people in all the earth, God's adopted son. And later it means the successor to David (each grandson, great-grandson, and great-great-grandson who becomes king) is chosen to be God's earthly prince, God's adopted son.

From the beginning of Israel's existence as a nation, the people believed they had been singled out by God, chosen to be God's own possession among nations, God's special child. But when Israel became a monarchy of twelve tribes under King David, God's special relationship with Israel took a new form: a royal covenant with the Davidic king as God's son and anointed mediator between God and the people.

Psalms 2 is a song for a day of coronation. A new descendant of David is being anointed as God's son, begotten that day, coronation day. As the earthly prince of the heavenly king, that descendant of David is endowed with God's Spirit to be God's regent to the people of Israel.

But notice, it is Yahweh, the God of Israel, who is exalted in Psalm 2. When the nations surrounding Israel are pictured plotting against the newly crowned prince, it is Yahweh, the king of Israel, who laughs. Yahweh is the sovereign. Yahweh has placed the descendant of David on the throne. Yahweh will preserve him. Yahweh will empower him.

In reality, however, things did not turn out as pictured in Psalm 2. Only David and his son Solomon ruled over a united kingdom of twelve tribes. Only Solomon enjoyed a reign of peace and prosperity, and that at the long-term expense of his people's well-being. None of the successive Davidic kings achieved the greatness envisioned by the temple songs such as Psalms 2, 45, 72, and 110. Indeed, the day came when the Davidic king himself was broken "with a rod of iron" and the Davidic kingdom dashed "in pieces like a potter's vessel" for ever. What remained were the eternal promises of God to the House of David, and the hopes of the people that God would one day raise up a new son of David to restore the kingdom to Israel.

2. "Now it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved son; with thee I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:9-11).

The voice from heaven is specific: quoting phrases from Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. "Thou art my beloved son," from Psalm 2, is a reference to God's special relationship to David's descendant, the king of Judah. "With thee I am well pleased," from Isaiah 42, is a reference to God's special relationship to God's

chosen servant, the people of Israel. Here is something unusual. Jesus is designated as Messiah and Servant. He is called "my beloved son" in his role as the royal son of David, God's Messiah. He is called "well pleasing" in his role as God's elect servant, true Israel. Here, through baptism, Jesus is anointed as David's royal heir. Here, in the Jordan, where Israel first entered the promised land, the nation is reborn in Jesus. He is to be what each of David's royal descendants was meant to be: leader of his people; champion of justice; advocate of the poor; defender of the weak; savior of the oppressed. He is to be what God's servant Israel was called to be: a light to lighten the Gentiles; a blessing to the nations; mediator of God's Word; intercessor for transgressors; bearer of grief; the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is a startling turn of events: a new and contrary way which leads, not to the smashing of Messiah's enemies as announced in Psalm 2, but to the astonishment of Israel's enemies as

announced in Isaiah 52:14-15.

Elie Wiesel, the contemporary Jewish writer, has said, “The true Messiah does not behave like a Messiah. He does not covet honors or gold. Neither does he reveal what must remain hidden.”¹⁵ This is an apt description of Jesus. He was not what his people were looking for in the Messiah. Not only was his behavior unacceptable to many, in the end he became a scandal to all, being put to death on a Roman cross.

There is a further use of the declaration “You are my son” (Ps 2:7) in the New Testament. Its principal use *is* in the baptismal accounts of the synoptic Gospels to identify Jesus as Messiah, and, in tandem with Isaiah 42:1, to point the way to the Cross (Mark 1:11 and parallels). But it is also used in the transfiguration accounts of the Gospels: an event which is a preview (if not a portrayal) of the resurrection of Jesus (Mark 9:7 and parallels). Indeed, it is used in Acts 13:32-33 to proclaim that, in raising Jesus, David’s heir, from death to the place of dominion, God has fulfilled his eternal promises to the House of David.

Not that the Resurrection overcomes the scandal of the Cross. On the contrary! The Resurrected One remains the Crucified One. The Resurrection does not cancel out the Cross, but glorifies it. As the hymn in Philippians, chapter two, expresses it, “...he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him...” (Philippians 2:8-9).

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29, 22-24)

¹⁵Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (New York: Random, 1972) 157.