

Psalms Session 4 The Royal Psalms

In the ancient world, temples and cult were closely associated with the monarchy. The king was often the patron of the temple, and this was the case in Jerusalem. Consequently, the king figures prominently in the psalms. These psalms are important historical windows on the religion of Judah before the Babylonian exile, when there was still a king on the throne. They display a view of the kingship in mythological terms that is very different from what we find in the historical books and the prophets. A number of these psalms, scattered through the Psalter, are usually classified as “royal psalms” because of the prominence of the king. These are Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 110 and 132.

Psalm 2

Psalm 2 is written on the assumption that all nations should be subject to YHWH and his king (called *mashiach*, or anointed one) in Jerusalem. One might suppose that it was written after an attack on Jerusalem by a foreign power, such as Assyria, under Sennacherib in 701 BCE, when Jerusalem survived. (See 2 Kings 19; Isaiah 37). But this is not necessarily the case. The psalm is an expression of the royal ideology, wherein the rule of the king is guaranteed by divine decree. That decree assures the king: “you are my son, this day I have begotten you.” Note that the king is said to be begotten, not adopted. The idea that the king was begotten by God has its closest parallels in Egypt, in the late second millennium BCE. Egypt had ruled over Jerusalem in the second millennium; and Egyptian traditions about kingship were passed down by the Jebusites, who lived in Jerusalem before David conquered it. Some scholars think that this formula, “today I have begotten you” was pronounced by a prophet when a new king ascended

the throne. (Another possible coronation oracle is found in Isaiah 9, “unto us a child is born”). The begetting is metaphorical. No one thought that the kings of Judah were born from virgins. But it is a powerful way of expressing the king’s close relationship with God. Since the king is called *mashiach* in this psalm, it gives rise to the belief that the messiah is the son of God. This belief is expressed in a heightened way in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the stories of the virgin birth of Jesus.

Psalm 110

The theme of divine kingship comes up again in Psalm 110. In this case, the king is addressed as *Adonay*, “my lord,” using the term that is used as substitute for the divine name in later Judaism. Ancient translations, beginning with the Greek, read “The Lord said to my Lord,” underlining the affinity of the king with the Most High. The king is told to sit on the right hand of YHWH. This is probably a reference to the place of the king’s throne in the Temple.

The Hebrew of Psalm 110:3 is corrupt. The NRSV translates: “From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you.” The Hebrew word that is translated as “your youth” could be read with different vowel pointing as “I have begotten you,” and this is how it is read in the Greek. (The Hebrew was originally written without vowels. The vowel points were only added in the Middle Ages). The verse should probably be translated “from the womb of dawn, like dew I have begotten you.” In this case, the scribes who copied the text in the Middle Ages seem to have been uncomfortable with the idea that the king was begotten by God.

The psalm continues with an intriguing comment: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek was the priest-king of Salem (presumably Jerusalem) in Genesis 14, who blessed Abraham, and to whom Abraham gave a tithe of his spoils.

Melchizedek was a Jebusite, which is to say a Canaanite. He was priest of El Elyon, the Canaanite God of Jerusalem. El Elyon is identified with YHWH in the Hebrew Bible, but originally the two deities were distinct. The claim that the kings of Judah were priests “according to the order of Melchizedek” affirms continuity between them and their pagan predecessors, and allows that the Canaanite El Elyon was a manifestation of the true God.

Melchizedek appears again as a mysterious figure, without father or mother, in Hebrews 7:3. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, he appears as an angelic figure who executes judgment on behalf of God, in a scroll called 11QMelchizedek.

Psalm 45

An even more startling view of the kingship appears in Psalm 45. This is a song for a royal wedding. It begins by telling the king that he is “the most handsome of men. The vss 6-7 read:

Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever

Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;

You love righteousness and hate wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you

With the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

Here the king is addressed as an *elohim*, a god. Some scholars translate the first line of the quotation as “your divine throne endures forever,” but verse 7 clearly distinguishes between the *elohim* who is being addressed and “your God,” or the Most High. To say that the king is a god does not mean that he is equal to the Most High. But it implies that he is not on the same level as other human beings either. He is a divine being in some, qualified, sense.

Psalm 45 emphasizes the obligation of the king to uphold truth and righteousness. This obligation is also clear in Psalm 72. That psalm does not address the king as a god, but it prays that he may live as long as the sun and moon and have dominion from sea to sea. Psalm 21 suggests that this prayer is answered: “He asked you for life; you gave it to him – length of days forever and ever” (Ps 21:4; Psalm 20 prays that God may grant the king his heart’s desire). Some scholars take this to mean that the king was thought to enjoy a beatific, eternal, afterlife. There are some parallels for this idea in the surrounding Canaanite cultures, but the evidence is not decisive.

Both Psalm 45 and Psalm 72 associate the king with righteousness. Throughout the Ancient Near East, kings were the guardians of justice. Hammurabi of Babylon, about 1700 BCE, several hundred years before Moses, said that the gods had chosen him to be king “to promote the welfare of the people . . . to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak.” This was the common idea of justice in the ancient Near East, that the powerful should not oppress the weak. In the Old Testament, this often appears as concern for “the widow, the orphan, and the alien.” We associate this concern especially with the prophets, and with reforming laws, such as we find in Deuteronomy. But it was also the concern of the kingship. So, Psalm 72 prays:

May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. . .

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,

Give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor (Ps 72:2-4).

Needless to say, kings did not always live up to this ideal, but at least they affirmed it in principle.

The covenant with David

These psalms paint a very different picture of the kingship from what we find in the account of the covenant with David, in 2 Samuel 7. There too we are told that God will regard David's heirs as his sons, but nothing is said of divine begetting, and the king is subject to chastisement if he should sin. This possibility is not entertained in the psalms we have considered so far. There are, however, two other psalms that are closely related to 2 Samuel 7. These are Psalms 89 and 132.

Psalm 89 falls into three parts: vss 1-18, 19-37, and 38-51. These parts may have been composed on different occasions. The first part states the basic point of the Davidic covenant: "I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations. This is an unconditional promise. The rest of vss. 1-18 goes on to praise God as creator, in mythical terms, alluding to a battle with a sea-monster that is never recorded in the Bible: "You crushed Rahab like a carcass." (Compare Job 26:12; Isa 51:9). The second part of the psalm elaborates the promise to David. The king is promised control over the forces of chaos ("I will set his hand upon the sea," vs. 25. He will call God father, and God will treat him as his firstborn. This section of the psalm makes provision for sin and punishment: "if his children forsake my law." This part of the psalm corresponds closely to 2 Samuel 7 and probably depends on it. The reference to "my law" probably presupposes the Deuteronomists reform. The final section of the psalm envisions a situation where God has rejected the king, and apparently renounced the covenant. The most plausible setting for this section is the Babylonian Exile.

Taken as a whole, the psalm recalls the covenant with David in terms of 2 Samuel 7, to remind God of his promise and ask him to honor it.

Psalm 132 is a celebration of the moving of the ark to Jerusalem, and also narrates God's promise to David. It departs from 2 Samuel 7 at one very significant point. It affirms that "the Lord swore to David a sure oath, from which he will not turn back: one of the sons of your body I will set upon your throne" (vs. 11). This time, however, the right of the sons to rule is conditional: "if your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also forevermore shall sit on your throne" (vs. 12). While the psalm does not use Deuteronomic language (such as reference to the name of God) it seems to presuppose Deuteronomy in two key respects: the insistence that the king must keep "my covenant" and "my decrees," in vs. 12, and the statement that the Lord has chosen Zion as his resting place in vss. 13-14. Some scholars have tried to date Psalm 132 very early, before the royal ideology had been fully formulated, but there is no evidence that the kingship of David's line was originally conceived as conditional. It seems clear that we have here an extension of Deuteronomic theology that not only makes the kings subject to punishment but allows for the possibility that the whole line could be rejected. This theology only emerged after the Deuteronomic reform in 621 BCE, near the end of the monarchy. The psalmist still expresses confidence that the promises to David and Zion are still valid, and does not show the kind of distress that we find in the last part of Psalm 89. Psalm 132 may have been written in the last years of the monarchy, before it collapsed under the Babylonian invasion.

The significance of the royal ideology

The royal ideology is somewhat atypical of the Old Testament, in the degree of trust it places in a human institution. The prophets were scathing about the pretensions of kings to be divine.

Consider the oracle of Ezekiel against the king of Tyre:

*Because your heart is proud
and you have said, 'I am a god;
I sit in the seat of the gods in the heart of the seas.
yet you are but a mortal, and no god,
though you compare your mind with the mind of a god.*

At least some of the prophets would probably have felt the same way about the claims that the Davidic kings of Judah were begotten by God, and that they should be called “*elohim*.” Jeremiah castigated Jehoahaz, the son of King Josiah:

*Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbors work for nothing
and does not give them their wages. (Jer 22:13).*

The Book of Deuteronomy, written at the end of the monarchic period, drafted a “law of the king,” which severely limited the king’s freedom of action and made him subject to the Law (Deut 17:14-20). Similarly, Jeremiah said that if the kings upheld justice, and did not oppress the widow, the orphan or the alien, then the monarchy would endure. Otherwise the house would become a desolation (Jer 22:3-5). The right of monarchs to rule would no longer be unconditional.

The royal ideology is extremely important, however, for the development of messianism in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. The promise to David was the basis for the hope

that the David kingdom would one day be restored. Moreover, the idea that the king/messiah is the Son of God was crucial to the development of Christian belief. Psalm 110 (“the Lord said to my lord, ‘sit at my right hand’”) was taken as proof that the messiah must ascend to heaven (Acts 2:34-36). In Jewish tradition, however, the messiah was first of all one who would restore the kingdom of David. The Christian claim that Jesus was the fulfillment of messianic promises required considerable reinterpretation of the Jewish understanding of messianism. Nonetheless, the royal psalms played an important part in the formulation of Christian belief in the New Testament and later.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why does the king play such an important role in the Psalms?
2. In what sense was the king thought to be divine?
3. How does the portrayal of the king in Psalm relate to the way kingship is portrayed in the prophets?
4. What is the importance of the royal psalms for Jewish and Christian messianic expectation?

Further Reading:

See the commentaries in the general bibliography on the particular psalms.

Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 1-24 (“The King as Son of God”).

Norman K. Gottwald, "Kingship in the Book of Psalms," in William P. Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of The Psalms* (New York: Oxford, 2014) 437-44.