

Of Wedding Songs and Prophecies: Canonical Reading as the Clue to Understanding Psalm 45 as Prophecy

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ABSTRACT

How do the Psalms prophesy the Messiah? The New Testament writers like to cite the Psalms to show Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah, but they do so in ways that surprise us. This has caused a long-standing interpretive problem, for while the reasoning may have been clear to them it is not clear to us. This article therefore speaks to that issue. It makes a case for a canonical approach to the Psalms as a window into the interpretive practices of the New Testament writers. Psalm 45, an Israelite wedding song cited in Hebrews 1 as evidence of Christ's exalted nature, is used as test case.

Introduction

The Apostles often surprise us with their reading of the Psalms. Take, for example, Peter's sermon in Acts 2. Arguing the death and resurrection of Jesus were part of the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (v. 23),¹ Peter cites Ps 16 as evidence. If we wonder why exactly he chooses a psalm and not something from, say, the book of Daniel, Peter soon gives us the answer. "Being therefore a prophet," King David "foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ" in the Psalms (Acts 2:30–31). The logic is clear to Peter: since David was a prophet, the book attributed to him, the Psalter, was likewise a book of prophecy.

The problem, though, is the logic is not as clear to us today. While we may accept the Psalter as a book of prophecy in some sense, it is not entirely clear *how* it prophesies the Messiah. How exactly does it shape the expectation for Israel's coming king? The canonical approach has become increasingly helpful in answering this question, and I use it here to show how this is so. The essay focuses on Psalm 45 in particular, which Hebrews 1:8–9 cites as evidence of Christ's exalted nature.

Psalm 45 within the Psalter

Psalm 45 speaks of the king and so is marked by one of the classic pointers of messianic psalms. But the trappings in which we find this king are not very Messiah-like, at least not to

¹ Unless indicated, translations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

our modern minds. We find him in a love song. The song is filled with flowery language extolling the glory of the king and the beauty of his bride, and wishing them the blessing of a good name and many offspring. In this way the song contains much of what we would expect to be sung during a wedding ceremony. But that is the rub: it is the stuff of a wedding song, not a messianic psalm, so how are we to understand it as speaking of Israel's Messiah?

Old Testament Setting and Meaning

"My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king." So begins the psalm (v. 1), casting the whole of it as the lyrics of a court poet performing a song at the wedding festivities.² While he is in front of an audience of gathered dignitaries, we can imagine him addressing two parties in particular: the king and his bride. And the psalm is more or less structured along these lines. Verses 2–9 address the king, 10–12 his bride. Then in vv. 13–15 the poet shifts to describe the pageantry of the bride's entrance and wedding procession, only to conclude by addressing the bride again (vv. 16–17). Or at least that is how it seems. As we shall see, there is some question about who actually is being addressed in vv. 16–17, as well as in v. 6, and that this ambiguity is important to the psalm's messianic significance.

When this song was first delivered (whether it was for Solomon, Ahab, or whomever),³ how would an Israelite have understood it? The song itself was of a familiar kind to people of that time. It was common in the ancient Near East (ANE) for kings to have an expert poet in their court compose a wedding song, whose purpose was to extol the virtues of the royal couple and to stand as a monument to their greatness. Granted, this song is unique in the Psalter and has only one sibling in the rest of the OT, the Song of Songs (esp. 3:6–11). But its affinity with other traditions in the ANE suggests that the psalm is the product of a familiar genre.

Psalms 45 is, in many ways, a masterpiece in how it puts the ancient love song into the service of Israelite theology. To begin with, one finds both extolling and exhorting in the poet's words. Somehow the poet is able, in the midst of his extravagant praise, to extend a solemn charge to the royal couple. To the king he offers a reminder of the unique call upon Israel's anointed: namely, the moral and ethical imperative. It was hardly surprising for an ANE king to be charged with leading his army into battle, and for this charge to reflect a call to courage and strength. But that is not what happens in Ps 45. Instead in vv. 3–4 we find:

Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
In your splendour and majesty!

² Unless otherwise indicated, the verses refer to the English versions, not the Masoretic Text (MT).

³ Whatever its origin, the psalm is often seen as having been "passed on from generation to generation and used over and over in subsequent wedding ceremonies in the kingdoms" of Israel and Judah. Nancy deClaisse-Walford, "I Will Cause Your Name to Be Remembered," pp. 416–420, in Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2014), 416.

In your majesty ride our victoriously,
For the cause of truth, and meekness, and righteousness,
Let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!

Do you see what has happened? The psalm does not follow up the charge to battle with typical virtues of warriors such as courage, strength, and valour.

Instead v. 3 calls the king to gird up his sword in “splendour” and “majesty.” To the modern eye this may seem unsurprising, but in ancient Israel these terms were often reserved for Yahweh or his special servants. So while this language may not have completely shocked an Israelite audience, it would have caused them to sit up and take notice. Verse 4 then moves to describe the splendour of the king’s victorious riding out in battle. Yet it does so using terms of moral virtue: truth, meekness, and righteousness. One should be careful here, for the idea is not that Israel’s king would abstain from conflict. Rather, the point is that his exercise of power would be motivated by a certain ethic. In place of the common view that “might makes right,” where a ruler did whatever he pleased, Israel’s king bound himself to a higher standard—that of Yahweh. The classic expression of this is in Deut 17:14–20, which emphasises that the king’s power was meant to serve the people, not to gain for himself wealth, women, and prestige. Implicit is the idea that if truth, humility, and righteousness characterise the king, then the same will be true of his kingdom.

Within the address to the king we find another important verse, one that has sparked much debate. The ESV renders v. 6:

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness.

The issue arises from the first line, which seems to speak to God. So what is the problem? The problem is at once contextual and theological, centering on the fact that God’s appearance here is entirely unexpected. Contextually, the reference to God disrupts the flow of the passage, which otherwise speaks to the king. As such, the use of “your throne” at the beginning of v. 6 leads us to expect the king, not God, as the subject. The following verse (v. 7) furthers the confusion when it speaks of God anointing the king. So in v. 6 God and king appear as one in the same while in v. 7 they are different! Theologically, the mention of God introduces a more pointed problem. The Old Testament (OT) goes to great lengths to set apart its own view of kingship from that of other ANE cultures. In particular, Israel’s king was not to be deified, that is, made godlike. The reason for doing so was to preserve a unique understanding of kingship which, as already mentioned, maintained that God’s anointed was a servant of him and his people. To deify the king was to run the risk of obscuring this uniqueness.

Interpreters have tried to resolve this tension in a variety of ways, many of which involve amending the text or changing its natural reading. One approach, for example, is to render it “your throne of God”.⁴ This would alleviate the problem by keeping the king as the addressee, making the throne his and not God’s. Such a change is hard to square with the Hebrew syntax, however. Another way is to read the Hebrew of “your throne, O God” as “God enthrones you [the king]”.⁵ In English it may seem far-fetched, but in Hebrew the two phrases are very similar, so it would be possible. But the problem is that if this were the case one would expect at least some of the ancient manuscripts to reflect it. We do not find this, and the tradition is nearly unanimous in the rendering, with the Greek in the Septuagint being the clearest.⁶

There are other possibilities apart from these. The translators of the RSV have it as “your divine throne,” trying to ease the tension by replacing “God” with “divine.” But this is simply an explanatory gloss, and it is hard to see how it helps. Another suggestion is to read the verse like Exod 7:1, where Moses is said to be “like God to Pharaoh”.⁷ As with Moses, then, the reference to the king as “God” would mean he serves as Yahweh’s special representative. The idea is a good one in that it seeks to solve the problem by casting it in light of biblical uses of “God” for entities other than the divine. But yet again it does not pan out, for nowhere else in the OT is the king called God.

So how are we to understand Ps 45:6? It seems to me that ambiguity is precisely the point—that the blurring of God and his king is purposeful, even essential, to the psalm’s messianic meaning. One must be careful about making too much of ambiguity, for it can be pressed into nearly any shape a person desires. But in this case I believe the text invites us to do so. But how?

I think it does so on the micro and macro levels. On the micro level, there are the individual psalms classically held as messianic. Characteristic of these psalms is that they are *messianically pregnant*, that is, they portray God’s anointed as a figure that is bigger than life—he is magnanimous in character and his reign reaches to the ends of the earth and lasts forever. Some will say that this simply reflects the heightened language of poetry or an idealised portrait of the king. Indeed, these passages do reflect an ideal king, one that never appeared in Israel; and they do so through the medium of poetry. But those are hardly sufficient explanations for what we find in the Psalter. After all, in Ps 45 the figure’s description includes “splendour” and “majesty,” two terms typically associated with Yahweh. So when we come to v. 6, the blurring of God and king is not an aberration but a continuation

⁴ E.g., John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 59.

⁵ E.g., Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 336–7, following Dahood.

⁶ For a succinct discussion on this, see Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 53 fn 6.

⁷ Jewish commentator Rashi was perhaps first to suggest this in medieval France.

of a key idea. The throne never belonged to Israel's kings; it was on loan from Yahweh. That idea becomes especially clear here as the Psalter develops a vision of the new David.

Beyond individual psalms, the Psalter as whole also strengthens this idea on the macro level. This is where the canonical approach comes into play. Rather than interpret a psalm primarily according to its historical context, as many traditional approaches have done, the canonical approach looks at a psalm's place within the Psalter as a whole.⁸ This comes from noticing how the ancient divisions, or 'books,' of the Psalter seemed to develop a storyline. Books 1–3 (Pss 1–41, 42–72, 73–89) chronicle the rise and fall of the Davidic kingdom, and Books 4–5 (Pss 90–106, 107–150) focus on Yahweh's divine kingship. This, against the backdrop of the Psalter being largely formed during the postexilic era, suggests the storyline addresses the burning question of that time: What is the future of the Davidic king? Since this king would be the conduit of God's promises to Israel (2 Sam 7) but no such king currently existed, the question was of no small import.

Among advocates of the canonical approach, one point of disagreement concerns the way the Psalter answers the question of kingship. Some see the shift between Books 1–3 and 4–5 as answering the question in one way: the shift in focus from a human king (Books 1–3) to the divine king (Books 4–5) means the faithful should likewise shift their hopes from the rule of an earthly Davidic king to the rule of Yahweh the eternal king.⁹ Others, however, see it differently. They see it not so much as a moving on from Davidic kingship as a refocusing of it: "Books 4 and 5 respond...with the call to trust in the Lord's rule, not in human rulers, 'without giving up the hope in the eternity of the Davidic covenant.'"¹⁰

Wenham, following Norman Whybray, draws attention to the Davidic psalms at key seams in the first three books (Pss 2, 72, 89), and then points to Davidic psalms toward the end of Book 4 (Pss 101, 103) and toward the beginning and closing of Book 5 (Pss 108–110, 138–145). These Davidic psalms, he says, "must be understood as the psalms of a future David."¹¹ In this light, the entire Psalter is future oriented, "envisag[ing] not simply the Davidic dynasty

⁸ For a helpful summary of the canonical approach, see Nancy deClaisse-Walford, "The Canonical Approach to Scripture and *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*," pp. 1–11, in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship*, ed. Nancy deClaisse-Walford (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014). For an insightful essay on the different uses of 'canonical,' see in the above book the chapter by Harry Nasuti, "The Editing of the Psalter and the Ongoing Use of the Psalms: Gerald Wilson and the Question of Canon," pp. 13–19.

⁹ Gerald Wilson was a seminal voice in the canonical movement, and he advocated this view. See *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (1986): 85–94; and "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, pp. 72–82, ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Psalter as Torah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 37, citing Martin Kleer. See also Wenham, "Reading the Psalms Canonically," pp. 57–79, in *The Psalter Reclaimed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

¹¹ Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 70–71, following Kleer.

lasting forever, as 2 Samuel 7 promises, but the particular king reigning forever... 'The hyperbolic language' points 'beyond the present to a future saviour-figure.'¹²

The canonical shaping of the Psalter, in other words, is a messianic shaping; it moulds expectation in the form of an exalted future king. And such an idea would have important implications for Ps 45. It would mean the ambiguity we find in v. 6 between Davidic and divine kingship is not foreign to the Psalter but *integral*. Here in an individual psalm we find the twin threads interwoven into the larger storyline, which somehow entwine the human and the divine.

In this way, the blurring in Ps 45:6 accomplishes two goals. Firstly, it maintains the balance of theology in Israel's kingship. Unlike the surrounding cultures, Israel's king was not divine; yet the king was still adopted by Yahweh, set apart and empowered to rule in his stead. It is as if to say that we cannot look at the throne without seeing the man who sits there and the God who stands behind him. And secondly, the blurring of the earthly and divine kings establishes an eschatological arc for the Psalter. Organised as it is, the Psalter elongates the ideas of individual psalms, stretching them across time and forming them into a vision of the renewed kingdom. Maybe we can imagine an arc with twin lines, beginning together (the theology of earthly/divine kingship), parting as they run through history (Israel's kings, Yahweh's reign), and then coming together again in the eschatological vision of the new David. In this sense the new David will be more than a man. Through his leadership will come the consummation of all things, starting with the promises to David for Israel.

Having addressed the king in Ps 45:2–9, the poet now turns to the bride. Two things in the address are important to a messianic reading. One is the fact that the wife-to-be seems to be a foreigner, indicated by the call to "forget" her people and her father's house in v. 10: "Since royal brides were often from other peoples, the implication would be that she needs to turn her back on her own culture, her loyalties, and her religion."¹³ The fact is not surprising in itself, as Israel's rulers frequently followed this ANE practice to forge liaisons with neighbouring nations (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:1–8). But it is surprising given the context of Ps 45, which evokes a vision of Israel's ideal king from Deut 17:14–20 who, it says, should *not* marry foreign women! Perhaps this is why the later Jewish Targum of Ps 45 glosses v. 10, from "Hear, O daughter" to "Hear, O congregation of Israel."

It is possible, too, that the gloss represents the eschatological thinking common in the postexilic era and which lay behind the shaping of the Psalter. This would mean the Israelite community recognised the historical reality that kings married foreign wives, but sought to locate these, ultimately, within God's grand plan to restore the world. Behind the call for the

¹² Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 67, quoting Whybray.

¹³ John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 60.

bride to “forget” her people lay two possibilities, represented biblically in the figures of Jezebel and Ruth.

Jezebel, the princess from Tyre who King Ahab took as his wife (1 Kgs 16:31), embodied the danger of a foreign wife. Under her influence, the effects of false worship were writ large in the land of Israel and the people suffered greatly (1 Kgs 17–21; 2 Kgs 9). On the other hand, though, is the example of Ruth. She too was of foreign descent, a Moabitess, though of a very different disposition. To her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, Ruth famously said: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). The example of Ruth, then, is the kind of “forgetting” the poet of Ps 45 has in mind, where the bride turns wholly to Yahweh and commits herself to him. In so doing, she as an individual represents the eschatological vision of the nations, who turn to Yahweh. The Targum’s gloss of “king” as “King Messiah” and “daughter” as “congregation of Israel” would suggest this kind of thinking. We shall say more about this in the Psalter shortly.

The second aspect concerning the bride that is important to a messianic reading is found in vv. 16–17, the concluding address:

In place of your fathers shall be your sons;
You will make them princes in all the earth.
I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations;
Therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.

In context, this appears to be compensation for the bride’s forsaking of her people. For her great act of devotion she will be rewarded with two great blessings of the ancient world: kingly offspring and a great name. Yet the Hebrew complicates this reading, for the pronouns are not feminine but masculine. “Your fathers,” “your sons,” etc., are addressing a man, in this case the king. But how does that make sense? Would not “in place of your fathers” in v. 16 naturally parallel the call in v. 10 for the bride to forget “your father”? After all it is she, not the king, who has been asked to forsake her people and homeland.

It seems to me that here, as in v. 6, we find the intentional dovetailing of ideas. Often in ancient wedding ceremonies “the promise of the blessing of children” would be given “when the bride was on the point of departing for her new life” (Gen 24:60; Ruth 4:11).¹⁴ That is precisely the setting we find in Ps 45. The use of “fathers” in v. 16 only encourages the idea that the poet is speaking a blessing over the bride. But then the masculine pronouns enter the picture, which basically transform the bride’s blessing into a “benediction addressed to the king”.¹⁵

¹⁴ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. H. Hartwell (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1962), 364.

¹⁵ Weiser, *Psalms*, 364.

According to Weiser, the point of this is to unite “the young couple in their joint task and in the purpose of their matrimony.”¹⁶ Weiser makes a shrewd observation here: that the way in which the text blends the two genres—the king’s benediction and the bride’s blessing—represents the way in which the duties of the king and his bride blend together as well. Yet there is another dimension that he does not explore. Given the context of a royal psalm, it is natural to see the Davidic promises in the background. The echo of key elements only strengthens this idea: the promise of progeny that will rule to the ends of the earth and of a name that will endure “forever and ever.” As such, the eschatological arc runs not only through the Davidic king but, in some sense, also through his foreign wife. It is hard not to hear in this an echo of Ruth, whose devotion to Yahweh and his people resulted in David as heir.

Even though we have seen that there is more going on in Ps 45 than meets the eye, it is still difficult to understand the psalm as a full-blown messianic text. A fair distance exists from the images of Ps 45 to their flowering in the NT. So how did the psalm get from one to the other? Until recently it was common to locate the transition somewhere outside of the OT, such as in intertestamental period development or fuller revelation in the early Church. Whatever the explanation, the underlying view was that there was a sharp difference between the OT and the NT. Peter Craigie expresses this idea well: “The primary meaning of the psalm is clear; it is a wedding song, celebrating the marriage of a king to a princess. In its original sense and context, it is not in any sense a messianic psalm. And yet within the context of early Christianity (and in Judaism before that), it becomes a messianic psalm par excellence.”¹⁷ Craigie uses C.S. Lewis’ term “second meaning,” which implies that the original OT meaning was something different.¹⁸

This is where the canonical approach is again helpful, for it shows that the so-called second meaning of Ps 45 might have been present in the Psalter itself. The first clue is in the structure of Book II (Pss 42–72). Here J. Clinton McCann helpfully suggests that Pss 42–49 serve as the interpretive framework for the remaining psalms in the book.¹⁹ What they seek to do, he says, is show that the promises of old (from 2 Sam 7) must be understood in light of the recent exile and dispersion. Psalms 42–44 raise the reality of the exile: the faithful continue to try to maintain hope, despite having been “rejected” by God (43:1; 44:9) and “scattered...among the nations” (44:12), and while their enemies taunt, “Where is your God?”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 340.

¹⁸ It is curious that deClaisé-Walford (*Psalms*, 416–420), who adopts a canonical approach, says little more than this in her reading of Psalm 45.

¹⁹ J. Clinton, McCann Jr. “Books I–III and the Editorial Purpose of the Psalter,” pp. 93–107 in *The Shape of the Psalter*. ed., J. Clinton McCann, Jr. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993).

(42:3, 10). Psalms 45–49, then, follow the idea of exile with images of the God’s promises of old: namely, a Davidic king (Ps 45), Zion (Pss 46, 48), and God’s universal enthronement (Ps 47).

How then does Ps 45, in this context, speak to the question of exile? With Pss 42–43 expressing a longing for hope in the midst of suffering, “Psalm 45 therefore becomes the answer to this prayer, revealing the redeemer, the bridegroom-king, who will turn Israel’s sorrow to joy.”²⁰ For David Mitchell this is an inherently eschatological hope, intentionally transforming the wedding song of the king and his bride into an image of the future fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to his people. Mitchell shows that the idea was perfectly at home in ancient Israel, highlighting, for instance, the striking parallels between Ps 44–45 and Zech 9–11: Israel has been “scattered” (Ps 44:9; Zech 10:9; 13:7) but hopes to be gathered back from exile by a Davidic king (Zech 2:7–10; 12:7–14), a figure who “rides” (Ps 45:4; Zech 9:9) as a bridegroom to a bride (“daughter”) (Ps 45:10; Zech 9:9). If this can be maintained, the marriage metaphor already had eschatological meaning at least by the fifth century BCE, when the book of Zechariah was finished.

Another clue comes from the way in which Book II of the Psalter relates to Book III (73–89). In his essay, McCann draws attention to similarities in theme and structure and shows that they can hardly be incidental. As with Book II, the third book addresses the issue of where Israel can find hope after exile. And, also like the previous book, Book III develops an answer by structuring the psalms in a certain way. In particular, both books begin with psalms that set the stage for their ensuing material. For Book III, Ps 73 “sets the tone for the whole” with “its movement from lament to hope.”²¹ The book then proceeds to alternate between lament and hope throughout.

One note of hope comes from Ps 87, which some have related to Ps 45. Wenham has put the relationship succinctly: “In Psalm 45 Israel has been pictured as the bride of the Messiah. Here in Psalm 87 we have another picture: Jerusalem (its inhabitants) is the mother of the nations.”²² Wenham’s point is that each psalm takes up a metaphor to describe aspects of the Davidic promises. In the case of Psalm 87, it develops the idea of Zion beyond that of a stronghold for Israel to being the mother of all nations. “The world revolution of Psalm 2 becomes transformed into a great world family in Psalm 87...Zion as the mother of messianic Israel (Psalm 2) and mother of all mankind (Psalm 87).”²³ In this way, Wenham highlights that

²⁰ David Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 250.

²¹ McCann, “Editorial Purpose,” 96.

²² Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 180.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181. Quoting Lohfink and Zenger.

Ps 87 ties in to the overall arc of the Psalter. It may be implied that Ps 45, by association, ties in as well.

Wenham does not make the connection himself, but his reading may help explain how the foreign bride in Ps 45 becomes the congregation of Israel in the Targum. If Ruth is the kind of foreign bride envisaged, the pattern is one in which a foreign woman comes into the community of Israel, devotes herself to Yahweh, and becomes the mother of the messianic line. In this way, she becomes not only a true Israelite in the order of the circumcised heart (Rom 2:28–29), but also an exemplary Israelite who, through her progeny, will bring blessing to the world (Matt 1:5). In other words, Ruth is a foreign bride who ultimately becomes the congregation of Israel. While this does not draw a tight loop around all of the elements in question, it does show, I think, that they are strands interwoven within the same interpretive fabric.

Perhaps, then, the structural parallels of Books II and III give the images of Pss 45 and 87 more significance than is often thought. Psalm 45, we recall, sits alongside songs of Zion (Pss 46, 48) in the framework of the second book. Since the point of that framework is to show how the promises of old still offer hope, an idea the third book picks up on and develops, then Pss 45 and 87 are not insignificant. In a context rife with questions about the future of the Davidic promises, these psalms offer enduring images of hope. Perhaps what we find in Pss 45 and 87, then, is Israel's hope crystallising into key images: the Davidic king as Messiah, the people as his bride, and Zion their centre as the mother of the nations. So when Goldingay entitles Ps 45 “the true king and queen,”²⁴ he may be saying more than he thinks!

Second Temple Literature

Before moving on to the NT, I should make mention of the Second Temple period (515 BCE–70 CE). This period features the later writings of the OT and the intertestamental literature, and, as such, it provides a helpful bridge between the Psalter and the New Testament. It shows, in particular, the extent to which interpretive practices carried through the intertestamental period and into the first century.

The Psalter itself reached a final form in the Second Temple period, with perhaps the most significant shaping coming in the early part, the postexilic era. Another biblical book dating to this era, 1 Chronicles, offers a helpful window into the perspectives of that time. First Chronicles 25 records the establishment of the temple worship ministry: “David and the chiefs

²⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 52.

of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals" (v. 1).

Two items are of import here. Firstly, David is characterised as patron of the temple music worship, which explains why he came to be viewed as patron of the Psalter as well. We see this kind of thinking in the Acts 2 passage which opened this essay. And secondly, the passage characterises the ministry of the temple musicians as prophetic. Their compositions, as such, were no mere songs but prophecies. It thus appears from early times that Israel understood the psalms themselves as prophecies, and the collection of these in the Psalter would have had the same status. Since the shape of the Psalter betrays a concern with the Davidic King, it is natural to understand the collection as a book of messianic prophecy and explains why many Jews were reading it in a "prophetic and eschatological direction".²⁵ A second piece of evidence from this era is in the Jewish Targum of Jonathan. This, we have already noted, translates "king" in Ps 45:7 as "King Messiah" and "daughter" in v. 10 as "congregation of Israel." The translation reveals an eschatological reading of the psalm, where the king becomes Messiah and his bride Israel. What should also be acknowledged, though, is the antiquity of this reading. We cannot be certain of its date of origin, but some see its messianic perspective as "very ancient"²⁶ and perhaps from the postexilic era. Even if not this early, it represents at the very least a continuation of the perspective of the postexilic writings.

New Testament Use

It is becoming clear that early Christians saw the Psalter in a similar light. We find indications of this in various places in the NT, such as Luke 24:44 where Jesus says "that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Or in Acts 2:30 where Peter speaks of David, saying, "being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ." As Douglas Green puts it, early Christians viewed the Psalms "not merely as ancient Israel's inspired hymnody...[but] as *predictions* of events that would occur at the climax of Israel's history."²⁷

²⁵ Douglas J. Green, "The Lord is Christ's Shepherd: Psalm 23 as Messianic Prophecy," in *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: Essays in Memory of J. Alan Groves*, ed. Peter Enns, Douglas Green, and Michael B. Kelly (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 33–46; 36.

²⁶ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 74. DeClaissé-Walford, *Psalms*, 416, offers a helpful framework: "The Aramaic Targum comes from as early as the period of the second Jerusalem temple (after 515 B.C.E), at a point when the Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures ceased to be a spoken language. The Targum translates the Jewish Scriptures into Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire, and adds commentary to help hearers more fully understand the meaning of the text." She goes on to reference Nehemiah 8:7–8 as a possible first reference to targumic activity; we might add also that the first occurrence of the verb related to 'Targum,' meaning 'translate' or 'interpret,' is found in Ezra 4:7.

²⁷ Green, "Messianic Prophecy," 37.

The question, though, is to what extent a canonical reading helps us understand Hebrews 1:8–9, which is the only direct quote of Ps 45 in the NT. Let us look first at the text itself:

But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,

The sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom.

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” (Heb1:8–9)

Generally speaking, the text joins Hebrews’ larger aim to call for undivided allegiance to Christ by showing that he, and the covenant he offers, is superior to all else.

One of the book’s favourite ways of doing this is to highlight Christ’s superiority to OT figures. Hebrews 1:5–13, the context in which our passage is located, does this with angels. Another way the book shows Christ’s superiority is by portraying him as both high priest and exalted Son of God. Our context emphasises the latter aspect, the exalted Son, and, as such, has been called “a celebration of the enthroned son.”²⁸

The author’s portrayal of the unparalleled position of the exalted Son has effectively shut the door on any possibility of a shift of allegiance... This majestic portrayal of the Son’s exaltation firmly establishes the identity of the one to whom the recipients have pledged themselves. In a world... crowded with deities, the exalted Son reigns supreme.²⁹

Thus Heb 1:8–9 helps portray Jesus as the exalted Son who is superior to the angels and to whom all devotion is due.

Since the point of the passage is to exalt the Son, it is not difficult to understand why the author cites Ps 45:6–7. This is especially true in light of our previous discussions. At least from the postexilic period onwards, Ps 45 was understood as portraying an exalted Messiah. That the psalm would speak of the Davidic son in terms reminiscent of Yahweh and then blur the lines between servant and Lord is, to the epistle writer, precisely the point—the Son has no peer. The Septuagint, from which the author quotes, only strengthens the idea when it clarifies the reference to the king as God. It may be that the writer of Hebrews’ tweaking of the Septuagint Greek is a subtle way to emphasise further the Son’s enduring throne and righteous rule.

²⁸ Kenneth L. Schenck, “A Celebration of the Enthroned Son: The Catena of Hebrews 1,” *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 120.3 (2001): 469–85.

²⁹ Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 41–42.

Yet there is another aspect in the passage that may connect it to Ps 45. In Heb 1, Christ is portrayed not only as the Davidic son but also as Divine Wisdom. The portrait begins in the introduction (1:1–4) where we find strong echoes of Divine Wisdom: the Son having a role in creation (v. 2), being the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (v. 3), and sitting on the throne of God (v. 8).³⁰ The echoes continue in 1:5–13 in the citing of certain OT texts (Deut 32:43; Pss 104:4; 102:25–26).

This portrait of Christ as Divine Wisdom does not stand alone, however; it is interwoven with Davidic sonship (citing Pss 2:7; 110:1; 2 Sam 7:14). Indeed, it appears that the purpose of Heb 1 is to weave a two-braided cord of Christ’s identity: as Davidic son and Divine Wisdom. What is most interesting, though, is the idea that Ps 45 is the thread holding these two braids together. Gert Steyn has suggested just this.³¹ He sees the psalm, presumably because of its exalted language about God’s anointed, providing a convenient bridge between these two first-century Jewish concepts. Since Steyn does not believe Ps 45 had previously been interpreted messianically, he attributes its use in Hebrews to the author’s creativity.

But what if something else informed the author? Here I am thinking again of the canonical shape of the Psalter, which provides an interesting parallel to the hermeneutics of Heb 1. From a canonical perspective, Pss 1–2 form the interpretive framework for the Psalter. They do so by presenting two figures, the righteous (Ps 1) and the Davidic son (Ps 2), that they fuse into one persona. The righteous, of course, is shorthand for the wisdom literature’s ideal person. For this reason, some scholars prefer to say the Psalter is framed by wisdom and the Davidic promises. If we imagine that this was also known in the first century, it is not very far to Hebrews’ interpretation of Ps 45. Granted, Hebrews portrays the Messiah as exalted Son *and* Divine Wisdom. But Ps 45 already casts an exalted, godlike image of David’s heir, and the Psalter’s framework fuses this heir with the ideal persona of wisdom. Therefore, the level of creative license in Heb 1:8–9 may not be as great as once thought. Perhaps instead the author was making the Psalter’s implicit ideas explicit, connecting the theological dots.

Reading Psalm 45 for the Church

Often people want to know, “Can I do this myself?” That is, they wonder whether they can read the Psalter as the NT writers do. The question comes from the fact that to us the NT methods seem unorthodox. So much is this the case that, in theological colleges, lecturers often tell students *not* to mimic the NT authors! “They were inspired by God,” the lecturer says, “but we are not, so we may use their conclusions but not their methods.” What this

³⁰ Herbert W. Bateman, “Two First-Century Messianic Uses of the OT: Heb 1:5–13 and 4QFLOR 1.1–19” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38/1 (1995): 11–27; 18–19.

³¹ Gert J. Steyn, “The Vorlage of Psalm 45:6–7 (44:7–8) in Hebrews 1:8–9,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 60.3 (2004): 1085–1103; 1086.

means in practice, then, is that the only psalms you can read messianically are the ones that NT writers cite. All others are off limits. Naturally, this strikes many as arbitrary, and the good news about a canonical approach is that it provides a way beyond this barrier.

I have spoken of the shape of the Psalter and the storyline that it forms, and that these things may have influenced how the NT writers read the Psalter. And I think they serve us in the same way. In particular, the shape and storyline provide both direction and limits to messianic readings. They do so through the framing ideas and trajectory of the Psalter. Here I mean the key components of the Psalter's canonical shape: the fusing of the righteous and the Davidic personas and their development in the five books of the Psalter. These invite us, on the one hand, into the journey of righteous living exemplified in God's anointed. Like him, we are called to trust and praise God despite suffering and expectantly await the coming of his kingdom. On the other hand, we are invited to see the anointed and his kingdom in a new light. A new David will usher in a new kingdom, whose substance is far greater than anything Israel ever saw. He will be an exalted Messiah, ruling in Zion over the gathered exiles and even the nations.

Precisely how to interpret an individual psalm messianically, then, depends on where it is located in the Psalter and what role it plays in the development of these ideas. I think we can, like the NT writers, be creative, so long as it fits within the Psalter's arc. After all, that is the task of every good preacher—to extrapolate how aspects of scripture intersect with our own world today. Some such psalms are easier than others to understand messianically. Psalm 21, for example, is not quoted in the NT and therefore typically does not enter messianic discussions in Christian circles. But it does mention Israel's king and speaks of him in heightened language, which is probably why Jews have seen it as messianic. Psalm 25 offers a better test. As an individual psalm it is rather discreet, portraying a righteous sufferer waiting upon God. So how is it messianic? In the canonical view, it sits within the first book of the Psalter, whose purpose is to portray David as the model of God's anointed—continuing to trust and praise God despite his suffering. Indeed, we find in the psalm elements that would confirm this idea, plus an ascription to David at the beginning. Messianically, then, we may say that it foreshadows Christ in that he is the new and final David. The virtues and character of the person portrayed looks forward to the one who would embody them perfectly. In the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth, we find ultimate incarnation of the suffering Davidic king.

About the author

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