

Psalm 45: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 45 To the Choir Master, according to Lilies, a maschal of the sons of Korah, a love song. My heart overflows with a pleasing theme. I address my verses to the king. My tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. You are the most handsome of the sons of men. Grace is poured upon your lips. Therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride out victoriously, for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness. Let your right hand teach you awesome deeds. Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies. The peoples fall under you. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad. Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour. At your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear. Forget your people in your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him.

The people of Tyre will seek your favour with gifts, the richest of the people. All-glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many coloured robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. With joy and gladness they are led along, as they enter the palace of the king. 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 for ever and ever. Psalm 45 is perhaps a rather surprising thing for us to find in the book of the Psalms, a love song. It seems to be a royal psalm for the specific occasion of a royal wedding. It might also be termed a messianic psalm. As in the case of the Song of Songs, the principal reference of the psalm seemed to exceed the historical individuals who might have initially prompted its composition. Royal or messianic psalms include psalms such as 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132 and 144. This is a very conservative list, however, as there are a great many other psalms for which one could make a case for inclusion. Psalm 45 is notably referenced in the book of Hebrews, where it is related to Christ. Along with psalms 60, 69 and 80, the music that was supposed to accompany it is given to us, called lilies. It was given to the choir master, who presumably would have directed Levitical choirs in its performance on the happy occasion of the king's wedding.

The psalm opens with the psalmist's description of his part in its composition. The song is an overflow of his heart, which has been stirred by the goodness of the theme. His tongue readily answers to his heart, like the pen of an attentive scribe, delivering its praise with a fluidity that seems almost spontaneous. He begins by addressing himself to the king in the first nine verses. The king is praised for his handsomeness, his eloquence and wisdom, and his valour. He stands apart from other men by his striking looks. We might think here of the ways that kings such as Saul and David were distinguished by their pre-possessing or arresting appearance. Saul was head and shoulders above everyone else. David was ruddy and handsome and good-looking. He won the love of everyone. The king in ancient Israel was often a figure of love and desire, a romantic figure that the people looked to as their sort of husband. Beyond mere physical appearance, however, the king is noted for his gracious words, words that are also remarkable for their fittingness and their wisdom. The king is eloquent and noble in his speech. As Proverbs chapter 25 verse 11 declares, a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Wise and good words can bring a person renowned for their beauty and dignity, not just their physical appearance. The king is not just a man of fine words and fine countenance though. He is a mighty man of effective and just action, a

romantic and heroic figure who acts in the cause of what is good. He rides out in majesty and the brilliance of his might and glory. He is skillful at war, not just for his own personal pride, but for the cause of truth, meekness and righteousness. Military might and ability are praised on several occasions in scripture, but the most important thing is that they be used in the cause of something greater than self-aggrandizement.

[4 : 57] The king is concerned for the justice of his cause. His fighting is for and governed by truth, meekness and righteousness, virtues that are so easily abandoned or lost sight of in the situation of war. Perhaps even more than the others, meekness or humility is difficult to find in such situations of conflict and is a surprising thing to see an ancient song praising. This would probably not be among the most prominent of virtues in the minds of most ancient Near Eastern thinkers. Yet the good king is governed by the cause of meekness, concerned to act as a humble minister to his people, fighting their battles rather than lording over them. Verse 6 begins with a sentence that has invited much commentary, especially on account of the fact that it is taken up by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews chapter 1 verses 8 to 9. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The meaning of the reference to God here is not immediately clear, especially as its most natural readings seem so remarkable and surprising. Alan Ross lists five possible readings that have been advanced by various commentators.

First, the claim is that God himself is the throne, the foundation of the kingdom. Second, that the claim is that the throne is of God, as the throne of Solomon is the throne of the Lord. Third, that the claim is that the throne of the king is eternal like God. Fourth, that the psalmist is turning to address God himself in praise at this juncture. However, as Ross observes, this jars with the verse that follows.

Finally, that the king himself is being addressed as God. Ross favours this reading, especially on account of the following verse, which distinguishes between the addressee and the Lord. As the king was the representative of the Lord and the covenant son of God, he shares in the rule of his divine father and on certain occasions can even be referred to as God. Elsewhere in the story of the book of Exodus, God says that Moses will be as God to both Pharaoh and Aaron. The king is distinguished by the uprightness of his rule. It is a rule of just judgment on account of the king's love for righteousness and hatred of wickedness.

For this reason, God has set him over others, anointing him with the oil of gladness like a divine coronation. He is a romantic figure, arrayed as a royal bridegroom in splendour, perfumed with costly fragrances and accompanied by the sweet sound of musical instruments in majestic palaces. His court is glorious, with the daughters of kings as ladies within it. However, the queen consort is set apart from all of the other women, resplendent in gold and glory by his side. The psalmist turns to address her, perhaps recalling counsel given to her before her wedding. She is exhorted to leave behind her past life and give her full honour to her new husband, the king. The king desires her beauty, but the beauty is not merely her physical appearance, but her devotion to him.

Her queenly stature will be found in the glory and the honour that she renders to him as her king, in which she will be elevated by his intense love and desire for her. She is his glory, and she will be glorious as she glorifies him. As she processes towards the king, people of great nations offer her gifts, seeking her favour. Her bridesmaids follow her in a joyful train into the palace, adorned with glorious multicoloured robes, woven with gold. She is dazzling in her beauty and majesty. The psalm concludes with a blessing upon the couple and upon their marriage. While people tend to look back to the glory of their ancestors, this couple will look forward to the glory of their descendants. The king will be remembered through all generations, nations praising him forever.

[8 : 47] The application of this psalm to Christ and his church is not difficult to understand.

Christians were not the first ones to hear this psalm as a messianic one. Christ is the glorious royal bridegroom, a theme especially explored in John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Sebastian Smolash has suggested the presence of allusions to Psalm 45 at the end of the Book of Revelation, in its treatment of the marriage supper of the Lamb and the Church as the Bride of Christ. Jocelyn McWherter extensively discusses the relevance of Psalm 45 in her treatment of marital dimensions of the Gospel of John, which is replete with allusions to Song of Songs and other marriage themes in the Old Testament text.

She makes the case that Psalm 45 is the key to John's deployment of all of these themes. Many Christians over the years have meditated upon this psalm as something that teaches us about the relationship between Christ and the Church. Here, as just one example, is a reflection from St.

Augustine. What beauty is this, if not what he himself created in her? He has desired beauty. But whose? The beauty of a sinner, a wicked, ungodly woman, as she was in the house of her father the devil, and among her own people? No, no. But the beauty of the bride described in the Song of Songs. Who is this who comes up washed in white? She was not white before, but now she has been washed pure white, as the Lord promises through a prophet. Even if your sins are brilliant red, I will wash you white as snow.

The king you are marrying is God. He provides you with your portion. By him you are adorned, by him redeemed, by him healed. Whatever you have in you that can please him, you have as his gift. A question to consider. What connections can you see between this psalm and the Song of Songs?