

Psalm 110: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 110, a Psalm of David. After the order of Melchizedek, the Lord is at your right hand.

He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses. He will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will drink from the brook by the way.

Therefore he will lift up his head. Psalm 110 is one of the most famous psalms in all of the Psalter. The opening verse of this psalm is the most quoted verse from the Old Testament in the New, and verse 4 is the subject of extended theological reflection in the book of Hebrews.

The psalm opens with an utterance of the Lord to the king. The king is summoned to sit at the Lord's right hand, a place of great authority and power. The one sitting at the right hand of the throne is the one who administers the power of that throne.

The Lord is the king of his people. But the Davidic king serves as his son. The actual exercise of God's reign of authority occurs in large measure through the agency of the Davidic king.

[1 : 3 2] The Lord is going to achieve his supremacy through the king. He will make the enemies of David as if the footstool for his throne. Placing one's feet upon conquered enemies is a sign of power at various points in scripture.

Such enemies have been so completely dominated that they become part of the structure of the throne itself, the footstool. The Lord will place the enemies under him. The Lord will also send out his power over the surrounding nations.

His enemies will be made his footstool and he will rule in the midst of his enemies. The Lord will also make him effective in making his people willing. On the day of battle, his people will freely offer themselves.

This is language that we find also in Judges chapter 5 verse 2 in the Song of Deborah. The rest of verse 3 is difficult to understand.

The reference to holy garments or holy splendor recalls language that is generally used of the Lord. This army will bear something of the holy and glorious character of God. The womb of the morning and the dew of the youth may perhaps refer to the freshness of the military force led by this king.

[2 : 5 4] Alternatively, it might have a similar meaning to the expression that we see in 2 Samuel chapter 17 verse 12. In verse 4 we arrive at a section that parallels verse 1.

The psalm has started with a statement of the Lord to the king. Now there is a more solemn oath from the Lord concerning the king. He will be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek was the priest king of Salem, a figure we encounter after Abraham returns after his defeat of the kings. He gives Melchizedek a tithe of all of the spoil. The fact that Melchizedek is the king of Salem or Jerusalem gives him an added significance.

David, when he conquers Jerusalem, takes the throne that was once the throne of Melchizedek. The joining together of priestly and kingly elements within the one person is something that is generally resisted in scripture.

The priests had their responsibilities in the temple and the king had responsibilities elsewhere. Yet for David and his descendants there were many ways in which their role as king overlapped with or moved towards the role of a priest.

[4 : 08] The king's palace was associated with the temple. They were part of the same complex of buildings. The king could intercede for and lead the people in worship, as we see in Solomon and his inauguration of the temple.

Later in scripture, in the book of Zechariah chapter 3 and 6, there is reference to the joining together of the roles of priest and king. Although the Davidic king had some sort of role within the worship of the people, leading them and blessing them and praying for them, there is an anticipation that that role would become something more permanent and something more extensive.

And this psalm has been seen as a messianic one, one that points forward to a greater than David. Jesus himself uses it in this way as he refers to the fact that although it is a psalm of David, David refers to one who seems to be his son as his lord.

How can he be his lord if he is his son? The lord is at the right hand of the king. He is the one who makes the king effective in his rule. Through the king, the lord exerts his power over the nations, showing his dominance over all the peoples that would rise up against him.

The action here, although achieved through the king, is described as the lord's own action. The subject of the final verse is a matter of some debate. It seems to be ambiguous. Is it the lord who will drink from the brook by the way, or is it the king?

[5 : 24] And what is the meaning of this action? Golden Gate raises the possibility that this is an allusion to part of the coronation ceremony that we read of in 1 Kings chapter 1 in the case of Solomon. Alternatively, the brook might bring to mind the blessing of the lord upon the land in giving rains so that there is abundant water to drink.

In both the dew of youth and drinking from the brook, water is seen as refreshing, something that brings youth. This psalm is used frequently within the New Testament to refer to the ascension of Christ.

Christ has been lifted up to sit at the right hand of the father, and he will reign until all enemies are put under his feet. He is the new Davidic king who brings together the role of priest and king within himself.

A question to consider. What are some of the reasons why, reading the story of Genesis chapter 14, we might recognise Melchizedek to be a character of a special note and importance?