

6-1-2000

Psalm 110: A Psalm of David

Walt Keller
Valparaiso University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

Recommended Citation

Keller, Walt, "Psalm 110: A Psalm of David" (2000). *Walt Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms*. 1.
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walt Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Psalm 110
A Psalm of David
(NRSV) (LW)

Introduction to Psalm 110

With this Psalm it is most important to read it, as in fact all of the Psalms must be read, in several tiers or strata. There is first of all the original occasion and intention, to the extent to which that can be recovered in our day. There is general agreement among students of the Psalter that this is a royal Psalm which, like Psalm 2, was composed to celebrate the enthronement of a king, chosen by Yahweh and promised victory over his enemies. Although the Psalm is conventionally attributed to David, it may well have been composed at any number of times in the history of Israel and Judah. Secondly, by the time of Jesus the Psalm was interpreted by the scribes and rabbis as referring to the Messiah, an opinion Jesus shared. And thirdly, the early church quoted this Psalm, particularly verses 1 and 4, more frequently than any other Old Testament passage, and uniformly applied it to Jesus as the Messiah.

The Psalmist announces the theme of the Psalm

V. 1

1a The LORD (Yahweh) **says to my lord** (the king),

**1b “Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool.”**

Notice that the word “lord” is used in both its senses in this verse. Its first use is as the translation for the name of the God of Israel, Yahweh. The second use is as a reference to one’s earthly lord, namely, the king. The Psalmist is saying that Yahweh is addressing his lord, the king, with the words in verse 1b. This makes it difficult to think of David, the first king of Israel and Judah, as the author. In Psalm 2:7, in the other famous enthronement Psalm in the Psalter, David says, “Yahweh said to *me*.” There David, the traditional author of the Psalm and the newly enthroned king, refers to himself in the first person. Here in Psalm 110, the king is referred to in the third person. A third party, in all probability another poet, notes that Yahweh addressed his lord, king David – or some later king. If that is the case, it would be more accurate to read this as a Psalm *about* David instead of as a Psalm *by* David.

However that may be, it is clear that by the time of Jesus both he and his debating opponents, the Pharisees, were agreed that this was a messianic Psalm written by David. In a story recorded by all of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44) Jesus uses this authorial identification to press a debating point relating to the identity of the messianic son of David. David says, “Yahweh addresses my lord (that is, the Messiah).” Read thus, the Psalm says that David acknowledges the lord Messiah to be his lord. How, Jesus wants to know, does the fact that David calls the Messiah his living superior comport with the undoubted tradition that the Messiah is David’s son (descendant)? It was a question about messianic identity which Jesus’ detractors could not answer.

But Jesus did not ask the question simply to shut the Pharisees up. It was intended also as an indirect witness to his own identity. The question could be answered if, instead of thinking of Messiah as *either* David's lord *or* as David's descendant, one thinks of Messiah as *both* David's lord *and* as David's descendant. It is thus a hint from Jesus that the Messiah is simultaneously *both* already in the time of David his living Lord *and* long after the time of David his distant descendant. That Jesus should turn out to be this Messiah is the theme of the Gospels. When the story is completed, his disciples will begin to understand not only that *prior* to his incarnation is Jesus the everlasting Lord, but that *in* the incarnation he is also the earthly descendant of David.

Back in the days of the Old Testament, whoever would "sit at the right hand" of a king on formal occasions was next to him in rank and identified as the official empowered to represent the king and carry out his policy. In verse 1 Yahweh authorized the messianic king to occupy the place of great honor and powerful office at his right hand. This part of the verse is quoted four times in the New Testament as authority for confessing that Jesus the Messiah now "sits at the right hand of God" (see Acts 2:32-36; Ephesians 1:20-21; Colossians 3:1; and Hebrews 1:13). The theme of Jesus' ascension in victory to the seat of honor and power at the right hand of God makes this a fitting Psalm for use on the day of *The Ascension of our Lord*. The phrase made its way into the Apostles Creed, when in the Second Article we confess: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who ... ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

"To make one's enemies into a footstool" is a symbolic way of declaring complete victory (see also Psalm 8:6b). The word "until" is not intended to limit the time of sitting at the right hand of Yahweh, as though once the enemies had been overcome the king no longer could sit at Yahweh's right hand. To avoid this misimpression the REB has nicely paraphrased, "Sit at my right hand, and I shall make your enemies your footstool." Thus at his coronation the Davidic king was given the repeated promise, as he had also been in Psalm 2, that Yahweh would secure his victory over all his enemies. After Israel no longer had kings, they no longer enjoyed political autonomy and were always a nation subject to the hegemony of foreign rulers. Thus the passage came to be understood in a future Messianic sense. Someday the Messiah would come, and then Yahweh would give them the victory over their enemies.

It is useful to understand that kings and nations were regarded as foes, not necessarily because of some specific quarrel or conflict with Israel, although that too was often the case. But they were regarded as enemies because their rulers were not appointed by Yahweh; they owed their allegiance to other gods. Moreover, other nations and kings institutionalized in their governments an exception to Yahweh's world-wide sovereignty. For those reasons alone these nations will be judged and defeated by God and his earthly messianic agent, so that all the earth might acknowledge Yahweh as the sole Sovereign. In actual fact the enmity was usually exacerbated by injuries and cruelties. In Jesus' day those enemies were the Romans.

But in fact Jesus did not lift a finger to rid his countrymen of the Roman political rule. His program for the universal rule of God lay elsewhere. It lay in acknowledging that Jesus had in fact been given all authority in heaven and on earth; he it is who is sitting at God's right hand. His disciples lived by that premise: Jesus is Lord! Their mission in turn is to make disciples of all the nations through baptism in the name of the now-revealed Triune God and through being trained in obedience to his commands. After his resurrection from the dead, his disciples began to understand that through Jesus God had secured victory over those enemies more fundamentally named Sin and Death and the Devil.

The Psalmist addresses the king

Vv. 2-4

**² The LORD sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.**

Yahweh will see to it that the dominion of the newly enthroned messianic king will move outward from Zion into wider areas, despite the opposition of the enemies. When applied to Jesus the Messiah, this Psalm may have suggested to Luke the theme of his book of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 1:8b Jesus, who is about to ascend into heaven, instructs his disciples to bear witness in expanding circles, beginning in Jerusalem, moving outward to Judea and Samaria, and finally going out to all the ends of the earth.

**³ Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning,
like dew, your youth will come to you.**

**³ (REB) You gain the homage of your people on the day of your power.
Arrayed in holy garments, a child of the dawn, you have the dew of your youth.**

**³ (NAB) Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendor;
before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you.**

**³ (TEV) On the day you fight your enemies, your people will volunteer.
Like the dew of early morning your young men will come to you on the sacred hill.**

The Hebrew text of this verse is unclear; that is why you will find so many different translations into English. The general idea is, I think, clear. When the king moves outward from Zion to do battle against the enemies, his people willingly volunteer their service for the cause. As surely as the dew appears on the grass in the morning, so surely will the youth of the people join in the ranks of his army. And when the Messianic King turns out to be Jesus, how much more will not his people enlist in his cause!

The NAB follows the Septuagint (the translation from Hebrew into Greek about 200 B.C.) and the Vulgate (Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin in 384 A.D.). It offers its attractive alternative English translation. On the day of his enthronement the king is, as it were, born as the messianic heir. And on that birthday he receives his princely power along with his splendid attire. That birth takes place when Yahweh has begotten the Psalmist's lord, the king. This recalls the language of begetting in Psalm 2:7-8. This begetting takes place before the daystar, that is, before the sun, had been created. In other words the king is begotten in Yahweh's plan from all eternity. That begetting takes place in a mysterious manner, like the appearance of the dew in the morning. This reading seems to lean heavily on the Christian reading of the mysterious verse that follows.

**⁴ The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”**

The background for this verse is Genesis 14:17ff. Abram (later Abraham), who lived sometime between 2000 and 1750 B.C., came home victorious from a battle to rescue his nephew Lot from capture by a hostile coalition of local chieftains. Abram was then met by Melchizedek, who puts in this cameo appearance in the Bible. Nothing more is known of Melchizedek than the three things that are said of him in these few verses. First, he is identified as the king of Salem (=peace), an early pre-Israelite Canaanite settlement on the site that David much later (around 1000 B.C.) chose to be his capital, and that he then named Jerusalem. As king of Salem, Melchizedek was known as the king of peace. Second, although he was a king he was also a priest of God Most High. While it was not unusual for early Canaanite kings to be such priest-kings, that was not the case in Israel. In Israel, though kings did occupy a mediatorial role between Yahweh and the People of God, the sacrifices and the worship were conducted by a separate order, the tribe of Levi. (David and the Davidic kings were from the tribe of Judah.) And third, as a priest-king he served Abram bread and wine, blessed him, and received a tithe of his booty.

What precisely David and/or his successors were authorized to do as priests is not clear. But it is clear that, if they were to be priests, they could not be priests according to the Torah's regulations for the priesthood. Moses and his brother Aaron were both descended from the tribe of Levi (Exodus 6:16). And by divine ordinance the first priest was to be Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, and his sons after him (Exodus 28; 40:12-15). Thus, if David, descended from Judah, was to be a priest, it could not be according to the order of Levi. It would have to be another order of priesthood, here referred to as the order of Melchizedek. This Psalm has Yahweh himself installing the Davidic king into this priesthood, and installing him with an irrevocable oath. In addition, Yahweh installs the king as a Melchizedekian priest “forever.” At the time of David “forever” would have meant “for life.” The perpetual continuation of the Melchizedekian priesthood would take place through the person of the Davidic successor to the throne. Only later, when Israel learned about a life after death and an eternity that surrounded time would the phrase come to be understood as forever in the sense of everlastingly imperishable.

When after 586 B.C. Israel and Judah no longer had kings, this Psalm was understood with reference to the coming king who would restore the Jews to their hoped for glory. In other words, the king of the Psalm was understood to be the coming everlasting Messiah, who would rule enthroned in glory forever and not just for the rest of his life. And so Jesus also seems to have understood it.

The most extended development of the idea of the Melchizedekian priesthood in the New Testament is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This Epistle develops Jesus' Messianic office as that of a Priest. Messiah Jesus is a Priest-Messiah. But the priesthood of Jesus is superior to that of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood, because Jesus' priesthood is a Melchizedekian priesthood. Jesus entered into that Melchizedekian priesthood when he rose from death into the death-proof life of the resurrection (Hebrews 6:19-20). The name Melchizedek translates into “king of righteousness;” and his office was that of king of Salem, king of peace. This perfectly describes Jesus, who is our king of righteousness and peace (Hebrews 7:2). Moreover, Melchizedek has neither father nor mother, and he has no descendents; he has neither beginning nor ending. This perfectly describes Jesus, who as the eternal Son of God also has neither beginning nor end (Hebrews 7:3). Furthermore, great

father Abraham in giving tithes to Melchizedek acknowledges him to be superior, and thereby also all of Abraham's descendants are declared to be inferior to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:4-10). The Levitical priesthood and all of its provisions could not produce in us the necessary perfection to give us a living hope for heaven. So there is a new and better priesthood, not according to the order of Aaron, where priests succeeded to the office by the legal entitlement of physical Aaronic descent, but according to the order of Melchizedek, where the Melchizedekian priest comes into office by the power of an indestructible life and on the strength of an oath of God (Hebrews 7:11-22). Old Testament priests continually needed to be replaced, because they all died; but the great Melchizedekian priest, risen from the dead, holds his priesthood forever. Hence "he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). The old priesthood had to always to offer daily sacrifices, first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people; but the great Melchizedekian priest did this only once when he offered up himself, once and for all (Hebrews 7:27).

The Psalmist addresses Yahweh

Vv. 5-7

- ⁵ The Lord (the messianic king) is at your (Yahweh's) right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.**
- ⁶ He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads
over the wide earth.**

The Psalmist here speaks about the king to Yahweh. In the confidence that comes from trusting the divine promise the Psalmist is certain that the king will successfully carry out his mission as Yahweh's appointed deputy on earth to gain victory over the enemies, both God's and therefore his own.

- ^{7a} He will drink from the stream by (alongside) the (appointed) path;**
^{7b} therefore he will lift up his head.

This verse is easily enough translated, but it is hard to understand how this fits in with the earlier verses of this Psalm. In verse 7b "to lift up one's head" is a posture of victory. The verse says that the king will lift up his head because he drinks from the stream. Are we to think here of a literal stream from which he literally drinks? Or is this perhaps a poetic image? I think of it figuratively: because the Messianic king drinks humbly and deeply from the stream of God's promised aid, he will therefore lift up his head in final victory. It is the Psalmist's concluding confession of faith in the sworn promises of God.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 110:

Almighty God, make known in every place the perfect offering of your Son, the eternal high priest of the new Jerusalem, and so consecrate all nations to be your holy people, that the kingdom of Christ, your anointed one, may come in its fullness; and to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all honor and praise now and forever. Amen.

Luther on Psalm 110: This Psalm is a prophecy of Christ, that he shall be an eternal king and priest, indeed true God, sitting at the right hand of God, and that he would be glorified and recognized. In the entire Scripture there is nothing like this Psalm. It would be right to acknowledge it as the chief confirmation of the Christian faith. For nowhere else is Christ prophesied with such clear, plain words as a priest and an eternal priest. It is prophesied as well that the priesthood of Aaron would be abolished. This Psalm is yet again and more splendidly extolled in the epistle to the Hebrews. It is indeed a shame that such a Psalm is not more richly extolled by Christians.

Nugget

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self – all your wishes and precautions – to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way – centered on money or pleasure or ambition – and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As he said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short; but I still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

That is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes of the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or a stain which soaks right through. Jesus never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, “Be perfect,” He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder – in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird; it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Walter E. Keller

June 1, 2000 – **The Ascension of Our Lord**