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## Psalm 2

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## **Psalm 2**

(RSV, with supplementary "sense" translations)

Although both Lutheran Book of Worship and Lutheran Worship assign only verses 6-13 of this Psalm as the Psalm for Transfiguration Sunday, it seems to me that for our purposes there is merit in looking at the entire Psalm.

This Psalm is a Coronation Psalm, one that was used whenever a new descendant of great King David succeeded to the throne, whenever a new Son of David became the next king. It may also be viewed as also written for the coronation of Christ, the eternal King.

### **STROPHE ONE**

(Human rebellion against the LORD and His Anointed)

#### **Vv. 1-3**

##### **<sup>1</sup> Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?**

**(The nations are in an uproar -- but why? The peoples plot, but it is useless!)**

The Psalm reflects a high sense of Israel's election; Israel is the chosen People of God, the others are simply "the nations" or "the (Gentile) peoples" (the Goyim). There is a restlessness, ultimately futile, to be sure, but nevertheless a very pronounced stirring among the outsiders.

##### **<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves,**

**(The kings of the earth prepare themselves for combat,)**

**and the rulers take counsel together,**

**(and the rulers co-operate with each other in their rebellion,)**

**against the LORD and his anointed, saying,**

**(against Yahweh and the king whom Yahweh has anointed (his Messiah), saying,)**

Specifically, it is the leaders of the nations who are engaged in a conspiracy to rebel against the LORD and His anointed. The word "anointed" translates the Hebrew word "messiah". The king of Israel with his throne in Jerusalem was coronated in a ceremony of pouring oil over his head, a ceremony called anointing. The king was thus "the anointed one," in Hebrew "the messiah." He was anointed to be the head of God's People, the one who was to lead and care for them, and who was in his own person the symbol of the People of God. The significant feature here is that rebellion against the messiah anointed, or appointed by Yahweh, is simultaneously rebellion against Yahweh himself. Or, as the Psalm has it, any rebellion against Yahweh is simultaneously an attack upon the People of Yahweh.

You should note that verses 1-2 are cited in the New Testament in Acts 4:25-26, and thereby provide us with a clue as to how to interpret this Psalm in a Christian sense. In this Acts passage, the Psalm is quoted when the civil/religious authorities act against the Apostles for preaching the Gospel. The early Christian community noted how first the Lord Jesus had been attacked by both Herod and the Gentile Pontius Pilate. Then the disciples (who are not above their master) are hounded by the authorities.

**3 "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."  
("Let us free ourselves from their rule, and throw off their control.")**

The nations want to be free from "their" rule, that is, from the rule exercised by the one anointed on Yahweh's behalf, or alternatively, from Yahweh's rule through his anointed one, his earthly deputy. It is characteristic of those who wield power to want to be independent and sovereign and to acknowledge no authority higher than themselves. But in Biblical faith it is a given that the LORD is the Sovereign Ruler, and that therefore all living things must acknowledge that sovereignty or perish.

### **STROPHE TWO**

(God's derision and decree)

#### **Vv. 4-5**

**4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.  
(the LORD mocks their feeble plans.)**

**5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,**

**6 "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."  
("I have enthroned my king...")**

The futility and absurdity of any rebellious undertaking is emphasized in this strophe. Notice the contrast between "the kings of the earth" in verse 2 and "the One who sits in the heavens" in verse 4. The LORD'S derision turns to "wrath and fury" (cf. Romans 2:8) at their presumptuous lese majesty. Notice the underlined words in verse 6. The stumbling block here is that the God of heaven and earth should choose a nation as His own People, and within that People should anoint a chosen king as a leader and an embodiment of that People, so that an assault on the anointed is by that fact also an assault upon the Anointer. When Christians pray this Psalm, they need to think of Jesus, whom God the Father has chosen as His anointed One, and of the Church as the People of God formed by our being "in Him" through faith.

### **STROPHE THREE**

(The king's rehearsal of God's decree)

#### **Vv. 7-9**

**7 I will tell of the decree of the LORD:**

**(what the LORD has declared:)**

**He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you.  
(I have fathered you.)"**

Now the newly anointed king speaks. He refers to "the decree of the LORD." This is certainly a reference to the content of 2 Samuel 7, and it is conceivable that it may even refer to the actual text of that chapter. (I have added a brief study also of that chapter at the end of this reflection on Psalm 2.) The significant feature of this declaration is that upon his coronation (notice the "today" of verse 7) the latest son of David is declared to be the son of God. The anointing is symbolically the moment when Yahweh calls the anointed king His son and proclaims Himself to be the Father of this son of God. That too is part of the background of Jesus, the Son of David,

also being declared the beloved Son of the Father. (See Mark 1:11 & 9:7 and parallels; also see Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5 & 5:5.)

**<sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.**

The son of David/son of God is invited to pray to Yahweh, and the promise to the son of David/son of God is that he shall receive the rebellious nations, indeed, the whole earth as his own possession. But of course, what is given to the anointed king is given not only *by* God, but it is also expected that such a gift will also be returned *to* God, for the Anointed One is God's Anointed One.

**<sup>9</sup> You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."**

This is the judgment of the derisive and angry God upon all rebellion and disobedience among the nations, a sentence that for its execution is entrusted to *you*, to the anointed son of David/son of God.

#### **STROPHE FOUR**

(Concluding moral exhortation)

#### **Vv. 10-12**

**<sup>10</sup> Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.**

This warning is issued to the leaders of the nations, or more broadly to all those who chafe at being subject to the Sovereign LORD.

**<sup>11</sup> Serve the LORD with fear,**

There is here not only the idea of political submission to Yahweh, but also that of the worship of Yahweh.

**with trembling <sup>12</sup> kiss his feet,**

It is difficult to understand as this passage is in Hebrew, but the fundamental idea is clear enough: you don't take God lightly.

**lest he be angry, and you perish in the way;  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.**

Lest you perish in the way, that is, while you are still en route, still travelling. Simply put, lest you die prematurely and unexpectedly -- because you have angered God, whose fuse may be shorter than we might imagine.

**Blessed are all who take refuge in him.**

The alternative to rebellion against God is to lay down your disobedience and to find your refuge in Him. The final word is a word of the good news that in him there is blessedness.

In order fully to appreciate this "Coronation Psalm," it is good to recall some history from the Old Testament. David, who reigned from about 1000 - 960 B.C., was, and is remembered as, the great King of Israel. He pacified the region and extended the borders of Israel to their widest extent. After he had achieved great military success and fame, he turned his attention to peacetime pursuits, especially to the construction of a fitting House for God. That is the background to 2 Samuel 7, which is the narrative of how God gave what came to be called the Davidic Covenant.

## **2 Samuel 7**

**<sup>{1}</sup> Now when the king dwelt in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies round about, <sup>{2}</sup> the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent."**

David notices the incongruity: he, the king, lives in a splendid house. God has no house at all!

**<sup>{3}</sup> And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart; for the LORD is with you."**

Nathan the prophet endorses David's desire to build a fine house for God. But God has other plans.

**<sup>{4}</sup> But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, <sup>{5}</sup> "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? <sup>{6}</sup> I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt *(about 1280 B.C.)* to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. <sup>{7}</sup> In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel *(the period of the judges was ca. 1200 - 1020 B.C.)*, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"**

God is not -- at the moment -- asking for a house. He had always been content to live in a portable tent, to travel more easily where He was needed. Never had He complained about not having a fine house.

**<sup>{8}</sup> Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; <sup>{9}</sup> and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.**

God is not, after all, helpless. It was God who had brought David up from obscurity, who had given him his victories over his enemies, and who would secure his place in the memory of subsequent generations.

<sup>{10}</sup> And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, <sup>{11}</sup> from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies.

But it is quite clear that what God is doing is being done for the sake of His People, that they might have a land, and that they might live in permanent peace. As for the fine House, that was a task to be performed by the son of David, who is Solomon. Notice the language that is used in the following promise of God:

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. <sup>{12}</sup> When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>{13}</sup> He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. <sup>{14}</sup> I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; <sup>{15}</sup> but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul (*David's immediate predecessor*), whom I put away from before you. <sup>{16}</sup> And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever." <sup>{17}</sup> In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Here God inverts David's proposal. Whereas David has proposed to build a fine House (namely, a building) for the LORD, the LORD now promises instead that He will build a House for David (namely, a dynasty). That dynasty begins with David's own physical descendant, Solomon, and will continue forever. It is the son of David who "shall build a house for my Name," whose "kingdom shall be established forever," and who "shall be the son of the father-Yahweh," and who shall suffer "chastening with the stripes of the sons of men," but "from whom father-Yahweh would never remove his steadfast love." These are the unshakable promises of Yahweh our God. And when David received this Word of God, he could only respond in the prayer of thanks and adoration which follows:

<sup>{18}</sup> Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far? <sup>{19}</sup> And yet this was a small thing in thy eyes, O Lord GOD; thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house for a great while to come, and hast shown me future generations, O Lord GOD! <sup>{20}</sup> And what more can David say to thee? For thou knowest thy servant, O Lord GOD! <sup>{21}</sup> Because of thy promise, and according to thy own heart, thou hast wrought all this greatness, to make thy servant know it. <sup>{22}</sup> Therefore thou art great, O LORD God; for there is none like thee, and there is no God besides thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears. <sup>{23}</sup> What other nation on earth is like thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his people (*that is, by rescuing them from Egypt*), making himself a name, and doing for them great and terrible things, by driving out before his people a nation and its gods? <sup>{24}</sup> And thou didst establish for thyself thy people Israel to be thy people for ever; and thou, O LORD, didst become their God. <sup>{25}</sup> And now, O LORD God, confirm for ever the word which thou hast spoken concerning thy servant and concerning his house, and do as thou hast spoken; <sup>{26}</sup> and thy name will be magnified for ever, saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel,' and the house of thy servant David will be established before thee. <sup>{27}</sup> For thou, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, hast made this revelation to thy servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore thy servant has found courage to pray this prayer to thee. <sup>{28}</sup> And now, O Lord GOD, thou art God, and thy words are true, and thou hast promised this good thing to thy servant;

<sup>(29)</sup> **now therefore may it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee; for thou, O Lord GOD, hast spoken, and with thy blessing shall the house of thy servant be blessed for ever."**

It was comparatively easy to believe and trust this LORD, our God, during the days of the first son of David, Solomon, and correspondingly easy to pray Psalm 2. He built the fine house for the name of the LORD, the great Solomonic Temple. And the kingdom seemed destined to last in splendor forever. But three factors then made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the reliability and trustworthiness, and therefore also the goodness of Yahweh, and correspondingly to pray Psalm 2:

1. After the death of Solomon, and at the beginning of the reign of his successor, Rehoboam, the second son of David/son of God, the great kingdom of David and Solomon was split into a large and prosperous Northern Kingdom and a rump Southern Kingdom, when Jeroboam successfully seceded from Jerusalem.

2. The Southern Kingdom, the custodian and heir of the throne of David and the Temple of the Son of David, lived a politically marginal, indeed precarious existence for some 335 years. It was during this time that Psalm 2 was ritually recited at the coronations of the successive sons of David/sons of father-Yahweh. The vision of the Psalm, in which the Throne of the Anointed of the LORD held restless peoples in control and in which they kings of the earth plotted their coup d' etat corresponded to no historical reality. It was a scene derived totally from the vision of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7.

3. The destruction of the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C., following upon the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C., left no trace of the Solomonic Temple, the house for the Name of God, or of the city of David atop Mt. Zion; it put paid to any dream of living in their land in perpetual peace; and because the Israelites were deported into the alien and Gentile country of Babylon, it crushed the sense of being God's chosen People. It was easy to give up on the God of Abraham, of Moses, of David, because he had been proved on the field of battle to be a weak and inferior god.

It was exceedingly hard to pray Psalm 2 after 586 B.C. The premier question became: Was the Word and Promise of God (for example, in Psalm 2) worthless or not? What was to be trusted: the Promise of the Davidic Covenant, or the obvious and painful evidence of their own history? The resolution was that while some may have dropped by the wayside, the mainstream of the People of God trusted that promise of God, but awaited its fulfillment sometime in the future, when the Rule of God would once more come. And they expected the fulfillment to be modeled along the lines of the same political structure that inspired the promise.

The New Testament Gospel is that the expected Kingdom of God had come and that it was fulfilled in Jesus who embodied that Rule of God in his own person. In his humanity he was a descendant (the son) of David, his own body was the temple for the Name of God, he was shown in the resurrection to be the Son of God with power and that God was indeed his faithful Father, he had been chastened with the stripes of cruel men, God had not withdrawn His steadfast (faithful) love from him, and as the resurrected Lord he now lives that death-proof life which alone can grant perpetual peace. He is now the King who embodies and governs the new People of God. THIS fulfillment reveals the promise and plan of God to have been far deeper than the political context of Old Testament Israel's history could possibly have known.

When therefore we read or pray this Psalm from a Christian point of view, it seems to me that we need to place ourselves quite consciously in the long stream of the history of God's People. We need develop a fellow feeling with those ancient saints who first received such a promise, who gloried in it, who were beset by temptations to unbelief when their history did not match the expected glory, when they turned their eyes confidently to the future as an expression of their confident trust in God, when they experienced perhaps an initial perplexity, even disappointment in the non-political character as Jesus' claimed Messiahship, and when they experienced the unutterable joy in the fulfillment of the resurrection. Peter experienced the thrill of the Transfiguration foretaste of the resurrection glory, but he had to descend to the plain, ordinary, every-day tasks of his life and calling, and return to the mundane nitty-gritty or the "real world." Except that now "the real world" had a new dimension to it; it was no longer just one d----- thing after another; it was the arena of hopeful service *en route* to the Final Fulfillment of the Resurrection glory. The Psalm does, however, contain a warning: if, indeed, King Jesus Christ (THE Anointed One) is the Final Fulfillment of this promise of God, you don't want to mess with this King. There is no alternative, there is no other.

**The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 2:**

Lord God, you gave the peoples of the world to be the inheritance of your Son; you crowned him as king of Zion, your holy city, and gave him your church as his bride. As he proclaims the way of your eternal kingdom, may we serve him faithfully, and so know the royal power of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I like the prayer for its accent on the universal rule of this King Jesus Christ.

I personally prefer to avoid references to Zion, unless it is clear that it is used in a spiritual, not political sense. The imagery of the bride is intrusive in this prayer.

I think you can do better. Give it a try in the space remaining.

*Walter E. Keller*

February 18, 1996 — **The Transfiguration of Our Lord**