

1-9-2000

## Psalm 45: To the choirmaster: according to (the tune) Lilies. A Maskil of the Korahites. A love song.

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### Recommended Citation

Keller, Walter E., "Psalm 45: To the choirmaster: according to (the tune) Lilies. A Maskil of the Korahites. A love song." (2000). *Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms*. 48.  
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms/48>

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**Psalm 45**  
**To the choirmaster: according to (the tune) Lilies.**  
**A Maskil of the Korahites. A love song.**  
(NRSV) (LBW) (LW)

To understand this Psalm fully we need to read it on several levels.

The first level is its original setting, to the extent to which that can be recovered. It is a poem celebrating the marriage of a Davidic king to a foreign princess. In those days marriage was a form of diplomacy, whereby a king assured peace, sometimes with a subject nation or sometimes with an allied nation. Here the princess was from the nation of Tyre (verses 10-12). So we may think of Solomon, a master at the art of diplomatic marriages (1 Kings 11:1-3), or perhaps Ahab (1 Kings 16:30ff). But we cannot say for sure just when this Psalm had its original setting.

The second level is one that we find already in the Old Testament. After the Jews returned from Exile in 538 B.C., there were two important changes in their national life. One, they no longer had a political king, because they were a vassal nation to a succession of foreign powers. And two, they no longer spoke the same language of the Psalms; Hebrew had developed into Aramaic. Consequently there developed a system of *targums*, paraphrases in Aramaic of the Hebrew Bible. The Targum on Psalm 45:2 reads, "Thy beauty, O king *Messiah*, is greater than that of the children of men." The Jews had begun to project into the future the kingship of which this Psalm speaks. Thus the way was paved for Christians also to read the Psalms messianically. We read this Psalm specifically of *Jesus* as the Messiah. That is what the New Testament does, notably when Hebrews 1:8-9 applies Psalm 45:6-7 to Jesus as the Son of God. It is at this level that Psalm 45:7-9 must be understood when these verses are used as the Psalm for the First Sunday after the Epiphany, which commemorates Jesus' baptism and his declaration by the Voice from heaven as the beloved Son of God.

The third level on which we may then read this Psalm is as a poetic allegory of the relationship between God and His People. In the Old Testament marriage is well established as a representation of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, as for example in Hosea 1-3. The New Testament then adapts this figure for speaking about the relationship between Christ, the bridegroom, and His Church, the bride, as for example in Ephesians 5:22-33.

These three levels then will intermingle in our consideration of the details of this Psalm.

**V. 1**

**<sup>1</sup> My heart overflows with a goodly theme;  
I address my verses to the king;  
my tongue is like the pen of a ready (an expert) scribe.**

Psalm 45 is unique in that the author refers to himself, both here in verse 1 and again at the end in verse 17. He is an expert scribe, well trained for his office. It is an important office in ancient royal courts, for the scribe had to produce the appropriate language for a wide variety of occasions: legal, diplomatic, and (as here) celebratory. His goodly theme is this Psalm, praising the ideal king. His tongue is his pen; he had composed this Psalm and delivers it orally. Only later does he commit it to writing. But when he does commit it to writing, he does

so fully conscious of the fact that he is immortalizing his (ideal) king for future generations (see verse 17).

### **Vv. 2-5**

**<sup>2</sup> You are the most handsome of men;**

The older translation, “You are the fairest of the sons of men,” was the inspiration for the hymn, “Beautiful Savior,” especially of stanzas 2 and 3 (LBW #518; LW #507; TLH #657).

**grace is poured upon your lips;**

This can mean either that the king is an eloquent speaker, or that graciousness and kindness are the trademarks of his conversation.

**therefore** (it is easily seen that) **God has blessed you forever** (God has always blessed you).

**<sup>3</sup> Gird your sword on your thigh** (place the sword in its sheath), **O mighty one** (O king),  
**in your glory and majesty.**

**<sup>4a</sup> In your majesty ride on victoriously**

This verse appears in the Palm Sunday hymn, “Ride on, Ride on in Majesty!” (LBW #121; LW #105; TLH #162).

**<sup>4b</sup> for the cause of truth and to defend the right;**  
(NIV: in behalf of truth, humility, and righteousness;)

The uncertainty of the Hebrew text allows for both translations of verse 4b.

**<sup>4c</sup> let your right hand** (your strong hand) **teach** (show) **you dread deeds.**

Dread deeds are deeds that strike terror in the hearts of the enemy, while evoking awe and respect from the allies.

**<sup>5</sup> Your arrows are sharp**  
**in the heart of the king's** (i.e., your) **enemies;**  
**the peoples fall under you.**

The king is powerful and victorious in all his battles.

The language of verses 2-5 is the language of encomium used in royal courts. The superlatives are intended to show respect, affection, and praise. One would use such language, even if the king were homely and somewhat lacking in military skill. They describe an ideal that is only partially approximated in any given exemplar. But precisely because the description transcends any known person, it points to a person or a state of affairs that we may yearn for and even ache for. To look to the future for one in whom these attributes are indeed found is the birth of messianic hope. The question then becomes whether such hope will be vindicated, or whether

it will be put to shame. We Christians bet our lives on the fact that Jesus is indeed that expected Messiah, and our hope is justified.

**Vv. 6-9**

- <sup>6</sup> Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever.  
Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;  
<sup>7</sup> you love righteousness and hate wickedness.  
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;  
<sup>8</sup> your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.  
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;  
<sup>9</sup> daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;  
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.**

The most troublesome verse in this Psalm is verse 6, and it is perhaps the reason that the Lectionary selects only verses 7-9, omitting this verse. The difficulty is that these verses, along with the rest of the Psalm, are an address to the king who is about to be married. But verse 6 addresses the king as God! That is strange among a people who are under strict command to have no other God than the One who had delivered them out of Egypt. Psalm 45 is the only place in the Psalter where that is done. Alternative readings have therefore been suggested that would avoid using the word "God" as an address for the king. So, for example the text of the Revised Standard Version reads, "Your *divine* throne endures ...." Or the RSV footnote suggests "Your throne is *of God*, your throne is *God's*." The intended sense of both of these variations then would be that, while the throne belongs to the king, it is given to him by God. But the New Revised Standard Version translation above is the simplest and most obvious translation of the Hebrew text, and it is also adopted by the New International Version.

I want to offer what I think is a sound comment on this problem by James Luther Mays:

Such a designation of a king (God) does occur in the royal literature of other contemporary nations. If this is a unique case in the Old Testament, the term '*elohim*' (the Hebrew word for God) need not indicate belief in a king who is divine by nature, but rather a divinely chosen and gifted person. The throne names for a Davidic king in Isaiah 9:6 may be an analogy: "Mighty God, Everlasting Father." But '*elohim*' does seem to press the limits of adoration of a human king in a religion ruled by the principle of "no other god." Immediately the psalm goes on the subordinate the king to "God, your God" (verse 7).

We may then think of that address as a daring, extravagant, even near idolatrous encomium of the king. Yet we must also think of this word as an address to God; the throne of David does after all belong to God (Psalm 2:6). But in a deeper sense we must also reckon with the fact that an inspired poet is addressing, unwittingly to be sure, the final incarnation of the Son of David/Son of God (recall Psalm 89), the Son of God *par excellence*. That is the way in which we are taught to think about it by the author of the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews (see Hebrews 1:8-9). He refers this address, beyond any reigning earthly king, to the Son of God who sits higher than any angel does in the heavenly places with God. Of Jesus we may rightly say that he is indeed also God.

Of the king the Psalmist now also says that God ('Elohim) is *your* 'Elohim (God). It has the effect of properly subordinating the king to keep him human. It is as if the Psalmist were saying, "You, O king, may be an 'elohim, but 'Elohim is still also your God. When we think of this Psalm

in our Christian context, we may then reflect on how our confession of *Jesus* as God does not exhaust the fullness of God. There is more, so to speak, of God than Jesus. For the Son of God, though fully God, also has a Father-God who too is fully God. We are here skirting the edge of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

God has anointed the king. Recall the significance of anointing in my comments on Psalm 89. The anointing was done with oil, here called the oil of gladness, not only because to receive such an anointing would make any son of David a happy person, but also because it was a joyous and festive occasion for the entire people. And it was he, not any other contemporary, who was chosen for such anointing. This anointed king ranked higher not only than any of his fellow-Israelites, but also higher than any of his fellow kings!

Again, as in Psalm 89 and 2 Samuel 7, there is the confidence that the Davidic king has a throne that will last forever. And again, as in Psalm 89 and 2 Samuel 7, Christians will have the confidence that no earthly son of David will reign forever; only Jesus, the Son of David/Son of God who died and was raised again to a death-proof life can possibly be the heavenly King who now reigns forever.

This is the force of the Psalm in the context of the observance of the Baptism of Jesus on the First Sunday after the Epiphany. When Jesus was baptized, he was anointed to the office for which he had come. In that baptism there was revealed to him – and to us – that he was indeed the Son of God *par excellence*, whose scepter alone is equity, and who loves righteousness as much as he hates wickedness.

Verses 8-9 then describe the splendor of the king who is about to be married. His clothing is beautifully perfumed; he comes from a palace decorated with ivory; he is entertained with a string orchestra. His ladies of honor (a polite euphemism for his harem) include kings' daughters. But pride of place, the right hand of the king, belongs to the bride about to become queen, who is dressed in the finest gold from Ophir.

Note that in Ephesians 5:25-27 St. Paul teaches that Christ, as the husband of his bride, gave his all for the Church, to cleanse her, that he might present his bride, the Church, to himself in all splendor. The Church, as the Bride of Christ, is clothed in the beautiful robe of righteousness. It is our glory to be so splendidly clothed as members of Christ by faith.

#### **Vv. 10-13a**

- <sup>10</sup> Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;  
forget your people and your father's house,  
<sup>11</sup> and the king will desire your beauty.  
Since he is your lord, bow to him;  
<sup>12</sup> the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts,  
the richest of the people <sup>13a</sup> with all kinds of wealth.**

The court poet now addresses the bride by calling her daughter, a term of affection. He counsels that she leave behind her former loyalties in her father's house and to her own people of Tyre in now becoming the wife of the king of Israel. For her royal husband is now her lord to whom she owes her allegiance and obedience. This is initially a political statement; she has taken out a new citizenship. But the question must also be asked whether this is not also a statement about the marriage relationship, with her move from her father's home to that of her

husband. It seems to our modern ears that for a wife to acknowledge her husband as her lord is the height of distasteful patriarchalism. Yet it seems much of the Bible speaks precisely in those terms. I think that such a relationship is redeemed by the heavenly Bridegroom who as Lord lays down his life for his Bride, and whom his Bride, the Church, rejoices to call Lord. Something of that relationship is retained in a Christian marriage, if it is truly “sacramental” (Ephesians 5:31-33). But a full discussion of that topic must be reserved for another day.

#### **Vv. 13b-15**

- <sup>13b</sup> **The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;**  
<sup>14</sup> **in many-colored robes she is led to the king;**  
**behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.**  
<sup>15</sup> **With joy and gladness they are led along**  
**as they enter the palace of the king.**

The court poet now describes the wedding procession. The bride dresses in her chambers in beautiful clothing, and, accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting, she is led into the palace of the king.

#### **V. 16**

- <sup>16</sup> **In the place of fathers you (O king) shall have sons;**  
(NIV: Your sons will take the place of your fathers)  
**you will make them princes in all the earth.**

The court poet now addresses a final blessing upon the king. He shall have sons, and thus the dynasty will continue. But his sons shall exceed his fathers in splendor and in the extent of their rule. The faith-based hope in the promises of God to David shines here. The present time will surely yield to the glorious future God had promised. All the earth shall come under the gentle rule of Messiah’s realm. This hope anticipates and gives birth to the great eschatological vision of Revelation 11:15: “**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.**”

#### **V. 17**

- <sup>17</sup> **I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations;**  
**therefore the peoples will praise you forever and ever.**

The poet-scribe is quite conscious of his role. By composing and writing this piece he shall have made a contribution to the messianic celebration of future generations. And with our “Amen” we can certify how right he was!

#### **The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 45:**

Lord God, you have formed the holy Church to be the bride of Christ. Grant to your Church the faith and peace she will need to do your will and to show your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Luther on Psalm 45:

The 45<sup>th</sup> Psalm is a prophecy of the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ, adorned with magnificence, splendid, and powerful words. For it portrays Christ as a king – with all kingly splendor, very handsome, well spoken, well adorned, well armored, successful in war, righteous, gentle, gracious, having likewise a fine castle, a grand host of ladies-in-waiting, a beautiful queen and children forever. This all is nothing else than a spiritual picture of the Gospel of Christ, his Spirit, grace, church, and eternal life, of war against sin, death, law, devil, flesh, world, and all evil.

The Psalm also clearly proclaims that the Old Testament shall come to an end. For it calls on the daughters to forget their father's house and people and call on this king as the one God, of which there is no other God. It gives him also the honor of the first commandment, namely prayer, and it names him clearly as the true God, acknowledging him to be the eternal king who rules in righteousness and takes sins away. An eternal king can only be God himself.

### Nugget

(The author, van Beeck, is a Roman Catholic, and therefore when he speaks of the sacraments he speaks not only of the three sacraments we acknowledge: baptism, absolution, and Lord's Supper; but also of two others in this passage: Christian marriage and the last anointing of the sick. Despite that difference, I find this to be a powerful statement on the nature of the Christian life.)

*Sacraments are both real and provisional.* We profess "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," but that eschatological affirmation must remind us that baptism in water, while *really* making us children of God only put us *on the way* to the *eschaton* (*God's Final Future*). We *really* receive the gift of the Spirit, but as a pledge, not a consummation. The Lord Jesus is "*truly, really, and substantially*" present in the Eucharist; yet he is present as the Absent One, calling us to growth in unity in love by the giving of our lives, feeding us as we travel, *for the time being*; besides, only *select* elements of the cosmos itself – bread and wine, "the work of human hands" – are transformed, as Irenaeus wrote eighteen hundred years ago. So Mass (the Lord's Supper) is neither kingdom come nor the new heaven and the new earth *in full actuality*. We *really* receive God's forgiveness in the sacrament of penance (Confession and Absolution), yet we know from experience that we will have reason to return, often with better grounds of compunction as our consciences get more refined; thus we learn how to join Jesus in willingly taking responsibility for the sins of others. Those among us who are married *genuinely* embody the mutual love of Christ and the church, but married people are reminded every day that promises are not predictions; Christian marriage is a *school* of perfect love, not an achieved state of eschatological perfection. And just what does the anointing of the sick symbolize and embody? Return to health? Readiness for the last breath? Assurance of God's mercy in front of the dark portal of death? In the world of sacramentality it's all very real, but also very provisional. "Sacraments are *for the interim*, like the church itself," my teacher Pieter Smulders used to repeat back in the sixties. While indelibly marked by God's image, God's people travel precariously, supported by holy signs and symbols, *en route* to that holiest moment: the vision of God face-to-face.

Franz Joseph van Beeck, S.J., in *Common weal*, January 29, 1999

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January 9, 2000 – **The Baptism of Our Lord** – Epiphany 1