

Psalm 110 answers the psalmist's plea for the great reversal echoed in Mary's Magnificat (Ps 107:33-38; Luke 1:46-55) and fulfills the expectation for a triumphal deliverance over the nations (Ps 108). Psalm 110 is Yahweh's response to the plea of Psalm 109, "My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent" (Ps 109:1). The Lord's silence is broken with these words: "Yahweh says to David's Lord" (Ps 110:1). This psalm is the pronouncement longed for by the psalmist. Yahweh answers the cry for help. His unfailing love brings salvation and judgment. Psalm 109 ends with a picture of the Lord standing "at the right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them" (Ps 109:31). And Psalm 110 opens with the Lord sitting at the right hand of Yahweh awaiting the consummation of a deliverance that is already underway.

The implicit references to the Messiah leading up Psalm 110, prepare the worshiper for the extraordinary Messianic prophecy of the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. Psalm 107 previews Jesus' earthly ministry. The psalmist's description of the desperate human situation is answered in the Gospel stories of deliverance. Jesus is the one who proclaims "good news to the poor," "freedom for prisoners," "recovery of sight for the blind," and "sets the oppressed free" (Luke 4:16-21; Isa 61:1). Believers today pray Psalm 108 with Jesus in mind as the Lord of the nations and the hope of the world. He alone secures the covenant victory and will "trample down our enemies" (Ps 108:13). Psalm 109 is a powerful Good Friday psalm because it causes the Church to reflect on the suffering of Christ. This is the psalm the apostles turned to in order to bring closure to the pain of Judas' betrayal. The implicit Messianic significance of these psalms leads to the explicit Messianic climax of Psalm 110. Like a symphony orchestra building to a climax, the Psalter moves to this magnificent proclamation. The exaltation and triumph of the Messiah celebrated in Psalm 110 must be seen in the light of the experience of the cross.

Jesus and the apostles interpreted the psalm without debating origin, date, and setting. Scholars may explore the many views on the particular occasion that became the historical basis for the typological link to the one greater than David, the Messiah. But it is apparent that the apostles boldly grasped Psalm 110 as a Messianic prophecy. Bruce Waltke offers a plausible explanation for David's composition: "David probably composes his royal prophecy to be sung by cultic functionaries [worship leaders] at the coronation ceremony of his heirs, hoping that in the end of salvation history a final successor of his would fulfill and consummate his prophecy."¹ Commenting on 2 Samuel 23:1-7 Delitzsch describes David on his death bed intensely aware of the distance between himself and the promised Anointed of God. David "seizes the pillars of the divine promise, he lets go the ground of his own present, and looks as a prophet into the future of his seed." After quoting from 2 Samuel 23:3-4 Delitzsch concludes, "The idea of the future which passes before his soul is none other than the picture of the Messiah detached from its subjectivity. And if so there, why may it not also have been so even in Psalm 110?"²

In seven verses, the psalm comprehends the eschatological consummation of salvation history. The psalmist includes the Ascension ("Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool

¹ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 518.

² Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 186.

at your feet”), the militancy of Jesus Christ (“The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion”), the Church age (“Your troops will be willing on your day of battle”), the sacerdotal royal priesthood (“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek”), the final judgment (“He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth”), and the Incarnation (“He will drink from the brook along the way, and so he will lift his head high”). The sweeping impact of the shared work of the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit is deftly sketched in bold strokes on the canvas of our praying imagination. Finite words used by the Spirit inspired poet to reveal infinite truth. Luther wrote: “This beautiful psalm is the very core and quintessence of the whole Scripture. No other psalm prophesies as abundantly and completely about Christ. It portrays the Lord and his entire Kingdom, and is full of comfort for Christians.”³

The apostles teach us how the Old Testament works and they in turn learned from Jesus. He was the first to draw their attention to a radical new interpretation of Psalm 110. Toward the end of his public ministry Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1 in the temple courts (Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). Jesus asked the Pharisees, “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They replied, “The son of David.” Jesus responded, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? Jesus quoted the psalm, “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’”

The Pharisees were familiar with the juxtaposition of Yahweh and Lord. They may have felt the dissonance of David addressing one of his descendants as “my lord,” or “my master.” In any case Jesus leveraged this break with tradition (the father being superior to the son) and asked a question, “If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” Matthew reports, “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions” (Matthew 22:41-46).

Jesus implied that someone was destined to come after King David who was greater than David. Moreover, Jesus left the distinct impression that he was that someone. This exchange comes back into focus when Jesus was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked him pointedly, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus replied, “You have said so. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 27:63-64; Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13).

By making the implicit claim explicit Jesus’s confession became his condemnation. The high priest tore his robe and charged him with blasphemy. He could not comprehend that Yahweh was fulfilling his covenant promise. The one greater than David had come. The one destined to sit at the right hand of the Father. The apostles used Psalm 110 to shape their understanding of Jesus Christ. They quoted Psalm 110 twenty-four times to testify that the Son, “who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,” is by the Holy Spirit “appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3-4).

³ Luther’s Works, vol. 13, p.348, quoted in Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 492.

*David's Son and David's Lord*⁴

*The Lord [Yahweh] says to my Lord [Adnoni]:
"Sit at my right hand until I make a footstool for your feet."
The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
"Rule in the midst of your enemies!"
Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning's womb.
Psalm 110:1-3*

The dynamic purpose of the Psalms in general and Psalm 110 in particular is "to inspire and to promote the faith of Christians that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."⁵ The majestic tone of David's Spirit inspired prophecy draws the believer into a future that is now present and into a reality that is still unfolding. The ascended Lord Jesus sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father. The metaphoric language describes the indescribable majesty and power of the triune God (Rev 4:1-11). The ascension of Christ is preceded by his atoning sacrifice: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:3).

This was Peter's text at Pentecost when he said, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, [But Jesus did!] . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:32-36). Peter referred to Psalm 110:1 when he defended the gospel of Jesus Christ before the same Sanhedrin that weeks before had accused Jesus of blasphemy for making a similar reference (Matthew 26:64). Peter declared, "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins" (Acts 5:31; see 1 Pet 3:22).

The author of Hebrews brings his sevenfold sequence of Old Testament messianic prophecies to a climax with Psalm 110:1 (Heb 1:5-13). The author chooses angels, the highest created beings, to contrast the utterly incomparable relationship between the Father and the Son. Each of his carefully selected Old Testament references bears up under closer scrutiny as an inspired testimony to the supremacy of the Son. In the pastor's chain of quotations each line is linked to form "a direct verbal prophecy concerning the perpetual nature of the Son's reign, having been explicitly fulfilled . . . in the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God."⁶

⁴ Augustine, *Psalms*, 542. To paraphrase Augustine: Christ took upon himself flesh, died in that flesh, he arose in that flesh and he ascended in that flesh, and he sits on the right hand of his Father "in this same flesh so honored, so brightened, so changed into a heavenly garb, he is both David's Son, and David's Lord."

⁵ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 488.

⁶ Guthrie, "Hebrews," 939.

The apostle Paul drew on Psalm 110:1 when he spoke of the crucified and risen Christ Jesus seated at the right hand of God interceding for us (Rom 8:34); and when he encouraged believers to set their hearts on things above, “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1); and when he spoke of “the incomparable greatness of God’s power” because it was the same power that God exerted “when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (Eph 1:20).

Two images follow in the first half of this tightly crafted psalm.⁷ The psalmist pictures Yahweh extending the mighty rule of his king from Zion (see Ps 2:6), followed by a sweeping panorama of his army prepared for battle. Looking out over this vast army “arrayed in holy splendor,” David likens the refreshed and ready troops to the dew glistening in the early morning light. The militant imagery of Psalm 110 is not meant to convey a worldly struggle of armed conquest. The imagery is rooted in the era of Israel’s conquest of Canaan, but the prophetic trajectory of these images is transposed by the apostles to describe the Church militant. Yahweh’s command, “Rule in the midst of your enemies!” describes the Church age from the Ascension of Christ to his second coming. This is the era of gospel witness when God’s merciful and missional millennium means Satan is bound and unable to deceive the nations for a thousand years. One thousand symbolizes the perfection of God’s mercy and the completeness of the Church from Pentecost to the second coming of Christ. John describes martyred and witnessing saints in heaven and on earth continuing to seek first Christ’s kingdom. These are the troops “arrayed in holy splendor” glistening like dew in the morning sun.

The messianic army of the conquering Messiah fights with the strategic initiatives and tactical shrewdness of the sacrificial Lamb of God. As Paul said, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4). Make no mistake the fight is on and there is plenty of evil to contend with. Augustine said that we do not understand the meaning of “Rule in the midst of your enemies” if we do not realize that this war is on-going.⁸ “Jesus is not only our Friend, but our Commanding Officer. . . We disciples are not only his family; we are his troops.”⁹ Christ’s followers are meant to “put on the full armor of God, so that [they] can take [their] stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:11). The right kind of militancy is essential if we are going to be useful in the Lamb’s army. When the militancy of the world is substituted for the militancy of the Lamb, Christians end up being driven more by fear than the gospel. The militancy of the believer is different from anything the world has ever seen. Karl Barth describes it his way:

“The militant revolt demanded of Christians — and this distinguishes it from all kinds of other revolts — is not directed *against* people: not even against the host of unbelievers, false believers, and the superstitious. . . nor even. . . against the wicked. . . In terms of their commission — even though they will sometimes clash

⁷ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 501. Waltke writes, “The two parts consist of seven verses: 3 + 4, the number of perfection. Moreover there are ten lines of poetry, 5+5 (see translation), the number of fullness. Both numbers figure prominently in the Davidic covenant, which this oracle supplements. D. N. Freedman (*Psalms III:101-105*, The Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970, 113) strikingly observed that each stanza contains seventy-four syllables. In sum thematically and structurally the psalm has two parts.”

⁸ Augustine, *Psalms 110*, 542.

⁹ Bruner, John, 891.

with all kinds of people in discharging it – they rebel and fight *for* all men, even, and in the last resort precisely, for those with whom they may clash.”¹⁰

“All the armor language is a way to talk about identification with God and his purposes.”¹¹ To recognize “the devil’s schemes” is to see the world from God’s perspective. There is a demonic source and energy behind atrocities and catastrophes, but the fight is not for victory but from victory. The triumph of Christ and his Church is certain. The psalmist’s picture of a refreshed and renewed army, that is constantly replenished like the dew every morning, is a beautiful picture of the vital, ever-growing global Church under the rule of Christ.

Eternal Priest-King

*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”
The Lord is at your right hand,
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.
He will drink from a brook along the way,
and so he will lift his head high.*

Psalm 110:4-7

Three images focus our attention on Christ in the second part of Psalm 110: his sacerdotal priesthood based on Melchizedek, an historical precedent (type) of Christ; his victorious actions as Judge “on the day of his wrath” against the kings of the earth in final judgment; and a very human Messiah, “thirsty in his humanness and kneeling at the brook,”¹⁴ along the way, and then resuming his royal mission.

By Yahweh’s appointment the Lord who sits enthroned in Zion is ordained as “a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek is an obscure and mysterious person whose brief story is cited in Genesis 14:14-27. He lived in the time of Abraham and is presented in Psalm 110 and in the Book of Hebrews as an ancient precedent for a perfect, permanent priesthood. He foreshadowed Jesus’ high priestly ministry. Aaron’s Levitical priesthood followed Melchizedek by several hundred years and was based on the Mosaic law and ancestry. The Aaronic priesthood was eventually judged to be “weak and useless” and was “set aside” because Jesus became “the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb 7:18, 22).

Melchizedek symbolizes a flesh and blood type for the Incarnate One. His name meant the “king of righteousness” and he was the King of Salem, which means the “king of peace.” He was a priest of God Most High, described in four poetic lines: “Without father, without mother, without genealogy / having neither beginning of days nor end of life / made like the Son of God / he

¹⁰ Harink, *1 Peter*, 127. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/4: Lecture Fragments, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 210 (emphasis original).

¹¹ Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 339.

¹⁴ Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 46.

remains a priest forever.”¹⁵ Melchizedek was an historical person who played a cameo role in salvation history. He offered Abraham bread and wine and blessed Abraham, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen 14:18-20). Abraham honored Melchizedek and acknowledged his priestly role with a special title. This is what we know of Melchizedek. We know nothing about Melchizedek’s parents, his birth, his ancestry, and his death, but David is led by the Spirit to give messianic significance to Melchizedek.

The author of Hebrews gives this typology a strategic interpretative twist. Instead of Jesus resembling Melchizedek, it is Melchizedek who resembles the Son of God (Heb 7:3). What we don’t know about Melchizedek is used figuratively to illustrate the new and better priesthood of Jesus Christ. F. F. Bruce explains, “It is not the type which determines the antitype, but the antitype which determines the type: Jesus is not portrayed after the pattern of Melchizedek, but Melchizedek is ‘made conformable to the Son of God.’”¹⁶ Melchizedek foreshadows Jesus Christ, the King of righteousness and the King of peace and our great high priest, “who has been made perfect forever” (Heb 7:28). The author of Hebrews makes sure believers grasp his big idea: “Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (Heb 8:1-2).

If the reference to the priestly order of Melchizedek takes us back to Genesis, then the cryptic description of the final judgment leads us forward to the Book of Revelation. The power of God, symbolized by the Lord’s right hand, judges the nations and crushes kings. The end of evil will not come about through legal reform or advances in education or a thriving global economy or international efforts for world peace. Evil will only come to an end in God’s final judgment. Even so, this does not mean that believers refuse to be Christ’s salt and light in a dark and decaying world. To sit idly by and watch the world go to hell is to ignore and reject Yahweh’s command, “Rule in the midst of your enemies!” (Ps 110:2). The one who is powerful to save, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9) is also powerful to judge (Ps 2:9).

The third and final image of the eternal Priest-King pictures him drinking from a brook along the way. This simple act of quenching his thirst underscores the humanity of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He rules over a host arrayed in holy splendor. He has the power to save for eternity through his atoning sacrifice and he brings down judgment on the nations once and for all. But this closing picture of an individual stooping down to take a drink of water triggers our praying imagination to behold the Incarnate One. We see Jesus traveling through Samaria “tired as he was from the journey” sitting by Jacob’s well, having a conversation with a woman at high noon over thirst. “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,” Jesus says to her. “But whoever drinks the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:1-26). We see Jesus again, but this time he is on a Roman cross, a victim of Roman and Jewish law. And before he says, “It is finished,” he cries out, “I am thirsty” – giving final

¹⁵ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 298,

¹⁶ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 160.

exclamation to the truth of the incarnation. The psalmist prophetically points forward to the one who left his throne to identify fully with our fallen human condition. Augustine closes his sermon on Psalm 110 by quoting the last line of the psalm, “and so he will lift his head high.” Augustine continued, that is to say, that “because He was humble, and ‘became obedient to death—even death on a cross:’ therefore God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a Name which is above every name; that at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:8-11).¹⁷

¹⁷ Augustine, Psalms, 544.