

The enthronement psalms celebrate the rule of Yahweh over all the nations, over all people, and over the fullness of salvation history. Christ's followers cannot pray Psalm 99 anachronistically as if Jesus was not born King of the Jews, as if the Magi had not asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 1:2). It would be foolish for believers to pretend that the Lord who reigns in "the splendor of his holiness" is not Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem, and seated today "at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:3). We have no theology that makes sense of Psalm 99 apart from the history of Jesus. We are not waiting for this King to be identified; we are waiting for his return. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:28-29).

Three stanzas sketch the comprehensive impact of the Lord's holiness on government, justice, and redemption. To do this the psalmist paints a picture of the exalted King on this throne ruling over all the nations. The second poetic vision is of the mighty King administering justice with worshipers invited to bow before him at his footstool (the ark of the covenant). The third scene pictures three famous mediators, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, who on behalf of the people of God called on the Lord for guidance and forgiveness. In all three pictures the Lord is exalted and praised because he is holy. This threefold doxology, holy, holy, holy, corresponds to the prophet Isaiah's experience when he beheld the Lord, high and exalted, seated on the throne, and the seraphim were calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:1-3).

The holiness of the Lord is not an attribute of his character nor a feature of his reign as much as the very essence of his being in relation to his creation. The Lord's holiness means that he is wholly other and radically separate from his creation. He is free from all contingencies and dependencies; he is free from all perversions, corruptions, impurities, and evils. With that said, the Lord's holy love and holy righteousness are essential for his creation and for human flourishing. We cannot exist for a moment without the holy otherness of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's holiness, and there is no other kind of holiness, has made reconciliation to God possible. King Jesus holds everything together, sustains all things by his powerful word (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3), and reconciles to himself fallen sinful people "by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:20). His holiness sets us apart from a sin-twisted world, and sends us back into the world with the holy gospel of our Lord and Savior, with this admonition: "just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet 15; Lev 11:44).

Holy Government

*The Lord reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim*

*let the earth shake.
Great is the Lord in Zion;
he is exalted over all the nations.
Let them praise your great and awesome name –
he is holy.*

Psalm 99:1-3

We have a vivid sense of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom (Matthew 24:7), but no sense today of the nations trembling before the sovereign Lord. Human leaders and their peoples “plot in vain” (Ps 2:1). Nietzsche’s will to power is an apt description for the chaos presiding over the rule of nations. The political landscape bares no resemblance to the psalmist’s eschatological vision. To envision the Lord seated upon a dynamic throne of angelic power is to invite the modern reader to picture a dramatic cinematic scene in Star Wars. The reality of the Lord’s reign is so far removed from our daily experience and political thinking that it might as well be science fiction. However, the psalmist insists here and in all the kingship psalms that this vision of the Lord’s sovereignty is not wishful thinking or fake news.

Psalm 99 anticipates the power of the sovereign Lord to gather the nations under his holy government. Jesus’ Sermon on the End of the World corresponds to Psalm 99. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him. . .” (Matthew 25:31-32). In the wake of today’s political chaos, the mission of the church remains constant, go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), so that “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). It is important to note that the Lord is gathering the nations not by conquering them the way an ancient or modern superpower would, but by the power of the sacrificial Lamb of God. The people of God will sing a new song, saying, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12). We look forward to the triumph of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who is the Lamb that was slain. One day, “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them,” will join in doxology, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Rev 5:13).

The political strategy of the kingdom of God does not line up with the American two-party political system or with any other political system. Psalm 99 calls Christians who feel threatened by secular culture back to the conviction that Jesus is King. Instead of growing bitter and resentful we need a renewed sense of the Lord’s sovereignty. If we have cherished the American Dream over the Kingdom of God, we are bound to be angry and fearful. The vitriolic rhetoric and slander expressed by Christians against politicians is not an indication of strength and boldness, but of fear and hate. It is wrong to place our faith and trust in political ideologies and politicians. Some Christians talk as if they had no other identity or loyalty other than to America and when things don’t go their way politically they are filled with anger and fear. Tim Keller writes, “This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U. S. political trends in such an extreme way. . . . They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their

political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel.”¹ The psalmist leads us out of our ideological captivity and into realm of Yahweh’s rule. “At present we do not see everything subject to [Christ]. But we do see Jesus” (Heb 2:8-9). Jesus was the one spoken of by the prophet when he declared that “the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). The psalmist reminds us that true worship is political. To say, “Great is the Lord in Zion; he is exalted over the nations,” is to confess an international truth that is as true in church as it is in the world, and is as political as it is spiritual. Holy government calls for eschatological thinking that sees today in the light of God’s coming kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Holy Justice

*The King is mighty, he loves justice –
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right.
Exalt the Lord our God
and worship at his footstool;
he is holy.*

Psalm 99:4-5

The King’s impressive strength is found in justice and righteousness. “Only in him are holiness and grace, power and justice, perfectly at one.”² Evidence for these attributes of holiness can be found in the revelation of God’s law. God “established equity” in Israel, and “in Jacob” he did “what is just and right.” The Law, including the sacrificial system of atonement, provided a shared moral vision and the redemptive means to overcome sin. The Lord established right and wrong (e.g. the Ten Commandments) and the means of grace (the sacrificial system). All of which is summed up in The Shema or great commandment: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4-5). Implicit in this all encompassing command is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev 19:18).

The psalmist extols the Lord’s justice and righteousness and the prophets chime in with their bold exclamation. The prophet Micah asks, “What does the Lord require of you?” But “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). On behalf of the Lord, Amos put the priority on justice. “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:23-24).

The psalmist calls believers to “exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy” (Ps 99:5). To lift up the Lord in praise and thanksgiving is to lower oneself and worship the Lord at his footstool. David described the ark of the covenant as God’s footstool (1 Chron 28:2). The ark of the covenant was the most important symbol of God’s presence in the tabernacle. It was

¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 99.

² Kidner, *Psalms*, 354.

lined and covered with pure gold, and it was stipulated that it was not to be touched by human hands but rather moved by specially made poles. It was but a box and not a very big box at that, measuring three feet, six and a half inches long and two feet, two and a quarter inches wide and high. Everything else in the tabernacle, from the table of the bread of presence to the altar of the burnt offering, was placed in reference to the ark of the covenant. Its lid was called the atonement cover and its contents included a copy of the commandments.

By calling the ark of the covenant the Lord's footstool there was never any danger of confusing the object with the invisible reality of God. It pointed to the divine work of redemption and revelation necessary for the salvation of God's people, but it was never thought of as a substitute for the invisible reality of God nor as an object of worship and devotion. The ark of the covenant pointed away from idolatry to the human need for redemption and to God's merciful provision.³

Holy Redemption

*Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel was among those who called on his name;
they called on the Lord
and he answered them.
He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.
Lord our God,
you answered them;
you were to Israel a forgiving God,
though you punished their misdeeds.
Exalt the Lord our God
and worship at his holy mountain,
for the Lord our God is holy.*

Psalm 99:6-9

In the Book of Revelation the number three represents the triune God: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whether or not that it was in the mind of the psalmist is hard to say, but besides the threefold, "holy, holy, holy," we have mention of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, and reference to the ark of the covenant (footstool), the pillar of cloud, and Zion, the holy mountain of the Lord. Three sets of three are poetically woven into the fabric of meaning, along with a constrain refrain of adoration: "The Lord reigns. . . Great is the Lord in Zion. . . The King is mighty, he loves justice. . . Exalt the Lord our God. . . Exalt the Lord our God. . . for the Lord our God is holy."

Three notable mediators between Yahweh and his people are identified by name and characterized as priests who called on the Lord continuously on behalf of the people. "These servants of the Lord would cry out to the Lord, and he would answer them (Exod 17:11-12;

³ Calvin, Psalms, 78-79. Calvin makes two interesting observations on the ark of the covenant. (1) Calvin challenges Augustine's notion that the footstool symbolizes the Incarnate One's earthy humanity (see Augustine, Psalm 99, sec.8, 485). (2) Calvin challenges "the frantic bishops of Greece," who used this passage to prove that God "was to be worshiped by images and pictures."

32:30-32; Num 12:13; 1 Sam 7:8-9; 9:12-13).⁴ It may be significant that the era of salvation alluded to in the psalm took place before the people rose up and demanded a king so that they would be like the other nations (1 Sam 8:5). The Lord's answer to Samuel's prayer is poignant: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you: it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (1 Sam 8:7). For Samuel to be last the named person in this series of enthronement psalms may suggest implicitly that Yahweh has always been Israel's one and only King.

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, these three priestly mediators, called on the Lord for guidance and forgiveness. The Lord answered them first from the pillar of cloud, and later from Mount Sinai, giving the people his law so that they could keep "his statutes and the decrees." And he answered them not only with guidance, but with forgiveness. With a sense of endearment the psalmist says, "You were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds" (Ps 99:8). These key mediators in Israel's history point forward to Jesus Christ: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Tim 2:5-6). Jesus became our "merciful and faithful high priest in service to God" so that "he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17). He was appointed "to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" on our behalf (Heb 5:1). He sacrificed for our sins "once for all when he offered himself" (7:27), "and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:5).

Mount Sinai is not mentioned explicitly because it has been eclipsed by Mount Zion, but the author of Hebrews expands on the psalms final emphasis: "Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy." The theological argument of the Book of Hebrews closes with a comparison between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. The author argues for the complete sufficiency of Christ's once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice. Everything Mount Sinai anticipated and foreshadowed has been accomplished in Christ. "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched. . . .But you have come to Mount Zion . . ." (Heb 12:18, 22). The religion of Mount Sinai has been replaced by something absolutely better. Instead of Sinai's awful terror, darkness, and gloom, Zion is pulsating with awe-inspiring worship, joy, and love.

"But you have come to Mount Zion, // and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, // and you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, // and to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, // and you have come to God, the Judge of all, // and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, // and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, // and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:22-24).

The psalmist's refrain, "he is holy," is in the end expanded "and given warmth, to read (in its actual word-order) *For holy is the Lord our God!*" Kidner adds, "The majesty is undiminished, but the last word is now given to intimacy. He is holy; He is also, against all our deserving, not ashamed to be called ours. Well may we worship."⁵

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 181.

⁵ Kidner, Psalms, 355.