

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM THE PSALMS

There is perhaps no psalm in the Psalter that is more difficult to translate and interpret than Psalm 110. (See text on page 5.) As a good study Bible will demonstrate, translating this psalm into English challenges even the best Hebrew scholars. The vocabulary and syntax of verse three are notorious, and the challenge of figuring out who is talking to whom runs throughout the psalm. In verse one, for instance, we encounter the curious statement, "The LORD (Yahweh) says to my Lord (Adonai), 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" If David wrote the psalm, then who is this Lord in the middle-between David and his God? Just as puzzling is the fact that this Lord to whom the LORD speaks appears in the psalm as both a king (vv. 1-2) and a priest (v. 4). Who is this individual to whom the LORD himself speaks and who is also David's Lord as well as king and priest?

Some have suggested that we can make sense of the psalm by seeing it as written not by David but about him. In this interpretation David would appear in the psalm as the Lord to whom the LORD speaks (v. 1). This interpretation, however, runs into some difficulties. While it is possible that the opening ascription, "a psalm of David,"

could mean that the psalm is about David and that David is the victorious king (vv. 1-2), it is hard to imagine how David could also be "a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4). Although David offered sacrifices and worshiped in Jerusalem, he never usurped the priestly role for himself, nor did he ever incorporate the priesthood into the monarchy. In fact, we know that Zadok and Ahimelek served as priests during David's reign. While David's conquest of Jerusalem suggests a likely occasion for the writing of the psalm, then, it is doubtful that the enigmatic figure who is Lord, king, and priest could be David himself.

The psalm
points
us to
Christmas...

Still others have suggested that the psalm is neither by nor about David but rather about a much later Hasmonean monarch. It is true that the Hasmonean dynasty combined the roles of high priest and king, but to transplant this psalm from the tenth century B.C., when David ruled, to the second century B.C., when the Hasmoneans ruled, creates more difficulties than it solves. For starters, this interpretation asks us to disregard the opening phrase which ascribes the psalm to David. We must either see this ascription as a blatant error or as an outright deception on the part of some scribe prior to the

time of Christ. Neither possibility would be easy to pull off, nor would it lend legitimacy to the Hasmonean practice of combining high priest and king in a single person. The attempt to connect this practice to the Davidic monarchy, only takes us back to the problem we identified in the previous paragraph. Namely, David never incorporated the high priesthood into the monarchy. Any second-century attempt to legitimize the Hasmonean practice by appealing to the Davidic practice, therefore, would be undermined by the historical record about David's reign. There is nothing gained, then, by transporting the psalm from the tenth century B.C. to the second.

Yet another way of reading this psalm is to see it as Messianic. In other words, we should include the psalm among the numerous passages in the Law and the Prophets that point to a mysterious figure who was still to come when the Old Testament was written. The Law and the Prophets identify this individual as the "Anointed One," the "Messiah" in Hebrew, or the "Christ" in Greek. Since Scripture presents this individual in many striking ways, perhaps this Messianic figure can help us make sense of Psalm 110. Even here, however, we are still left wondering, for the contradictions and puzzles remain. How could the Messiah, whom Moses presents as the great prophet, also be the priest and king of Psalm 110? How could one person, who is identified by Samuel and Isaiah as David's son, also be, as Psalm 110 asserts, David's Lord?

In the final week of his life, Jesus of Nazareth gave us the answer to these questions by suggesting that we see him as the one about whom psalm 110 was written. The Gospel of Luke records that days before his death Jesus raised the obvious question about psalm 110. "How is it," he asked,

"that they say the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the book of psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" David calls him "Lord," how, then, can he also be his son?" (Luke 20.41-44)

Though, on this occasion, Jesus answered his question only with a weighty silence that was met with silence by his audience, a few days later Jesus made his own answer to this question clear, and he did so by returning to the words of Psalm 110. As he stood trial on the night of his death, he was asked to say clearly whether or not he was the Christ. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and when I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on," Jesus continued, "the Son of man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God" (Luke 22.67-69). Using the imagery of Psalm 110, Jesus declared that he was about to be seated at the right hand of the Almighty God; he was about to take the place reserved for David's Lord.

...for it was on
Christmas night
that the one
who had been
David's Lord
became
David's son.

In this critical exchange, Jesus identified himself as the one in whom Psalm 110 finally makes sense. He is that Lord in the middle, to whom the LORD made promises and whom David acknowledged as his sovereign. As the Son of God, who conquered sin and death, it is appropriate that the LORD would promise him victory over his enemies and that David would address him as his Lord. As the princely hero who has defeated sin and death through the priestly sacrifice of himself on the cross, it is also appropriate for the psalmist to identify him as both king and priest. As the Apostles observe, he ascended as the king, who has "gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-with angels, authorities and powers in sub-

mission to him" (1 Peter 3.22), and he ascended as the priest, "who died-more than that, who was raised to life-[and] is at the right hand of God ... interceding for us" (Romans 8.34). Indeed, in Jesus, the roles of king and priest cannot be kept apart. He is the "Prince and Savior," whom "God has exalted ... to his own right hand ... that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5.30-31). As the writer of Hebrews argues, "The 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 man" (Hebrews 8.1-2). Jesus, as both king and priest, has ascended to the place reserved for David's Lord and is now enthroned in the Holy of Holies, the throne room of heaven.

While the full implications of Psalm 110 run from Jesus' birth to his ascension and beyond, Jesus' own question about the psalm points us to a very specific moment in human history. It points us to Christmas, for it was on Christmas night that the one who had been David's Lord became David's son. On that extraordinary night, in the city of

David and to parents who were of the house and lineage of David, a child was born who was both Son of God and son of Mary. He was David's Lord and David's son. He was born a prophet, for he was the very Word of God made flesh. He was born a king, for he was both King of the Jews and King of Heaven. He was born a priest, for his name was Jesus and he came to save his people from their sins. Psalm 110 is a Christmas psalm, for it is only in the birth of Jesus at Christmas that the psalm makes sense and finds its meaning.

In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis observes that the Anglican prayer book uses Psalm 110.1 as the reading for Advent. Lewis admits that this is not the passage he would have chosen for Christmas, and he wonders why those who chose it did so. Lewis suggests that perhaps they wanted to give us not only a word of peace but also a word of warning at Christmastime. This may be the case, but it may also be that Lewis gives us a better answer to his own question in another of his observations about the psalm. "When [Jesus] asked how Christ could be both David's son and David's Lord," Lewis notes, "He was in fact hinting at the mystery of the

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May God Bless You
WITH
All the Blessings of Christmas
IN THE
Celebration of Christ's Birth

FROM ALL OF US AT THE CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

THE PEOPLE OF THE CENTER

One of the great blessings of directing the Center is the privilege of working with the volunteers who serve here. I am often amazed at the amount of work that has been accomplished during the past few months, and I know that it is the volunteers who are to be given the credit.

A few weeks ago, for instance, we had the first of two work days. The goal of the first work day was to empty the old kitchen area of the Center building so that we could begin to convert that space into a classroom. Under the oversight of Gary Lewis, we were so successful in achieving this goal that several of us were ready to cancel the second work day we had scheduled. Several students who had volunteered that morning, however, had a different idea, so back we came the next Saturday to do still more. As a result, not only did we empty the old kitchen space, clean the area, remove all the trash, and take several trips to the landfill, we also cleaned all the windows in the building, cleared and created a work area for volunteer staff, sanded and re-painted all the outdoor furniture, cleaned and oiled all the hardwood floors by hand, polished all the brass and wood work, and created more parking spaces in the parking lot. Over thirty people contributed their time and energy.

Like all the other events at the Center, this one would not have been possible without still more volunteers organizing, publicizing, and preparing it. Let me mention a few names. It is hard for me to imagine any of the special events of the center without Laura Lynch, hard to imagine the myriad of communications and office related matters without Nora Wickham, hard to imagine Center finances without our treasurer Betty Jo Hickox, and hard to imagine any of the academic initiatives without John Sommerville. It is, of course, hard to know where to stop naming names, for I could go on and on about people who have run errands, entered data, done artwork, managed our web page, cleaned and maintained, tinkered and repaired, planted and tended, and served the Center in numerous other ways that have often come at inconvenient times and with more than a little personal sacrifice.

There are others as well who are an integral part of what is going on at the Center, and I want to acknowledge them too. It is my privilege to be associated with the Oxford Coffee Company and to work alongside Alex Sink and all the baristas who work the Ox: Amanda, Amy, Melody, Shane, Austin, and Geoffrey. Thanks as well to Todd Best, the Center's Intern and Research Assistant who has become an integral part of the Center and an indispensable conversation partner. Finally, I am very thankful to enjoy the encouragement, support, and friendship of the Center board: John Sommerville, Ron Akers, Vonda Douglas, Fran Holm, Kendall Spencer, and Jay Lynch.

Thank you all. It is my privilege to be associated with you and work alongside you. And thanks to all of you whose financial and prayer support makes this community possible.

A CHRISTMAS PSALM

PSALM 110

VERSE 1

The LORD says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."

VERSE 2

The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion;
you will rule in the midst of your enemies.

VERSE 3

Your troops will be willing on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn
you will receive the dew of your youth.

VERSE 4

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind:
"You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

VERSE 5

The Lord is at your right hand;
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

VERSE 6

He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.

VERSE 7

He will drink from a brook beside the way;
therefore he will lift up his head.

– BOOKS WORTH READING –

The Hidden Smile of God:

The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd

John Piper (Crossway Books, 2001)

On Sunday, November 18 many churches committed time in worship services to awareness and prayer for persecuted Christians throughout the world. For followers of Jesus Christ some experience of suffering is expected either from persecution or simply because we live in a fallen world. However, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon have reminded us that the plight of suffering is not reserved for Christians alone. These events have shown us the need to mourn together, and they have shown us the equally great need for Christians to consider reflectively the presence and role of suffering in human experience and to offer a theology of suffering. John Piper's latest book, *The Hidden Smile of God*, brings substance to such consideration.

While most theological treatments of this topic have focused on philosophical issues surrounding the problem of evil, Piper offers a fleshy perspective that shows how God-centered theology quenches the thirst that emerges from human suffering. In *The Hidden Smile of God*, he asserts from the scriptures that suffering is part of the "design of God" and says that a developed understanding of this truth will produce joy even amidst great affliction.

Piper creatively illustrates this through the biographies of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd. All three of these individuals experienced a great deal of adversity, but in their suffering they serve as examples of

how a biblically rich view of God as Creator and Redeemer not only enables us to endure suffering but also joyfully to embrace it as the work of God's purposeful hand. The reader of *The Hidden Smile*, however, understands clearly that this joy is not another positive-thinking, self-help tool that lays an all-is-well veneer over life. To the contrary, through Bunyan, Cowper, and Brainerd one realizes that there is a very real and often lasting sense of pain in life.

For John Bunyan (1628-1688), a life of pain included twelve years in prison apart from his beloved family for refusing to cease preaching the Christian message. Yet, as he explained in his prison-born classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he saw suffering as something normal and essential in the life of the Christian. Appealing to Bunyan's example, Piper writes that "what we need from Bunyan is a glimpse into how he suffered and how he learned 'to live upon God that is invisible,' ... for nothing glorifies God more than maintaining our stability and joy when we lose everything but God" (p. 46).

While Brainerd's brief and physically painful life also offers an example of how God's mission to humanity can go forth more vigorously through suffering, it is probably the story of the eighteenth-century poet, William Cowper, that is the most moving of the three. Cowper spent most of his life in a battle with depression that was at times suicidal and never disappeared. Yet, he clung throughout to what he knew was true of the God who offered refuge from his hopelessness.

Piper concludes by suggesting that we look to Cowper to "free [ourselves] from trite and chipper worship. If the Christian life has become the path of ease and fun in the modern West, then corporate worship is the place of

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increasing entertainment" (p. 167). Assuming there are people like Cowper among American congregations today, Piper goes on: "There are tired and discouraged and lonely strugglers. Shall we come to them with a joke?...What they need from me is not more bouncy, frisky smiles and stories. What they need is a kind of joyful earnestness that makes the broken heart feel hopeful and helps the ones who are drunk with trifles sober up for greater joys" (p. 167).

If there is a weak point in Piper's book, it is that he does not elaborate on the central fact that the deep hope that God alone can offer has been made real through the life and work of Jesus Christ. Through his incarnation and crucifixion, the Son of God entered into human suffering and suffered on our behalf that he might relieve our suffering in an ultimate way. For Bunyan, Cowper, and Brainerd, says Piper, the centerpiece of their stability and joy in the midst of affliction was their hope in the reality

of a sovereign, just, and gracious God. This God poured out his love in Christ Jesus, and yet, it is this role of Christ at the intersection between the purposes of God and the suffering of humankind that remains to be more fully explored. Perhaps this should be the focus for our continuing reflection and conversation in the face of human suffering.

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Incarnation by pointing out a difficulty which only it could solve." Here, it seems, is why Psalm 110 appears as the reading for Advent. Those who chose this psalm for Christmas did so because they understood that the psalm is one of those portions of Scripture that refuse to make sense until the day when the one who was, and is, and always shall be David's Lord became David's son, eternal priest and king.

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The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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