

An Exegetical Examination
Of the Second Psalm

By
Eric Greer
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Introduction and Translation

As evidenced by its frequent inclusion with the New Testament texts and the book of Proverbs, it is clear that the Psalter is a treasured part of the Old Testament canon for Christians. Alongside Isaiah, the Psalter stands as the most oft quoted book in the New Testament scriptures. The role of the Psalms in Christology is crucial. Many familiar passages are given new life in a New Testament context including one from the particular Psalm under consideration.

"You are my son; today I have become your Father" (Ps. 2:7).¹ Pronounced at the coronation of a Davidic King, this Psalm has also been closely associated with the life of Jesus. It is referenced at Jesus' baptism (Mt. 3:17), mentioned in connection with his resurrection (Acts 13:33), and elsewhere as will be discussed. Because Christians see Jesus as the promised Messiah, anything that strengthens this claim becomes pertinent to that discussion. Moreover, this particular Psalm is connected with God's promise to David to establish his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16). Claims for Jesus as Messiah, the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty, and the general love affair that people of both

¹All Scripture citations are from the New International Version.

Christian and Jewish faith have for the Psalter all coincide in this second Psalm.

¹Why do the nations make [such]² a commotion
and [why do] people devise [such] empty [schemes]?

²The Kings of the earth stand aloof -
the ruling powers have established a union
against YHWH and against his messiah.

³"Let us break away from their bonds;
let us fling those ropes away."

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs;
my Lord disdains them.

⁵Then He denounces them - His nostrils flaring -
and they are terrified at His fierce anger.

⁶"I, I have installed³ my King
upon Zion - my Holy mountain!

⁷"I will recount the proclamation YHWH said to me.
I am your Father. Today I bring you forth⁴

⁸Ask anything of me; it is yours
and I will give you nations as your inheritance.
And your property lines? The ends of the earth.

⁹You will smash them with an iron scepter;
like a clay pot you will shatter them."

¹⁰Now kings, be on the alert;
accept instruction governors of the earth.

¹¹Serve YHWH with reverence
and celebrate with awe.

¹²Kiss the chosen one or he will be angry
and you will drop dead in your tracks
because he will consume you quickly in his wrath
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

²[Words in brackets] added to smooth translation.

³The verb is יָדַבֵּר which is literally "to pour out" as in a libation offering. It is translated here as "set up or installed" in most English translations though the New American Standard does footnote the word as "consecrate". Through a lens of the New Testament Scriptures this "pouring out my King upon Zion" leaves an interesting impression.

⁴The father presents his son as King. The idea here is "I bring you forth to present you to your subjects as their new King". See 2 Sam. 7:14 and Ps. 89:27.

Structure

Reading the several commentaries on this Psalm suggests a generally recognized division into four strophes of three verses each. The first strophe (vv. 1-3) is comprised of the author's observations regarding the rebellious nations and peoples with the words of the rebels found in verse three. The second strophe mirrors the first in structure as the author composes his observations of the One enthroned (vv. 4-5) followed by the indignant response of the LORD to the rebels in verse six. A third strophe begins and ends (vv. 7-9) with the words of the Messiah. Perhaps these are the very words recited by David or his successors at the moment of their coronation. Finally, the author returns to indicate an appropriate response to the LORD and his "chosen one" (vv. 10-12). The final blessing (v. 12b) certainly fits for those who respond appropriately to the LORD and the "chosen one", though it seems to have the feel of a later gloss to the text and is set apart for that reason.⁵

⁵Pierre Auffret, *The Literary Structure of Psalm 2*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Series 3, trans. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT, 1977), 28. It seems unnecessary to impose any additional symmetry upon this Psalm. Auffret manages this in his work though it is a bit confusing. He does make a smart argument for the relation of the blessing at the end of the Psalm to the entire Psalm.

"Sitz im Leben"

A traditional interpretation by Christian scholars had been in light of the New Testament references to the text. Beginning with the church fathers: Origin, Jerome, and Theodore of Mopsuestia⁶ and continuing on to the modern age interpretation of the text remained cloaked in a mystery awaiting a yet future revelation. An example of this explanation follows.

In this psalm as in most of the prophetic writings of the Bible, the prophet is not told by the Holy Spirit, in words, what events are to take place, nor does he write an account of them in the way of narrative; but in prophetic ecstasy he beholds the events actually occurring before his eyes, he sees the multitudes tumultuously assembling, he hears what they say, he sees God quietly seated on his throne, he hears him speak; and he writes down the whole scene...⁷

With the formalization of the concept of "typing" various forms of sacred literature Hermann Gunkel fundamentally changed how texts like Psalm 2 are approached. Instead of explaining the psalm in isolation or merely as a form of automatic writing detailing future events, Gunkel did so in the context shared with other

⁶William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 169-174.

⁷C. E. Stowe, "Translation and Exposition of the Second Psalm," *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review* 26 (April 1850): 354.

psalms. He also made comparisons with other Ancient Near Eastern writings and cultures.

Gunkel makes several useful observations directly from the texts of Psalm 2 and the others categorized in the genre of Royal Psalms. He notes that one can "conceptualize reigning native kings", "Davidic ancestry" arguing against "foreign power" and "Maccabean rulers" and "intercessions that are only understandable for the present ruler".⁸ Each of these circumstances makes a case for the necessity to seek an original life setting for the Psalm.

Gunkel reminds his readers of the scriptural evidence for celebrations by the Judean, Israeli, and Ancient Near Eastern kings.⁹ The habit of God's people as well as other Near Eastern kingdoms to mark significant events with song and celebration is well documented. The scripture also reports that a standing chorus was maintained by the kings (Eccles. 2:8). Gunkel further explains that the reputation

⁸Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 99.

⁹*Ibid.*, 100. Gunkel cites allusions to royal banquets (1 Sam. 25:36), religious events (2 Sam. 6:5,15), coronation announcements (2 Sam. 15:10), the temple dedication (1 Kings 8), Xerxes' royal celebration (Esth. 1:4), and a festival of a king (Hos. 7:5) among others as examples of background texts for royal celebrations in the Ancient Near East and Judah in particular.

of the Judean court singers - as evidenced by an "Assyrian report" - was such that "Senacherib [sic] included the temple choir among the fineries he demanded from Hezekiah"¹⁰

Though scant material is available, some sort of coronation ritual and celebration of a king exists in scripture (1 Kings 1:32ff, 2 Kings 11:12ff, Hosea 7:5). It is sufficient to conclude that the appointment of a king to the throne was a festive event and may well have been celebrated throughout his reign on different occasions. As further evidence one may examine the text of 1 Kings 12:32ff. Jeroboam organized a festival of unknown origin to compete with a similar feast in the Southern Kingdom. This festival was held in the eighth month of the year - inconsistent with any other feast known in scripture - and was meant to strengthen his grip on the kingdom.

The typing of Psalm 2 among the Royal Psalms seems most consistent with the evidence presented. The particular use of the psalm remains a matter of discussion. Mowinckel is adamant that, "It can hardly be anything else than the religious cultic part of the enthronement of the king, in

¹⁰Ibid., 101.

connexion with the ceremonies of anointing..."¹¹ Likewise von Rad sees the decree found in Psalm 2:7 as substantiation of a charge given to a new king by YHWH, adding that it is comparable to other Ancient Near Eastern enthronement ceremonies such as those found in Egypt.¹²

While agreeing with the conclusion that this psalm is among those pertaining to the kings of the Davidic dynasty, Willis offers a different opinion regarding its use.¹³ He posits that the psalm demonstrates the characteristics of the ancient practice of "verbal defiance prior to single combat".¹⁴ An example of such is found in the David and Goliath narrative in 1 Samuel 17 where the giant rained insults down on the camp of Israel taunting them to produce a worthy combatant for him. Perhaps this Royal Psalm has such a use in history or alternately as a speech made by

¹¹Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms In Israel's Worship*, vol. 1, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 66.

¹²Gerhard von Rad and K. C. Hanson, *From Genesis to Chronicles: Explorations in Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 170.

¹³John T. Willis, "A Cry of Defiance - Psalm 2," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (June 1990): 35.

¹⁴Ibid., 38.

Jewish scholarship such as that of Rashi - Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac pointed to this setting.¹⁸ The occasion of David's coronation and the subsequent rebellion by his Philistine neighbors as recounted in 2 Samuel 5:17ff serve as the historical background for the psalm according to Rashi.¹⁹ According to earlier Christian scholars this claim is buttressed by an attribution of the psalm to David found in Acts 4:25.²⁰ However, the psalm itself is anonymous and in the New Testament texts terms such as "'hymn of David' and 'Psalm' are synonymous terms, nothing is to be inferred from Acts iv. 25"²¹ Further problems with a Davidic interpretation arise when one remembers David did not capture Jerusalem until sometime after the events recorded in 2 Samuel 5 - complicating the references to Zion in the psalm.

The most compelling individual setting for the psalm is related to the reign of Hezekiah. Sonne actually makes a

¹⁸Michael A. Signer, "King Messiah: Rashi's Exegesis of Psalm 2," *Prooftexts* 3 (September 1983): 273.

¹⁹Ibid., 274-275.

²⁰C. E. Stowe, "Translation and Exposition of the Second Psalm," *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review* 26 (April 1850): 352.

²¹Franz Julius Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on The Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. David Eaton, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1887-1889), 117.

plausible argument for a textual variation that could include the name "Hezekiah" in verse seven in place of YHWH's decree - יְהוָה יִקְרֶהוּ evolves into the present יְהוָה יִקְרֶהוּ.²² He goes on to mark a time for the psalm consistent with the events of Hezekiah's coronation found in Isaiah 14:28-32 with language that has similarities to the psalm itself.²³ A final connection is suggested based upon the placement of the psalm at the head of the Psalter noting that it would be consistent to time the final arrangement of Book One and Two of the psalms during the reign of Hezekiah and would serve as an honor to the king.²⁴

While no certainty can be made about the specific date or occasion for the psalm it would seem most consistent with a Davidic Dynasty ruler. In fact making too much of the identity of the king may only serve to detract from the overall message of the psalm. Perhaps the anointed one is only a literary figure with whom all subsequent Davidic kings could identify.

²²Isaiah Sonne, "The Second Psalm," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19(1945-1946): 49-50.

²³Ibid., 51.

²⁴Ibid., 54.

Interpretation

Strophe one initiates the reader into the crisis with the incredulous commentary of the psalmist. "Why" - unto what end - do people and nations rebel against YHWH and his messiah. Much has been made of this term most commonly translated as "anointed one" but transliterated in this context for emphasis. Used on thirty-nine occasions in the Old Testament scriptures with the most frequent reference being made of King Saul by David, the term has a very ordinary use in reference to Kings. Deutero-Isaiah applies the term to Cyrus in 45:1. It also has a rather common application to the priests of YHWH.

In this context it would seem to have a rather common application to the reigning King of Judah. The situation is similar to that of most other Ancient Near Eastern transitions of power. Vassal states often made a move to throw off the yoke of their Suzerain at a time national uncertainty. Jeremiah 25:1 illustrates this point when Jehoiakim chose to rebel against Babylon following Nabopolassar's death and Nebuchadnezzar's acquisition of the throne.

This strophe reflects such a moment. Perhaps as described earlier Hezekiah or some other pre-exilic Judean King in Zion ascends the throne and must put down a

rebellion by a vassal state or city-state like the Philistine towns along the coast. Reliant upon the covenant promises of YHWH to his people regarding the throne of David and the land of promise, it does not make good sense to the author of the psalm for this rebellion to occur.

The second strophe illustrates the author's awareness to whom the throne actually belongs and against whom the nations actually rebel. A piel verb (רָדַף) is used in v. 5 to emphasize YHWH's disdain for the rebellious attitudes and his anger is anthropomorphized with the word picture of his flaring nostrils. In balance the response of the rebels is emphasized by the piel verb (יִרְאָהוּ) - terrified of him.

YHWH then addresses the troublemakers asserting his appointment of a King in Zion. The strong language continues in v. 6 with the doubling of the personal pronoun reading literally, "I, I have installed..." YHWH's appointment will stand and these rebels will be rebuffed. The location of the "Holy hill of Zion" argues here for a King later than David. He was anointed King over both Israel and Judah at Hebron and his conquest of Zion was subsequent to this (2 Sam. 5:1ff).

An interesting word study is worthy of attention in v.6. As noted above, the word (יָדַף) is translated in modern English versions as "set up" or "installed" in this

passage. Only one other instance of this English translation exists in the Old Testament - Proverbs 8:23 a similar translation of the word into English as "appointed" is given. However, it is most frequently translated as "poured out" (25 times) as in the sense of pouring out a drink offering. The location in which YHWH "יָדַךְ" his King - Zion - and the later "pouring out" of Jesus' blood at this location is worthy of notice even if one does not overtly emphasize the eschatological significance of the passage.

The third strophe seems to be all in the voice of the messiah. He steps forward to boldly claim his place in the Davidic covenant using the phrase (אֲבִי יְהוָה) to connect the reader with the promise of YHWH to David in 2 Samuel 7. As he announces with confidence YHWH's proclamation concerning his anointing, "I am your father, today I bring you forth" (v. 7), the synthetic parallelism of this line of verse explains the special relationship between YHWH and His anointed. The first line announces that YHWH is the father of this messiah and the second advances the thought by explaining the nature of the relationship as one of adoption.

One can envision an earthly King presenting his son before the people of his kingdom and installing him as co-regent of the realm. Here the unique aspect of the Davidic

monarchy is on display. The King is not seen by the Hebrews as divine in the same sense as the other Ancient Near Eastern rulers. He serves instead as a representative with divine rights as evidenced elsewhere in the Royal Psalms.²⁵ The original setting of v. 7 is a sort of oath of office. The King is claiming his right to the throne through the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:11ff.

Regarding the promise of worldwide dominion, many would remark on the absence of such a promise to the Davidic dynasty. The promise of land to God's people was limited in its scope. However, this promise is more of a convention of the enthronement festival. Gunkel makes note of the natural use of this convention among the neighbors of Israel.²⁶

Verse nine is an unusual word picture for the modern reader. To the ancient this language is typical to the enthronement of a new ruler. A ritual associated with the preceding idea of world domination involves the shattering of earthen vessels. In Egyptian practice vessels of clay

²⁵By example, Psalm 18 and 21 portray the King as invincible. In Psalm 45 the King's throne is like God's throne and is eternal. Psalm 72 describes the realm of the King as reaching to the ends of the earth and his ability to save the poor.

²⁶Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 116.

had inscribed upon them the names of the nation's enemies. According to Keel, shattering these pots was a rite demonstrating continued domination over vassal states.²⁷ Keel adds that a 1962 excavation uncovered some 3,600 potsherds representing over 100 vessels and scored with the marking of a mace.²⁸

The final strophe shifts back to the narration of the psalmist. He recommends an appropriate response to the vassal nations. They should serve YHWH and do so with awe and reverence. An outward demonstration of this service is commanded by the psalmist in the closing verse. The phrase (רַךְ-אֲרָמַיִם) translated "kiss the son" or "kiss the feet" in several English texts is uncertain.²⁹ *Young's Literal Translation* renders this phrase as I have done. It is consistent with an alternate English reading of the word (רַךְ) as found in Song of Solomon 6:9 where we find the idea of a favorite or "chosen one". This selection was made because the word (רַךְ) has an Aramaic flavor as opposed to

²⁷Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and The Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 268.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹J. Swanson, "1337 I. רַךְ and 1338 II.," in *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew Old Testament*, Logos version 3.0 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

the more frequent Hebrew (לִּדָּ). And, the picture seems more consistent with the idea of a representative of the Divine One as being "chosen" much like the parallel of one who is "brought forth" by YHWH in verse seven. The similarities with other Ancient Near East customs continue as we envision the vassal kissing the feet of the new King as a pledge of loyalty much like the scene found on the Assyrian gypsum relief pictured in Keel's work that dates to the time of Isaiah.³⁰

The final blessing phrase of Psalm 2:12b seems to be a later gloss and is set apart to signify such. The blessing seems most likely to be an *inclusio* formed along with the blessing found in Psalm 1:1. These blessings bracket the first two Psalms and create an introductory pair of psalms for the Psalter.³¹

One may make a final assessment of this Psalm in its Old Testament setting based upon the position at the head of the Psalter. Wilson does just that in his groundbreaking dissertation as he discusses the significance of

³⁰Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and The Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 268.

³¹Pierre Auffret, *The Literary Structure of Psalm 2*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Series 3, trans. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT, 1977), 31.

the placement of the Royal Psalms at the "seams" of the Psalter.³² This intentionality in placement speaks to the significance of the Royal Psalms as they serve to introduce the earliest portions of the Psalter.

New Testament Usage

It is exegetically unacceptable to begin with the New Testament use of a verse or two of an Old Testament text and to try to impose the New Testament meaning given that text on its Old Testament context. The exclusive Messianic interpretation of Psalm 2 ignores or fails to appreciate that the New Testament uses the Old Testament in a variety of ways, including allegory (Gal. 4.21-5.1), typology (1 Cor. 10.1-11; Heb. 9.1-10.4), and midrash pesher (Rom. 10.11; 12.9; 1 Cor. 15.54).³³

The preceding remarks by Willis are significant.

Failure to heed them makes for an unusual theology of the Old Testament. Yet, there is no missing that this psalm gained a "Messianic" placement at some point before the first century.³⁴ This does not dispute the original use and intent of the psalm. But, in post-exilic times it was evident that the ideal fulfillment of these words was yet future.

³²Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, vol. 76 of *Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 208.

³³John T. Willis, "A Cry of Defiance - Psalm 2," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (June 1990): 34.

³⁴Gert J. Steyn, "Psalm 2 In Hebrews," *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003): 266.

However, there is not a standard interpretation of the oft quoted Psalm 2:7. It is referenced at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:17), spoken of in connection with his resurrection and ascension (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5), and in a sense of a priestly anointing (Heb. 5:5). The varied uses of the passage suggest that it is not a predictive prophecy as much as it is being used in a the manner of typical rabbinical teaching of the first century - a midrash in which the rabbi assumes a simple literal meaning as well as deeper meanings. The midrash of the disciples of Jesus uncovers different "deeper meanings" of the original text in the context of their relationship with the ideal King.

Ultimately, the text of Psalm 2 does speak on many different levels to its readers. It stands with Psalm 1 as twin sentinels through which one enters the Psalter emphasizing the importance of the Davidic covenant and looking with hope toward the ideal King that many know to be Jesus of Nazareth, one who was poured out on the Holy hill of Zion for the sins of all men.

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