

DISCUSSION OF THE PSALMS - PART IV

THE ROYAL PSALMS

I. The royal psalms reflect the promises made through the monarch, especially those made to the line of David.

A. The idea of a sacred king begins in the Bible with Melchizedek (translated "king of righteousness"), the mysterious priest-king of Salem (translated "perfect peace"), which is later to become Jerusalem. After rescuing his nephew Lot and his family by defeating four minor kings, Abraham met Melchizedek and gave him a tenth of the amount recovered, recognizing him as a representative of God. Melchizedek brought out bread and wine and gave Abraham a blessing. Gen 14:18-20. Chapters 5 to 7 of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Melchizedek was a precursor to Jesus because he represented a primordial priesthood before the Levitical priesthood was established.

B. Shortly before his death, Jacob gave a blessing (or warning) to each of his sons, and through them, to the tribes that would be their descendants. He gave reigning primacy to Judah (replacing the firstborn Reuben), saying among other things that the scepter will never pass from him. Gen. 49:8-12..

C. Deuteronomy, which represents Moses' last instructions to the Chosen People before his death and their entry into the promised land, gave instructions to them if they should choose to have a king. Duet 14-20

1. The king must be one of their kinsman and must be chosen by God. It says that the king, upon enthronement must receive a copy of the law, must read it constantly, and must adhere to it.

2. The passage also instructs the king against three specific things: (1) acquiring many horses, especially from Egypt; (2) marrying foreign wives; and (3) amassing great amounts of gold or silver. The idea in all cases is that he must put his trust in God and refuse anything that would tempt him to disobedience or a loss of faith. There is also a strict warning against pride.

3. The passage promises that if these conditions are fulfilled, the people will prosper.

D. The people decided that they wanted a king when the judge/prophet Samuel was growing old and his sons, whom he

appointed as judges, were corrupt. The people believed that a steady line of kings would bring about the order that they needed. Although recognizing the request as a sign of a lack of trust, God granted them their request after warning through Samuel that the king would burden them greatly and that the request, once granted, was irrevocable. 1 Sam. 8.

1. And so Samuel appointed Saul as the first king. Saul, however, is referred to as nagid, i.e., more of a commander than a full king.

2. After Saul disobeyed God by performing sacrifices that Samuel was supposed to perform, and by keeping the nobles and some of the spoils of the tribe of Amalek for himself, God rejected him as king. At God's instruction, Samuel then secretly anointed David as king. It would be some years before David would take the throne.

E. God's promises to David began when David decided to build a temple for the ark of the covenant. While in the desert, the Chosen People had built a "Tent of Dwelling," which was virtually a portable building for the ark, based upon the vision of Moses of the sanctuary in heaven. See Ex. 24-27; Hebrews 8:1-5; 9:1-23.. David wished to give the Ark a more permanent home. 2 Sam. 7:1-4

- God instructed the prophet Nathan to tell David that it was his son who would build the Temple. However, apparently in response to David's piety, God promised that He would adopt David's son (a collective term for his heirs) as His son, and preserve the line forever. God warned that, if David's heirs violated God's covenants He would chastise them, but that He would never withdraw His favor. 2 Sam. 7:5-16.

- However, in response to David's later crimes in committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah to cover up the affair, Nathan would warn that the sword would never depart from the house of David.

- The king was responsible for keeping order in worship, and giving blessings. There are some references to kings offering sacrifices, but it was likely the priests who actually performed the rite. See 1 Kings 3:4, 8:54ff. When Saul tried to offer unauthorized sacrifices, he was condemned. See 1 Sam. 13.

F. Because of Solomon's infidelity to the covenant (which involved amassing armies, foreign wives and great wealth), the kingdom was divided after his death. 1 Kings 11:11, 12. Later on in large part because of the infidelity of later kings of David's

line, the southern kingdom, where they ruled, fell to Babylon and the people were exiled in 586 B.C. There was a brief attempt to have Zerubbabel anointed king after the Chosen People returned from exile 40 years later, but the ruling Medes would not permit it. And so the line of kings was lost until the time of Christ.

G. Nevertheless, the prophets prophesied a restoration of the unified People of God and a glorious messianic era through the line of David. E.g., Isaiah 11:1-12:6; Zech. 9:9-12; 10:1-7; 12:10-14; see also Micah 5:1-4 (referring to a 'ruler' from Bethlehem.).

H. The queen mother played a subtle but powerful role. See, e.g., 1 Kings 2:19; 2 Kings 11 (describing the effective reign of Athalia, the queen mother of King Ahaziah). In other nations queens, such as Esther, played very large roles. The mother (or grandmother) of the king is generally listed next to the king in the first and second books of Kings. E.g., 1 Kings 15:2, 10; 22:42.

II. The royal psalms extol the establishment of the monarchy, describe and decry its decline, and anticipate the glorious future king.

A. Psalm 2 describes the king in the context of representing the law and the order of God in the midst of nations who try to defy God.

- The psalm reflects both the importance of the king in bringing God's law to all nations and (in a mostly negative way) the ability of the nations to follow it. In ancient Israel, the kings generally did not have much in the way of vassal nations, nor was it intended to, but this psalm reflects the fact that the king was meant to put an end to injustice everywhere.

- The king is referred to as God's anointed and His son, reflecting the notion of consecration and the promise made to David.

- What is only metaphorically true of the kings of Israel then becomes actually true of Jesus. See Acts 4:25-31.

B. Psalm 18 is virtually the same as the ode of David recorded in 2 Sam 22, which summarized God's deliverance of him from enemies in general. It is a hymn of thanksgiving for God's salvation for the king and by extension for His People generally.

- It begins with a classic use of repetition, showing the constancy of God's power.
- The psalm describes the enemies in terms of death itself.
 - God hears the prayers from the temple, which is either the Tent of Dwelling or God's throne in heaven.
 - God's assistance is described in terms of a great theophany. It may have taken the form of a great storm that stopped Saul from pursuing David, but there seems to be a mystic vision of deeper forces at work.
 - Verses 20-24 give a tenfold claim to innocence. It may originally reflect the fact that David did not kill Saul when he had the chance, nor kill other enemies, such as Nabal needlessly. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 24:1-25:39.
 - The psalm then extrapolates from David's experience, God's justice with all people. God's help is especially describe in terms of victory in battle, although there is also a notion of deliverance from the need for violence. See v. 43.

C. Psalm 20 is a threefold hymn with addresses to the king, to the people, and to God.

- The psalm contrasts the protection given by the name of God and by sacrifices made for Him with reliance on armies. The psalm refers to the name of God three times.
- The psalmist prays that God will accept the sacrifices, for these sacrifices bring God's blessings. If God does not accept the sacrifices, it indicates God's disapproval. See, e.g., Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 5:21.
- The fortunes of the king and the people are intertwined. There is a strong desire for both the holiness and success of the king.
- This psalm and psalm 22 would likely have been prayed by the priests in the king's presence. Later on, it would be applied to leaders generally

D. Psalm 21 continues psalm 22's prayer, this time beginning and ending with a prayer and addressing the king in the middle.

There is a dramatic contrast between the blessings bestowed upon the king and the wrath of God worked through the king upon the enemies of His people.

- The psalmist apparently refers to the blessings of David's house such that it will bring about a glorious restoration and would not fail in saying the God gave the king "length of days forever" and "the pattern of blessings." What is true of the ancient kings through their heirs becomes literally true of Jesus

- The second section has a rather vengeful tone, referring to the king as bringing on God's wrath like a furnace that destroys the enemies of the king and their offspring. As currently applied, it would refer to the forces of evil, and never in its fulness to individuals on earth until the end of all things, when Jesus will return with fire. See, e.g., Jer 4:4, 21:11-14; Rev. 8:7; 9:18; 11:5.

E. Psalm 45 is a glorious wedding song for the king and queen.

1. After an introduction indicating the psalmist's joy and glory at composing the hymn, it addresses the king. Verse 6 may be an address to God or the king.

- The psalm describes both the king's righteousness and splendor.

2. The psalmist then addresses the queen, saying that she is rising up to receive great honor by coming to the king, leaving behind a lesser inheritance. The queen is presented as an intercessor to whom the nations come in reverence.

3. The psalm can symbolically refer to the Church coming from all lands to Jesus, or to the people, receiving glory from God. There is also an implication of Mary being espoused to the Holy Spirit

F. Psalm 72 prays that the king may rule his people well so that they people prosper.

1. The first verses connect prosperity and justice. The idea is that a society cannot (or should not) prosper unless the ruler implements justice.

2. Verses 5 to 7 would have originally meant metaphorically a prayer for the line of kings to continue forever, and for the

king's influence to continue. It was fulfilled in a literal sense in Jesus Christ. Part of the idea is that there is an order to nature, and that the king should reflect that order. See, e.g., Ps. 19, which describes the order of the world and the law of God, and paves the way to the royal psalms 20 and 21.

3. Originally, verses 8-10 and 15 would have also had a metaphorical meaning, but they are now fulfilled in the reign of Jesus, and the extension of His influence throughout the world. There was also no king before Jesus who really fulfilled verses 12-14 in their fulness.

4. Verses 15-17 then switch to a more peaceful messianic vision. See., e.g., Isaiah 2:2-5, 11:1-10; Micah 4:1-5. The last verses act as a doxology for the whole of the second book, which is mostly .

G. Psalm 89 combines a praise of God and reflection upon His covenant with David and a plea for help for the line of David. It was likely written after the division of the kingdom, or possibly during the further decline of the kingdom.

1. Ethan the Ezrahite seems to have been a reputed wise man who lived at about the days of Solomon. See 1 Kings 5:11.

2. Verses 1- and 20-38 are poetic descriptions of God's promise to David through Nathan. They extend this prophesy with promises of dramatic victory over enemies and worldwide rule.

3. In the middle, the psalm praises God as the highest in the heavens. The "gods" here probably refers to the angels, which pagans mistook for gods. The sea beasts would then symbolize demons who create chaos in the world.

4. The idea of judgment and justice being the foundation of the throne of God would contrast with pagan gods who were worshiped more because of raw power or ability to give favors. The judgement leads to rejoicing in God's presence

5. Verses 39-52 could be for an individual king, or for the return of the kingship in general. Even in describing distress at the victory of enemies, the psalmist implicitly declares his confidence that God is in control.

6. Unlike most psalms that express distress, this psalm does not end with a declaration of confidence, a reflection of the fact that it was written at a time when the monarchy seemed to have failed.

H. Psalm 101 seems to have been a declaration to be made by a just ruler. It may have been actually written by King David, or may have been the idealization of his reign.

- The emphasis is that the king, in order to be just, resolves that he will associate only with the just.

- The psalm uses repeated parallelism to emphasize its points.

- The psalm ends with a dramatic resolution to rid the land of the evil each day. The implication is that evil is continually trying to get a foothold.

- It can by analogy be applied to each person's reign over his own soul, expelling all evil influences.

I. Psalm 110 combines the priestly and royal roles of the king.

1. As with Psalm 110, there is an implication of worldwide rule by the king, who represents God's justice on earth.

2. Verses 3 and 4 indicate that the kingship was anticipated from all time. The letter to the Hebrews presents Melchizedek as a sort of eternal figure, with no parentage or death described in Scripture. Hebrews 7:1-4.

3. Verses 5 and 6 present God Himself as crushing kings on behalf of the king. The idea is that God brings unjust reigns to an end so that the king may rule in peace. See Daniel 3:98-4:24; 7:1-27. Curiously, here God appears at the right hand of the king, rather than the reverse, as in verse 1.

4. Drinking by the wayside appears to be a reference to advancing the righteousness of God with such enthusiasm that there is no time for rest.

J. Psalm 144 reflects rejoicing in the confidence placed in God.

1. As with psalm 18, it refers to God repeatedly as the source of all strength and security, here especially using analogies to war.

2. The psalmist then contrasts on the transience of human life and efforts with the might of God and goes back and forth between distress at enemies and exultation at God's glory.
3. The psalm then switches quickly to a more idyllic blessing, comparing the families to the temple and the fields, and then asking God's blessings upon the city and the lands. The idea is to reverse the fall by restoring the fruitfulness of the lands, the order of nature, and the ability of people to live in harmony.