

MESSIANIC PSALMS (and PSALM 110)

Psalm 110 is "the OT text most frequently cited or alluded to in the NT" (Allen, Word Comm. [1983]: 87). It is seen by almost all as a Messianic psalm in the ultimate sense. However, the majority of mainstream scholarship sees it as originally a royal psalm, composed by a court prophet in honor of the king. The Davidic attribution was added to identify it with other Davidic psalms and perhaps to identify it as Messianic from the start, but David is not seen as the one speaking. Rather, in v. 1 ("YHWH says to my lord"), "my lord" refers to David (or any Davidic king), who is being referred to with deference by this court prophet.

Among traditional and conservative scholars, the psalm occupies a special place because of the many NT references to it. Verse 1 is quoted often, most notably by Jesus in a discussion with the Pharisees about the Messiah ("the Christ") (Mt. 22:41-46 // Mk. 12:35-37 // Lk. 20:41-44). Here Jesus, to make a point about the infinitely greater position/stature of the Messiah over David (the king par excellence heretofore), asks them whose son is the Christ. Their natural response is that he is David's son. However, Jesus, quoting from Psalm 110:1, claims that "David himself" (Mk., Lk.) "inspired by (or `in') the Spirit" (Mt., Mk.) called the Christ "Lord." How could David call one of his sons (or descendants) "Lord" unless (and this is the point Jesus is making) this son be far greater than he?

Elsewhere, v. 1 is seen as a prophecy of Christ's exaltation. Peter, discussing Jesus' resurrection and exaltation at the Father's right hand, says that it was not David who ascended into the heavens, but rather that he himself said, "The Lord (God) said to my Lord (the Messiah), `Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet'" (Acts 4:34-35). He concludes arguing that Jesus lives and is now on the throne (as predicted by David).

In Hebrews 1 and 2, Christ's exalted position is developed, in Chapter 1 by means of a series of quotations from the OT (and mostly the Psalms) that point out that he is greater than the angels. Verse 13 quotes from Ps. 110:1: "But to what angel has he (God) ever said, `Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet?'"

Because of NT passages like these, particularly the ones above from the Gospels and Acts, the title of Psalm 110, ascribing it to David, is taken by traditional and conservative scholars to be accurate. This does not mean that all of these scholars see every psalm title as accurate necessarily, but they see this one as such, since the NT makes such a point of what David said. It is hard to see "David" here as referring to the "Davidic collection" of psalms. Both the Gospel passages and Acts are speaking of

"David" as a person, not a collection. ("David" can refer to this collection at times, as is likely the case in Heb. 4:7, where the author quotes from Psalm 95, and attributes it to "David." However, Psalm 95 has no title in the Hebrew manuscripts. The author either has an independent knowledge of Davidic authorship revealed to him directly, or he is referring to the LXX title [which does attribute it to David], or he is referring to the collection, in the same way that "Moses" can refer to the Pentateuch.)

Thus, Psalm 110 is seen by most traditional and conservative scholars as always and originally having looked to the future, and its classification by many as a "royal" psalm is misguided, if by "royal" they mean that it originally referred to David or another human king. (It may exhibit generic or structural similarities to other "royal" psalms, but this is a different question.) Thus, Delitzsch, in a good discussion of Messianic psalms (Vol. 1, pp. 64-71), saw Psalm 110 as the only purely predictive psalm in the Psalter (p. 66). This type is what he later (p. 68) calls a "directly eschatological Messianic psalm." He calls it a "prophetic-Messianic" psalm in his commentary on it, where "in it the future Messiah stands objectively before the mind of David" (Vol. 3, p. 184). Kidner (Vol. 1, p. 25) also sees "only one or two purely prophetic oracles, e.g. 2:7; 110:1."

Most traditional and conservative scholars have seen many more psalms as Messianic in a typological way, however. Delitzsch is representative of these. His five categories are these (Vol. I, pp. 68-70):

(1) Directly eschatological Messianic psalms.

These are the ones in which "the poet, looking beyond his own age, comforts himself with the vision of this [Davidic] king in whom the promise is finally fulfilled" (p. 68), of which Psalm 110 is the prime example (for Delitzsch, the only one).

(2) Typically Messianic psalms.

These are those psalms in which David (or the poet) gives expression to typical events and features in his life, especially suffering. Many are quoted in the NT as having been fulfilled in Jesus's life. The difference between (1) and (2) is that in (1) it is the "prophetic word" that is fulfilled, while in (2) it is the "prophetic history." Examples of this type would be found in Psalms 34 or 69. Psalm 34 is an individual psalm of thanksgiving, and v. 20 (MT 21) says "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." This is commented upon by John thus (Jn. 19:36): "These things [the events surrounding Jesus' death] took

place that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of him shall be broken.'" Psalm 69 is an individual lament, and is frequently quoted in the NT.

(3) Typico-Prophetically Messianic psalms.

These are similar to those in (2), with the difference that David (or the poet), in describing his various experiences, consciously utters things that go beyond his own

particular conditions or experiences to find a fulfillment only ultimately in the Messiah. They are typical, since they come from David's (or the poet's) experience, but they are prophetic, since they "express present individual experiences in laments, hopes, and descriptions which point far forward beyond the present and are only fully realized in Christ" (p. 69).

Examples of this type include Psalms 22 and 40. In his commentary on Psalm 22, Delitzsch speaks of it as Davidic, in describing the painful reaction to circumstances that David must have gone through on one or more occasions in connection with his persecution by Saul (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:25ff.). However, Delitzsch also says this: "The detailed circumstances of the distress ... are not known to us, but they certainly did not coincide with the rare and terrible sufferings depicted in this Psalm in such a manner that these can be regarded as an historically faithful and literally exact copy of those circumstances. ... On the other hand, the first portion exactly coincides with the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and the second with the results that have sprung from his resurrection" (Vol. I, p. 305).

(4) Indirectly Eschatologically Messianic psalms.

These include those psalms that spoke of the king, but whose conditions/expectations were never fulfilled by David or any other human king. Their original focus may have been the human king, but their fulfillment was "transferred" to the Messianic King.

Examples of these are Psalm 45 and 72. Both are among Gunkel's royal psalms. However, the pictures therein are so idealized and lofty that it is questionable as to whether they were ever intended at all to refer to a specific human king, or (perhaps better) whether they were ever intended to be fulfilled in/by a specific human king. In this sense, these psalms can be seen as akin to those in (3). There, David or the poet idealizes (or exaggerates) his own circumstances to speak of One who will later undergo these circumstances in a much more intense way. Here, a poet idealizes (or exaggerates) the king's circumstances or position to speak of the ideal King who will truly embody what is spoken of here.

(5) Eschatologically Jehovic psalms.

This is the largest category for Delitzsch, since it is the most general. These psalms are those which describe the advent of YHWH and the consummation of his kingdom. These would include the Kingship of YHWH psalms (47, 93, 96-99), and many others. In this analysis, God and the Messiah are one, so any psalms that speak of God's attributes, especially as he comes to judge and establish his kingdom, are Messianic psalms.

Leaving aside Delitzsch's last category for the moment, we can see how his 2nd through 4th categories fit what we have earlier discussed in connection with other conservative approaches. The common thread in these three categories is that they all are,

in one way or another, "typically" (or "typologically") Messianic. That is, traits of an individual poet (David) or a king belong also to the Messiah (Christ) as the ultimate human being or ultimate king. Events in the poet's (usually David's) life can prefigure events in Christ's life. Thus, when Bullock¹ speaks of two types of Messianic psalms, his first category generally fits Delitzsch's fourth (and first) category and his second generally fits Delitzsch's second and third categories. These categories include those that deal with

- (1) The King and His Rule (Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 110, 132, 144)
- (2) Man and His Life Generally (Psalms 8, 16, 22, 35, 40, 41, 55, 69, 102, 109)

Most conservative scholars do not give us complete lists of what they consider to be Messianic psalms (Bullock's is complete, however). Usually, what is present is a set of criteria for determining what are Messianic psalms, or descriptions of them (as Delitzsch has done). Kidner's discussion (Vol. I, pp. 18-25), however, goes beyond this. Taking the limited list of 13-15 psalms quoted in the NT as applying to Christ, he extends the category to include many more. (Bullock did this, too, but he was much more cautious, coming up with only 21.) After surveying the terminology used in the limited list, he finds some vocabulary that is typical, such as references to the (anointed) king, God's "son" (Ps. 2:7), or God's "servant," and he goes on to say (p. 24) that "It would scarcely seem too much to infer from this treatment that wherever David or the Davidic king appears in the Psalter (except where he is confessing failure to live up to his calling), he foreshadows in some degree the Messiah." Although this is not explicit in Delitzsch's treatment, it appears that his approach would be close to this.

Postscript: The following are the royal psalms in Hermann Gunkel's classification:

Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144:1-11; and 89:47-52

¹ C. Hassell Bullock, Introduction to the OT Poetic Books [1979]: 141-44.