

“Sit at My Right Hand”

A Sermon on Psalm 110

Texts: Psalm 110:1-7; Acts 2:22-42

When the authors of the New Testament sought Old Testament passages to prove to Jews that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah), one of the passages to which they frequently turned was Psalm 110. This particular Psalm is among the most commonly quoted Psalms in the New Testament. What makes this particular Psalm so important to New Testament writers is that it unites two distinct offices which God gave to ancient Israel—that of king and priest—in a single person. But David—to whom Jesus attributes authorship of this Psalm—was of the tribe of Judah, and not a Levite (and therefore not a priest). As it turns out, the one to whom these offices both apply is David’s Lord, a mysterious messianic figure associated with yet another mysterious and shadowy figure from Israel’s ancient past, Melchizadek, who was the king of Salem, and a priest to whom Abram paid tithes.

As we continue our series on select Psalms, we now take up one of the so-called “royal Psalms” connected to Israel’s most famous king, David. We will proceed by: first, discussing the background and structure of the Psalm; second, we will then go through the Psalm; and finally, we will observe how this Psalm is utilized throughout the New Testament, where it is quoted from or alluded to by Jesus, Peter, Paul, Luke, and the author of the Book of Hebrews. Since the authors of the New Testament saw in this Psalm clear Old Testament evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah (and the figure about whom David is actually speaking), this is a Psalm with which we ought be well familiar.

We know virtually nothing about when this Psalm was written or why—although it is ascribed to David in the title of the Psalm, a point which Jesus acknowledges when he quotes the 110th Psalm and applies it to himself. This Psalm might have been written for any number circumstances in Israel, such as a celebration of David’s authority over the twelve tribes of Israel, or even a celebration of David’s enthronement as Israel’s king. Given the fact that chief authors of the New Testament saw this Psalm as predicting a great messiah yet to come—we too should understand this Psalm as messianic.¹ This simply means that although David composed the Psalm, and it was used for a particular occasion in Israel, the contents of the Psalm point to a kingly/priestly figure yet to come—a descendant of David who holds both the kingly and priestly offices mentioned in this Psalm.

The 110th Psalm is found in Book Five of the Psalter (which includes Psalms 107-150). This particular Psalm has a very simple structure, taking the form of two oracles (vv.1-3; and vv. 4-7), each of which speak of God’s promise (v. 1, 4) followed by an explanation of the way in which God will give his people the promised victory. Both this Psalm and the preceding (Psalm 109) are associated with David, and follow after the lament in Psalm 108:11, in which the Psalmist cries out, “*have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies.*” Psalms 109 and 110 answer the question as to whether or not God has rejected his people by reminding the Israelites that God has indeed given his people a divinely-appointed king who will lead and protect them (Israel).

Both Psalm 132 and 145 (which occur later in Book Five) remind the people of God that David was chosen by God, and that one of David’s descendants will remain upon the throne, on condition that the

¹ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5, 813.

people of Israel obey the terms of the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai.² In fact, in Psalm 132:11-12, we read, “*the LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: ‘One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne.’*”

As one commentator points out, both the structure of the Psalm as an oracle (a word coming from YHWH) and its role in Book Five of the Psalter point us in the direction that “King David speaks in this Psalm as the prophet who [speaks forth] the enthronement oracle to the Messianic King, corresponding to the oracle given to other kings at their anointing or crowning (cf. 1 Sam. 10:1 ff; 1 Kings 11:12).”³ In other words, David is speaking of the enthronement of a future king, but not just any king. The king of Israel (David) is speaking of the enthronement of someone much greater than himself—someone yet to come. David is predicting the coming of a Messiah,⁴ even though David never identifies this messianic king by name. But the New Testament clearly identifies him—Jesus, the Christ, that one enthroned by YHWH after he dies upon a cross, rises again from the dead, and is then ascends to YHWH’s right hand in heaven. As we will see, when Jesus appeals to Psalm 110, he leaves it to his hearers to figure out what he means by speaking of this verse as applying to himself, and (as we will see) his apostles will then spell out how this passage applies to Jesus’ person and saving work.

With this background in mind, we turn to the text of the Psalm. The 110th Psalm opens in verse 1, with a truly remarkable promise. “*The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’*” How can the king of Israel speak of “*my Lord*.” A king is subservient to no one. Yet David is humbling himself before another. As is the case in Psalm 2, two kings are mentioned here. One of them is YHWH (the LORD God of Israel) the other is David’s Lord or master (*Adonay*). This means that David is not talking about himself, but one of his descendants yet to come—a Messiah.

It is the LORD (YHWH) who says to David’s Lord (*Adonay*) “*sit at my right hand.*” This corresponds with certain phrases from Psalm 2. In verse 2 of the 2nd Psalm we read, “*The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed.*” In verse 7, we read, “*I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’*” Finally in verse 12 of Psalm 2, “*Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*” But how can YHWH’s son be both David’s Lord, the Anointed one, as well as one of David’s physical descendants? This makes no sense until the coming of Jesus Christ to whom this passage clearly points and in whom it is ultimately fulfilled.

This mysterious Lord (*Adonay*) will sit at YHWH’s right hand—symbolic of his great authority and power. He will also make Israel’s (and David’s) enemies a footstool. This is an ancient metaphor, meaning to take absolute power and authority over someone. A conquering king would often humiliate his defeated counterpart by placing his heel on the neck of his enemy—a metaphor which appears in several passages dealing with the Lord’s return such as 1 Corinthians 15:25-28, where Paul writes, “*For [Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, ‘all things are put in*

² VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5, 813.

³ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 391-392.

⁴ Grogan, Psalms, 184.

subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.” No doubt, Paul is thinking of this verse from Psalm 110 and applying it to Jesus, who Paul says defeats our greatest enemy—death itself.

In verses 2-3, David goes on to speak of the victory stemming from the promise in the opening verse. “*The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.*” The LORD (YHWH) will give his power to his chosen king (*Adonay*). This power and rule is symbolized by the scepter from Zion. The Lord and his king are one—they possess the same power and authority. They rule according to a common purpose. Notice too that the word translated “rule” is an imperative (a command), because the king’s power will be imposed upon his enemies. YHWH will bring this to pass so that the Gentile nations know that he alone is God.

The background to the rule of Israel’s king over the promised land (and the Canaanites) is again found in Psalm 2:6, 9. “*As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.*” “*You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.*” The holy place is Zion, where the king wields his scepter—his rod of iron. The same thing is prophesied of the Israel’s future kings in Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:10, where it is written “*The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.*” No doubt when this singing the 110th Psalm, the people of Israel thought of David, and yet must have wondered to themselves, “is this Psalm really about David?” Since this Psalm points beyond David to someone else, it is no wonder the Jewish commentators have had such a difficult time explaining what this Psalm means and to whom it refers if it doesn’t apply to Jesus Christ.

Because YHWH’s king rules over all, the Psalmist says his people will themselves become the offering given to YHWH—they whole-heartedly give themselves to their king because they are his willing servants. While the explanation of this is hinted at in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2) –“*That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD!*”—the full meaning of this imagery of freely offering oneself the Lord and his service can only come to expression after the coming of the Messiah to whom this Psalm points. In Romans 12:1, Paul speaks of the way in which Christians offer themselves to God. “*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*”

The Psalmist describes how the king’s people wear holy garments (symbolic of the fact that they consecrate themselves to him), they serve the king in their youth, and are many in number. As one commentator puts it, “this verse pictures the Messiah going forth in primal vigor, holiness and glory, at the head of a host which is as dedicated as those early Israelites” risked their lives unto death.⁵ In other words, David is describing the coming of the Messiah leading a great host into battle, an image much like that of Revelation 12:11; “*And they have conquered [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*”

As we move into the second prophetic oracle (vv. 4-7), the scene shifts from the image of kingly rule of David’s Lord, to that of the priestly office which the messianic king also holds. In the second oracle we also have a divine oath, followed by the comment that once having sworn it, God will not change his

⁵ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 394-395.

mind. God is immutable—he does not change either in his essence or his will. This is made clear in verse 4, the promise portion of the second oracle. “*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’*” The priest pictured in this verse will always be faithful to his office so that he is never forced to forfeit it. He is greater than the whole house of Levi (the line of Israel’s priests).⁶ This coming messianic king is also a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

We know very little about the mysterious Melchizedek except that he has nothing to do with the Melchizadek priesthood claimed by those nice young Mormon men who come to your front door! His story is recounted in Genesis 14:18-20. “*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*” The author of the Book of Hebrews tells us the mysterious Mechizadek was a type (or a foreshadowing) of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 5:5-6 (where the author cites from Psalm 110) we read, “*So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’*”

Melchizedek lived some 500 years before David composed this Psalm, and some 1500 years (or so) before the coming of Christ. Based upon the biblical evidence we do have, Melchizedek was both a king and a priest (two of the offices held by Jesus) and he ruled over Salem (now the city of Jerusalem). Since Jesus was not a Levite (and therefore not from the line of Israel’s priests), the Book of Hebrews points out that Jesus’ priesthood (so that he can make sacrifice for our sin) is said to derive from Melchizedek’s. The one of whom David is speaking in the 110th Psalm holds an eternal priesthood and belongs to the order of Melchizedek. YHWH’s *Adonay* (the LORD’s Lord) is a king who rules over his people. But he’s also a priest like Melchizedek. There is no question that David is speaking of Jesus Christ.

In verses 5-7, the Psalmist speaks of this king going to war. Once again the two kings mentioned act as one. The will and power of the one (YHWH) is that of the other (*Adonay*). “*The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head.*” The king (*Adonay*) sits at the right hand of YHWH. YHWH will shatter the power of all those who oppose Israel’s king (and eventually, Israel’s Messiah). David tells us that there is coming a day of wrath when all of the king’s enemies will be destroyed. Another way to put this is, the battle is the Lord’s. And he never loses.

When that day of God’s wrath finally comes, YHWH will judge all the nations, causing mass casualties (David speaks of “corpses”), and bringing their chiefs (their leaders) to total defeat. The Israelites, no doubt, saw this Psalm as fulfilled when the Davidic kingdom extended the borders of Israel further than they had been before. But the judgment depicted in Psalm 110 finds its ultimate fulfillment in the vision given John in Revelation 19:11-21.

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the

⁶ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 395.

armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

As we know from the Old Testament, YHWH fought for Israel, until Israel sought other gods and brought down the covenant curses on themselves. The people of Israel saw the victorious king in Psalm 110 as David. At the same time, it is clear that this Psalm points beyond the temporary victories of Israel to the final judgment of God on that day when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. When Israel is victorious, Israel’s king (David and his royal descendants) wins the victory only because YHWH fights for him. The king can lift up his head in triumph. The king will grow weary from battle, but will refresh himself from a brook.

The image here is drawn from Judges 7:5-7 when God gave Gideon a great victory over the Midianites. *“So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.’ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.’”* When David drinks from the brook, he is leading Israel to victory, just as Gideon led the Israelites to victory. In both cases, YHWH fought for them. But in both cases (that of Gideon and of David), YHWH was pointing his people ahead to the victory depicted in Revelation 19:11-21.

A careful reader of the New Testament soon notices that the 110th Psalm plays a huge role in the New Testament’s teaching about the person and work of Jesus. This can be seen in how Jesus himself interprets the words of this Psalm. When accosted by the Pharisees, Matthew recounts Jesus’ response to their futile attempt to get him to say something so that they might arrest him. In Matthew 22:41-48 we read of this remarkable exchange. *“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, ‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?’ And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”* Jesus says that he (Jesus) is David’s Lord (*Adonay*), the mysterious king and priest of Psalm 110. The Pharisees are shocked at Jesus’ interpretation of this Psalm and have no reply. The only way Psalm 110 makes any sense is if it refers to Jesus.

In Mark 14:60–64 we read of yet another instance when Jesus appeals to the first verse of this Psalm and applies it to himself. This time Jesus has been arrested and is on trial before the high priest. We read

that “*the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, ‘Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?’ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’*” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “*What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?*” And they all condemned him as deserving death.” Once again, Jesus appeals to this Psalm as proof that he is Israel’s Messiah, and the very Son of God, that one to whom those now accusing him and are soon to crucify, will give an account on the day of judgment.

How then do the apostles and their circle interpret the words of Psalm 110 in reference to Jesus?⁷ First, as we saw from part of our New Testament lesson (Acts 2:34-35), they use this Psalm to argue that Jesus is greater than David. Luke recounts that in Peter’s Pentecost sermon he makes this very point to convince the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. Quoting directly from Psalm 110, Peter proclaims, “*for David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’*” The author to the Hebrews cites the same verse (Psalm 110:1) to make the point that Jesus is superior to everyone Old Testament figure, including David. In Hebrews 1:13, we read, “*And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’?*” Therefore, because he sits at YHWH’s right hand, Jesus is superior to David, as well as every Old Testament figure. Jesus is even greater than the angels.

The second way in which Psalm 110 is used to show the superiority of Jesus is that when rejected by his people only to suffer the depths of humiliation in his suffering upon the cross (for us, and in our place, dying for our sins), God then raised him from the dead and exalted Jesus to his right hand. Peter makes this point in a sermon recorded in Acts 5:29-32. “*But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.’*” Peter does not cite directly from Psalm 110, but certainly alludes to it.

Third, because Jesus sits at God’s right hand—in fulfillment of the promise YHWH makes in the oracle of Psalm 110:1—he is both our Savior and intercessor. In Romans 8:31-34, Paul says of Jesus (while alluding to this passage), “*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*” Because Jesus has ascended to the Father’s right hand, it is David’s Lord who intercedes for us. And nothing can separate us from his love.

Fourth, the author of Hebrews appeals to this Psalm to demonstrate Jesus’ superior priesthood to that of Aaron or the Levites. In Chapter 10, he writes, “*and every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who*

⁷ The following list comes from; Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 395.

are being sanctified.” As a priest after the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is the great and final high priest.

Like a spider’s web spreading out from a central point, so too the 110th Psalm connects a number of themes from both Old and New Testaments. In this remarkable Psalm, David draws on many events from Israel’s past—including the account of Melchizedek. But the New Testament writers also see in this Psalm of David, multiple references to Jesus. In fact, no one else but Jesus Christ is David’s Lord to whom YHWH himself says “*sit at my right hand.*” No one else is both the descendant of David and therefore Israel’s Messiah, who is, at the same time also a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Only Jesus can make all of his enemies—the greatest of which is death itself—a footstool for his feet. No one else will sit in judgment upon the nations and rule them with a rod of iron from the heavenly Zion. No one else but Jesus can cite Psalm 110 and apply it to himself. More importantly, it is Jesus himself who teaches us to find him throughout the whole of Scripture, including the Psalms.