

The defining element of those psalms called “the royal psalms” is the subject of kingship. They refer to the “king” or the “anointed” or specifically to David as king. In two psalms (101 and 110), none of these designations are used and yet they clearly describe the power and activity of the king.

In Israel, the king was the representative of the people. In many ways, the challenges he faced were the challenges of the nation.

Sigmund Mowinkel suggests, “These psalms are not a special ‘kind’ or ‘type’ from the point of view of the history of style or literature or liturgy. They comprise nearly all kinds of psalms, both hymns of praise and lamentations, thanksgivings and prophetic sayings, and several other types. Common to them is the circumstance that the king is in the foreground. He is the one who prays or the one who is spoken of, or who is prayed for.”

Israel’s kings had a special and unique relationship with God. They were chosen, “anointed,” or placed in power by God. But, they also were representatives of the nation or people to God. Thus, in obvious ways, they prefigured the role of Jesus as “mediator” between God and men. And, Jesus was to be the perfect or ideal king of God’s people.

“If the book of Psalms takes any one institution and holds it up as the ideal paradigm of the future, it is kingship. In fact, the messianic interpretation of the Psalms . . . found its center of gravity in the psalms that deal with Israel’s kings,” says C. Hassell Bullock.

It is difficult for Americans to fully understand the ancient view of kings. The power and blessings bestowed upon the king by God flow forth in benefit to the nation.

The psalms most commonly identified as royal psalms are Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 28, 45, 47, 61, 63, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144. Many others are so identified by some writers and scholars.

Two Kings in View

It is important to perceive the relationship between the earthly king in Israel and the Lord Himself, who is enthroned in heaven (Psalm 2:4), yet has installed the earthly king upon his throne in Jerusalem (Psa. 2:6).

Kings in Psalms

God as King—Psalm 47

A human king—Psalm 45

Jesus foreseen in both these images

The rulers in these psalms are variously described as “the king” or “Jehovah’s king” or “Jehovah’s anointed” or “Jehovah’s servant.” His residence is “Zion.” Many of the royal psalms appear to have been sung at festivals. Some, of a more private nature, seem to be intercessions on behalf of Israel’s king.

God Depicted as the Power behind the Throne

God Himself is Israel’s ultimate king. During the days of Samuel,

The Royal Psalms

Israel rejected the concept of having only a heavenly king and asked for an earthly one, like the nations about them (1 Sam. 8). God granted the request, yet designates the request as at least a partial rejection of Him as king of the nation.

But, even in approving appointment of an earthly king, God’s pattern was far different from that of the nations surrounding Israel. First, God selected the king, as the examples of Saul and David illustrate. He put them upon the throne as His representative, as Psalm 2:6 illustrates: “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion.”

God established a Father-son relationship with the king (Psa. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14). This reveals many things about how God’s king would be different from other earthly monarchs, as well as pointing to the ultimate king—Jesus, the Messiah.

These psalms often speak of the king’s military accomplishments, but don’t envision him as the cause of the victories. Rather, God is the power behind various conquests. Psalm 18 exemplifies this well.

Royal Psalms Depict an Era of Justice and Righteousness

God’s intent always was to have His nation ruled in justice and righteousness. Some of the royal psalms express this. God’s own

throne is founded on justice (89:14) and thus the Lord anticipated that the monarch whom He would set upon the earthly throne would rule in like manner, with a “scepter of righteousness” (45:6). It was the role of kings, as is divinely ordained government today, to defend those being mistreated and to help the needy and punish evildoers (72:4, 12-14).



The Royal Psalms and the Messiah

The royal psalms are a large anchor for the Messianic hope. The very term “messiah” means “anointed one,” which was another term for Israel’s kings. While the psalms picture the ideal role of a king, biblical history declares the disappointments and failures of purely human monarchs, foretold in 1 Samuel 8. Yet, in the frail model is set the hope of a future king that God would appoint, who would achieve the ideal.

Psalm 2: Reign and Victory of God’s King

A messianic psalm, this is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament (Acts 4:24-27, 13:33; Heb. 1:5, 5:5; Rev. 1:5, 2:27, 12:5). David is the author (Acts 4:27).

The psalm is divided into four strophes with an equal number of points of view:

1. The psalmist’s question: Why do nations resist God and His anointed—vv. 1-3
2. God’s reaction: Laughter, derision, wrath, while putting His king in Zion—vv. 4-6

3. Response of the Messiah: God had decreed Him His son, given Him the nations of earth as an inheritance and power over His enemies—vv. 7-9
4. Call to nations: Kings and rulers should fear and love the Son (king)—vv. 10-12

Psalm 18: King David Gives Thanks to His Rock

The text of this psalm is nearly identical to 2 Samuel 22. The most famous king of Israel describes God variously as his strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, salvation, stronghold, and Lord.

The title indicates it was written by David when God delivered him from his enemies, and particularly from the hand of King Saul. The psalm speaks of God delivering him from a “strong enemy” (v. 17); from a “flood of ungodliness” and death (v. 4).

The poem may be outlined simply as follows:

1. An introduction or prologue filled with praise—vv. 1-3
2. The main body of the poem in narrative recounting God’s goodness—vv. 4-45
3. The conclusion or epilogue, which is largely filled with thanksgiving—vv. 46-50

Psalm 45: The Wedding of the King

This psalm begins with praise of the king and then speaks of his bride. On its surface it seems to be speaking merely of a king’s wedding. Yet, the language seems to speak of something deeper, and thus probably Messianic in its nature. This is made all the more likely by the quotation of 45:6-7 in Hebrews 1:8-9, speaking of Jesus and His kingdom.

Whether a historical wedding of a king in Israel is the original picture or not may be open for debate. However, the ideal depicted seems to only have been fully realized in the union of Christ and His bride, the church.

The poem has two main divisions:

1. An address to the bridegroom—vv. 2-9
2. An address to the bride—vv. 10-15

The first verse serves to introduce and the last two verses to conclude.

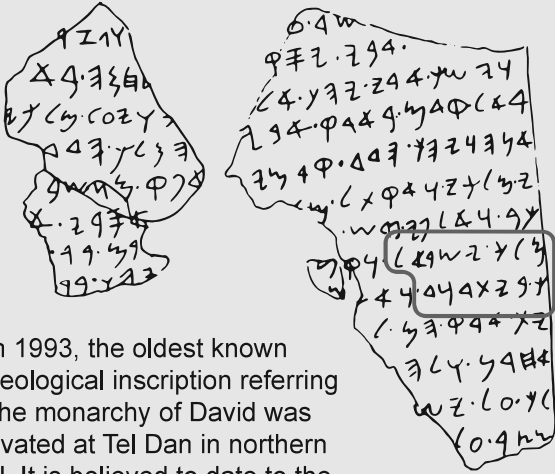
Psalm 47: The Divine King

Historically, God was Israel’s divine king before there was an earthly monarchy in Israel (Exod. 15:18). Jehovah is the “king of kings.” And, it is worth noting that God remained Israel’s king after the earthly monarchy ended with the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

But notice, especially, that God is not being praised merely as the king of Israel, but as king over all the earth. He is the king and God of Israel, but much more.

Daniel refers, with some accommodation, to Nebuchadnezzar as “king of kings” in Daniel 2:37. In a very limited sense, he was. He ruled over many other nations and their kings. His rule was a microcosm of a greater one that God would set up. Even this Babylonian king seemed to realize there was yet a greater king. Later in the same chapter, he told Daniel, “Truly, your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings . . .” (2:47).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as “King of kings” and the Lord of lords” (17:14; 19:16).



In 1993, the oldest known archaeological inscription referring to the monarchy of David was excavated at Tel Dan in northern Israel. It is believed to date to the ninth century BC.



“King of Israel”
“House of David”

Psalm 72: Plea for a King of Justice

The title of this psalm attributes it to Solomon. While it well may reflect a prayer for Israel’s ancient king to help bring righteousness and peace to the nation, it also looks forward to the ultimate achievement of those goals in the reign of the Messiah.

The poem opens with a plea that God give the king His judgments. This parallels Solomon’s request to God at the beginning of his reign for wisdom. Famously, the granting of such wisdom is seen in the account of Solomon’s judgment with the two women arguing over a baby.

Yet, whatever the achievement of righteous rule in Israel, it pales in comparison to the rule of Christ, the king of peace. The righteous rule is to be marked by fair treatment of the poor and needy. As a result, the

king will be exalted above all other rulers.

Psalm 110: Sit at My Right Hand

The title says this is a psalm of David. Remember that this can mean it is written *by* David, *about* David, or *for* David. Even a casual reading finds problems with the idea that this is exclusively describing David.

We are greatly assisted in knowing the long-range implications of the psalm by Jesus’ own reference to it in His dialogue with the Pharisees, recorded in Matthew 22:43-45 (also Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). There, Jesus asks how David could call one of his offspring “Lord.” In doing so, he points back to Psalm 110:1.

Reference also is made in the psalm to King Melchizedek, a contemporary of Abraham, who

is described as a priest “forever.” Hebrews 5 quotes this part of Psalm 110 and applies it to Jesus.

Thus, like Melchizedek, Jesus combines the offices of king and priest. No Israelite king could do so, since the kingly dynasty was rooted in Judah and the priestly function in Levi.

Peter used this psalm in his Pentecost sermon to identify Jesus as the Messiah of prophecy (Acts 2:34). Paul uses the psalm to look forward to the conquest of all enemies under the Christ (1 Cor. 15:25). See also Hebrews 1:13 and 10:13.

Thus, the psalm is both royal and Messianic.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Describe your understanding of the authority and responsibility of a king. _____

2. In Psalm 18, David speaks of God in a number of figures or comparisons. Explain what you think David meant by calling God his . . .

Rock: _____

Strength: _____

Fortress: _____

Deliverer: _____

Refuge: _____

Shield: _____

3. In Psalm 18, how does David describe how God responded to his cries for help? _____

4. Look first at Psalm 18:46-50. Now, using more modern language, write a four-line poem that speaks to how God protects and secures your life. _____

5. Reading carefully Psalm 45, list the reasons you believe the psalm to be speaking of either (a) a human king; or (b) Jesus, the Messiah. _____

6. During the time prior to the cross, how did God prove Himself to be king over all the earth, and not merely a local or national “god”? _____

7. What, to you, is the significance of the idea of a “king of kings”? _____

8. From Psalm 72, what linkage do you see between righteousness and peace? _____
