

Image of God's Kingship in the Royal Psalms

By Alexander Peck

This article discusses a dominant image of God in the royal psalms – that of *God's kingship*. (The length of the article precludes the discussion of other images, although a few are noted.) Three aspects are addressed: how this image relates to the culture from which it came; how it functions in the royal psalms; and how relevant it is for praying the psalms today.

The article is limited to nine generally accepted royal psalms – 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, and 132.¹ These psalms refer to the king, or are spoken by the king.² Mays describes the royal psalms as follows:

The King of God. The regent on earth of the LORD's reign is the Davidic king, designated as the Anointed by the LORD's covenant (89; 132). His kingship is given the vocation to represent the divine rule to the people of the LORD and to the nations. See Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; and 110.³

The psalms are termed “royal psalms” on the basis of their content rather than their form.⁴

While earlier scholars dated many of these psalms in the postexilic period (due to their messianic features), today's scholars generally date them to the monarchy (due to the

¹ Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. Graeme Dunphy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 115. The number of psalms designated as royal psalms varies. Craven (*The Book of the Psalms*) lists the nine addressed in this paper. Seybold (*Introducing the Psalms*) and Jensen (*God's Word to Israel*, rev. ed.) list 10 psalms, adding Psalm 89. Eaton (*Kingship and the Psalms: The Biblical Seminar*, 2d ed.) lists almost 40 (38) psalms with clearly royal content, and about 20 (23) less clear cases.

² Joseph Jensen, *God's Word to Israel*, rev. ed. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), 228. The *NIV Study Bible* describes the royal psalms as “by, for or concerning the king, the Lord's anointed” (p. 996).

³ James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 33.

⁴ Jensen, *God's Word to Israel*, 228. Westermann, in seeing the variety of royal psalms, felt that their treatment did not justify a separate genre (*Ausgewählte Psalmen*). However, Lawrence Boadt (*Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*), in listing psalm categories according to literary genre, includes as a genre the royal psalms of the king (p. 282).

liturgical background for the psalms).⁵ Jensen proposes that “the specific occasion for some of them (for example, 2; 110) must have been either the coronation of a new king or an annual festival that included the renewal of the kingship”.⁶ Seybold concurs by stating that the royal psalms were related to the different phases of the coronation ritual of the Jerusalem state-sanctuary (involving the anointing and enthronement of the newly inaugurated ruler), stemming from the time of the early kings.⁷

The kingship of God is alluded to in the royal psalms in such passages as Psalm 2:4; 18:13; 20:2, 6; 45:6; 72:19; 110:1; and 132:7, 14. In Psalm 2, for example, the Davidic king's installation is enclosed in a presentation of God's kingship.⁸ In addition to these royal psalms of the king, other psalms also address Yahweh's kingship. Boadt lists the following as specifically royal psalms of Yahweh as King: Pss 29; 47; 93; 95-99.⁹

Cultural Roots of the Image of God's Kingship in the Royal Psalms

The kingship of God was not unique to the Hebrews. “Many ancient Near Eastern nations”, writes Craigie, “attributed the role of kingship to their deities.”¹⁰ Examples are found in Ugaritic mythology, such as the kingship of Baal and other Ugaritic-Canaanite gods.¹¹

⁵ Ibid. Hans-Joachim Kraus (*Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*) writes that “the period of research that dated the type “royal psalms” to the time of the Maccabees has conclusively been refuted. Today there is no longer doubt that Psalms 2; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; and 110 belong to the historical epoch of the time of the kings” (p. 64).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, 99.

⁸ John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms: The Biblical Seminar* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 113.

⁹ Lawrence Boadt, “Israelite Worship and Prayer”, in *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 282-283.

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, “Psalms 1-50”, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 19 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 213.

¹¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, the annual remembrance, or renewal, of a king's enthronement is comparable to both Mesopotamian and Egyptian practices, located in the autumnal new-year festival.¹²

In fact, coronation rites in ancient Israel may well have been influenced by the great empires of Egypt, the Hittites, and Mesopotamia.¹³

Von Rad has studied the commonalities between Egyptian and Judaic royal rituals,¹⁴ including enthronement ceremonies and rites. However, since the documentation is fragmentary, conclusions drawn must be held tentative for Israel as well as for Egypt.¹⁵

Areas studied include the anointing, purification, legitimation, crowning, empowering, sceptre, throne, and protocol of coronation rituals.¹⁶ The rites of royal inauguration, or renewal (anniversary), may well have been richly sacramental (cf. Ps 21)¹⁷ – belonging to the cultic tradition of the royal feast.¹⁸

Ancient sacred marriage rites may have influenced the Davidic king's wedding to be associated with enthronement (or its renewal).¹⁹ Psalm 45 is an example of a wedding song at the wedding of a royal couple.²⁰ Jensen concludes that the psalm was in fact composed for a royal wedding.²¹

¹² Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 112. Eaton writes further that “there are indications outside the psalms that the king's enthronement was celebrated at the autumn festival” (p. 112).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁴ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. T. Hallett (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 256-257.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 257-259; 264. See also Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 112.

¹⁷ Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 118.

¹⁸ Willem VanGemeren, “Psalms”, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 193.

¹⁹ Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 119.

²⁰ VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 343.

²¹ Jensen, *God's Word to Israel*, 228.

Finally, as VanGemen notes, the “Davidic king was the Lord’s vassal and as such was appointed to execute the wishes of his sovereign, the Suzerain”²² (cf. Ps 101 and Deut 17:14-20). Consequently, one can also see parallels with the treaty form of the ancient Near East.²³

The Function of the Image of God’s Kingship in the Royal Psalms

The image of God’s kingship in the royal psalms served a number of functions.

One such function was the resolution of a dilemma facing the Israelites – God as King together with order in creation versus historical experience marked by conflict and chaos.²⁴

Craigie summarizes the resolution when he writes:

It is God, the Creator of order, who is also the Warrior of Israel, subduing the military threats (the chaos) that undermine Israel’s orderly existence. Order in creation, and victory and peace in historical existence, are part and parcel of the same concept: God is King.²⁵

Another function of the image of God’s kingship in the royal psalms is that it presents Yahweh as the personal deliverer of his king.²⁶ Yahweh is also the faithful fulfiller of his covenant with the king and his descendants.²⁷

²² VanGemen, “Psalms”, 640.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Craigie, “Psalms 1-50”, 214.

²⁵ Ibid., 215.

²⁶ Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 114.

²⁷ Ibid.

A related function of God's kingship is that Yahweh hears prayers and demonstrates power over all creation.²⁸ In recognizing God's kingship, petition is made for the prosperity of the Davidic king, the Lord's anointed²⁹ (cf. Ps 72).

Furthermore, the image of God's kingship leads to the expression of solidarity between the people and their leader – the people recognize the anointed king as God's agent in bestowing his favour on the people (cf. Ps 20).³⁰

Moreover, the image of God's kingship in the royal psalms resulted in the Davidic king having, in a certain sense, the function of being God's son (for example, Ps 2:7) – as well as having authority over a kingdom of vast extent (cf. Ps 2:8; 72:8-11) and rulership by God's own authority (cf. Ps 2:7; 45:7-8; 110:1-2).³¹ Eaton adds that “as in Ps 2:7 the king is considered in a most special way Yahweh's ‘son’ . . . as such the king is representative of all the people who are also called Yahweh's children (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1).”³²

Finally, the image of God's kingship functioned as an overarching metaphor and included other images or qualities of Yahweh. For example, Psalm 18:2 shows God as a rock or a fortress or a refuge, signifying his trustworthiness and protection.³³ Also, as Psalm 18 further shows, God is just and upright, and can be trusted to uphold what is right (Ps 18:25-26).³⁴

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 469.

³⁰ Ibid., 187.

³¹ Jensen, *God's Word to Israel*, 228.

³² H. H. Eaton, *Psalms: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 130.

³³ Boadt, “Israelite Worship and Prayer”, 287.

³⁴ Ibid., 288.

Relevance of the Image of God's Kingship in Praying the Psalms Today

The supreme kingship of God is the most basic image in the royal psalms, as well as being the most pervasive image in the Psalter and even in the Old Testament generally.³⁵ This image conveys God's transcendent greatness and goodness.³⁶ As a basis for prayer, the image of God's kingship:

Provides the fundamental perspective in which man is to view himself, the whole creation, events in 'nature' and history, and the future. The whole creation is his one kingdom. To be a creature in the world is to be a part of his kingdom and under his rule. To be a human being in the world is to be dependent on and responsible to him. To proudly deny that fact is the root of all wickedness – the wickedness that now pervades the world.³⁷

The sovereign kingship of God, then, is not only a religious affirmation – rather, it is the basis for praise and worship.³⁸ God remains faithful to his promises.³⁹ Accordingly, people in need today can also have confidence in God's royal help (cf. Ps 20).⁴⁰

Recognizing God's kingship leads to accepting God's sovereign rule over life⁴¹ – and one can meaningfully pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10b).⁴² In the final analysis, submission becomes the only acceptable response to the Great King (Ps 2:11).⁴³

³⁵ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), 1000.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1000-1001.

³⁸ Craigie, "Psalms 1-50", 214.

³⁹ VanGemeren, "Psalms", 187.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 187-192.

⁴¹ Craigie, "Psalms 1-50", 214.

⁴² *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 11.

⁴³ VanGemeren, "Psalms", 71.

Acknowledging God's royal authority also assumes moral integrity.⁴⁴ The relevance in relation to prayer is the need for accompanying right conduct, loyalty, and obedience (as had been demonstrated by the king, cf. Ps. 18:20-26).⁴⁵

Furthermore, since God's kingship and sovereignty is to extend to the ends of the earth (cf. Ps 72:8-11),⁴⁶ the words of the petition in prayer, "Your kingdom come", are affirmed (Mt 6:10a).⁴⁷

Additionally, the kingship of God anticipates the ultimate and triumphant advent of the King – Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ In other words, the royal psalms, with their image of the kingship of God, have messianic overtones and give "ground for hope and joy in the anticipation of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ" (cf. Ps 20-21).⁴⁹ While the Davidic king was the God's anointed, Jesus is the "Christ" – the "anointed one". "Therefore", as VanGemeran concludes, "the prayer for the Davidic king is at the same time an expression of hope in the glorious and just rule of Jesus over the earth."⁵⁰

In the Church's liturgical tradition, Psalm 110 has been designated for use on Ascension Day.⁵¹ The New Testament faith community saw the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as the fulfilment of Ps 110:1 and his being at the right hand of God as the goal of the ascension.⁵²

⁴⁴ Craigie, "Psalms 1-50", 214.

⁴⁵ Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 114.

⁴⁶ VanGemeran, "Psalms", 70.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Craigie, "Psalms 1-50", 214.

⁴⁹ VanGemeran, "Psalms", 193.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁵¹ Mays, *Psalms*, 37.

⁵² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 187.

Finally, in relation to prayer today, and spiritually speaking, Psalm 110, according to Eaton, “consecrates Jesus as *our* king and Messiah, ruler of each moment and part of our lives, as the resurrected Jesus sends the Spirit into our hearts (Acts 2:34-35).”⁵³

⁵³ Eaton, *Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, 132. Eaton adds that “this messianic king was crowned with thorns and mocked with a sceptre or reed in his hands (Matt 27:27-30). Here we witness a fulfilment of royal psalms with dramatic reversal!”

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