

The Lord Says to *Who*?

Psalm 110 in Context

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Psalm 110 (NRSV)

¹*Of David, a Psalm. The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool."*

²*The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes.*

³*Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you.*

⁴*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."*

⁵*The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.*

⁶*He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth.*

⁷*He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head.*

This psalm has acquired a perhaps inordinate amount of fame since the New Testament quotes it several times. We may therefore think we know what it means. Many Christians who know this psalm through its appearances in the New Testament take for granted that it is King David talking about Jesus. This is, in fact, an extremely difficult Hebrew text, and close examination reveals that its meaning is not so simple.

"Of David, a Psalm. The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" At first glance what could be more natural? God is talking to a conquering figure, who apparently must be the Messiah. He calls that figure "lord," so it must be the divine Christ.

But here is the first difficulty: "Of David, a Psalm." Does that mean the psalm is "by" David? Not necessarily. In Hebrew, לְדָוִד literally means "to David." This could be a psalm written to David, for David, or in David's honor. In fact, this could well be true of all psalms beginning with David's name. Some scholars believe that the superscripts of

many of the psalms were added later. Many reputable scholars believe the Davidic psalms (and even the non-Davidic ones) are *pseudepigraphic*, not written by the figure in the title but by an anonymous author or authors. This would hardly be unusual for the time, since many ancient writings, including the four Gospels and several of the epistles, fall into this category. If in Hebrew you wanted to say unequivocally that a psalm was “by” David, you would probably say נְשֵׁל דָּוִד, but that usage is not found in the Psalms.

Let’s take a close look at the next phrase: “The Lord says to my lord.” Some translations capitalize the second “lord.” In English we are misled by the use of the same word “Lord”: it is natural to think that the same word must mean the same thing, or even that the same word in English translates the same word in Hebrew.

But that is not how the Hebrew of this psalm works. In the Hebrew they are not the same word. The first “Lord” is actually YHVH, the unutterable name of God. It is usually translated “Lord,” reflecting the Jewish custom of substituting another word, *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי) out of respect.¹ The second “lord” (which should be rendered lower case) is *adoni* (אֲדֹנִי). The first, *Adonai*, is a special construction, a singular word with a plural suffix, indicating God. The second, *adoni*, has a singular suffix. The Hebrew word *adon* (אֲדֹן) is very similar to the Spanish *señor*. It can mean “lord,” “Lord,” or simply “mister.” *Adoni* with the singular suffix never refers to God or to any divine entity. In modern Hebrew, “adoni” is like saying “kind sir.” It is heard all the time, and is not calling the other person Messiah or God. In the Bible the word is used very similarly, for example Genesis 44:18-19: “Then Judah stepped up to [Joseph] and said, “O my lord [*adoni*], let your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears.” It is an address of respect, in this case to a high official, but certainly not to God. In contrast, *Adonai* with the plural suffix always refers to God.

Therefore “The Lord says to my lord,” in Hebrew אֲדֹנָי לְאֲדֹנִי [YHVH] אֲדֹנִי, *neum Adonai l’adoni*, is clearly God speaking to a human being, not to another member of the Trinity. The psalm is not King David speaking to God about the Messiah. It is almost certainly a court poet speaking about his king, very possibly King David. I would translate the beginning this way: “To David, a Psalm. The Lord says to my master [my king], sit by my right until I make your enemies a stool for your feet.”

Understanding the psalm this way makes the rest of the text sound natural. It is speaking about an Israelite king just the way one would expect. If one takes it as speaking about Jesus there is a big problem: *it would cast Jesus as exactly the type of Messiah he was not, a military leader:*

³Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains.

⁵The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

¹ Some English translations render the unpronounceable Hebrew YHVH as “Yahweh,” a practice that should be discouraged.

⁶He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth.

This is not the kind of Messiah that Jesus became, although it may have been the kind for whom many had hoped. For this reason alone, the original subject of the psalm cannot be Jesus.

As if this were not difficult enough, we run into another problem if we take this psalm as referring to Jesus. Let's see how Jesus himself uses this psalm:

*⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴“The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet””? ⁴⁵**If David thus calls him Lord, how can he [Lord] be his [David's] son?**” ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22, emphasis added)*

If this psalm is actually David referring to the Messiah and *not* to David's son, then by Jesus's logic *it cannot be referring to Jesus because Jesus was, according to the Gospel, David's "son"* (in Hebrew "son" can mean descendant, and a descendant is subordinate to an ancestor, who would not call him "Lord"). So at first glance Jesus, with historical accuracy, appears to be excluding himself as the subject of the psalm. Or is he? What is Jesus up to here? All we can say with certainty is that Jesus's opponents were constantly trying to trip him with trick questions, so here Jesus gets them one back, by showing that they don't understand their own scriptures and are unable to explain them. He does this like a Zen master, by asking them a question that cannot be answered and that throws them into confusion. (Beyond this, how we understand the passage will depend on our own Christology. I understand the Christ as the angelic presence of God on earth, so have no difficulty seeing both Jesus as embodying the Christ and the Christ itself as preexisting David so not being David's "descendant." This is what I understand Jesus to have meant in this passage. Jesus was teaching that the Christ cannot be confined to a human bloodline.)

So if this psalm is really a court poet speaking about the king, and not the king speaking about Jesus, are we justified in understanding it Christologically? Maybe, but we need to know what we are doing. To appreciate this, we need to understand the ways Jews interpreted their sacred texts.

In our modern era we often tend to read a sacred text as if it were a legal document, insisting that it must mean this or it must mean that. Biblical literalists go even further, treating every word as etched in stone with only one possible meaning (somehow forgetting they are dealing with translations). Therefore Christian and Jewish views of this psalm can't both be right, and Christians have often beaten Jews down with the accusation that Jews don't understand their own scriptures, recalling the way Jesus

embarrassed the Pharisees. We can avoid this rancor if we consider how Jews, who wrote these texts, often approached them.

To the Jewish mind, a sacred text has not just one meaning but layers of meaning. There is the plain, unembellished meaning of the text, as close as we can get to its original context, which in Hebrew is called *p'shat* (meaning "simple"). Then there is the expounded meaning, intended to clarify the truth that the text expresses, called *d'rash* (meaning "to inquire" or "interpret"). From this we get *midrash*, a rich body of homiletic interpretations of the biblical text meant to educate and instruct. These are not competing or contradictory ways of approaching a document; rather, they complement each other and one is no more or less "true" than the other.

For example, it is said of Abraham that when he was a child he smashed the idols in the house of his father Terah the idol maker. This is nowhere in the Bible. It is *midrash*. To ask whether it is true or false makes no sense. Its purpose is to tell us something about Abraham, to showcase his significance, to point towards a spiritual truth. Did Adam and Eve really exist? Did Noah take two or seven of each animal into the ark? What kind of fish was big enough to swallow Jonah? Such questions might make sense to the historically minded modernist, but they would have made no sense at all to those who wrote and preserved these texts; for them such questions miss their spiritual meaning, and thus their main point, completely.

Therefore a proper Christological interpretation of the psalm is valid not as a historical evaluation of the text but as a *midrash*, and as such is as Jewish as any other *midrash* might be, especially when we keep in mind that the New Testament authors were Jews. If we interpret "my lord" in verse 1 as referring to the Christ we are engaging not in exegesis but in *midrash*, and while some might consider this falling into historical error, we can see it as bringing us to different levels of meaning.

To understand fully the Christian *midrash* on this psalm we must turn to the other verse that the New Testament embellishes: "*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*" Huh? Who is this guy and where did he come from?

A *midrash* only makes sense against the background of the simple meaning of the text and not separated from it. So once again we start with the simple meaning. Who was Melchizedek?

In Hebrew he is מֶלְכִי־צְדָקָה, *Malki-Tsedek*, which means "King of righteousness." We meet him very briefly in Genesis 14. In the time of Abraham (he was still called Abram then) a regional war broke out, and his nephew Lot, who lived in the city of Sodom, was kidnapped. Abram took his band of men, fought Lot's captors, and rescued Lot. One of those whom Abram's actions benefited was Melchizedek, King of Salem. In addition to being a king he was also a priest. He came out to meet Abram and gave him a priestly blessing.

So our psalm says, possibly speaking of King David, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” A better translation of the Hebrew על־דְבַרְתִּי מֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק would be “You are a priest forever in the manner of Melchizedek.” That is, a priest in the way that Melchizedek was a priest, being king as well. How could this apply to King David, who was not of the priestly class?

In David, kingdom and priesthood were not entirely separate. Sometimes we see David exercising priestly functions:

¹⁷They brought in the ark of the Lord, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being before the Lord. ¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt-offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts, ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes. (2 Samuel 6)

So David the priestly king was a priest “in the manner of Melchizedek,” also a priestly king.

That is the simple meaning of the Melchizedek reference. To elaborate upon this meaning we go not to the Gospels but to the Letter to the Hebrew Christians, which views it from a completely new perspective.

Hebrews 4-7 describes Jesus Christ not only as King but as High Priest. A king rules, judges, and leads; a priest intercedes with God for his people and aids their sanctification. Jesus is both. In Hebrews, Melchizedek, a mythical priest-king, is presented as a prototype of Jesus:

¹This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him”; ²and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.” His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.” ³Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Hebrews 7)

The author of this letter uses the mysteriousness of Melchizedek – he has no lineage, no human origin, he just appears – to suggest the transcendence of the Christ. This makes Jesus Christ a different kind of priest entirely:

¹⁷It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, ¹⁶one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷For it is attested of him,

*“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 7)*

We are no longer in Hebrew but in Greek, and the Greek word for “order” is *taxis*, from which we get “taxonomy” and which means “distinct class.” At this level of the *midrash* Jesus is not simply a priest “in the manner” of his predecessor; he is in an entirely different class. Different from what? From the Levitical, hereditary priesthood founded by Moses’s brother Aaron and bequeathed to Aaron’s descendants. Jesus Christ could not have been a traditional priest of this type since he came from the tribe of Judah, not Levi, which was Aaron’s tribe. But as a new kind of priest, he makes a new kind of relationship with God possible. The hereditary priesthood became corrupt and lost its intended purpose. Jesus Christ restores and renews the function of the priest as bringing the people to sanctification, purifying their sins, making them whole. The author of Hebrews sees Jesus Christ as the mediator of a “better” covenant. I prefer to think of it as a “renewed” covenant.

Jesus Christ is therefore the eternal priest, and hereditary descent is no longer necessary. During Lent Jesus Christ, as High Priest, fulfills the function originally performed by the Temple High Priest on the Day of Atonement: he intercedes for the people, makes sacrifices for them, and brings them to sanctification.

To go further than this, one must rely upon one’s own Christology. The reader may note that in this part of the discussion I speak only of “Jesus Christ” and not simply of “Jesus.” The Christ is the angelic presence of God, called by John the *logos*, preceding all creation and through which the world was created (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16-17). This brings us right back to our passage from Matthew 22 (and its parallel in Luke 20): Jesus can indeed speak about the Christ as preceding David and superior to him. But Jesus is the “incarnation” of this presence, the embodiment of God’s angelic presence on earth. Thus he is the Messiah, God’s anointed and appointed one, bringing salvation by consciously connecting us to God’s presence and fulfilling the original mission of the priesthood.

In this way we can understand what the Pharisees whom Jesus tested could not: that by interpreting Psalm 110 Christologically we are not dealing with contradiction but with paradox. As a literal interpretation it is anachronistic and wrong, but as *midrash* it reveals a deep spiritual truth that has redeeming power. And so were sacred texts understood before the modern era.

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