

An Exposition of the Second Psalm

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Only Psalm 110 is cited more frequently in the NT than Psalm 2. Both bear unmistakable Messianic application and both identify the Messiah as God’s anointed king. This study will provide an exposition of Psalm 2 with particular focus upon its relevance to the balance of the Protestant canon. Following the exposition, a few brief points of application are provided.

I. An Exposition of Psalm 2

Before an exposition of Psalm 2, a consideration of how OT messianic prophecy is fulfilled in NT is required. Michael Rydelnik has provided an excellent description of the various interpretive approaches to Messianic prophecy with the modern era.[1] A few of these approaches are incompatible with evangelical conviction (i.e., historical fulfillment and reflection fulfillment) and require one to discard divine inspiration altogether and even the concept of prophecy. Of the remaining approaches, two find the greatest traction among evangelicals, namely, dual fulfillment and direct fulfillment. Of these two, the approach of Erwin W. Hengstenberg is, in the opinion of the author, the most successful.

Refreshingly, Hengstenberg viewed critical approaches to Scripture as hazardous to the church and instead sought to view OT messianic prophecy through the lens of the NT.[2] Presupposed in his approach is an affirmation of progressive revelation wherein the clarity and specificity of OT predictions increases from Genesis to Malachi. On this view, the NT is the superior revelation in terms of its ability to authoritatively interpret OT prophecies. Hence, in the Psalter “There is no direct mention of the person of the Messiah...the words, when considered in their full import, point, indirectly, to Him.”[3]

John Sailhamer has articulated a similar approach. While he too affirmed that the OT ought to be read through the lens of the NT, he has argued that the final form of the OT is

already intentionally messianic and is fulfilled and confirmed in Jesus of Nazareth.[4] Just as the prophets feature commentary upon Pentateuchal events, the NT is a commentary upon the messianic prophecies of the OT. Further, Sailhamer has argued that the OT also functions in this way as it sheds light upon the NT and thus whereas the OT is read through the NT, the NT is read through the OT.[5]

With both Hengstenberg and Sailhamer, there is no intermediary fulfillment with OT messianic prophecy. Jesus is the intended direct fulfillment of OT messianic hope. An implication of this approach is that the difficulties in placing, for example, Davidic kings as the first fulfillment in the Psalms, evaporate. This approach also seems to be the one taken in the NT (e.g., Acts 4:25-26) as well as the patristics.[6] Messianic prophecies are said to be fulfilled in Christ without mention of intermediate fulfillment (e.g., Matt. 1:23; Heb. 1:5).

Like the first Psalm, Psalm 2 does not feature a title or an identification of its author.[7] Instead, it begins by posing a two-part question to its readers both original and modern: “Why do the nations rage...?”[8] “Nations” (*goyim*) is a classic circumlocution for the Gentile world and the term generally refers to those outside of the covenantal blessings enjoyed by Israel within the Psalter (e.g., 9:5-20; 44:11; 79:6). Moving from the general to the specific, the noun is defined in v. 2 to refer to the officials and rulers of the unbelieving world. The verbs in v. 1, “rage” and “plot,” are in parallel essentially connoting the same thing, namely, muttering discontentment, conspiracy, and defiance of Yahweh and his Christ.

Goldingay noted that “One Jewish tradition treated Pss. 1 and 2 as one Psalm, and this reflects a number of points of connection between the two... Whereas people of insight talk about Yhwh’s teaching (1:2), nations and peoples also talk of something—emptiness (2:1).”[9] This tradition may be reflected in the rendering offered in the Septuagint: “Why were the nations insolent and the people meditated on empty things?” While the blessed man of Psalm 1 ceaselessly meditates upon Yahweh’s instructions, the nations meditate on that which is “fruitless.”[10]

The question posed by the psalmist in v. 1 is “Why” and it is indicative of amazement. The plots of the nations and their rulership are incoherent since none “is possible of realization.”[11] Their plots are vane and their rebellion ineffective as the object of their disloyalty is the Lord who determines the outcome of both the righteous and wicked (Ps. 1:5-6). Yet, “the kings of the earth” “take their stand”[12] and the “rulers,” instead of consulting the oracles of Yahweh, take counsel with themselves (cf. Ps. 1:1). The content of their rebellion is explicit in v. 3: “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” The cohortative “let us” is frequently used to signal significant acts of rebellion in the OT (Gen. 11:3-4; 19:32, v. 4; Judg. 16:2; Ps. 83:12) and here it is the ordinance of Yahweh that is heralded by his people that are described as strictures to be broken. Whereas the blessed man of Psalm 1 derives

his sustenance from the ordinance of Yahweh, the wicked seek to throw off the bonds of his instruction and sovereign rule.

To the consternation of the kings of the earth, “He who sits in the heavens laughs” (v. 4).[13] Here Yahweh is described as the one who is far exalted among the futile plans of men. Far from a legitimate threat, the rebellion of the nations is a humorous trifle to God. While the nations devote their time to futility, “The Lord holds them in derision.” Initially met with laughter, Yahweh reacts with mockery and anger: “Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury” (v. 5). Yahweh is so far exalted among the kings of the earth that “The very utterance of his words instills terror.”[14] The content of Yahweh’s terrorizing speech is the announcement of the installation of his king: “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my Holy hill” (v. 6). His king will be the arbiter of justice and allegiance to him will be indiscernible from allegiance to Yahweh himself (vv. 11-12).

Verse 7 marks a change from the third person to the first person wherein Yahweh’s Son says “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” Interpreters who take a dual-fulfillment approach tend to argue that this language refers to God’s adoption of the Davidic king and thus the verb *yalad* refers not to the king’s birth but to his coronation, marking the start of a changed relationship between the king and Yahweh.[15] However, the manner in which this verse is quoted and applied in the NT makes it clear that it is intended as a metaphor for exaltation. One need not invoke dual-fulfillment to get there.[16] At Acts 13:33, (“this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’”) Psalm 2:7 is used to describe Jesus’ resurrection. Paul gave a similar sentiment at Romans 1:4: “[Jesus was] declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (cf. Matt. 3:17; 17:5). The prologue of Hebrews (v. 5) invokes Psalm 2:7 as part of a catena of passages marshaled to demonstrate the supremacy and preeminence of the Son. Hebrews 5:5 utilizes Psalm 2:7 as evidence that the Son did not engage in self-exaltation but that the Father exalted him. Subsequently, the NT interprets Psalm 2:7 as metaphorical language intended to identify the exaltation of the referent and not as a literal begetting. The Son is said to have been adopted in a metaphorical sense to emphasize his unique ‘chosenness’ as Yahweh’s regent.

This observation has considerable Christological import as it relates to subordinationist interpreters who find in Psalm 2:7 evidence of an exclusively human Jesus. For example, Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting claim that Psalm 2:7 is a reference to Jesus’ conception (Luke 1:35)[17] but fail to recognize that the text is never used to refer to Christ’s actual birth and is instead always used as a proof-text of Christ’s exaltation, even as it relates to his resurrection. Never do they explain how the identification of Christ’s conception would bolster an argument for his supremacy and uniqueness as in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5.

The same nations who have chosen to rebel will become a heritage for Yahweh's king: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (v. 8). So favored is the king that he "does not ask for anything from God; God merely promises that the king may ask and God will grant it." [18] This is followed by Yahweh's prophetic declaration of the Son's agency in subduing the nations: "You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (v. 9). The fragility of the rebels is here contrasted with the unyielding strength of Yahweh's Messiah (cf. Rev. 2:24; 19:15). He will subdue the nations in conquest as the Israelite kings before him, especially David, only all of the nations shall be his possession. Not only with the Son possess the earth, but he will also possess it in perpetuity.

The warning in vv. 10-12, particularly the adverb *attah*, marks a return to the psalmist's narration and the concluding imperative. Since God has established his plan, wisdom requires a change of course: "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth" (v. 10). The coronation of the Messiah affords God's enemies an opportunity to change: "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled" (vv. 11-12). Like the threat from a king who has incomparable military supremacy, the nations are warned to pay tribute or perish. [19]

The phrase "kiss the Son" connotes both approval of his rulership (cf. 1 Sam. 10:1) and allegiance (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:18). It also signifies love and a level of intimacy that goes well beyond formal obeisance. Either one embraces the Son and signals their love for him by means of a kiss or one will experience his wrath and die (cf. Ps. 1:6). When it comes to God's royal Son, there is no neutrality (cf. Matt. 12:30). Moreover, one must make their choice immediate as "his wrath is quickly kindled."

Psalm 2 concludes with the claim, "Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (v. 12). Like the blessed man of Psalm 1, the blessed man of Psalm 2 is the one who finds safety in the statutes of God. Those who, instead of attempting a futile rebellion, find sanctuary in the Son are those who live according to Yahweh's commandments. The blessed of Psalms 1 and 2 are one and the same.

II. Application

Psalm 2 articulates the collective need for full allegiance to Christ. There is no middle ground or neutrality when it comes to God's anointed King. Either one humbles himself and finds sanctuary in Christ or he will enter into judgment (Ps. 2:9, v. 12). Indeed, there is no alternative. The only acceptable terms are immediate unconditional surrender and allegiance to his Lordship. Therefore, since the Scriptures are devoid of warnings from God to pay homage

to culture or the transient mores of society, the loyalty of God's people must be with God's King.

In light of the above, the common refrain[20] to contextualize Christian ministry to the point wherein the church is nearly apologetic for its Christianity is completely incompatible with Psalm 2. Those who take refuge in Christ need not countenance the opinions of those who continue in their rebellion as to their faith.

One of the most neglected applications of Psalm 2 within the church is its eschatological implications. Psalm 2 envisions an eschatology of victory wherein the Christ-King rules the nations with comprehensive dominion and inherits the earth and its inhabitants (v. 8; cf. Dan. 7:14). The most common eschatological outlook among American evangelicals is one wherein the church is defeated and the vast majority of the world is lost (i.e., dispensational premillennialism). Instead, Psalm 2 depicts a triumphant Messiah whose prize is all the inhabitants of the earth.

The NT defines how God's King will conquer, namely, through the evangelization of the nations. Having been given all authority everywhere, Christ orders his people to evangelize and disciple the nations (Matt. 28:18-19). Psalm 2 will be fulfilled as Christ, by means of his body and Spirit, turns rebels into those who will "kiss the Son," taking refuge in him. Hence, Psalm 2 ought to revitalize evangelistic efforts and afford the church an optimistic outlook when it comes to the great commission. Keith Mathison noted:

Through the sending of his disciples into the world, Christ the anointed king is receiving His rightful inheritance—all the nations of the earth. And since He is the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), this sending out of His church is also the means by which He is bringing blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).[21]

An important pastoral application of Psalm 2 is recognizing that the evils of this world will be dealt with (v. 9). It is easy to become disillusioned when one has been afflicted by others and their sin has gone either unnoticed or validated. Reminding disillusioned Christians of the certainty of Christ's dominion and judgment ought to inform how one is to parse through the evils of this life, trusting that the wrongs done will be rectified whether through the sufferings of Christ or through his judgment. So too, Psalm 2 serves as a helpful reminder of the universal need for grace since all have rebelled and sought vain plans. Those who rebel against God will be broken (v. 9) but those who kiss him will be blessed and secure (v. 12).

References

- [1] Michael Rydelnik et al. eds. *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2018), 73-89.
- [2] E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on Messianic Predictions*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1856), 32.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 243.
- [4] John Sailhamer, 2001. “The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible,” *JETS*, 44.1, 14.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 22.
- [6] For examples of patristic affirmation of the direct fulfillment of Ps. 2 see Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 88 (*ANF* 1:244); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.21 (*ANF* 1:493); Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 1.7 (*ANF* 2:224); Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.12 (*ANF* 3:168); Origen, *Cels.* 4.8 (*ANF* 4:168); Cyril, *Cat.* 6 (*NPNF* 2.7:66).
- [7] The authoritative apostolic interpretation (Acts 4:25-26) is that David is the human author of Psalm 2.
- [8] All biblical citations unless otherwise noted are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).
- [9] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 94-5. See also Cole’s extensive and successful argument in favor of viewing Pss. 1-2 as a two part introduction to the Psalter. Robert L. Cole, “Psalms 1-2” in Rydelnik, *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, 477-89. Tantalizingly, there is a variant at Acts 13:33 which calls Ps. 2 “the first Psalm” (*tō prōtō psalmō*) in two MSS (D; 1175). While not a viable reading, it probably reflects a relatively common second temple viewpoint.
- [10] “*Kenos*” in Franco Montanari, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden, NL; Boston: Brill, 2015).
- [11] Charles A. Briggs et al., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 2000), 14
- [12] L. Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1994-99), 427.

- [13] The contrast is between the “kings of the earth” (v. 2) and the Lord who is seated in heaven (v. 4). Thus, a better rendering would bring out the sense of the participle *yasab* as in the *New International Version*: “The One enthroned in the heavens laughs.”
- [14] Peter C. Craigie et al., *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 66.
- [15] Bratcher and Reyburn similarly conclude, “*Today* is the day the king was enthroned.” Robert G. Bratcher et al., *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 29. Older commentators tend to argue that “today I have begotten you” refers to eternal generation as with Spurgeon: “Here is a noble proof of the glorious Divinity of our Immanuel.” The difficulty with this view is that it ignores the manner in which Ps. 2:7 is utilized in the NT. C. H. Spurgeon, 02/1865. “Expositions of the Psalms: Psalm II,” *The Sword and the Trowel*, 55.
- [16] Cf. Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 99-100.
- [17] Anthony F. Buzzard et al., *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham, MD: International Scholar’s Pub., 1998), 277.
- [18] Nancy deClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 69.
- [19] Craigie and Tate note that the verb “to serve” (*ibdu*) in v. 11 “has political overtones and implies that the foreign nations should submit as vassals to Israel’s God.” *Psalms 1-50*, 68.
- [20] E.g., James E. White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 21-3.
- [21] Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 74.