

Psalm 2 - Quare Fremuerunt Gentes?

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

DVBF 501-01
Biblical Interpretation

Dr. M. Sydney Park

By
Joshua P. Steele
#269

October 31, 2013

Beeson Divinity School
Fall, 2013

As the first royal psalm of the Psalter, Psalm 2 exhorts rebellious world leaders to serve Yahweh in wisdom by submitting to his anointed Davidic king who has been granted a global kingdom.¹ Comprehension of the psalm's original message first requires an examination of its constituent parts, with an eye toward its poetic features and original context. Furthermore, an understanding of the enduring significance of Psalm 2 necessitates a consideration of its canonical and redemptive-historical context, including the New Testament's typological interpretations of the passage. This essay will provide both aspects before concluding with a brief discussion of how best to interpret and apply Psalm 2 to the contemporary Christian Church.

Original Message

Psalm 2 is arranged in four stanzas of three verses each that follow a loosely chiasmic movement from the rebellious rulers of nations (2:1-3), to Yahweh (2:4-6), to his anointed king (2:7-9), and back to the rulers (2:10-12).² The psalmist opens with a twofold rhetorical question that uses synthetic parallelism to express indignant astonishment at the nations' rage (2:1a) and the peoples' vain plots (2:1b).³ The rest of the first stanza clarifies the scene: the “kings” and “rulers” of the earth are rebelliously conspiring “against the Lord and against his Anointed” (2:2), using the metaphor of “bonds” and “cords” in their reported direct speech (2:3) to express comparatively the implied rule of the Israelite king.⁴ The second stanza shifts the focus upward from the limited earthly sphere of influence of the rebellious kings to the unlimited heavenly kingdom of Yahweh (2:4), who anthropomorphically responds to their machinations with laughter and derision, “just as humans would mock something ridiculous.”⁵ As Ross notes, the two verbs “he will speak” and “[he will] terrify them” (2:5) are respectively a metonymy of cause and of effect to portray the full divine response, arranged in chiasmic order (“speak + wrath // anger + terrify”) to emphasize God's wrath.⁶ At the heart of the passage's chiasmic structure, bridging the second and third stanzas, is a dramatic shift of scene from Yahweh speaking while seated in the heavens (2:4-6) to Mount Zion and the Davidic king's recounting of the divine decree (2:7). Both divine speeches emphasize that

¹ All consulted commentators classify Psalm 2 as a royal psalm, the first example of their remarkable agreement throughout the passage. See P.C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1983) 64; D.J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 179; J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1994) 45; A.P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. 1:1-41 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011) 199; and W.A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC 5, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 89. The main, notable exception is a certain facet of Gunn's analysis. See fn. 15 below; cf. G.A. Gunn, "Psalm 2 and the Reign of the Messiah," *BSac* 169 (2012) 431-2.

² Craigie, Mays, Ross, and VanGemeren all agree on the verse divisions of the stanzas. Craigie and VanGemeren note the chiasmic structure of the Psalm as a whole. See Craigie, *Psalms*, 64; Mays, *Psalms*, 45; Ross, *Psalms*, 200-1; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 89.

³ “Psalmist” will refer to the unknown author of Ps 2 throughout this paper. As Gunn notes, “though the psalm is anonymous, it is accorded Davidic authorship in Acts 4:25. [...] Whether the psalm is of Davidic authorship has little bearing on the interpretation of the psalm.” Gunn, "Psalm 2," 427.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version [ESV].

⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, 205.

⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, 206.

the authority of Israel's king proceeds from his divine installation and sonship.⁷ As Mays notes, although the human ruler in view is not equal or identical to the deity, this unique appearance in the Psalter of “son” as the Davidic king's title (cf. 2 Sam 7:14) reveals the close correspondence between God and the king.⁸ This powerful polemic against the rulers who would dare to rebel against such an authoritative king continues through the third stanza (2:7-9), where the son/king is granted a global kingdom (2:8), described with synonymous parallelism between (1) the “nations” and “ends of the earth” and (2) “your heritage” and “your possession.” The section concludes with a vivid image, utilizing “a rod of iron” as a metaphor for the Davidic king's divinely-granted authority and “like a potter's vessel” as a simile for the relative vulnerability of the rulers of nations sans divine installation and protection.⁹

In the final stanza (2:10-12), the psalmist appropriately begins with “now therefore,” a common phrase from Hebrew wisdom literature, before exhorting the rebellious kings and rulers of the earth to “be wise” (2:10) by serving the Lord in reverential fear (2:11) and submitting to his anointed son/king (2:12a).¹⁰ The urgency of the exhortations is “met by the warning that *he* may be angry” (2:12b-c).¹¹ The ambiguity of the subject (“he”) of the descriptions of anger in these two clauses serves to illustrate the close link between Yahweh and his king throughout the entire psalm. As Ross rightly notes, the result of either interpretive option would be the same – “the king will put down their rebellion, but it will be God giving him the victory. To rebel against the one is to rebel against both, and to submit to one is to submit to both.”¹² The psalmist concludes by promising blessing to those who take refuge in “him” (2:12d) – an again ambiguous referent, but contextually describing those who demonstrate reverential faith for Yahweh by submitting to his anointed king.¹³

Contextually, the parallels between this passage and the promises spoken to David in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 clarify the content by identifying the psalm with the coronation of a Davidic king, in addition to the Davidic covenant's continuity with the other covenant commitments of Yahweh throughout the OT.¹⁴

⁷ Cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 66-7.

⁸ Mays, *Psalms*, 47-8. Ross agrees, noting that “you are my son” is “a pure metaphor. The statement makes a comparison between what a son is to a father and what the king is to God to describe the special relationship between them.” Ross, *Psalms*, 207.

⁹ Cf. Ross, *Psalms*, 209-10.

¹⁰ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 97. For the Wisdom use of “now therefore,” see Prov 5:7; 7:24; 8:32. For kissing as a sign of “homage and submission,” see 1 Sam 10:1; 1 Kgs 19:18; cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 68. Finally, for a discussion of the phrase “kiss the Son” as the *crux interpretum* of the passage at hand, see the discussions in Craigie, *Psalms*, 64, fn. 12.a; and VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 97-8, fn. 12. I agree with Ross when he notes that “in addressing leaders of other countries where Aramaic was spoken, using the Aramaic word [for “son”] made sense.” Ross, *Psalms*, 198-9, fn. 6.

¹¹ Ross, *Psalms*, 212; emphasis added.

¹² Ross, *Psalms*, 213.

¹³ Cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 68; Ross, *Psalms*, 213;

¹⁴ Craigie, *Psalms*, 64. The Davidic covenant of 2 Sam 7 stands in elaborating continuity with the Abrahamic (Gen 12-17) and Mosaic (Exod 19-24) covenants, and is itself intensified and elaborated upon in the “new covenant” of Jer 31. This context of covenantal continuity is extremely important to the interpretation of Ps 2 because, without it, Yahweh's exclusive, close relationship with the king (Ps 2:4-12) is inexplicable.

Despite Gunn's creative proposal that Psalm 2 refers to the anointing and not the coronation of the king, Ross offers a balanced perspective when he views the psalm's original occasion as a time of crisis due to the vulnerability of the nation to foreign attack at the time of a new king's coronation.¹⁵ Within the Psalter itself, Psalm 2 comprises an introduction along with Psalm 1 – focusing “on the victory of the LORD's anointed king over the nations” after Psalm 1's emphasis on the wise way of the righteous.¹⁶ Because the final editing and compilation of the Psalter took place in absence of a Davidic king, this fitting introduction “served as a reminder of God's plan” to its earliest audiences.¹⁷

However, as VanGemenen rightly emphasizes, “the juxtaposition of Psalm 3 [a Davidic lament psalm] with Psalms 1 and 2 creates a sense of dissonance” which refocuses “the hope of the godly from David to the Lord, who has made the promises to David.”¹⁸ That is, the tension between the idealized portraits (of the individual and Davidic king) in the first two Psalms, the “canonical understanding of the failure of David and of the Davidic dynasty,” and the “real world of failure and exile” experienced throughout the rest of the Psalter and Hebrew Bible encourages a christological and eschatological reading – one which looks for the fulfillment of the expectations of Israel and David in a coming anointed king who is both Son of David and Son of God.¹⁹

Enduring Significance

It is reasonable to assume that Psalm 2's uniqueness as the only psalm to use “son” as a title for the Davidic king and the only OT combination of “anointed/messiah,” “king,” and “son” in one passage contributed to its frequent use in the NT.²⁰ The redemptive-historical context of the second psalm suggests its meaningful relevance (1) during the Hebrew monarchy when a Davidic king was on the throne, (2) during the post-exilic absence of a king, and (3) as the psalm's circle of context extended into the New Testament and the nascent Church – taking on a typological significance in its portrayal of the anointed

¹⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, 200. VanGemenen rightly notes that “any attempt to link the psalm with an actual coronation of a Judean king...finds little support in the text.” VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 89. Gunn's proposal, while heeding VanGemenen's caution and offering a creative explanation of the already-not-yet dimensions of Jesus Christ's current kingly reign, seems more driven by the concerns of a presupposed eschatological system than by a straightforward exegesis of the passage at hand. Although the gap between David's anointing as king (1 Sam 16) and his coronation as such (2 Sam 2, 5) is instructive for considerations of the Hebrew monarchy, it does not mean that such a gap was normative for the kingly sons of David for whom the psalm at hand was probably composed. Furthermore, there are other, better ways to explain the unique kingdom reign of Christ during the current age than this kind of artificial reverse interpretation of Psalm 2. See Gunn, “Psalm 2,” 431-2.

¹⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, 200.

¹⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 200.

¹⁸ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 90.

¹⁹ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 90,8; cf. Pss 19:13; 25:7, 18; 31:10; 32:3-5; 38:3-4, 18; 39:1, 8; 40:12; 41:4; 51:1-2.

²⁰ Mays notes both aspects of Psalm 2's uniqueness. The OT/NT assumption is my own. Mays, *Psalms*, 40,7. According to the *UBS Greek New Testament*, 4th Rev. Ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001) 887,95, Psalm 2 is quoted in the NT at Acts 4:25-26 (Ps 2:1-2); 13:33; Heb 1:5, and 5:5 (Ps 2:7). Furthermore, there are allusions and verbal parallels to Psalm 2 at Mt 3:17; 17:5; Mk 1:11; 9:7; Lk 3:22; 9:35; Jn 1:49 (Ps 2:7); Heb 1:2 (Ps 2:8); Rev 11:18 (Ps 2:1); and 19:19 (Ps 2:2). Gunn notes that “based on New Testament quotations, allusions, and verbal parallels, Psalm 2 is one of the most frequently referred to of all the psalms.” Gunn, “Psalm 2,” 427.

Davidic king as the *type* of which Jesus the Messiah was the *antitype*.²¹ Based on the NT evidence, as VanGemenen notes, “from the perspective of typology, Jesus is the fulfillment of the psalm,” because “he is born of David's lineage (Mt 1:1; Lk 2:4, 11), has a right to David's throne (Lk 1:32), is the Son of God in a unique way (Mt 3:17; Lk 9:35; Heb 1:5), and will ultimately subdue all enemies under his feet (1Co 15:25-27; Heb 2:5-8).”²² Although a full discussion of messianic typological interpretation exceeds the purview of this paper, a discussion of the quotations of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:25-26 and twice in Hebrews (1:5 and 5:5) will suffice to demonstrate the NT sensitivity to the contours of God's redemptive mission and the uniqueness of his Messiah – an awareness which contemporary interpretative methods should embody.²³

Following the reprimand and release of Peter and John from the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-23), the believers to whom they are reunited quote Psalm 2:1-2 (Acts 4:25-26) as they confess to God (4:24) a poignant interpretation of the resistance the anointed king of Psalm 2 faced from the “Gentiles,” “peoples,” “kings,” and “rulers” (4:25-26) in terms of the lethal opposition Jesus received from “Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel” (4:27). Of note is the intimate awareness of not only the content but also the eschatological bent of Psalm 2 that such a typological interpretation of the text required. In a profound interpretive dialectic, familiarity with the passage's unmet expectations, the patterns of God's redemptive work, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus enabled these believers to bring Psalm 2 to bear on the very resistance their messianic interpretations were creating for themselves.²⁴ Because Psalm 2 teaches that “the declaration of the Son of God is God's answer to the opposition of the world's powers,” the early Christians used the passage to bolster their proclamation of the gospel in the face of external threats, not by directly identifying themselves with Psalm 2's Davidic king, but by taking refuge in him, so to speak, by proclaiming their experience of the passage's unique fulfillment in the person of Jesus and trusting in Yahweh's promised blessing (Ps 2:12).²⁵

The uniqueness of Jesus' fulfillment of the second psalm is further accentuated in the quotation of Psalm 2:7 at Hebrews 1:5a and 5:5. The former quotation follows immediately after the introduction to the epistle (1:1-4), and is paired with a quotation of 2 Samuel 7:14 (Heb 1:5b) in order to emphasize the Son's superiority to the angels, a theme which is then carried forward through a litany of OT quotations

²¹ Ross, *Psalms*, 213, fn. 31, citing J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 46.

²² VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 91.

²³ As noted above (fn. 20), NT quotations of and allusions to Psalm 2 abound. The three examples have been chosen based on this essay's prompt and the author's prior familiarity with the thought-flow of Hebrews.

²⁴ As Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard note, “the use of typology rests on the belief that God's ways of acting are consistent throughout history. Thus NT writers may, in places, explain phenomena in the new Messianic era in terms of their OT precursors.” W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg and R.L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004) 183. A familiarity with the consistent patterns of God's redemptive work throughout history would have undoubtedly involved an intimate knowledge of the covenantal continuity throughout the OT, reference in fn. 14 above.

²⁵ Mays, *Psalms*, 50.

which collectively emphasize the same point.²⁶ The latter occurrence of Psalm 2:7 (Heb 5:5) is the first use of an OT passage in the lengthy central discussion of the priesthood of Christ in Hebrews 5:1-10:18, explaining his appointment as high priest in terms of his divine sonship – with an emphasis on the humility of one who “did not exalt himself,” (5:5a) but rather was installed by God. In answer to those who would overlook the Son's unique status, both uses of Psalm 2:7 together emphasize that “the same one who exalted the Son above the angels (Heb. 1:5) has also glorified him to become high priest (5:1-9).”²⁷ Significantly, the typological use of Psalm 2 in terms of Jesus Christ's fulfillment as antitype coheres with the central point of the passage in its original context: the indissoluble link between Yahweh and his anointed son/king.

The interpretation of Psalm 2 in the contemporary Christian context should demonstrate the same sensitivity the NT does to the contours of God's redemptive mission and the uniqueness of his Messiah. This does not denigrate the passage's relevance to Christians today, but rather guards against identifying oneself with the king of Psalm 2 and usurping the uniqueness of God's Son in the desire for authority, blessing, and protection. Although Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard claim that “royal psalms [such as Psalm 2] relate best to the modern counterparts of Israel's kings: the leaders of the Christian community,” this approach, seems to risk a gross misinterpretation of the passage if Christian leaders fail to show due concern for the uniqueness of Jesus as the passage's fulfillment.²⁸

Instead, interpretations of Psalm 2 best emphasize the “crucial inherent differences between monarchs and church leaders” when they cohere with the passage's original exhortation to demonstrate wisdom by submitting to God's authoritative and anointed king.²⁹ This is a warning to those who rebel against God by neglecting the authority of his anointed king – either by spurning him or, perhaps even more dangerously, by trying to take his place.³⁰ Christian leaders need to heed this warning just as much as anyone else. And yet Psalm 2 is simultaneously an encouraging comfort to those who follow Jesus the Messiah as the King of Kings, especially in times of fierce opposition when the future of God's mission seems most vulnerable. The promised global kingdom (Ps 2:8-9) will one day be fully given to the Son of David who is the Son of God – and although the rulers of this world will continue to rise up against Yahweh and his king, those who take refuge in the Son (and therefore in Yahweh himself) will still receive the promised blessing (Ps 2:12) as faithful citizens of the Son's kingdom.

²⁶ Cf. “ανγγελων” as a “hook-word” between Heb 1:1-4 and 1:5-14. The other OT passages cited are, in order: Deut 32:43; Pss 104:4; 45:6,7; 102:25-27; and 110:1.

²⁷ Gunn, “Psalm 2,” 438.

²⁸ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 358. Christian leaders who desire instruction in the biblical ways of leadership do well to look to Jesus the Messiah as an example of humble servant leadership (cf. Jn 13:12-20), but should not feel the need to identify themselves with the Messiah himself in order to secure the respect and obedience of those under their instruction. No messianic interpretation of Christian leadership is necessary in order to follow Paul when he exhorts his readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

²⁹ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 358-9.

³⁰ Cf. Ross, *Psalms*, 214.