

Psalm 110
Oracles of Antiquity



Phillip Michael Garner

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Preserving Oracles of Antiquity

The theological significance of Psalm 110:1 is attested to by its role as the most oft quoted and alluded to verse in the NT.¹ The writer of Hebrews also puts verse four to good use. The purpose for the entire Psalm is to preserve the two oracles contained in verses one and four. I will attend to this claim as the essay unfolds. Initially, we will begin with establishing the idea of verses 1 and 4 as received oracles in the literary world of Israel's scribes.

The first word of verse 1 is not the common speech formula 'Thus says Yahweh' (כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה). The word *neum* is used and although 'utterance' is a good translation, contextually within Psalm 110 the word 'oracle' is preferable because of the antiquity of verses 1 and 4, and because of their theological role in the NT. Although verse 4 does not contain the *neum* speech formula, it does record that Yahweh swore, *sheva*. For God to swear is to make the given oath an irrevocable reality.

It is noted that Psalm 110 contains an abundance of words with roots in Ugarit. However, verse 4 makes a direct connection to the figure Melchizedek from Genesis 14:18 that is believed to be written during the Babylonian exile. The name Melchizedek means 'my king is righteousness'. Of course, there are volumes of literature on the origins and age of Psalm 110, and it is not my purpose to add to that effort. When Jesus referred to the Psalm, he simply followed the tradition and ascribed its origin with David.

Verses 1 and 4 are removed from the Psalm to support the thought and theology of the NT writers. This affirms the importance of the two verses while relegating the rest of the Psalm to literary ingenuity for supporting and providing the two oracles an enduring role in Israel's hymns.

Classified as a 'royal psalm', Psalm 110 is an exceptional piece of crafted poetry contributing to the development of Israel's messianic ideologies and religious nationalism; in both cases they were terribly wrong. Jesus points out with glaring clarity that the Lord *Adonai* of verse 1 cannot be one of David's descendants if David addresses him as Lord. This is so in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 22:43; Mark 12:35; Luke 20:44). That the gospel writers went to great effort to affirm that Jesus' lineage was connected to David demonstrates the importance of Israel's messianic ideologies. Yet, Jesus refuses the identity that would go along with accepting the 'likeness' of David. Jesus is the only begotten son of God and is uniquely different in both his origin and from the violence and nationalism associated with David. So, if we are to read Psalm 110 in light of the revelation of Jesus as messiah, we must read the violence and nationalism as metaphorical for a grander vision.

By disassociating from a messiah like David, Jesus has set aflame the mythic power of David's memory and left the scribes to wrestle with the identity of the *Adonai* of Psalm 110:1. Jesus is the Messiah and is nothing like David, rather Jesus is more than David. Jesus' question is genius, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" At the time of Jesus, the divine name was not spoken, and the word Lord was used in its place. This makes Jesus' question even more potent as a suggestive but apparently unimaginable answer for the scribes and Pharisees. So, the scribes and pharisees cannot answer Jesus' question.

Further, verse 1 of Psalm 110 provides a picture of God as King and the *Adonai* at his right hand sitting as an equal. This is consistent with the Philippian hymn's descent and ascent of

Jesus. Jesus let go of his equality with God to regain it and be given the name that all creation is to bow before.ⁱⁱ

In my reading of the OT the book of Job cries out for the incarnation, the theophanies of Genesis in particular lean towards God taking the next step from appearing in human form to fully becoming a human being. The theology of God as King, likewise, leads to God joining us, as one of us, that God might reign as our King, our *Adonai*.

Excursus

King or Imaging Goodness / Melek or Nagid

In order to aid my reader on the idea of God as King, I want to share, briefly, a couple of pieces that contribute to one's understanding of God as King in scripture. First, is one from the book of Samuel. There is a tension in Samuel over the anointing of a king. The people's desire for a king is a rejection of the reign of Yahewh.

^{NRS} 1 Samuel 8:7 and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

Samuel as a prophet for God experiences God's rejection. He must now anoint men to govern over Israel. Samuel will anoint both Saul and David. Each man will be anointed twice. The first time each of them is anointed the word *king* '*melek*' is not used, rather the word *nagid* which is translated as prince and ruler in the NRSV.

The word *nagid* is applied to a person who will reflect what God is like through their leadership. Both Saul and David were initially anointed to represent God to the people. The second anointing is accomplished by the people.

Saul's First Anointing

^{NRS} 1 Samuel 10:1

Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you *ruler* '*nagid*' over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around. Now this shall be the sign to you that the LORD has anointed you ruler¹ over his heritage:

Saul's Second Anointing

1 Samuel 11:15 ¹⁵ So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul *king* '*melek*' before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

David's First Anointing

1 Samuel 16:13 ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

2 Samuel 6:21 ²¹ David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as *prince 'nagid'* over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD.

2 Samuel 7:8 ⁸ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be *prince 'nagid'* over my people Israel;

David's Second Anointing

^{NRS} 2 Samuel 2:4 Then the people of Judah came, and there they anointed David *king 'melek'* over the house of Judah. When they told David, "It was the people of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul,"

Yahweh's reluctance to anoint a man to be king is evident in the language and anointing of David and Saul. Yahweh longs to be King over Israel and all of humanity. God's invisibility and unfathomable distance as creator limits his ability to fulfill humanity's need for a King. What will he do?

Theological Shaping of the Psalter

The shaping of the psalter is an important part of understanding and reading the book of Psalms. It is not my purpose in this brief piece to offer all the purposeful placing of the Psalms in the Psalter. Rather, I simply want my reader to know that after Psalm 89, a psalm that laments the failure of the Davidic covenant, the word *King 'melek'* is not used to reference an Israelite king. This is significant in light of the shaping of the Psalter.

See: Wilson, Gerald H. (1985). *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*.

The failure of the Davidic covenant attests to the question of its origin as an inviolable promise or else it is completed in the resurrection of Jesus. This theme of letting a promise die that it might be resurrected is first seen in the Aqedah, the sacrifice of Isaac. At least according to the writer of Hebrews understanding of Genesis 22, and the book of Hebrews is scripture.

A Canonical and Poetical Reading of Psalm 110

Psalm 110

The LORD says to my lord,
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

The LORD sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.

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.

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

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

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

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

Psalm 110:1

Yahweh is a Spirit and does not sit upon a throne. Yet, at the place of equality and power, at the right hand, the one who works the will of God rests in the assurance that God will place all that resists his reign as subservient enemies. The victorious Lord finds rest and approval and awaits the victory of God.

Isaiah 66:1

*Thus says the LORD:
Heaven is my throne
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is my resting place?*

Psalm 110:2

Zion the hill that replaced Sinai is exalted as the highest of all places for it no longer opposes the one anointed to be King. For from this humble hill there is one who rose to the heavens. His reign has already begun even though his enemies seek to claim the humanity he loves.

Micah 4:1

*In days to come
the mountain of the LORD'S house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.*

Psalm 110:3

Willingly they all come, he will lose not a one, every mountain becomes holy for *Adonai* has won. From a tomb early in the morning the vigor of your life returned.

Mark 16:1

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

Psalm 110:4

God has sworn, the irrevocable act of joining humanity is complete, there is a righteous King who forever represents humanity to God and God to humanity. *Adonai* is become one of us, even a priest.

Hebrews 6:19, 20

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Psalm 110:5

The Lord's enemies are sin, violence, death, and shame each one has reigned like the kings of the earth, finding their home in power's curse. Their designs are shattered now like shards of silica to line the shore with sand that all might walk softly, peacefully, on the shore where chaos once lived.

1Cor. 15:26

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Psalm 110:6

All those who sat at the head of power are exposed, judgment has come, and none can hide or escape. The death of all their symbols, ceremonies, and systems has arrived, and are exposed across the earth as enemies of life.

Revelation 13:15

...and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

Psalm 110:7

With one foot in heaven and one on earth he fills the world with living water and lifts his head above all powers to reign forevermore.

John 4:10

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

ⁱ Psalm 110: 1 quotations and allusions

Verse 1 - Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42,43; Acts 2:34–35; Hebrews 1:13.

Compare: Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12,13; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22

Psalm 110:4 - Hebrews 5:6; 6:20; 7:17,21

ⁱⁱ Read my PDF essay, An Ontological Hymn available at mikegarner.org. The hymn can be translated as ‘the name belonging to Jesus’ and is at least suggestive that the name of God *Yahweh* is applicable to the son.