

Psalm 72

At last.

At last the last of the Psalms of David.

Though some of the Psalms in the remaining half of the Psalter will be ascribed to David, this Psalm marks the end of the collection, actually the two collections of the Psalms of David – Book One (Psalms 1-41) and Book Two (Psalms 42-72).

Book Three will be dramatically different. Rather than the prayers of a shepherd boy who became a successful warrior, who became a great monarch, ruling over a united kingdom, powerfully defending its borders, Book Three will be the collective prayers of a nation without borders in exile in Babylon yearning to come home. The complaints of David concerning his many enemies within the nation, will be the laments of a whole nation concerning the nation that is over them. David openly wondered whether God would always be with him; exiled Israel openly wonders if God will ever be with them again.

When Israel laments in Book Three it will use the laments of David as model for the expression of their own trials and tribulations and they will offer a, sometimes faint and sometimes robust, praise for the promised deliverance they await, and when they do so they will sometimes use the words of David. In this respect one may say, and some have said through the ages, that all the Psalms are the Psalms of David. But it is unmistakable that the Psalms of Book Three are prayed and sung by a community in a dark place.

David wrote in the genre of Jazz and Gospel; exiled Israel sings Blues and Gospel.

Think of the songs of your life – your favorite ones, the ones you find yourself humming without effort or intentional recall – and when you once sang them. Are they different songs of different eras that reflect the changing circumstances of your life?

**Now think specifically of the important sacred songs of your faith. Have different hymns and spiritual songs expressed your faith and expressed the Faith differently to you in the changing eras of your life and faith?
Which ones?
Which ones comfort you now?
Which ones challenge you now?**

**Can you trace any difference in the sacred songs that express the faith of the individual – namely you – and those that express the faith of the whole people of God?
Which do you hum most often?**

The King.

This Psalm is all about a king.

Which one?

Solomon.

Kinda.

The superscription (the writings above the Psalms) on this Psalm usually says something like 'Of Solomon'. Without further grammatical clues that would come from a whole sentence we cannot be finally be sure if this means 'by' Solomon or 'for' Solomon.

Remember your eighth grade grammar teacher teaching the difference between an objective genitive and a subjective genitive? (Did I just recall a bad memory for you?) If the 'of' (a genitive modifier of a noun) is subjective then Solomon is the subject of the sentence/thought and thus is the actor and thus the Psalm is written 'by' Solomon; in this way it is 'of' him. But if the 'of' is objective then Solomon is the object (direct or indirect) and receives the action implied (writing this Psalm) and thus the Psalm is written 'for' him; in this way it is 'of' him. Scholars and traditions have come to both conclusions, the majority thinking this Psalm is 'for' Solomon and written by his father David.

The subscription (the writing below the Psalm, sometimes called a colophon) of this Psalm, and is to be read as part of the Psalm, influences this decision. It says 'This concludes the Psalms of David...' suggesting to many that it identifies this particular Psalm (and that of the whole collection of Book Two, and maybe Book One) as written by David. But... note there is a genitive, 'of David'. Are we sure it is objective? Alas. Old Testament scholars argue about such things and graduate students write dissertations on the subject. Enough already.

Let's say David writes 'of' Solomon. The earliest Hebrew scholars thought so. If so, then we can safely imagine that this Psalm was written by an elderly king contemplating his own passing and the passing on of the kingdom to his son. The succession after and the inheritance of David was contested. We know that David promised Bathsheba that her son Solomon would be the next king and that David controversially supported Solomon (who was not his oldest son). Was David weighing in once more on the succession with this Psalm? Was this Psalm published immediately? Was it read like a will soon after his death?

In any case it matches Solomon quite particularly and appears to be written by David.

Hymns, and spiritual songs all have origins. Some of these origins are dramatic.

Look up on Wikipedia and elsewhere the author and origin of your favorite hymn.

Watch again the 'Parson to Person' of last Friday (the 15th) on the circumstances surrounding the writing and singing of 'Now Thank We All Our God' – The Thirty Years War and The Black Plague. Does this knowledge help you understand, appreciate, and sing the hymn all the more?

Here are some of the ways this Psalm seems to speak 'of' Solomon and 'by' David:

Solomon's reign was characterized by wisdom and wealth. God had early given him a choice of the two; Solomon chose wisdom; God rewarded that choice by giving him both. The stories of Solomon's wisdom in the Bible emphasize wisdom in making judgement – justice between competing claims of right and righteousness. This Psalm holds up as the core characteristic of the good king his rightness in judgment. Sounds like Solomon.

The visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon 'to see for myself' as she says it, the wisdom and wealth of Solomon is concluded by her giving Solomon gold (Sheba was a goldmine in antiquity). The Psalm says, 'May gold from Sheba be given him'. How's that for prophecy?

There is a play on words here. 'Prosperity' (twice) in our translation, 'peace' sometimes in others, is the well-known word, even in English, 'shalom'. 'Solomon' as a name (proper noun) is not related in meaning to 'shalom', but it is a homonym – that is, it sounds nearly exactly alike. Our English ears could not tell the difference. Was David, late in life, and well past Solomon's childhood, explaining the name of His son to his world and all of Israel, cleverly imbedding his name twice in the Psalm?

Writers have styles. David as a writer had many styles - most good writers do. Most good writers over a life-time use different styles for different purposes. The style of writing in this Psalm – the vocabulary, the grammar, the meter of the poetry, the imagery, the precision of language coupled with an intentional ambiguity of referent (more on that later) is Davidic; he's done it before. But he hasn't written like this often. This was a special occasion – once in a lifetime - so a special way of writing was employed.

All this adds up to David writing this Psalm 'for' Solomon. And it suggests when it was to be prayed and sung – at Solomon's coronation. Perfect. This one last Psalm of David is now released/published/used for the first time when his son becomes king. It is as if the final editors who decided the order the Psalms would appear in the Psalter placed this last to make a point, the same point David was making – at the critical moment of transference of power and legitimacy from one king to another – 'look at Solomon; hear David'. Solomon is the first king of Israel to succeed his father. David is the first King of Israel to pick his successor. Thus the beginning of the Davidic monarchy.

David had been promised by God through the words of the prophet Nathan that his offspring would reign on the throne forever. No other king from any other family has sat on David's throne. This is the Psalm of that first transference from one generation to another.

What is the best song to sing when a new President, democratically elected, is inaugurated?

Both David and Solomon reigned for 40 years. Both reigned over a time of great prosperity. David secured the borders; Solomon expanded them. Both reigned over a united kingdom. They will be the last to do so.

Nonetheless, for all the exceptionalism of David and Solomon, (never was the kingdom so united, never was it so successful in war, never were its borders so vast, never was its prosperity so great), this Psalm, we think, was used at the coronation of all the kings thereafter, and perhaps also on the anniversaries of their enthronements.

If so, it becomes a powerful Psalm, this last Psalm of David, in defining what a monarch is and does, what commission he has before God, and what duty he has to his people. When Bible scholars ask the question, 'What is the role of government?' it asks this question of Psalm 72. What answer does Psalm 72 give?

Righteousness. Righteousness defined as the provision of justice. Justice defined as the protection of the whole nation from its enemies, other nations presumably, and protection for the poor and needy within the nation, from others within the nation presumably.

The king has power. The power is to protect – the whole nation and the vulnerable within the nation. Kings have necessary enemies – oppressors - both hostile nations and the cruel citizens within the nation. The nation has the right to expect that leaders will lead in protecting the land and the poor of the land. To do this leaders need power, of course, no oppressor gives up their power voluntarily. They need legitimacy (recognition that they have, as the New Testament says it, the right to 'exercise the power of the sword'. And they need to be able to make good judgements, knowing right from wrong, which is not always the easiest thing (Solomon will testify that this comes from God alone).

One more thing the king must have – the will to do what is right. Thus this Psalm. It is not just coronation accompaniment, it defines the commission – exercise protection by power used always in the employ of justice for all the people and for the poor and needy. And it reminds (commands?) the king to do the right thing.

What song should be sung to Presidents at their inaugurations, and anniversaries thereafter?

Such a reminder is necessary. David will lose sight of this at the end of his reign; Solomon too. Those that follow them will seldom do well. The kings that follow will engage in alliances with hostile and oppressive nations and take sides against the poor in their own land. This Psalm cannot only be read as empowering kings, it critiques them as well. Israel will learn to recite this Psalm with sorrow and disappointment.

And...

Israel will learn to sing this song with hope. Great hope. Messianic hope.

Precisely because this Psalm is aspirational and never historical, being far more prescriptive than descriptive, no one ever having lived up to its high standards, it becomes a Psalm of hope – hope for the day when a king would ascend the throne of David who would reign in righteousness. Forever.

This hope, this hope for a Righteous King, is the hope for a Messiah – a Messianic King. This hope for a reign that would not end became, not the hope for an unending succession of David kings, but for a Davidic King that had himself no end. Long before Christians read Jesus as the fulfillment of this hope, Jewish scholars and people had cited it as a promise of God that the day would come when a king would occupy the throne of David and would never be dethroned. This ‘son of David’ would throw off the shackles of oppressive foreign nations and restore justice to the poor and needy. He would never die.

Jesus surely was the ‘son of David’, but is it clear:

**that he protected the nation from the oppressive foreign government – Rome?;
that he restored justice to the poor and needy?;
that he never died?**

How would you answer someone who asks why your belief in Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies of the Bible, Psalm 72 included, is not challenged by the historical facts?

With this and other thoughts in mind Calvin warned us all to avoid thinking that this Psalm was only about Jesus.

First, he says, David wrote it for Solomon, and then later the nation used it at every(?) coronation. In order for it to have the powerful aspirational and critiquing effect that was intended it needs to be about earthly kings first. The Bible always has first readers – the first readers!

Second, making this Psalm only Messianic, is offensive to the Jews – here he is thinking about his contemporary Jews whose scholarship on the Old Testament Calvin used often and with grateful respect. We are not to take away their Bible away from them. God spoke to them – first. Now God speaks to us.

How would you explain how one piece of literature – one word if you will – can speak to different things to different people over different generations in different places, yet always be ‘the one Word of God’?

Why do we with confidence read this Psalm just as legitimately about Jesus as it was legitimately about the ancient kings of Israel? Because it fits so well – the description of the righteousness of Jesus in the Gospels seems to be the perfect fit to the description in the Psalm? Yes, that helps, but the answer is No. The ‘fit’ in these matters is always intriguing and we can legitimately imagine and search for such connections, but we need also to be humble about it. Though Jesus is the fulfillment of the whole Bible – Old and New Testament, it may be merely our interpretation at work. We believe these passages are about Jesus because the Bible says so. That’s where we get our confidence. At the end of Luke’s Gospel the risen Jesus says to his disciples, ‘Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms’.

Though Psalm 72 is not quoted in the New Testament, the New Testament writers knew the Old Testament and its hope, indeed promise, of a Messianic King. When they wrote their New Testament Gospels and Letters they used not just quotes but the imagery and plots of the Old Testament. Here are some of those that apply to Psalm 72:

Jesus is the ‘Savior of the Nation’ and the ‘King of the Jews’,

In the all-important first announcement of the coming of Jesus, as reported by Luke, the angel Gabriel says to Mary of the child to be born to her, ‘The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end’. Mary sings in response of this child, ‘He has brought down rulers from their thrones (think oppressive foreign nations) but has lifted up the humble (think the poor and needy)’.

This conversation makes sense (‘makes sense only’, I am tempted to say) because of Psalm 72 and the long known, both disappointing but yet hopeful, description of the king as commissioned by God to protect the people of God from oppressive nations and oppressors within the nation.

This son of David – Jesus born to Mary - not Solomon nor any other of the ‘sons’ of David, is the final fulfillment of the Psalm.

Now, with this confidence, and permission, of Luke’s testimony, go for it.

What are the other New Testament passages that speak of Jesus as the long awaited Messianic King? Start with the angels’ announcement to the shepherds in the next chapter in Luke, the gold brought by the magi to the infant king in Matthew’s opening chapters (good grief, even Herod figures it out), and keep going past the sign board on the cross, all the way to the last book of the New Testament when ‘The Lamb’ sits on a