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AS THE NATIONS RAGE

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As the Nations Rage

Why do the nations rage?
Why do they plot and scheme?
Their bullets can't stop the prayers we pray
In the name of the Prince of Peace

The Lord in Heaven laughs
 He knows what is to come
 While all the chiefs of state plan their big attacks
 Against His anointed One
 The Church of God she will not bend her knees
 To the gods of this world though they promise her peace
 She stands her ground.
 Stands firm on the Rock
 Watch their walls tumble down when she lives out His love¹

The song by the famed ragamuffin might be one of the best ways to sum up what this Psalm communicates to its readers: The LORD's sovereignty is unmatched. It is a common tease from many Old Testament scholars that primarily New Testament students, when studying the Old Testament, seem to find Jesus everywhere we look. I like to think that I am in good company with that quirk, as one of the greatest Old Testament scholars of all time did much the same.² This psalm is all about Jesus and His church. It is deeply messianic, which gives hope to those who are considered worthy enough to suffer for the sake of the Gospel and the Kingdom, just like the suffering King we serve. However, it also gives a fair warning to all that when Jesus comes again to consummate His Kingdom, one will not want to find themselves aligned with one of the conspiring or raging nations upon which He has set His gaze and laughed at. In this essay, I will unpack my hermeneutical method in understanding this Psalm by walking through the hermeneutical process outlined by Third Millennium Ministries and the teachings in this class. It

¹ Rich Mullins, *While the Nations Rage*, 1989.

² Of course, I am referring to the great Apostle Paul, who previously was a student under Gamaliel while studying to be a Pharisee. He famously (and allegorically) told a group of Gentile Christians in Corinth that in the Old Testament story of Moses striking the rock and getting water from it, that the rock was Jesus Himself. If Paul sees Jesus in a rock, certainly it is not a stretch for me and every other Christian on earth to see Jesus' fingerprints all over this particular psalm.

is a three step process that begins with adequate preparation, deep investigation or interpretation, and concluding with appropriate application to our modern day situation.

Preparation

The Second Psalm, like any of the Psalms, will press itself against one's soul in different ways dependent upon one's biblical literacy level, cultural background, and current emotional situation. For instance, in the opening lines, there is a conspiracy against God by the kings of the earth and God laughs at them, he mocks them, and "in his anger terrifies them". How well one is acquainted with God's character will make the reader feel differently about reading these lines. How well does the reader know the story of Israel's struggle against her enemies? When we read this, do we feel as if God is just in His anger, or do we feel compassion for the enemies? How is our current disposition toward authorities in our lives? How much does our understanding of the early church's struggle and their use of this Psalm in Acts 4 affect our reading of the Psalm in its originality? This will immediately affect our questions of the text.

Later we read that God is speaking to "His anointed One" and says, "You are my Son, Today I have become your Father." Once again, it is easy to find familiarity with this line in the New Testament as this is what is said from the heavens at Jesus' baptism and during His Transfiguration. However, understanding the cultural differences between how we view the phrase "son of God" and how the ancients understood the phrase is emphatic to understanding the text. "Son of God" was not considered a divine title, for all kings were considered sons of the gods in all ancient cultures. Whereas it would reflect a theological system in which the kings would become deified later on, it was purely a royal title. Not so with the messianic implications

of this Psalm. Not only will this come to be a reference to the Davidic line of royalty, but an actual divine Son will take this Psalm to be His validation of identity.

When it comes to interpreting the Psalms, I have found that using different lenses to read the Psalms allows the interpreter to understand from multiple perspectives what the Psalm meant to the original audiences and how it can be interpreted and applied to a contemporary audience.³

Interpretation

Lenses allow us to view the objects of our study more clearly, and from multiple perspectives and differing angles. For someone struggling to see as an elementary aged student, an optometrist may prescribe glasses to help correct or enhance their sight. While driving, one may need to use sunglasses to see what is otherwise blinded by direct sunlight. Stafford continues the analogy,

The lenses on the Hubble space telescope have allowed us to see into the farthest reaches of the universe. Likewise, an electron microscope allows us to see things that are invisible otherwise. Night-vision glasses, infrared vision -- all of these lenses make a difference in how we see things, causing us to notice things that we otherwise might have missed.⁴

The Lens of the Author

³ I am indebted to multiple generations of language scholars and bible teachers for helping to formulate this interpretive method. However, it is to Matthew Stafford who was the first to formulate all six together as a hermeneutic method. Stafford is a linguistics scholar and Bible professor, who was my first teacher of the Psalms. Matt holds a BTh in the Old Testament and an MA in linguistics. He is a master of the Hebrew language. He has been teaching the Psalms for ten years and has been published in the Christian Standard many times for his reflections on Old Testament texts. It is to him that I attribute the compiling of these six lenses to view the Psalms through and by which I gladly continue to use and teach with. Matt has a class website that holds many of his lectures and notes, but I also have his notebook and notes from lectures in his class. It would be impossible for me to write this without using the methodology he helped ingrain into me, so I wish to attribute this and many of the comments surrounding the six lenses as first and foremost his hermeneutic that I am applying to this specific Psalm and from my specific experience, research, and reflection. Readers may find his site and many of his notes here: <https://www.mattstaffordpsalms.com/>

⁴ Matthew Stafford, "Introduction to the Psalms" (lecture, class notes, OT 330 L Psalms, Ozark Christian College, Joplin, MO, August 2015).

What are these lenses? First, we read the psalm with the author's intended meaning in mind. This is attempting to get into the mind of the author asking what is the situation. In the case of Psalm 2, we don't actually know who wrote the Psalm, but we have assumptions regarding the occasion and the reason for the Psalm being written.⁵ According to one scholar, Psalm 2 was written post-exilic, written at a time when there were no Kings in Israel. This is a visionary scene of revolt against God and His anointed Messiah, when God would raise up a future idealized ruler, not a portrayal of a real situation.⁶ Whereas I agree there is a fuller fulfillment in God raising up His Messiah at a later time, and this Psalm clearly looks forward to that day, I have become convinced from other sources that this could have been a real coronation hymn for the real Kings of Israel (and later Judah) during the royal period of Israel's history.⁷ Many others, including the Apostles in the book of Acts, suggest that this Psalm, written in a

⁵ In Acts, the Apostles quote this psalm and attribute it to their "father David who spoke through the Holy Spirit". This could be a claim to authorship and we wouldn't need much to convince many that because the Bible tells us who wrote it, that's the end of the matter. However, other theories are still permissible such that it could have been Luke adding in his best guess as to who wrote Psalm 2, or it could have been based on a Jewish tradition, or most likely just an overall attribution to David because it is from the Psalter. It is not a ridiculous notion to question whether Luke recorded exactly what the Apostles said in that moment or if he is recording commentary from someone's memory who just happened to attribute the Psalm to David from pure nostalgia. We can hold an inerrant view of Scripture and also allow pre-enlightenment understandings of "factual correctness" to still be true. Acts could also be picking up on a midrash or rabbinic tradition that attributes the Psalm to David, or it could be a common linguistic or cultural idea. In the United States we do this with some of our founding heroes. Jefferson is noted for writing the Declaration, although in reality he was one of three who were tasked at writing the well-known document. In the same way, Madison is attributed the title, "Father of the Constitution" since he defended and fought for its adoption more rigorously than anyone else. However, he was one of many who contributed heavily to the final product that the United States uses to structure its government. Since David wrote so many of these poems (at least 73, maybe as much as 85), the whole book is occasionally referred to as the psalms of David, even though we know many were written by others such as; Moses, Asaph, the Sons of Korah, and the two Ezrahites. (See Bonhoeffer, *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, for this idea fleshed out more.)

⁶ Moses Buitenhuis, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (New York: KTAV, 1969), pg 792.

⁷ Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms, a Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Harner, with an introduction by James Muilenberg (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pg 23

Davidic style, could have been written by David or at least one of the priests during David's reign for the coronation of his successor: King Solomon.⁸

No matter when the Psalm was written, it is obvious that the reason it was written is to convey the special relationship between the leader of the nation of Israel and the LORD.

Kriegshauser paints this picture for us,

If nations and peoples, kings and princes rebel against God and his representative on earth, it is because they do not understand the unbreakable bond between Israel's God and his anointed king. God is the one who "sits in the heavens" (v. 4) and who has "begotten" the king as his son on the day of the king's coronation (v.7). Speaking through the prophet Nathan, God had said of David's son, "I will be a father to him and he a son to me" (2 Sam 7:14). No other Israelite could boast of having God as his father like the reigning son of David.⁹

Another important feature that I attribute to the actual author of this Psalm and one way in which I believe the author was trying to communicate truths about God is through his use of chiasm within the Psalm itself. Verse groupings 1-3 and 10-12 are regarding the kings of the earth, whereas verses 4-6 and 8-9 are about the activities of God in heaven. This leaves verse 7 in the very middle of the chiasm which is usually the major theme or some emphatic idea. It is this verse where the Anointed One reflects on what God specifically said to him, that he had become God's adopted Son. As mentioned earlier in this essay, there are two occasions in which there is a voice from heaven which quotes the beginning of this particular verse. The Father is validating the Son for who He is.

⁸ See Footnote 5.

⁹ Laurence Kriegshauser, O.S.B., *Praying the Psalms in Christ*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) Retrieved from Kindle location 282.

The Lens of the Theologian

Next we read the psalm as a theologian, gleaning the big truths about God. What stands out to me from this vantage point is the original response of the nations who are conspiring. They do not wish to be under the LORD's authority any longer. They remark that the burden of being subjected to God's authority is like chains they wish could be broken, shackles that have been binding them in place. This is coming from a heart that has been turned away from God and has become depraved. They no longer see the goodness of God's authority in their lives, or of His anointed ruler. They wish to be in charge of their own lives or nations. Harman summarizes it this way,

When they take their stand and gather together they make a declaration of their independence... Sinful men never want to walk within the limitations that God places on His creatures. In their arrogance they proclaim their supposed freedom, and they claim to be master of their own destinies. Their spirit is typified in Ernest Henley's poem, *Invictus*:

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll.
 I am the master of my fate;
 I am the captain of my soul.¹⁰

This attitude expressed by the rebel nations is a product of a shadow long cast from Eden. The very first rebellion in which mankind brought forth iniquity into the cosmos was a lack of trust in God's authority and submission to His rule. Our primeval ancestors, goaded by the Satan, wished to have a knowledge that only God had, a knowledge for which we were not created to be able to hold. The moment the fruit touched their lips, our clay pots of bodies shattered. The reality is when we refuse to submit under God's authority, it is not chains or shackles that are broken, but rather, we become broken. Spiritually, by sin. Physically, by the anointed One who

¹⁰ Allan Harman, *Psalms: Psalms 1-72* (London: Mentor, 2011), 102

“will break them with a rod of iron;” and “dash them to pieces like pottery”. There lies in the mentality of the nations of Psalm 2, a plague which infects us all, sin which bends our innate God-given desire to rule creation inward and makes us fools rather than wise.¹¹

The Psalm ends with a warning and a blessing, however, for the nations who “take refuge in Him” by honoring the Son, celebrating His rule with trembling, and serving Him. Basically, the very things Adam and Eve were given responsibility for God still allows us to serve through, but we must always recognize God’s supreme rule and not try to overthrow Him in the world or within our hearts.

The Lens of the Compiler

Third, we attempt to get ourselves into the frame of mind of the compiler of the book. This is what the compiler (or editor) in the post-exilic Temple did to collect the 150 Psalms into the five books of the Psalms that we know today. There are clear themes that are associated with different eras of Israel’s history that these books echo back to. For our quandary, we are only interested in the first grouping, that is Book One where the lineage of David and David’s rule are celebrated. This is the era of good feelings for the Israelites. Although there were still struggles, what really enveloped the culture and the people of David’s day was a strong belief that God was with them and that David was truly the Lord’s anointed One. I think this lens helps us in a huge way when we look at what is specifically said by God in Psalm 2 and how the first book as a whole is arranged. God is clearly in control and his heart is bent towards helping the King of Israel. He is like a lion ready to pounce upon anyone who would come against his Son, the King.

¹¹ This idea of sin bending our good desires inward is attributed to Dr. Christopher A. Hall, “Corporate Flesh” (lecture, THEO 210: Foundations of Christian Spirituality, Eastern University, Philadelphia, PA, March 2016). I have applied it to this particular psalm.

Furthermore, the arrangement of the entire first book of the psalter¹² leaves us wanting to dive deeper into the richness of this text. According to Stafford, “A careful analysis reveals a multi-layered, subtle, and profoundly meaningful structure and arrangement by the Compiler. This arrangement is apparent in all five Books of Psalms, but it is particularly striking in Book one, Psalms 1-41.”¹³ There are a number of ways to analyze the arrangement, two of the keys to understanding this arrangement are seeing the big picture of the book’s composition by looking at its chiasms and the way in which common themes are linked together.

If one looks at the overall structure of Book One, a chiasm comes to light. Psalms 1 and 2 reflect a battle between wise and foolish individuals and wise and foolish nations. This connects with Psalm 14’s declaration that, “the fool says in his heart there is no God.” Psalms 3 through 7 are laments which connect with the five laments of Psalms 9 through 13. This leaves us with a chiastic structure in which Psalm 8 stands at the center. A good question to ask at this stage of interpretation would be to what extent Psalm 2 connects to Psalm 8, because at least in the mind of the Compiler of this book, Psalm 2 seems to have been an important stepping stone to bring readers to the major theme of the Psalm 8 creation hymn. So what theological idea or thematic point connects the two? Without spending too much time working through Psalm 8, I would like to offer that the connection lies in the glorification of God and the exaltation of humanity as God’s co-rulers over the cosmos. The same God who crowns humanity “with glory and honor”

¹² According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a “psalter” was originally a musical instrument, and only in a metaphorical sense is the word used for the collection of prayers that were offered to God as songs, ie the book of Psalms. I refer to the book as the Psalter numerous times in this essay. See: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 158.

¹³ Matthew Stafford, "The Arrangement of Book One" (lecture, class notes, OT 330 L Psalms, Ozark Christian College, Joplin, MO, August 2015).

scoffs at those who dare attempt to skew His plans. He has installed His king in Zion and we only receive honor when we submit to His rule.

The contrast between wisdom and folly introduced in the first Psalm is replicated in the second. If one reads the first two Psalms together, the parallels are clear in their relation to one another. The second psalm offers the same contrast between the wise and foolish as is found in the opening psalm, although here it begins with the actions of foolish nations, who rage or conspire against God and His plans, but it ends with the actions of a wise nation who, exhorted by God Himself, “takes refuge in Him”.¹⁴

Thematically there are two themes underneath the umbrella of wisdom that are revealed when we pair Psalm 1 and Psalm 2: the revelation of God in the Torah (1:2-3) and the reign of God through His son (2:6-7). These two themes, the revelation of God and the reign of God, are driven throughout the entire book of Psalms, and our mystery compiler who shaped the final arrangement of the Psalter meant to communicate these two themes as the pillars of wisdom from God. This was necessary to place at the beginning of the Psalter for these Psalms are meaningless without understanding it is God’s wisdom at work.

As an additional note, we observe that the second psalm has twice as many lines as the first, twelve to six. The multiplied number of verses reminds the readers that what is true of the individual (Psalm 1, singular) is true of the nation (Psalm 2, plural). This is one way numbers work in Hebrew poetry and how the Compiler would have chosen to place the Psalms back-to-back in order to communicate even deeper truths than only what the words on the scroll say. Understanding the mind of the compiler, or at least opening yourself to how the Compiler

¹⁴ S. Edward Tesh & Walter D. Zorn, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Psalms Volume 1*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999) pg. 91

may have thought through his editing of the Psalter we have today, can open up a world of greater understanding of the texts themselves.

The Lenses of Christ and the New Testament

The last three lenses bring us into the New Testament usage and era in which we envision Jesus praying the Psalms and seeing his role in them, we examine the usage of the psalms by the writers of the New Testament, and we read them as our own congregation's prayers. Through this last lens, we ask to what extent this Psalm helps our churches have deeper conversations with the eternal God of the universe? Perhaps we are perplexed as Bonhoeffer was when he asked, "How is it possible for a man and Jesus Christ to pray the psalter together? It is the incarnate Son of God... who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God..."¹⁵

There is no Scripture of Jesus praying this Psalm or quoting it, however, as noted previously, it was said of Him multiple times in the Scriptures. Twice most emphatically, when the voice of the Father quotes a portion of it at Jesus' baptism and again during His Transfiguration. God the Father has announced Jesus to be not just 'a son' but 'THE son'. "This psalm is obviously and confessedly Messianic," writes Joseph Bryant Rotherham in his classic work.¹⁶ The word messiah comes from the Hebrew 'Mashiach' (המשיח), which means "anointed one"-whether applied to Kings, like Saul, David, or Hezekiah; Prophets, like Samuel, Elijah, or Elisha; or of the promised Messianic figure of Jewish eschatological hopes: Jesus of Nazareth. Rotherham continues, "On what level this psalm is Messianic, whether on the lower or the higher level remains to be seen; but Messianic it is, on its surface and down into its deepest depths. To

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1974) pg. 20.

¹⁶ Joseph Bryant Rotherham, *Studies in the Psalms Vol. 1: College Press Edition*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1970) pg. 72.

ascertain its scope, it must be carefully and correctly interpreted.”¹⁷ Kriegshauser adds that this Psalm is unequivocally about the coronation of the Son of David as King, that is, it was written in its origin as a Royal coronation hymn, but it’s later meaning and implications overshadow its immediate context which gives it a much deeper application for the Church today.¹⁸

Kriegshauser continues this way, “While the son of David had become an adopted son of God on the “day” of his coronation, Jesus has been Son of God by nature from all eternity.”¹⁹ In Jesus there is added a totally unexpected meaning to the term “son” of God in this Psalm. It is not merely that God meets *His Anointed One* on Zion to lead us, but that God meets *us* through His Anointed One on His Holy mountain. It is here where God, by Jesus’ obedience, truly does make the nations Jesus’ inheritance. For when the Son of Man is lifted up, He will draw all peoples to Himself.²⁰

The Apostles saw Jesus all over this text, as they reflected on what they became witnesses to, and praying for boldness to be “obedient to God rather than men”²¹ they prayed the words of Psalm 2 back to God, acknowledging that “the kings of the earth” truly did conspire against Jesus when Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the enemies of Jesus. They did what God had decided beforehand would happen, yet they still did so not out of a desire to

¹⁷ J. B. Rotherham, 73.

¹⁸ L. Kriegshauser, O.S.B., Kindle location 309.

¹⁹ L. Kriegshauser, O.S.B., Kindle location 296.

²⁰ John 3:13 and John 12:32 NIV, I use these Scriptures together to point out Jesus’ claim that as the serpent was lifted up by Moses and people were healed by looking at it, so when Jesus is lifted up he will, according to His own statements draw the nations to Himself.

²¹ Acts 4:19 & 5:29 which was originally a quote from Socrates to the Athenian elders in which Socrates was on trial for his life. This can be found in Plato’s Apology 29.

follow God's will but actually attempting to destroy the "Anointed One". They scoffed at God's plans, but God scoffed right back at them by raising Jesus from the dead. The story the Apostles witnessed mixed with the words of this Psalm give rise to their petition that God would "consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."²²

Application

I saved the final lens of how the Church should read the Psalm collectively for the concluding portion of this essay. Truly none of the above information matters very much if it does not help us apply the Scripture to our lives. How can believers apply Psalm 2 to their lives? How could one preach and teach Psalm 2? How might God use Psalm 2 among those to whom we minister?

We find in Psalm 2 that the Son enjoys an unparalleled intimacy with the Father. When Jesus asks for the nations, in particular the spread of salvation across the globe, the Father sends the Spirit and the Church explodes.²³ Through Christ, God has established a kingdom that reigns over all the cosmos (1 Cor. 15:28) However, this isn't enough for the Godhead to be content in. Christ, being our brother who He is not ashamed to call us family members, longs for us all to come into His Kingdom. He wishes to share His divine sonship with mankind, restoring Eden, and fulfilling the promise made to Abraham. It is through baptism that we are accepted and become sons of God, brothers of Christ, and members of His Body. Only as we find ourselves in Him, can we too, pray this Psalm and make the same claim as the Anointed One, "The Lord said

²² Acts 4:29 NIV

²³ Tesh & Zorn, pg.98

to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.' We share in the very real relationship the divine Son of God has with His Father.²⁴

Although the son of God within Psalm 2 is fixated in a place, that is, God's Holy mountain, the Temple mount: Zion; God's rule is to radiate from this place. The Messiah is to reign and dwell at the very place where God dwells among the nations. For Christians, however this is no isolated or fixated place. The earthly members which make up the Body of Christ have become miniature, mobile temples. "For it is in Him we live, and move, and have our being," the Apostle Paul would later quote in Acts 17. Kriegshauser notes, "At baptism, we call God Father in the midst of the Church. God establishes his rule on earth through the people who believe in him and form a temple of living stones."²⁵ Jesus' reign is expanding outward from the Church in Jerusalem to include all nations and peoples throughout all history and all ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures.

The revelation of the king as a chosen son of God is robed in an atmosphere of conspiracy, rage, and unrest. The psalmist seems to be amazed that the kingdoms of the world are raging and whispering threats against God's rule through His chosen king. He also sees beyond this budding contention to what is actually true: God is seated on high and He is sovereign over all. His laughter at the expense of His enemies quickly becomes anger for the Lion of Judah is ready to defend His people. We, as His holy people, His royal nation, a people who belong to Him, can rest like the other Psalmist would, that "though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains

²⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2780

²⁵ L. Kriegshauser, O.S.B., Kindle location 309.

quake with their surging; we will not fear. For God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in times of trouble.”²⁶

²⁶ Psalm 46:2-3, 1 NIV

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