

# IN HONOUR OF KING YAHWEH: The Book of Psalms

Week 2 — Yahweh's anointed ruler



## Review

In Old Testament times, Israel was God's representative kingdom among the nations. The Psalms were the worship offered to the King by his kingdom, so it is hardly surprising that the central message of the Book of Psalms is: **YHWH is king**.

The Hebrew people built richly textured poems by layering **parallel** expressions over each other. The parallel expression could be:

- the same idea (*synonymous*),
- a contrasting idea (*antithetical*), or
- the development of an idea (*synthetic*).

We will use these questions as we study the Psalms:

- a) genre and structure;
- b) meaning for Israel;
- c) meaning in light of Jesus;
- d) meaning for us.

Let's apply these questions to Psalm 2.

## Psalm 2

### *Genre and structure*

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm, since it explicitly deals with the king. It declares that YHWH rules everything, even though the rulers of the nations refuse his authority. That reality inevitably leads to conflict. The Psalm deals with how that conflict will be resolved, i.e. how YHWH's kingship will ultimately be established over the whole earth.

The NIV structures Psalm 2 in four stanzas:

- a) The rebellious plot (2:1-3)
- b) The heavenly monarch's response (2:4-6)
- c) The divine decree (2:7-9)
- d) The appropriate response (2:10-12)

### *Meaning for Israel*

#### *Background*

Genesis 1–11 declares that the whole world is under God's authority, but the nations have resisted his reign. That's why God chose the Abrahamic family—to restore the blessing of God's reign to the nations (Gen 12:3). In other words, all the nations should be God's kingdom, and the Abrahamic nation has the role of showing the other nations how wonderful it is to be under God's reign, guided by his wise Law (Torah).

But in practice, Israel constantly struggled against the nations that wanted to oppress and abuse them. These nations had no respect for the boundaries of the Land that YHWH had given to Israel. They raided them in the time of the Judges, and they constantly fought against them in the time of the kings. Ultimately the empires of Assyria and Babylon overran Israel completely. The warring nations were constantly a problem for God's people.

The Psalmist offers quite a different perspective on this struggle.

***The rebellious plot (2:1-3)***

**2:1** The nations *rage* by posturing, shouting, threatening and using violence (making war) to assert their power over others. From Israel's perspective, they do this because they fail to submit to the authority of YHWH, the heavenly ruler who oversees all life on earth. If they did recognise YHWH's sovereignty, they would realise that all their plotting was *in vain*—a waste of energy.

**2:2** The most difficult foes were not just individual nations, but coalitions of nations that banded together to make war on Israel. Since Israel represents God's authority over the earth, the Psalmist depicts the nations as in cahoots with each other—a combined effort to get rid of YHWH's authority and enforce their own power instead.

Their rebellion against YHWH shows up in their rebellion against his appointed ruler, the king of Israel. At his coronation, the Israel's king was anointed with the power of YHWH, so he reigned as the representative of God's kingdom of earth. Consequently, the kings who warred against King David (and his anointed descendants after him) were taking the position of warring against YHWH!

**2:3** Any king who thinks he can defeat the king of Israel needs to realise he has picked a fight with God. Even if they form a coalition with other kings, they need to realise that David is in coalition with YHWH. Their attack on Israel is therefore described as an attempt by the rulers of the nations to free themselves from YHWH's rule—about the silliest and most futile thing they could attempt.

***The heavenly monarch's response (2:4-6)***

**2:4** God is not threatened by the posturing of the foolish kings who plan to throw off his authority. He finds their folly absurd. It's as silly as designing a lead kite: their plan is certainly never going to take off.

**2:5** All it will take is a single word from the heavenly ruler and their entire war plan will collapse into a heap. God's *anger* is his reaction as ruler to people who oppose him, threaten him, and refuse to live by his decrees. The last thing the stupid rulers want to do is to stir up God's anger against them!

**2:6** The word that the heavenly speaks affirms the authority of the Davidic king. Zion is the mountain on which Jerusalem rests, the location of Solomon's temple. It is *my holy hill* because on Mount Zion was the temple, the Most Holy Place where YHWH lived among his people. The temple was the earthly palace (house) of the heavenly king. Did these rebellious kings really think they could throw God out and take his city and his kingdom? God's declaration stands!

***The divine decree (2:7-9)***

**2:7** We don't know much about the ceremony that was used to crown the next descendant of David as the king. It probably involved pouring olive oil on his head, a visible symbol of heavenly anointing on the king. It was probably conducted at the temple, so the king is seen to be the representative of the divine ruler. It probably involved the language of sonship, perhaps even the declaration of 2:7-8.

Christian readers who are accustomed to calling Jesus "the son of God" think of that term as meaning divinity. Jesus is divine—the

second person of the trinity. For Israel, monotheism was foundational (Deut 6:4), and the king of Judah was certainly not divine. The king was not to be worshipped as God, and was actually a very fallible human, so in what sense was he God's son?

Once a line of kings has been established, a person becomes king because his father was. The son of David (Solomon) became king at his death and so on. You received authority to become king from your father. But the whole Davidic dynasty ultimately received its authority from YHWH. In that sense, the kings are sons of YHWH—i.e. they receive their authority from the ultimate ruler.

This is how the Bible describes the establishment of the Davidic dynasty. David wanted to build a temple for God in Jerusalem, but the prophet Nathan declared the temple was to be built by David's son Solomon:

2 Sam 7 <sup>12</sup> When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be his father, and he will be **my son**. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. <sup>15</sup> But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. <sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' ”

The king is therefore God's *son*, for he receives authority to rule as the prince who represents the heavenly ruler. On the day of his coronation, therefore, he became God's son (ruling with the authority of his heavenly Father). The parallel expression for sonship is that the king is *begotten* of the Lord. (Remember that the parallel is just another way of saying the same thing: don't try to make it mean anything else.)

**2:8** Since the king's authority comes from YHWH is cannot be undone or set aside by the threats of the warring nations. In fact, all the king has to do is place his request before the heavenly ruler (just as his subjects place their requests before him as the earthly ruler), and YHWH will deal with the kings of the nations by taking their authority from them and giving it to his son (the Davidic king) instead. God's purpose is that ultimately all the nations will come back under his authority, so the extremities of the earth will be part of the kingdom ruled by YHWH and his earthly king.

**2:9** YHWH's declaration continues: the Davidic king will break the warlords who dare oppose his authority as easily as one breaks a pot just by striking it with a rod or by throwing it down (two parallel expressions that mean the same thing). Once God has decreed it, the outcome is certain, although it did not always seem so easy in practice for Israel's kings.

***The appropriate response (2:10-12)***

**2:10** Given that heaven has already decreed that the Davidic king is to reign as his representative and that YHWH cares for Israel's king as his own son, the kings of the earth had better treat Israel's king right or they would have God to deal with.

**2:11** The kings of the nations (and their people) should therefore acknowledge YHWH as their ruler, and give him the honour due to him by submitting to him. If they understood his authority, they would both *tremble* before him and rejoice at the prospect of being cared for under his authority (*rejoice*).

**2:12** Then, because they have recognised the Father who gave his authority to the Davidic line, they would also honour (kiss) Israel's king, submitting to him instead of making war against him. They need to recognise that Israel's king has divine authority to subdue their enemies, so persisting in rebellion against him is sealing their own fate (*perishing*). They would be much wiser to *take refuge* in him.

***The problem***

Well, that's how things were supposed to work out. But by the end of the Old Testament period, it didn't look anything like that.

The kingdom of Israel split into two, refusing to have the Davidic dynasty ruling over them, and refusing to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. All nineteen kings of the northern kingdom are recorded as evil. The kings of the nations banded together to form the Assyrian Empire. In 722 BC, Assyria invaded and destroyed Israel.

All that was left was the tribe of Judah. Judah's kings were descendants of David, and some of them were godly but the majority were evil. In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire broken down the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple of YHWH, and exiled the people. It was the end of the Davidic kingship. The promises of Psalm 2 seemed to have failed.

Some of the exiles did return to Jerusalem and built a second temple there, but the Davidic kingship was never restored. The reign of God through his son in Jerusalem remained an unfulfilled expectation for the rest of the Old Testament period—more than 500 years. Passages like Psalm 2 kept the hope alive, but the reality seemed so remote and so long in coming that it almost seemed impossible.

***Meaning in the light of Jesus***

That's why it was so radical when Jesus appeared on the scene announcing that the time had come to restore the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Jesus was, of course, of the lineage of King David (Luke 2:4), the recipient of the promise that God would give him "the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32).

When the New Testament writers call him Christ, they are using the Greek word (*christos*) that means anointed. In Hebrew, the same word is *mā·šīaḥ*, i.e. messiah. This is the very word translated as his *Anointed* in Psalm 2:2. In other words, Jesus is the king whom YHWH anointed to rule his people, and the earth.

Jesus' apostles therefore taught that the unfulfilled promises of Psalm 2 (and the rest of the Old Testament) had now been fulfilled in Jesus in the most unexpected way. They had seen the rulers of the nations—Pontius Pilate, the proconsul of Rome over Jerusalem, and Herod Antipas, the Roman tetrarch ruling over Galilee—banding together to get rid of the one YHWH had anointed to rule the earth—the king of the Jews! **The apostles** knew that this was because the Jewish leaders themselves were determined to throw off the yoke of Jesus' authority. They continued to face those threats from the rulers of Jerusalem, and so they prayed, like this:

Acts 4 <sup>24</sup> Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

*“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?  
<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.”*

<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

<sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

In other words, what Jesus experienced from the rulers of this world was no different from the rebellion against God's authority that continued for centuries. The rulers did to him what they always do to any whom they consider a threat: they killed him.

But the heavenly sovereign overruled them! God stepped in, overruled their decision that Jesus did not deserve to live, raised him from the dead, and installed him as Lord of heaven and earth! If they thought they had got rid of God's anointed ruler, they were wrong! The one who sits in heaven frustrated their plans, by bringing Jesus back from the dead, and ruling through him.

This is precisely **the gospel that Paul preached** from the very start of his missionary work:

Acts 13 <sup>26</sup> Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. <sup>27</sup> The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. <sup>29</sup> When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

<sup>32</sup> We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors <sup>33</sup> he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:  
*"You are my son; today I have become your father."*

Despite what the rulers of the earth tried to do, Jesus is alive, and he is ruler! God's decree stands.

In fact, this is far bigger than Israel ever understood. Israel expected that a son of David would rule over them and hold the nations at bay. Jesus has brought the nations—the Gentiles—under his reign! Paul understood this better than the other apostles: that's why he devoted his life to proclaiming message of King Jesus to the Gentiles.

At the close of the New Testament, the resurrected Jesus spoke from heaven, delivering a message to his church in Thyatira (Western Turkey) through the prophet John. Jesus reminded them of the authority entrusted into his hands:

Rev 2 <sup>26</sup> To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—<sup>27</sup> that one *'will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery'* —just as I have received authority from my Father.

Let's try re-reading Psalm 2 with Jesus in mind as the son of David anointed to rule, the Son of God who now rules over all nations.

Perhaps we could paraphrase the Psalm like this:

- <sup>1</sup> Why do the nations continue their rebellion against God's throne, feverishly plotting to keep their own power?
- <sup>2</sup> The power-mongers divide the earth up among themselves, rebelling against YHWH and his Anointed ruler, saying,
- <sup>3</sup> "Let us break their yoke, and cut ourselves loose from their authority."
- <sup>4</sup> The one who rules from heaven laughs, scoffing such a ridiculous notion.
- <sup>5</sup> With a single statement, he blocks their attack on his authority:
- <sup>6</sup> "I have installed King Jesus over the earth, in my capital."
- <sup>7</sup> Our King Jesus has received the Almighty's authority to reign. His Heavenly Father declared to him, "You are my Son; today I have elevated you with my authority to reign.
- <sup>8</sup> Ask, for I will bring all nations under your authority, yes, even the extremities of the earth."
- <sup>9</sup> You will break their resistance down, and reign over them subduing every threat. You will throw down any resistance, as easily as smashing a piece of pottery.
- <sup>10</sup> Those of you who think you run the world, be wise! Wake up, rulers of earth.
- <sup>11</sup> Stop hoarding power for yourself! Submit to YHWH! Give him honour, and yield to his authority.
- <sup>12</sup> Honour the Son whom God has installed as king. Continued resistance will be your destruction. Quit your rebellion! The blessing of his reign covers all who find solace in him.

### ***Meaning for us***

In many places today, Christians still suffer persecution from rulers who imagine that they can resist God's authority and run the world without Jesus as Lord. These may be people of other religions, or of none. It can also apply to people who claim to be Christians, and yet are not living under his authority.

The reality is that Jesus has all authority, in heaven and on earth, whether people acknowledge him or not. He is unthreatened by those who try to reject him.

But that doesn't mean his people avoid suffering! Just like Israel in Old Testament times, Jesus himself suffered for the rebellious world to bring them back under Father's authority. He demonstrated what kind of ruler his Father really was, and is nothing like the way evil rulers operate from selfish motives and grasping at power. His followers are called to walk as he walked—to take up our cross also and give our lives to the announcement that Jesus is now Lord!

We are to pray for all nations to come under his authority, knowing that this is what Father has already decreed. All nations are his heritage. We are going to have to live as the community of people who demonstrate that kind of reconciliation, showing what life looks like under Jesus' authority.

So, we call for the powerful people to yield their authority to God's. We call for injustice and oppression to cease, as we look forward to the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus—the anointed ruler (Christ)—is Lord (ruler of God's world).

## **Conclusion**

The Psalms celebrate YHWH as Israel's king. God is their ruler (deserving honour). He provides for and cares for his people. He has given them his laws, so they can live wisely. They look to him for justice: he sides with the widow and orphan, and delivers his people from their enemies.

Israel's unresolved story finally found its resolution in the most unexpected way when Jesus stepped in. He was their king among them, though they did not honour him. He dealt with the injustice of the world in his own person, at the cross. He was exalted as ruler over heaven and earth in his resurrection. Consequently, all the Old Testament promises and expressions of God's royal rule through Israel come into focus in the person of Jesus.

Jesus did not destroy Israel's enemies: he incorporated the nations back under the God's rule. We live as the visible expression of his kingdom in the world that he is still setting right! What a privilege: showing the world what God's reign looks like!

## Memory verse

### Psalm 2:8 (NIV)

Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

## Take home exercise

Use Psalm 2 as a prayer. Meditate on how the nations today try to resist God's rule, by not submitting to Jesus and his royal law of love. Express your confidence to him that none of this threatens him—that he has it all under his control, and knows how to sort out the warring nations and the rulers who fight to control his domain. He has installed Jesus as king: Jesus is Lord! Express your own willingness to serve what he decrees for his world.

If you can, read Psalms 8 and 22 in preparation for next week. Meditate on these Psalms, asking what they would have meant to Israel, what they mean in the light of Jesus, and so what they mean for us. We will discuss these Psalms next time we get together.

## For further reading

Did you follow how we made the jump from what Psalm 2 meant to the Jewish people in Old Testament times to what Psalm 2 meant to Jesus' apostles in New Testament times? That's probably the most important thing to learn from this Psalm. Here's a quote from a commentary, expressing this in another way.

Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary (Nelson, 2004), 68–69:

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Psalm 2 is one of the psalms most frequently quoted and alluded to in the NT; from the perspective of early Christianity, it was a messianic psalm par excellence. Yet in the interpretation of the psalm which has been given so far, the psalm has been presented as a royal psalm, to be associated with a king's coronation; it has not been identified as explicitly messianic. To perceive the transition of the psalm from its royal to its messianic character, it is necessary first to perceive certain transitions in biblical history and religious thought.

A central theme of the entire biblical tradition is the *kingdom of God*. In the monarchic period, the kingdom of God is identified with the state of Israel (and later Judah). That state had a human king, but ultimately its king was God; Israel was a theocracy. Psalm 2 clearly reflects this joint-kingship of the state. The Lord, the Enthroned One (v 4), was the universal king, but his earthly representative was his "son," the Davidic king. Because God is a universal God, the earthly king's jurisdiction is also presented in worldwide terms (2:8–9), though with respect to the Davidic kings, the world-wide authority always remained an ideal rather than a reality. With the decline and eventual demise of the state of Judah (587/6 B.C.), the line of Davidic kings came formally to an end; the ideal of world-wide kingship, never realized during the historical monarchy, now seemed to be an impossible dream.

The demise of the state and the end of the monarchy required radical rethinking within ancient Judaism. The new thought, which emerged during and after Exile, took a variety of forms. There would be a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), which implied a new kingship. The covenant with David's house had been eternal, so that in some form the Davidic kings would have a role to play in the future. The concept of an "anointed one" or messiah, which had originally attached only to an earthly king (2:2), came to have eschatological and messianic overtones (in the modern sense of the term *messianic*). In one of the few other references to the word *messiah* in the OT, the office is seen to be a princely one associated with a future work of God (Dan 9:25).

When Jesus began his ministry of preaching, his central theme was the *kingdom of God* (Mark 1:14–15), and from the perspective of the Gospel writers, it is clear that Jesus was in some sense king in this newly announced kingdom. It is precisely the proclamation of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus which permits the terminology of royalty in Ps 2 to be incorporated into the NT language about Jesus. The “anointed one” (*Messiah*) in Ps 2:2 was the king; hence Jesus, understood within early Christianity as the king in the kingdom of God, could be entitled *Messiah* or *Christ* (the Anointed One). Again, just as the king in Ps 2:7 was addressed by God as his *son*, so too the new King Jesus could be designated the *Son of God*.

The interpretation of Ps 2 as messianic in conjunction with Jesus involves a great insight into the nature of the entire ministry of Jesus. The psalm is a coronation psalm and its interpretation with respect to Jesus is indicative of the coronation of Jesus within the kingdom of God. Whereas the coronation of the Davidic king took place on one day, there is a sense in which the coronation of Jesus took place throughout his ministry. In the NT, the words “You are my son” are quoted and paraphrased at a number of points in Jesus’ life: (a) at his baptism (Matt 3:17); (b) at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:5), and (c) with reference to the Resurrection (Acts 13:33). It is above all Jesus’ resurrection from the dead which publicly declares that he is King, or Son of God (Rom 1:4).

Yet the establishment of the kingdom of God by Jesus marks a radically new concept of royal power from that depicted in the coronation of the Davidic king. In OT times, the nations of the world were portrayed as rebellious at the time of the coronation (Ps 2:1–3), yet they would (or could) be subdued by the Davidic king; the psalm breathes an atmosphere of violence (2:9). This rebellion of the nations is interpreted by the earliest Christians as referring to the opposition to Jesus of Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel (Acts 4:24–28); their violence was not confronted by further violence, but accepted by Jesus in his death. The new kingdom was established in the receipt of violence and death, but the climax of Jesus’ coronation lay in his conquest of death through resurrection. It is this which distinguishes Jesus from a mere earthly king, which makes him more than human in his sonship, and which translates him higher even than the angels (Heb 1:5; 5:5).

There is a further dimension to the NT use of Ps 2 which is important for a full understanding of the messianic nature of the psalm. It was noted in the interpretation that the language of Ps 2 concerning the Davidic king was characterized by an ideal rather than reality; the Davidic kings never exercised world-wide dominion. But the same objection might be lodged against the kingship of Jesus. *Theologically*, one might affirm his universal dominion, but in reality the world is still characterized by tumultuous nations and rebellious rulers. From this perspective, the kingship of Jesus is established, but the climax of his dominion remains yet a future reality. And so it is not surprising that one of the NT books which contains many references to Ps 2 is the Revelation of St. John. The Revelation, in the symbolic and mysterious language of its writer, contains an anticipation of the ultimate rule and triumph of the man born to be King in the language and imagery of Ps 2 (Rev 1:5; 2:27; 4:2; 6:17; 12:5; 19:5 and others).