

Sermon Preparation on Psalm 72 'The Coming King'

Allan M. Harman *

** Dr. Allan Harman has been Professor of Old Testament at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, and the Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne, where he also served as principal for twenty years. He has served as Moderator-General of his denomination, the Presbyterian Church of Australia (1994-1997), and is the author of Joseph Addison Alexander (2014).*



1. Introductory Considerations

a. This psalm is one of the one hundred and fifty that make up the full book of Psalms in the Old Testament. As such, it is an important part of ancient, God-inspired literature that constitutes almost three quarters of our Bible. The book of Psalms is unique in that it deals so extensively with personal religious faith and experience. Translation from Hebrew into English is not always easy, as the two languages are very different. In translating it we can make some changes to give a flowing text, but we have to respect the period from which it came and the form in which it was given by God. We cannot make ancient literature such as the Old Testament modern, for that would mean distorting the very text we acknowledge as God-breathed. It is not just the thoughts of the Bible that are inspired but the words too. This means that we need translations that are essentially literal. Another way to express this is to say we need a transparent translation of the Bible that conveys as much as possible of what was said, and how it was said, into the target language. Many of the older translations achieved this better than quite a few of the more modern translations.

b. The language in this particular psalm, as in all the psalms, is poetic, and it differs from what we are used to in descriptive or narrative passages of the Bible. We must not despise poetry, or think that it is telling an entirely different story from prose. Comparison of the narrative account of the Exodus (Exod. 14:21-31) with the poetic account in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1-18) shows us how one complements the other. They speak in different ways and use different patterns of speech.

c. Poetry paints pictures that help us grasp the teaching it contains. It makes extensive use of similes (e.g., 'like/as . . .') and metaphors (e.g., God is a fortress). It uses words that do not occur often in narrative, and contains a

larger percentage of older words. We see this phenomenon even in modern English hymns and songs, e.g., ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God’. Hebrew poetry has its own special features, and it has few words that convey abstract ideas, such as those that follow the pattern of English words like ‘falsehood’ and ‘friendship’.

d. This psalm has a title, a concluding doxology, and a postscript. The title can mean either ‘by Solomon’ or ‘for Solomon’. The doxology in vss. 18-20 appears to be intended both as the conclusion of the psalm as well as the conclusion of the second book of the Psalter. It is an ascription of praise to the redeeming God Who alone does miraculous deeds, and a desire for His glory to extend to all the earth. All the other four ‘books’ that comprise the Psalter have similar doxologies (see 41:13; 89:52; 106:48; 150:1-6). The postscript (‘The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended’) appears to have been appended to an earlier collection of psalms that was later incorporated into the whole book of Psalms.

e. There are not a great number of unusual words or expressions in this psalm that need comment, but here are a few:

- ‘Judge’ (vs. 2) does not mean ‘condemn’ but rather ‘adjudicate’.
- In vs. 5 the NIV marginal note is to be preferred. It suggests ‘you will be feared’ should be the translation rather than ‘they will endure’ (the Heb. text is literally, ‘they will fear you’).
- ‘Prosperity’ (vs. 7) is literally ‘abundance of peace’.
- The word ‘River’ in vs. 8 is the translation of the Hebrew word *perat* that is the distinctive word for the Euphrates River, not the general word for any river.
- In vs. 16 NIV’s ‘let it thrive’ is questionable as a rendering of ‘from a city’ (compare the ESV’s ‘blossom in the cities’).

f. One feature of the language of this psalm is the number of word repetitions that occur, or different words that come from the same Hebrew root. These are not always brought out clearly in translations such as the NIV. It helps to read the psalm in translations such as the NASB or NKJV as they tend to be more consistent in the choice of words connected with the same root idea in Hebrew. These words include:

- ‘justice’ (vs. 1), ‘justice’ and ‘he will judge’ (vs. 2);
- ‘your righteousness’ (vs. 1), ‘in righteousness’ (vs. 2), ‘the righteous’ (vs. 7);
- ‘Solomon’ (in the title, from the root from which the Hebrew word ‘peace’ comes, vs. 1), ‘peace’, vss. 3 and 7 (NIV ‘prosperity, but literally, ‘abundance of peace’);
- ‘and bless him’, vs. 15, ‘be blessed’, vs. 17, ‘blessed be (NIV ‘praise be’), vs. 19;
- ‘his name’, twice in vs. 17;
- ‘Sheba’, vss. 10 and 15.

These repetitions are part of poetic usage and point to some of the major themes of the psalm that have to be taken into consideration.

2. A Prayer for the King (vss.1-7, 12-14)

The language in these verses is depicting an ideal situation. No real king in Israel or Judah can be in view, because the description goes far beyond what any human king could do. While the office of the king was appointed by God, yet we recognise that not every Davidic king came up to this ideal. They were sinners, but the office they occupied was the important thing. The picture here is of a king who is going to rule in complete righteousness. He will care for all the most oppressed people in the land, and prosperity will last forever. His rule is not bound by limits of months and years, but rather it is eternal.

Kingship was always God's intention for Israel. The thought here depends on two other Old Testament passages, Deuteronomy 17:14-20 and 2 Samuel 7:1-29. In the first of these, Moses spells out for Israel what was going eventually to happen when the people reached Canaan. God was going to ensure that they would have someone from within Israel to be their king who would rule in God's stead. He would be God's vice-regent.

Israel had to learn by hard experience what kingship meant for them. The people had experienced many different leaders during the time of the judges. They were raised up by God to deliver the people, but there was no hereditary kingship. The recurring phrase used near the end of the book of Judges is: 'In those days Israel had no king: everyone did as he saw fit' (Judges 21:25). This meant that those looking back on this period of Israel's history realised that the absence of a king meant chaos within the land. Or, to put it another way, Israel had too many kings, for every man did what he thought best for himself!

The second bitter experience that Israel had in preparation for true kingship was the period of Saul. There was nothing wrong with the people asking for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-5) as God had planned for kingship. What was wrong was the timing of the request, and the spirit in which it was made. The people wanted a king so that they would be like the surrounding nations. And so God gave them what they wanted, and they received Saul as their first king. He failed, thinking that he could take the place of the priest and offer sacrifices (1 Sam. 13:7-10), only to find that Samuel pronounced the doom of his kingdom: 'Your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command' (1 Sam. 13:14).

After unsatisfactory episodes of rulers who did not establish dynasties (the period of the judges) and the kingship of Saul, David was chosen as the man after God's heart. When he established his authority on the land, he wanted to build a house for God (the temple), God instead promised to build him a house (a family). The Hebrew word for house (*bayit*) can have both

meanings. God thus entered into a covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:1-29; 1 Chron. 17:1-27), promising him an enduring kingdom, and one that was to have implications for mankind as a whole, a charter for mankind (2 Sam. 7:18-19; see the poetic expansion on this covenant in Psalms 89 and 132). Though David failed in many ways, yet his kingship became the one extolled throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The Davidic kingship and the choice of Zion were concepts that went together and stimulated the thinking and the hopes in Israel. The Scripture teaches that the line of Davidic kings continued until in the fullness of time the Lord Jesus came, by human nature 'a descendant of David', and 'declared with power to be the Son of God' (Rom. 1:3).

Here in Psalm 72 the enduring nature of the kingdom being spoken about reflects the covenant with David. This is expressed in vs. 5 by comparing it to enduring as long as the sun and moon. Other Old Testament passages reinforce this promise (see Pss. 89:28-29; 132:11-12; Isa. 9:7). It is not surprising that the promise regarding an enduring dynasty of Davidic rule was re-echoed in the words of Gabriel to Mary, as he announced the impending birth of Jesus (Lk. 1:31-33).

When we come to Old Testament passages like this we can find out how the Jews, even before the time of Jesus, understood them. This is so, partly, because we have the early Greek translation of the Old Testament from about 250 BC, called the Septuagint. It is not only a translation, but in effect, by its choice of words, it is a commentary on the text. We also have early translations of the Old Testament into Aramaic that are called Targums. These were most probably oral at first, but later appeared in written form. In vs. 1 of Psalm 72, the Jewish Targum adds after the words 'Endow the king', the words 'the messiah'. Clearly Jewish scholars realised that the description could not fit any ordinary descendant of David, but had to point to a future messianic ruler.

What else does the psalmist say about this coming king? He tells us that the king will rule with justice, adjudicating with righteousness, and dealing with his afflicted ones with justice (vs. 2). These expressions in this verse are typically parallel ones, as occur so often in Old Testament poetry. 'Your people' and 'your afflicted ones' are describing the same people. God often spoke about Israel as His people, and they claimed that privilege for themselves. But how does 'your people' equate with 'your afflicted ones'? When we look at how the word 'afflicted' is used here, we might think that its opposite will perhaps be something like 'rich'. However, in the Psalms the opposite of 'afflicted' is not 'rich' but 'wicked', and so the term clearly refers to the godly believers. Further, it is noted that He will see that the poor and oppressed are helped (vs. 4).

3. A Universal Kingdom (vss. 8-11)

The promises that God made to Abraham are basic for all that follows in Scripture. He was promised a large family, a land to live in, and that his de-

scendants would become a blessing to the nations. On each of these points Abraham was tested.

He didn't have any children, and both he and his wife Sarah were past the normal age for having children. The New Testament comments on this fact both in Romans 4 and Hebrews 11. 'He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead' (Rom. 4:19). The writer to the Hebrews adds that 'from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the sea-shore' (Heb. 11:12).

Abraham also was stateless, in that he had no land. In the early Greek translation already mentioned, the Septuagint, Abraham is called 'the migrant', the wanderer. That's a fair comment, for he had come from Ur to Haran, then went down into Canaan, before moving further south to Egypt. Then he came back up into Canaan, but he did not have a right to that territory. When Sarah his wife died, he had to buy a burying plot for her from the Hittites (Gen. 23:1-20). But God told him about a country He was going to give him, and the Old Testament repeats in several passages the general area that it would cover – from Lebanon in to the north to the river of Egypt in the south, and from the Mediterranean in the west to the river Euphrates in the north-east.

The third great promise that God gave him related to blessing, and I'll mention that a little later as it has relevance for the final verses of this psalm.

In verses 8-11 the focus is on the land, but something very significant is said about the extent of this king's territory. In passages such as Genesis 15:18-21, Exodus 23:31, and Joshua 1:3-4, the boundaries of the land God swore to give Abraham are stated. However, here there is a dramatic change. It is not the narrow confines of Canaan that are described, but a territory that stretches outwards from the River, the Euphrates, to the ends of the earth. Messiah's rule is going to be from the River Euphrates outward!

The messianic import of this is made plain in the parallel passage in Zechariah 9:9-10, for the identical promise occurs there as well. Zechariah's prophecy is of the coming king, 'righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. We know this ninth verse well, because it is incorporated in the narrative relating to Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:5). However, in Zechariah the prophecy continues: 'I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle-bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth' (Zech. 9:10). That passage, and its quotation in Matthew, confirms the conviction that Psalm 72:8 is speaking of the messianic kingdom and its extent. It will not be constricted to the small territory that made up the promised land, but will be world-wide in scope.

The words that follow it describe subservience to the messiah. 'The desert

tribes will bow before him, and his enemies will lick the dust' (vs. 9). 'Desert tribes' seems to be a general expression to denote remote areas. To 'bow before' and to 'lick the dust' are biblical expressions for submission (see Isa. 49:23). That this is the correct interpretation is confirmed by vss. 10-11 that speak of Tarshish, Sheba and Seba. Tarshish is mentioned several times in the Old Testament without precise geographical descriptions of its location. It is linked with the sea, but it is unclear whether this means the Mediterranean or the Red Sea. Sheba was probably located in south-eastern Arabia, and Seba could be near it. Another possibility is that it is another variant of the name 'Sheba', with the conjunction 'and' between them being equal to 'that is' (for other examples of this usage, see Exod. 24:7, 'that is, we will obey'; 2 Sam. 14:5, 'that is, I am a widow'). If this is so, it could be understood as 'Sheba, that is, Seba'. Not only will the kings from far-off Tarshish, the coastlands, and Sheba and Seba bring gifts, but all kings and all nations will be in joyous servitude to him (vss. 10-11).

4. Universal Blessing (vss. 15-17)

The prayer for blessing is put in terms of the normal salutation of a new king – 'Long may he live!' A good illustration from a different context is the greeting to Solomon when Zadok the priest anointed him: 'Long live King Solomon!' (1 Kings 1:39; for other ones see 1 Sam. 10:24; 2 Sam. 16:16; 1 Kings 1:25). Just as the Queen of Sheba brought gifts to Solomon (1 Kings 10:10), so the psalmist pictures further tribute being presented to the Davidic king. Prayer too is offered for his welfare, and praise given for the prosperity he brings. The blessings of the messianic reign are spoken about in material terms – abundance of grain, fruit of Lebanon, vigorous population in the cities. The blessings of God's covenant with Israel included the promise of abundant crops and herds (Deut. 28:3-6). This again is part of the art of poetry in using picture language to describe the glories of the coming kingdom. Future glory is described in terms of present experience of earthly realities.

Verse 17 is crucial for understanding the message of the psalm as a whole. The certainty of the rule of this king and the consequent blessings that he will bring are given in terms of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). While it may have seemed early in the kingship of David and Solomon that the promises to Abraham were going to be realised in the history of Israel, it became clear that their fulfilment was to be beyond the limitations of a kingdom in the narrow confines of Canaan. By the time of the exile, the people were few in the land, the majority were in exile away from Palestine, and poor Israel, far from being a blessing, needed God's blessing to survive the exilic experience. The psalmist looked far beyond his own day and experience to a time when the nations of the world would be blessed. The Hebrew expression here is identical to that in Genesis 22:18. The nations will 'bless themselves', that is, they will ask for a blessing on themselves, perhaps praying, 'May we be blessed just as Abraham was blessed!' The New Testament tells us that the promises to Abraham were fulfilled in Jesus, as the songs of

Mary and Zechariah make plain (Lk. 1:54-55; 69-75), while Paul gives the definitive explanation in Galatians 3:13-14. Christ death was as a redeemer who became a curse for us, 'so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith'.

5. Concluding Doxology (vss. 18-19)

The concluding doxology is praise to the only true God. He alone does 'marvellous deeds'. The expression is one that is used in the Old Testament exclusively of things that only God can do. The reference is to the great actions of God like the miraculous signs in Egypt, or His provision for Israel in the wilderness. He is worthy of all praise because of what He has done in redeeming and preserving His people. The desire for the whole earth to be filled with His glory echoes the language of Numbers 14:21. Moses had interceded for the people after they rebelled against the Lord, and in responding to his prayer He solemnly declared: 'But truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord'.

Almost three hundred years ago, Isaac Watts paraphrased this psalm, and started it in this way:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Did Isaac Watts get it right by inserting the name 'Jesus' in place of 'the king'? Of course he did, because he rightly grasped the significance of Psalm 72 in the light of biblical teaching. How we listen to biblical passages is most important. As with music, we must listen to it in the correct key, and here in this psalm it is in the key that depicts the ultimate revelation of God in His glory. To put it in theological language, we must listen to it in the eschatological key. The psalm far transcends any of the achievements of Solomon or any other successor of David. It looks to the kingdom of Jesus that will be universal, when all His enemies are subdued before Him.

When Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) took his troops eastwards towards India, he often asked what lay to the north or south of them. His generals often replied that there were inhospitable mountains or waterless deserts. When they finally reached the Indus River, he asked them what lay beyond, and they described that there were swamps and other features that would impede any further advance. And Alexander wept, because he thought there were no more empires to conquer!

How different is the picture given in Psalm 72. It is describing a Davidic king who is going to reign to the ends of the earth. No longer is the kingdom restricted to the small land of Israel, but the Messiah will at the last be Lord

over all. He will reign till He subdues all kingdoms and delivers them over to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24-25). The new song that will be sung in heaven will be in praise of Him who has 'ransomed a people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation', making them 'a kingdom and priests to our God' (Rev. 5:9-10). Psalm 72 points to that glorious fulfilment. The Lord Jesus will not be disappointed for ultimately He will be king of the nations (Rev. 15:3).