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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PSALM 110:1 IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT

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*“The LORD says to my Lord
Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a
footstool for your feet.”*

Psalm 110:1

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 110 is used by the writers of the New Testament more than any other Hebrew scripture. The purpose of this paper is to examine the significance of Psalm 110:1 for the early Jewish followers of Jesus.

PSALM 110:1 IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

During Jesus’ lifetime it was *“commonly accepted by the Jewish community that Psalm 110 show-cased the Messiah”*.¹ Significantly, Psalm 110 occurs in the New Testament more often than any other Old Testament scripture. It is directly quoted at least thirty-three times.

Since the phrase *“sit at my right hand”* in verse 1 became deeply significant to the New Testament writers, we can count many more probable allusions if we assume that any such reference to the *“right hand of the Father”* is an indirect reference to Psalm 110:1.²

To *“sit”* meant to take a chief place, because a ruler would sit while everyone else stood. More significantly, *“at my right hand”* signifies a place of active authority. We can think of Joseph under Pharaoh, where all of Pharaoh’s authority was devolved to Joseph. We still use the phrase *“my right hand man”*, meaning the one who gets things done.

So when we think of Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father, we don’t mean that He is just resting for a while, waiting for His return to Earth. No, He is in the place of executive authority, actively involved in putting the

1 David Anderson The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews p 114

2 Anderson King-Priest p 3 & p 9

Father's will into effect. This is the significance which the New Testament writers intended, when they continually applied this verse to Jesus as Messiah.³

PSALM 110:1 IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

In the Synoptic gospels reference to Psalm 110:1 occurs in two scenes, firstly an argument with the Pharisees over David's son, and secondly during Jesus' trial.

Jesus and the Pharisees

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah?⁴ Whose son is he?"

"The son of David" they replied.

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him Lord? For he says 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' 'If David calls him 'Lord', how then can he be his son?"

No-one could say a word in reply, and from that day no-one dared to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41 – 46)

In this scenario Jesus is challenging the Pharisees over their concept of Messiah.⁵ D M Hay, who has produced a lengthy study of Psalm 110 in the New Testament, regards this story as the most important one in the synoptic gospels, in terms of directly expressing Jesus' understanding of His Messiahship.⁶

In the Qumran scrolls there appear four distinct concepts of Messiah which can therefore be regarded as current among the Jews at this time: an Aaronic

3 Anderson King-Priest p 294

4 Scripture quotations are from the NIV unless indicated. Following a discussion I once had with one of the translators who told me that the NIV very nearly used Messiah rather than Christ throughout the New Testament, I have chosen to use Messiah in the scripture quotations for this paper.

5 Matt 22:41– 46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41– 44.

6 D M Hay Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christology p 111

priest, a Davidic king, a prophet like Moses, and an angelic/Melchizedek type figure. What they did not have was a concept of a Messiah who was divine.⁷

When Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 during the discussion the Pharisees are nonplussed. While they have just affirmed their belief that the Messiah must be the “*son of David*” (meaning a direct descendant), they do not question Jesus’ assertion that Psalm 110:1 portrayed David (as the author) being inspired by the Spirit to address Messiah as “*My Lord*”. But Jesus’ argument left them silent. If David called his own son “*Lord*”, then He must be either divine, or in some other way be greater than David, himself the benchmark and reference point for kingship in their thinking. Their inability to provide a theological answer so embarrasses them, they are afraid to involve in any further debate.⁸

Not only did His use of Psalm 110:1 show that Jesus believed that the Messiah was both David’s son and David’s Lord, but His Jewish audience did not question His use of the Psalm or the assumptions He drew from it.⁹

Jesus before the Sanhedrin ¹⁰

Then the High Priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent.

The High Priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:62 – 65)

This second scene is the incident during Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin. All three Synoptic versions show Jesus referring to Psalm 110:1 combined with Daniel 7:13. Again Jesus’ reference to Psalm 110:1 identifies that He saw

7 J J Collins *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls* p 11– 12

8 Donald Guthrie *Jesus The Messiah* p 286

9 Guthrie *Jesus The Messiah* p 287

10 Matt 26:62-65; Mark 14:62-64; Luke 22:66 – 71

the psalm as messianic and himself as Messiah.¹¹ When Jesus puts the two scriptures (Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13) together, the Sanhedrin's response is to accuse Him of blasphemy. It is clear that the High Priest evaluates Jesus' statement as equating Himself to God.

So these scriptures amounting to a Messianic declaration become Jesus' final words to the highest religious authorities of the Jewish nation. His final confession of His identity to official Judaism is referenced by Psalm 110:1, "*you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power*".¹² It is His final announcement to the Nation as to who He was. No wonder it became a keynote text for His Jewish followers in the early church.

PSALM 110:1 IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

We find in Acts three passages which make direct or indirect reference to Psalm 110:1. These are Acts 2:32–36; 5:30–32; and 7:55–56.

Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2:32–36

"God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said: 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."' "

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:32–36)

Peter's speech in Acts 2 is described in some detail by Luke, indicating the significance he accords it in setting the theological tone at the inception of the church. Peter quotes from Joel 2, Psalm 16, 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 132 and Psalm 110 as evidence from the Hebrew scriptures to link the manifestation of the

11 Anderson King–Priest p 92

12 Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62 NRSV

Spirit which has just occurred with the dramatically radical concept of the resurrection of a crucified Messiah.

Peter not only has to deal with the astonishing phenomena being witnessed by those present, but at the same time overcome their natural objections to the seemingly insurmountable contradiction in Jewish thinking of a crucified Messiah. He does so through a pesher linkage of the above Old Testament texts, culminating with a Messiah who is not just risen as in Psalm 16, but who is also seated at the right hand, the place of authority and power, in Psalm 110:1.

Anderson comments that

*“Psalm 110:1 is used ... to buttress the claim of the apostles that Jesus was Lord and Messiah ... at the right hand of God [as] a fulfillment of messianic promises given to David ... he is granted the right to dispense the Holy Spirit upon all humankind. Along with this comes the right and authority to save all who call upon his name”, so endorsing “his Messiahship, his Lordship, his rule”.*¹³

So Psalm 110:1 is the crescendo of the keynote message at the very inception of the new community of believers, the ecclesia. The address does not cease with a reference to the resurrection as an end in itself. Rather, the direct quotation of Psalm 110:1 announces a Messiah who is ruling in present authority. So the address becomes an *evangelion*, that is a proclamation that an authority figure has come to bestow power and blessing.¹⁴

PSALM 110:1 IN ACTS 5:30–32

“The God of our Fathers raised Jesus from the dead, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince

13 Anderson King-Priest p 99

14 It can be shown that the terms ecclesia (church) and evangelion (gospel) are both linked to the twin themes of the authority of Messiah and his delegated authority to believers. On ecclesia see Rowan Williams Holy Week Lectures 2012 ; also Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church p 31. On evangelion see Graham Stanton Jesus and Gospel p 31–35; also Gerd Theissen The New Testament: A Literary History p 55-56, p 201.

and Saviour, that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:30–32)

Here Peter and the apostles are being examined by the Sanhedrin. When the high priest orders them not to teach in the name of Jesus, Peter responds that God has raised Jesus from the dead and has “*exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour, that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel*”. (Acts 5:31)

The first title, here translated as ‘Prince’ in the NIV, is found only four times in the New Testament. In fact “*in the Septuagint the term is usually used for a military or political leader*”, and so “*the concept of authority is again being emphasised*”.¹⁵

Furthermore, since in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus had shown that the right to forgive sins is an issue of authority, where He said “*so that you might know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*” (Matt 9:6), Peter is now linking “*to His own right hand*” to the authority of Jesus in terms of the forgiveness of sins.

Psalm 110:1 in Acts 7:55–56

Once again we are before the Sanhedrin. Now “*Stephen full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’.*” There is little agreement among scholars as to why Jesus is here standing rather than sitting, although a variety of explanations are offered. However there is general agreement that once again Psalm 110:1 is used to reinforce the messianic identification of Jesus. And, indeed, once again the Sanhedrin perceive the reference as blasphemy and react accordingly.

15 Anderson King-Priest p 100

PSALM 110:1 IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

Psalm 110:1 in Romans

Who is he that condemns? Messiah Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us. (Romans 8:34)

Although the metaphor here portrays a courtroom situation, with God as judge, once again the phrase “*who is at the right hand of God*” is used of Messiah. This shows that “*the real emphasis in this passage is on his power and authority. As the One on the right side of the judge, Jesus is a co-regent with all the power and authority*” that entails.¹⁶

Psalm 110:1 in 1 Corinthians 15:25–27

In 1 Corinthians 15:25 we read that “*He must reign until he has put all His enemies under his feet*”.

Anderson observes that “*the ultimate use of Psalm 110:1 in 1 Corinthians 15:25 is to prove the kingdom power of the King ... Psalm 110:1 is used to prove that the Messiah will subjugate all other authorities*”, and so “*Psalm 110:1 is used to support the messianic authority of Christ*”.¹⁷

Psalm 110:1 in Ephesians 1:20–23

When he raised Messiah from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:20–23)

Here Psalm 110:1 forms the bedrock of what some see as Paul’s last intended theological and pastoral message to the church. Ephesians 1:15–2:10

16 Anderson King-Priest p 103

17 Anderson King-Priest p 108

constitutes a midrash on Psalm 110:1, in which Paul expounds Jesus as seated in the place of present power and authority, where God has placed “*all things under his feet ... for the ecclesia*”, (1:22) that is for those called out to exercise that authority,¹⁸ as also implied at 2:6.

Hay comments that “*The chief meaning which this setting gives to Psalm 110:1 is power*”.¹⁹ Ephesians 1:20–21 identifies Christ as being “*seated at his right hand in the heavenly realms*”, and is emphatic that Jesus is “*far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come*”. Paul could not strive any harder to use as definitive and all embracing language as possible, in order to emphasise Messiah’s absolute superiority and authority. It is a graphic picture of the full theological significance of being *seated at the right hand*.

Ephesians 1:22 continues the derivation from Psalm 110:1 by noting that “*God placed all things under his feet*”. As noted above, by specifying that God “*appointed him to be head over everything **for the church***” Paul thus ties this in to involve the ecclesia, the body of the ruling elect, as participating in the present exercise of messianic authority. In case this is at all unclear or in doubt, Paul re-affirms his intention in 2:6 where he sees the church already spiritually “*raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms*”, so that we can do the (spiritual) works which God intended us to do (2:10).

If Ephesians is indeed intended as Paul’s final theological treatise to the church at large, as some believe, then it is hugely significant for our study that it relies on a midrash of Psalm 110:1 as its theological platform, not forgetting that Paul’s closing exhortation will refer to our struggle against spiritual powers (6:12).

So Paul begins his epistle by laying a powerful basis of the absolute authority of Christ, and of our right to be identified with him, before ending by acknowledging the realities of our struggles against evil in this world. The certainty of his theological position is derived from, and solidly based on,

18 See Note 14 regarding the term ecclesia (church) addressing the concept of Messiah’s delegated authority to believers.

19 Hay Glory at the Right Hand p 63

the absolute recognition by the early church of the messianic significance of Psalm 110:1.

Psalm 110:1 in Colossians

Since then you have been raised with Messiah, set your hearts on things above where Messiah is seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

Colossians is likewise concerned not only with the power and authority of the Messiah, but also with his identity with the church. Colossians 1:13 identifies the risen Messiah as having “*the kingdom of the Son*”, and goes on to elaborate his authority over things “*visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities*” (1:16).

He is shown to be the creator of these powers (1:16), their Head (2:10), and Victor over them (2:15). But He is also head of the body (1:18 & 2:19), echoing Paul’s insistence in Ephesians in linking the ecclesia to the functioning Lordship of Messiah. This link is again emphatically stressed in 3:1 where, since believers are already deemed to have been “*raised with Christ*”, they are enjoined to seek to identify with Him in that place “*where Christ is seated at the right hand of God*”.

Although the imagery of Psalm 110:1 is prominent, Anderson notes that it is now used as an assumption rather than by direct quotation, as though the church has become so used to Psalm 110:1 being their bedrock for the understanding of Messiah’s risen authority, that it is effectively taken as read.

So Anderson observes:

“despite verbiage which exalts Christ as much if not more than any other NT writings, Psalm 110:1 is not used for that effect. Like Ephesians 1:20 not a single word comes directly from the Septuagint. His exhortation in Colossians 3:1 seems to allude to Psalm 110:1 as a simple statement of fact. This move to the use of allusion rather than citation in the ‘Prison Epistles’ suggests that by AD 62 there was an established tradition in Christian

*circles regarding the use of Psalm 110:1. The imagery was well established and only allusions to it were necessary to convey the established meaning.*²⁰

Commenting on the links to the ecclesia who rule with Messiah (so in 3:1), Anderson sees an emphasis “*on the believers who are envisioned as also seated with Christ at the right hand of God ... they must be seated with him wherever he is*”.²¹

Anderson’s summation is significant: “*the use of allusion in Colossians rather than citation, is a strong indication that an established tradition of meaning for Psalm 110:1 was common knowledge by the end of Paul’s life.*”²²

PSALM 110:1 IN PETER

It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1 Peter 3:22)

As we have seen with Paul, so here where Peter places Messiah “*at God’s right hand*”, the expression becomes a statement of authority, linked to the subjugation of supernatural powers: “*with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him*”. As with Colossians, here we have an allusion to Psalm 110:1 rather than a direct quotation. However, once again it can be considered as a continuation of the “*established tradition*” which was “*common knowledge*” by this time.

PSALM 110:1 IN HEBREWS

Hebrews is widely regarded as highly sophisticated literature “*written in what is considered as the best Greek in the NT*”.²³ Scholars speak of the many different themes skilfully woven together, even making a comparison with an orchestral composition having intertwining melodies.²⁴

20 Anderson King-Priest p 110

21 Anderson King-Priest p 110

22 Anderson King-Priest p 111

23 Ellingworth Hebrews (Epworth) page viii

24 Ellingworth Hebrews (Epworth) p 41

However there is general agreement that among the many themes, Psalm 110 is the predominant refrain. Attridge picturesquely observes that Psalm 110 “*runs like red thread*” through the epistle.²⁵ F F Bruce is among those who support the view that the epistle is “*a homiletical midrash based on Psalm 110*”, in which the Hebrew scriptures “*are treated by our author as a mashal, a parable or mystery which awaits its explanation*”.²⁶

Picking up on the view that Psalm 110:1 had already become (or was fast becoming) an accepted expression of Messiah’s exalted position, one of the key arguments running through Hebrews can be summarised along the lines of “*since we know that Psalm 110:1 applies to Jesus, therefore Psalm 110:4 must apply also*”. This application “*so far as we can tell was unprecedented in the early church*”.²⁷

Psalm 110:1 is quoted directly in Hebrews 1:13, and is alluded to five more times (1:3; 8:1; 10:12 – 13; and 12:2). Psalm 110:4 is introduced in Hebrews 5:6, then re-emerges at 5:10, 6:20, 7:17, and 7:21, making it the dominant theme in the central argument of Hebrews.

What is significant from our point of view is that the strength of this argument rests on the assumption of the ready acceptance of Psalm 110:1 in the early messianic community. Ellingworth calls it an appeal “*to a quotation deeply rooted in primitive tradition*”, meaning an established early church tradition.²⁸

In Anderson’s extensive treatment of Psalm 110 in Hebrews he rejects the concept that “*Christ is enthroned but sitting passively on the throne*”. Since ‘at the right hand’ must imply active executive involvement, he insists it is unwarranted “*to say the King is simply waiting around in heaven while he rests up for the final battle*”.²⁹ Rather, Jesus is actively engaged through the church in exercising authority now. So “*Psalm 110:1 is used by the writer to the*

25 Attridge Hebrews p 23

26 Bruce Hebrews p 26 & 27

27 Bruce Hebrews p 123

28 Ellingworth Hebrews NIGTC p 131

29 Anderson King-Priest p 294

Hebrews to ... confirm the Son as King. He is ... the Davidic King who presently rules from his exalted position on high."³⁰

SYNOPSIS – PSALM 110:1 IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

From our survey, it is clear that among both the Jewish religious community in Israel and in the early church, Psalm 110 was seen to denote the Messiah, which the church insists was Jesus. Indeed "*from the Synoptics to Acts to Paul to Peter the Holy Spirit has planted Psalm 110:1 like seed in the soil of the NT to help germinate*" the church's foundational ideas about Messiah.³¹

Secondly, the New Testament literature identifies the place at the right hand of God as a place of authority and power. This is made clear by the link with Daniel 7:13 in the synoptic reports of Jesus' trial. When Jesus at His trial identified Himself as the figure "*at the right hand*", coupled with Daniel 7, it was enough to provoke a charge of blasphemy, indicating that the High Priest recognised an implicit claim to divine status. The same reaction occurs from the Sanhedrin when Stephen identifies Jesus as the figure at the right hand.

The authority over supernatural powers is emphatically portrayed in 1 Corinthians 15:20 – 27, Ephesians 1:20ff, Colossians 1:3 and 1 Peter 3:22. Technically, it can be affirmed from the grammar and syntax that "*through the use of aorist tenses ... Paul expressly states that the spiritual principalities and powers*" were made subject to Messiah at the Resurrection.³²

There is wide academic recognition of an "*already but not yet*" tension, but that is not an aspect we need to discuss here, except to note that it is already anticipated and implicit in the phrase "*until I make*" of Psalm 110:1.

Anderson insists that while this understanding of Psalm 110:1 was firmly in place "*as early as AD 33*", by the time of Ephesians, Colossians, and Peter some three decades later, "*the tradition was so firmly entrenched [that] only*

30 Anderson King-Priest p 291

31 Anderson King-Priest p 282

32 Anderson King-Priest p 284

allusions to Psalm 110:1 were necessary to convey the meaning” of a Messiah King ruling with authority.³³

The importance of Psalm 110:1 to the early Jewish messianic community should now be very clear. The trial of Jesus, Peter’s first announcement of the gospel at Pentecost, Paul’s seminal *midrash* to the Ephesians (possibly his final exhortation), the “*red thread*” running through Hebrews, these are not passing incidents, they are all landmark occasions. In all these Psalm 110:1 plays the key role.

Not surprisingly then, “*it is easy to see why some theologians seem to think the use of Psalm 110:1 in the NT is the beginning of Christology*”,³⁴ or we might say, the starting point for understanding the early Messianic community’s ideas about Messiah.

REFLECTION – PSALM 110:1 AND MESSIANIC BELIEVERS

We might ask - If Psalm 110:1 was of such importance to the Jewish writers of the New Testament, then what must be its relevance to Jewish believers today?

An academic acquaintance once remarked that as a Jew she had no problem with any of the concepts in the New Testament - apart from the Resurrection! If there is a common perception in the Jewish community of a lack of evidence in the Hebrew scriptures for the Resurrection in relation to the Messiah, then surely Psalm 110:1 must emphatically counter that perception. Was it for this reason that the New Testament writers found Psalm 110:1 so significant? Certainly Psalm 110:1 was the key Hebrew scripture which the New Testament Jewish community seized on avidly to promote the validity of a risen and exalted Messiah.

So today, Psalm 110:1 should have a prominent place in helping Jewish people understand the significance of the Risen Messiah from their own scriptures.

33 Anderson King-Priest p 115

34 Anderson King-Priest p 288

CONCLUSION

Psalm 110:1 is the most often quoted Hebrew scripture in the New Testament, yet its significance is largely overlooked. By the later writings of the New Testament the acceptance of Psalm 110:1 as relating to Messiah Yeshua was so commonly assumed by the New Testament community that it could simply be implied in passing. By the end of the first century it was taken for granted as a foundational scripture applying to Yeshua. It was used by the Jewish writers of the New Testament not simply as a solution to the issue of a crucified messiah, nor solely as a means of locating a risen messiah in Hebrew scripture, but as an aggressive, assertive assurance of the present rule and authority of Messiah Yeshua.

The importance of Psalm 110:1 for Messianic believers today must surely stem from the centrality and significance of this key scripture for the Messianic Jewish believers of the First Century.

*“The LORD says to my Lord
Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a
footstool for your feet.”
Psalm 110:1*

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