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The heavenly temple in the Psalms

Heavenly temple imagery in the Psalms paints some fascinating pictures, even if these pictures are not always fully understood. First, it must be stressed that the Hebrew word for temple, *hēkāl*, also means *palace*, so God's temple is also His palace.¹ Therefore *God as King* is also *God as Judge*. Underscoring each of these themes are the subthemes of creation and worship.²

This study will first examine passages that speak of God as the eternal King enthroned in heaven. This will include His conquest over evil, the affirmation of His throne being in heaven rather than on the earth, the stress upon His holiness, and the praise He receives. The second part will deal with God as Judge, first as the One presiding in the heavenly council, then His scrutiny of events on earth, the pleas for rescue from His subjects, and finally His decision to come in judgment to the earth.

For this endeavor, only verses from the Psalms that are in the context of the heavenly palace or temple will be studied.³

The LORD reigns

Psalms of adoration are featured throughout the history of Israel and describe the Divine Monarch on His throne. These psalms may be prayers for help from imminent attack, prayers to obtain reassurance in the face of mockery, or simply a reflection on

the wonders of creation. Therefore, a selection of psalms describing God on His throne will be featured to illustrate God as Victor, from where He reigns, and the praise He receives.

Enthroned Victor

*The LORD reigns;
Let the earth rejoice;
Let the multitude of isles be glad!* (97:1).⁴

Psalm 97 extols the One whose throne is founded on righteousness and justice (v. 2), before whom fire goes, lightning flashes, and mountains melt as wax (vv. 3–5). Although His physical form remains veiled, God's description here is based on what His throne is founded on—righteousness and justice. While “the impenetrable darkness of clouds reverently maintains the mystery of His nature,” this hymn of praise affirms “God is Ruler of the world and the Judge of the world.”⁵

*The LORD is King forever and ever;
The nations have perished out of His land* (10:16).

Psalm 10 speaks of evildoers mocking, and God seemingly hidden (vv. 1–4). The perpetrators of evil ambush, rob, murder, and crush the helpless, thinking that God does not see and has forgotten (vv. 7–11). The psalm closes with a reminder that YHWH is always

King (v. 16), and He will bring justice to the fatherless and the oppressed—the weakest and most vulnerable in society.

*The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;
The LORD is clothed,
He has girded Himself with strength....
Your throne is established from of old;
You are from everlasting* (93:1, 2).

The context of God's enthronement is Creation, quite unlike the enthronement of an earthly monarch, based on the defeat of rivals and enemies. Psalm 93 connects the establishment of God's throne (v. 2) to the establishment of the earth at Creation (v. 3). This is “in marked contrast” to the “cosmogenic battle motif found in other creation accounts,” such as *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic Baal narratives.⁶ In ancient Babylonian cosmology, the enthronement of the god Marduk was celebrated subsequent to his “victory over the powers of chaos at the creation of the world.”⁷ Psalm 93 celebrates God's enthronement based on the intrinsic nature and power of the Creator.

*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock;
you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth* (80:1, NIV).

David describes God as “Shepherd of Israel” in Psalm 80⁸ and as dwelling

“between the cherubim”; something easily recognized as temple imagery. The context of the psalm is God's judgment on the city, which has broken its walls down (v. 12). The city has been burned with fire (v. 16), and its “enemies” have laughed derisively (v. 6). In this context, we see the cherubim-enthroned Monarch in heaven (v. 14). G. K. Beale draws the parallel between the earthly temple, whose cherubim were sculptured into the ark and woven into the curtain, and the heavenly sanctuary, where living angelic cherubim guard the throne.⁹ Here is God seated in all His majestic power, ready to receive a plea for restoration from His people (v. 19).

*The LORD has established His throne in heaven,
And His kingdom rules over all* (103:19).

This magnificent psalm focuses on the object of worship—God. It draws heavily from the proclamation of God's name from Sinai (Exod. 33:12–34:7) and lists the ways that God shows His sovereignty: He forgives iniquity (Ps. 103:3a), heals disease (v. 3b), redeems people from destruction (v. 4a), “crowns” them with His covenant faithfulness (v. 4b), satisfies and renews (v. 5), ensures ultimate justice (v. 6), is slow to anger (v. 8b), and although He will not strive with us forever (v. 9), He does not deal with us as we deserve (v. 10). He removes our sin as far as possible from us (vv. 11, 12), and His “pity” for us is deeper than any parent's (v. 13).

*The LORD is in His holy temple,
The LORD's throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold,
His eyelids test the sons of men* (11:4).

Psalm 11:4 neatly summarizes all that can be said about God as King and Judge. In the context of David fleeing his enemies and a plea for God's intervention, Weiser suggests that the acclamation of God as King in Psalm 11 connects to two themes: the enthronement ceremony and the conquest of the land.¹⁰ Note the synthesis of the

holy temple and its place in heaven. Note also that the heavenly throne is pictured as being in that holy heavenly temple, affirming that—in the face of every threat faced by God's children—ultimate power and righteousness reside with God.¹¹

*A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows,
Is God in His holy habitation* (68:5).

Psalm 68 features God as Father with jurisdiction over three mountains—Sinai, Bashan, and Zion (vv. 8, 15, 29). A progression is seen here moving from one section of the psalm to another. In the first, David pictures God riding a chariot over the desert plains¹² to meet His people at Sinai. In the second, He rides among untold thousands of chariots at Mount Bashan (v. 18), and in the third, He rides through the heavens to get to His sanctuary (v. 24). The depicted meeting of God with His people at each mountain becomes more magnificent than the one preceding it. Amid the grandeur of military and kingly might, the Father God's first concern is the fatherless and widows (v. 5), the disenfranchised (v. 6), the poor (v. 10), and the captives (v. 18). To them He gives “strength and power” that becomes the basis for their praise (v. 35).

Praises

*Be exalted, O God, above the heavens,
And Your glory above all the earth* (108:5).

*The LORD is high above all nations,
His glory above the heavens* (113:4).

Here David depicts God as seated on high, a reference to His heavenly throne. His glory is seen above the heavens (Ps. 113:4), and He dwells on high (v. 5) from where He notices what happens in heaven and on earth (v. 6). So, when He raises the poor and needy from the dust and the ash heap and seats them with princes (vv. 7, 8), and when He gives children to the barren woman and fills her home with love and joy—then praises ring out (v. 9).

*Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
Praise Him in the heights!* (148:1).

*Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens* (150:1, NIV).

Psalm 148 is a hymn of praise that catalogues the wonders of creation and encourages all people to praise God “in the heights” (v. 1) and “from the earth” (v. 7). Psalm 150 is the great climax to the psalms that praises God in His sanctuary. These climactic psalms of praise suggest that all voices in heaven and on earth sing praises to God with the entire orchestra of temple musicians accompanying them.¹³

God judges

Our study so far affirms that the judgment theme is intimately bound up with God being King. Therefore, since God reigns from a palace or temple, the implication is that He is King and God mediating the benefits of His efforts to a waiting people. This section therefore explores those possibilities; first, by observing descriptions of God presiding over the heavenly council; then, noticing how He observes injustice and the cries for deliverance; and finally, describing Him as He comes to earth in response.

God presides

*God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment* (82:1, ESV).

*The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones* (89:5, NIV).

*In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
he is more awesome than all who surround him* (v. 7, NIV).

The ancient Near East attests to a grand assembly of the gods, with the senior god presiding. In this context

the great emperors of the time called themselves King of kings and Lord of lords. This meant that the lesser kings had to sit in council under the great king, waiting for him to administer “justice to all the kingdoms and nations of the earth.”¹⁴ In answer to this, the Scriptures also describe God as presiding (Ps. 82:1). But instead of God presiding over divine beings, the psalms specify that this is the congregation of saints that God presides over (89:5, 7). This theme is also seen in the book of Revelation with the description of God’s throne being surrounded by 24 elders (Rev. 4:4). They are the ones to notice His creative powers (Ps. 89:9), they hold Him in reverence and awe (v. 7), they walk in the light of His countenance (v. 15), they rejoice in His name (v. 16), and He is their glory and strength (v. 17).

God sees events on earth

The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men,

To see if there are any who understand, who seek God (14:2, 53:2).

Nothing that happens on earth remains hidden from the penetrating look of God, but what is hidden is the person who “acts wisely and cares for him.”¹⁵ While fools think there is no God (14:1), this God looks down from heaven and notices that corruption is widespread and rampant. In that context, David pleads for judgment or salvation “out of Zion” (v. 7).

For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary;

From heaven the LORD viewed the earth (102:19).

Psalm 102 brings out something similar. This psalm comes from an afflicted one who asks God, the One enthroned forever, for help (v. 12) because God, from heaven, looks down to see the earth (v. 19). Therefore, despite creation growing old and

needing to be changed (v. 26), God will continue into eternity (v. 27), assuring His people of a future as well (v. 28).

The LORD looks down from heaven He sees all the sons of men (33:13).

God looks down from the vantage point where He sits enthroned and sees them as individuals whom He has personally fashioned (v. 15). No king or military officer can deliver people from the woes they face (vv. 16, 17), but God can deliver (vv. 18, 19), and only He can answer their deepest hopes (vv. 20–22). Notice that the act of God observing His people is not to make life more unbearable for them but to deliver them from the worst oppressions that they face.

God hears the cries for deliverance

Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;

Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine (80:14).

The context of Psalm 80 is a battle, and no doubt raging armies and clashing chariots would have utterly shredded any vine or crop on the battlefield. In the midst of that chaos, God is depicted as drawing the psalmist out of deep waters; the same verb is used to describe the infant Moses’ deliverance from the Nile (Exod. 2:10).

Part your heavens, O LORD, and come down;

touch the mountains, so that they smoke. . . .

Reach down your hand from on high; deliver me and rescue me from the mighty waters, from the hands of foreigners (144:5, 7, NIV).

Psalm 144 portrays a hymn of David that extols God for giving him success in war in the past and now asks God to do it again, in order to give him a future, wealth, and security (vv. 12–14). He appeals to God to bend, bow down, part the heavens (v. 5), and stretch out His hand from on high to rescue him “from the mighty waters” (v. 7). Although the verses describe a scene of deliverance in the face of battle, the verb this time echoes the deliverance of the Israelite people as a whole.

God comes down

Let the heavens declare His righteousness,

For God Himself is Judge (50:6).

The devouring fire and roaring tempest in this psalm are reminiscent of the theophany at Sinai,¹⁶ where the law was originally given. Even more, this psalm seems to have an eschatological feel. Weiser observes that the “cosmic setting gives everything a universal and eschatological emphasis.”¹⁷ In broad sweeps, the heavens and earth are being called upon (v. 4). All beasts of the forest (v. 10), every bird of the mountains (v. 11), God’s people (v. 7), and the wicked (v. 16) are addressed. This does not describe something happening in a corner, but the great

universal day of the Lord, referred to in verse 15 as the day of trouble. The public nature of these descriptions is obvious—the heavens are encouraged to “declare his righteousness, for God Himself is Judge” (v. 6). Then judgment takes place, with God first addressing His people (vv. 6–15), then the evildoers (vv. 16–22). The final verse assures that those who offer thanksgiving will see the salvation of God (v. 23).

Summary and conclusion

There is much more to the subject of the sanctuary in the psalms than the rituals of the tent in the wilderness. As observed, the psalms look at the grander theme of God’s reign and judgment. Not only does God “dwell” in a palace or temple, but also His throne seems to parallel the mercy seat above the ark of the covenant, and instead of being flanked by golden cherubim, He is surrounded by real, living beings.

First, we noticed that God reigns—in heaven and from everlasting. This immediately rules out any earthly structure because all human sanctuaries are transient. The actual place of His sanctuary seems, in places, ambiguous because the earthly temple shadowed the reality and both were inextricably linked. What God decided in heaven was seen as coming from the temple and vice versa. There are enough references to suggest that the earthly structure functioned as a tiny microcosm of the eternal structure but on a very limited scale.

As various psalmists contemplated these themes, their sense of praise produced some majestic pieces. Their praise covered the entire created realm, consistent with the scope of God’s monarchy. Their praise also came from the lips of every class of people, and they not only recounted God’s acts of creation and the various redemptive victories of the past but had an abiding trust in God’s deliverance in the future—something for which they pled.

The justice He dispenses is both right and fair and in marked contrast

to the corrupt and incompetent judges in the human realm. To the modern mind, we find that this seems amazing because the psalm writers actually plead for judgment. The ancients saw judgment as God’s way of validating them, especially when they were being oppressed. God hears the cry of His distressed people when they call to Him for help. Judgment to them was salvation, not punishment.

These themes give us a deeper glimpse into the sanctuary—beyond the furniture and features. That God rules from His palace to ensure justice and presides from His temple to ensure holiness and restoration suggests we have hardly begun this journey. This brief exploration of the psalms reminds us that there are greater depths to plumb. The theme of God enthroned in the heavenly palace or temple deserves much greater study, and I trust others will take that challenge. 

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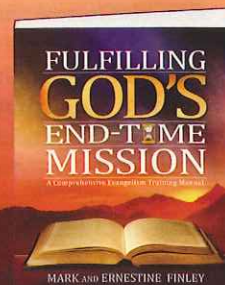
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