4 CREATOR, JUDGE, AND KING: GOD IN THE HEAVENLY TEMPLE IN THE PSALMS

DAVID TASKER

When people think of the Hebrew temple, they often try to make sense of a large amount of sometimes-bewildering material by thinking of specifics: rituals performed, location, and symbolism of sanctuary objects. The Psalms take a different approach to the temple theme, especially when referring to the heavenly temple. There, God is seated as sovereign of the universe, hearing the prayers of His sometimes-exasperated saints.

Rather than focusing on the priestly work conducted in the heavenly temple, the Psalms devote more attention to the themes of (1) God on His throne and (2) God as the Judge. The Hebrew word for temple, *hêkāl*, also means "palace"[1]; to limit its meaning to "temple" does not do justice to the rich theology that the Psalms describe. That many of the psalms refer to judgment (a significant role of the king in Bible times)[2] is further evidence for the link between the palace and the temple, as judgment is described as taking place in both.

In light of this, it is surprising that Adams, for example, draws the conclusion that "the Old Testament is almost completely silent on the meaning of practically all aspects of the ancient sanctuary economy."[3] Admittedly, Adams is speaking of specific theological explanations, which he is confident may be found in the New Testament,[4] but the general perception seems to be that—other than the simple description of the

1. BDB, *HALOT*. See, for example, Ps. 45:16; Dan. 1:4; 1 Kings 21:1.

2. See Pss. 9:4, 7–8; 35:23; 89:14; 97:2.

3. Roy Adams, *The Sanctuary: Understanding the Heart of Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1993), 33. In 1863 P. Fairbairn stated that there was no hint in the Old Testament of the cosmological nature of the sanctuary, and this view seems to have persisted. *The Typology of Scripture* (New York: Tibbals, 1863), 220, quoted in G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 50.

4. Adams, *Sanctuary*, 33.

desert sanctuary, Solomon's temple, and the cultus associated with them—the Old Testament is devoid of meaningful dialogue on the cosmological significance of the sanctuary/temple. This is a common misconception specifically addressed in the Psalms (just one example where the sanctuary theme features in the OT corpus), where a rich, cosmic spectrum of heavenly sanctuary themes is uncovered.

The purpose of this chapter is to make a preliminary exploration of the Psalms to observe this rich spectrum of ideas on the heavenly sanctuary. The chapter is divided between two themes: God as King, and God as Judge. Underscoring these main themes are the subthemes of creation and worship.[5] The first part will examine the passages about God being the eternal King enthroned in heaven. This will include His conquest over evil, His throne's position in heaven instead of on earth, His holiness, and His praise. The second part will examine the theme of God as Judge, first as the One presiding in the heavenly council, then His observance of events on earth—including the pleas for rescue from His subjects—and finally His decision to come in judgment to the earth.

In this endeavor, only verses from the Psalms that refer to the heavenly palace/temple will be examined.[6] To date there have been few studies on the theme of the heavenly temple imagery in the Psalms, so this chapter aims to offer an initiatory exploration of this fascinating topic.

THE LORD REIGNS

Embedded among psalms that describe the checkered history of Israel are psalms of adoration that describe a divine monarch on His throne. These psalms may be for seeking God's protection in the face of military disaster, obtaining reassurance in the face of enemies' mockery and scorn, or reflecting on the wonders of creation. Therefore a selection of psalms will be featured to illustrate God reigning in heaven, God as victor on His throne, the glory and significance of His throne, the protection He offers from the throne, and finally the worship at the throne, recognizing God as universal monarch. In this way, the significance of the kingly role of God, reigning from His temple/palace, may be readily demonstrated.

5. Psalms which feature God as King and Judge include 47, 50, 82, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99. George A. F. Knight, *Psalms*, The Daily Study Bible 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1983), 368.

6. These include Pss. 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 33, 43, 47, 48, 50, 53, 57, 58, 60, 68, 75, 76, 80, 82, 85, 89, 92, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99, 102, 103, 108, 113, 115, 119, 123, 135, 144, 148, and 150.

God Reigns in Heaven

He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The LORD shall hold them in derision. (2:4)[7]

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

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)

The raging of heathen kings (ch. 2) is contrasted with the One seated in heaven. Note the contrast between the agitation and rebellion on earth and the "sublime peace" and the "superior might" of heaven.[8] The inclusio is a major stylistic device used in Psalm 103 that brings out further contrasts.[9] A major inclusio is formed by the introduction and conclusion (a threefold blessing in vv. 1–2, 20–22), which serves to bracket the entire psalm. Within these limits, three lesser inclusios (vv. 6 and 10; 11 and 14; 15 and 19) bracket the three strophes that make up the body of the psalm.[10]

Although in the first strophe it may appear that the focus is on the psalmist, verses Psalm 103:3–5 leads the reader to focus on the object of worship—God, rather than the individual.[11] In the second strophe (vv. 6–10), the psalmist encourages the people of Israel to join him in praise, recalling incidents from the Exodus by focusing on the proclamation of God's name from Sinai (Exod. 33:12–34:7).[12] The third strophe (vv. 11–14) further elaborates qualities associated with God's name in Exodus 34:6–7 and explains God's dealings with His children in a series of contrasts. The fourth strophe (vv. 15–19) sets up a distinction between

7. All biblical references, unless otherwise stated, are from the NJKV.

8. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, Old Testament Library, ed. G. E. Wright et al., trans. H. Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1962), 112.

9. Timothy M. Willis, "'So Great Is His Steadfast Love': A Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 103," BibOR 72 (1991): 534.

10. Ibid., 535. Although Gunkel suggested a three-part structure for the psalm early in the twentieth century (Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form–Critical Introduction* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967], 210), many alternatives have been offered. See Willis, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 103," 21. A detailed examination of semantic parallelism indicates special affinities between Pss. 1–5 and 19–22 and between 6–19 and 17–18. See Paul E. Dion, "Psalm 103: A Meditation on the 'Ways' of the Lord," *Eglise et Theologie* 21.1 (1990): 22.

11. Willis, "Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 103," 534.

12. For an exegetical analysis of the link between Ps. 103:8 and Exod. 34:6, see Josef Scharbert, "Formgeschichte und Exegese von Ex 34,6f und seiner Parallelen," BibOR 38 (1957): 130–50.

human impermanence and God's permanence to demonstrate that a person can depend on God to continue displaying His (fatherly) character. The fifth strophe (vv. 19–22) is an extension of the previous one, showing that because God rules over all, He is more able to be "a loving, merciful, gracious, and forgiving King."[13] The scene shifts to God's throne room in heaven, from where He rules over His creation and from where He receives the praise of all His creatures throughout the created realm.

Meanwhile, Psalm 11:4 encapsulates 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 is connected to two themes: the enthronement ceremony, and the conquest of the land.[14] Note the synthesis of the holy temple and its place in heaven. Note also that the heavenly throne is pictured as being placed in that holy heavenly temple. This makes it possible, as Weiser affirms, that in the face of every threat faced by God's children, ultimate power and righteousness reside with Him.[15]

Although de Vaux asserts that a cosmic application of the temple was a later allegorical development,[16] Beale maintains that the "overall picture emerges clearly": the temple was a "miniature model of the cosmos."[17] This assertion is reflected in Jewish tradition recorded by Josephus, where everything to do with the earthly sanctuary reflected some aspect of creation. The outer court represented the earth, the inner court signified the sea, and the Holy of Holies was for God alone.[18] The twelve bulls holding up the "sea" of bronze; the lilies adorning its rim; the Tree of Life motif in the lamp stand; the lamps themselves, seen by some as the seven light sources visible to the naked eye: sun, moon, and five planets; the curtains and tapestries depicting the elements and the heavens; the colors and design of the garments of the priests and the jewels on the high priest's vesture; everything pointed to the entire cosmos over which God reigns supreme.[19]

I lift up my eyes to you,
to you whose throne is in heaven. (Ps. 123:1 NIV)

13. Willis, "Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 103," 537.

14. Weiser, *Psalms*, 154.

15. Ibid., 156.

16. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 328–29, quoted in Beale, *The Temple*, 50.

17. Beale, *The Temple*, 50.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 32–47. Josephus, *Ant.* 3.123, 146, 147, 180, 181, 183–184; *J. W.* 5.212–214, 217.

Forever, O LORD,
Your word is settled in heaven. (119:89)

But You, LORD, are on high forevermore. (92:8)

Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases. (115:3 ESV)

Psalm 123 is an ancient song of ascent that Jewish pilgrims sang as they climbed the hilly Jericho road on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. They were going to worship a God much higher than the hill they were climbing. Psalm 119 is the grand Torah acrostic psalm whose twenty-two verses, each with eight lines, all begin with different letters of the alphabet. Psalm 92 is a psalm of praise for the Sabbath, set in the context of both creation (vv. 4–5) and judgment (vv. 6–9); it declares that in YHWH, who is set on high forever (*ləʿōlām*, v. 8), there is no unrighteousness or injustice (v. 15).

Psalm 115 is hymn of praise contrasting the idols of silver and gold—silent, blind, deaf, and unfeeling towards worshippers (vv. 4–7)—with the God who blesses His children (vv. 12–18). Verse 3 answers the scoffing taunt of the nations: "Where is your God?" The answer refers not only to a location, but to the contrast between what the Gentiles worship and the God who created heaven and earth (v. 15).

Enthroned Victor

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

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

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)

This first example from the psalms includes a hymn of praise (Ps. 97) extolling the One whose throne is founded on righteousness and justice (v. 2) and before whom fire proceeds, lightning flashes, and mountains melt like wax (vv. 3–5). Although His physical form is veiled, this description of God highlights what His throne is founded upon—righteousness and justice. While "the impenetrable darkness of clouds reverently main-

tains the mystery of his nature," this hymn of praise affirms that "God is Ruler of the world and the Judge of the world."[20]

Psalm 10 speaks of when the evildoers mock and God seems to hide (vv. 1–4). The perpetrators of evil ambush, rob, murder, and crush the helpless, thinking that God doesn't see and has forgotten (vv. 7–11). The psalm closes with a reminder that YHWH is King forever (v. 16) and that He will bring justice to the fatherless and the oppressed—the weakest and most vulnerable in society. Psalm 93, a short hymn of praise, focuses on the majesty of the One on the throne, cast in the context of creation.

Commentators struggle with the relationship between these majestic scenes and the yearly reenactments of the enthronement ceremony of the ANE kings. But the biblical text seems to have far greater implications than what is reflected in the shallow ANE rituals of the annual enthronement of the god/king. Nor does God's dominion "begin with his enthronement at the end of time"; it is "established in eternity," "based on His creation," and "justified by the fact that He is 'God from everlasting.'"[21]

The context of God's enthronement here is not merely the defeat of earthly enemies but of creation. Psalm 93 connects the establishment of God's throne (v. 2) with 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.[22] 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."[23]

> God reigns over the nations;
> God sits on His holy throne. (Ps. 47:8)

Psalm 47 parallels Psalms 95–99 in proclaiming God seated on His throne. God is King over all the earth, reigning over the nations from His holy throne (vv. 7–8). Weiser comments that this is not only the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham but also the eschatological teaching of the New Testament's "one flock and one shepherd."[24]

---

20. Weiser, *Psalms*, 632.

21. Ibid., 619.

22. Mark K. George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 91.

23. Weiser, *Psalms*, 617.

24. Ibid., 378.

Enthroned Between the Cherubim

The LORD reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,
let the earth shake. (Ps. 99:1 NIV)

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)

Psalm 99 is an exhortation to worship God at His holy mountain (v. 9) where He sits enthroned upon the cherubim (v. 1). There is an appeal to the faithfulness of God, seen during the Exodus and to others who would later call on His name (e.g., Samuel; v. 6). God, as shepherd of Israel in Psalm 80,[25] is described as dwelling between the cherubim, a description easily recognized as belonging to the temple.[26] This psalm is in the context of God executing judgment on the city so that its walls are broken down (v. 12) and it is burnt with fire (v. 16) while its "neighbors" laugh derisively at this calamity (v. 6). Psalm 80 ends with a plea for restoration (v. 19).

Psalm 80:14 places the cherubim-enthroned monarch in heaven. G. K. Beale draws the parallel between the earthly temple—whose cherubim were sculpted into the ark and woven into the curtain—and the heavenly sanctuary, where living angelic cherubim guard the throne.[27] This description is reminiscent of God seated in all His majestic power and was reflected in the enthronement rituals of the earthly kings.[28] In ancient thinking, ascending to heaven to sit (at rest) on the throne was done after two major events: the completion of creation and the triumph over God's enemies in judgment.[29]

Foundations of the Throne

Your name, O LORD, endures forever,
Your fame, O LORD, throughout all generations. (Ps. 135:13)

25. The figure of the divine shepherd is common in ANE literature and refers to the political leadership of the gods; e.g., the Sumerian god Enlil is described as "the shepherd upon whom you gaze (favorably)" and "Enlil, the worthy shepherd, ever on the move." Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Recorded History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 92.

26. Exod. 25:22; 37:9; 1 Sam. 4:4; 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Pss. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16; Ezek. 10:1, 2, 14; Isa. 6:1, 2; Rev. 4:6–8.

27. Beale, *The Temple*, 35.

28. Weiser, *Psalms*, 641.

29. Beale, *The Temple*, 63.

> But the LORD sits enthroned forever,
> he has established his throne for justice. (9:7 ESV)

Psalm 135 is a hymn of praise that recounts God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and contrasts (in a similar way to Ps. 115) the idols of the nations to the Lord from Zion who dwells in Jerusalem (v. 21). Psalm 9 is a hymn of praise thanking God for delivering David from his enemies in the context of the King on the eternal throne, which was established for justice (v. 7) in Zion (v. 11). Because God does not "forget the cry of the afflicted" (v. 12 ESV), David rejoices in His salvation (v. 14). The psalm ends with a reminder that God is Judge of the nations; to remind them of their humanity (v. 20), "God's eternal rule is celebrated in the face of the transient nature of everything human," and is celebrated in this prayer (Ps. 102) in the form of a hymn.[30]

> Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
> love and faithfulness go before you. (89:14 NIV)

Psalm 89 is a lament, a hymn of penance, and a prayer attributed to the king after a day of lost battles.[31] It commences as a hymn of praise exalting God for His mercy and faithfulness, His omnipotent power in defeating the mighty monster (Rahab) of the primeval sea, and His subsequent "deeds of righteousness" and victorious help for His people. A reminder of God's covenant with David follows the rejoicing, with the promise that God would never forsake His seed.

Then comes the lament: God has apparently cast off His anointed one, and the covenant appears to have been laid aside, hence the concluding query, "How long?"[32] All this is in the context of God seated "in the council of the holy ones" (Ps. 89:7), whose throne has as its very foundation righteousness and justice, love and (covenant) faithfulness (v. 14).

In the description of God's throne[33] there is another qualification for

30. Weiser, *Psalms*, 654.

31. The national lament psalm may have either an individual or a national focus—the so-called "I-psalm" or "we-lament"; see Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:225. The lament is directed at God, in the discouraged belief that He has forgotten His covenant with David. See ibid., 1:198. Mowinckel suggests that among the national psalms of lamentation, including Ps. 89, there is a group that gives a general description of distress or disaster brought about by the enemy upon the land (Pss. 44, 74, 89); ibid., 1:219.

32. Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:70–71. Goulder suggests that there are a number of different genres through the psalm: verses 1–18 are a hymn (except v. 3f.), 19–37 and verse 3f. are citations of the Davidic covenant, 38–45 constitute a lament, 46–51 are an appeal, and verse 52 is a doxology probably intended for the whole of book III. Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, JSOTSup 20 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 212.

33. Pss. 85:10–11; 89:14.

Him to be Judge. Here we have "four extensions of Yahweh's presence which take the names of 'virtues'" that possibly took the form of animals surrounding His throne.[34] At Tabor (Ps. 89:12) the four virtues/creatures were Mercy and Truth before, Righteousness and Judgment behind; at Dan it was Righteousness and Peace, Mercy and Truth (85:10, 13); at Jerusalem it was Honor and Majesty, Strength and Beauty (96:6). These descriptors serve to describe the "fatherly" qualities of God displayed from the divine throne, depicting Him as the Sovereign administering justice on behalf of His people.

Protection from the Throne

> I cried to the LORD with my voice,
> And He heard me from His holy hill. (Ps. 3:4)
>
> LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
> Who may dwell in Your holy hill? (15:1)
>
> Oh, send out Your light and Your truth!
> Let them lead me;
> Let them bring me to Your holy hill
> And to Your tabernacle. (43:3)
>
> Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised
> In the city of our God,
> In His holy mountain. (48:1)

Despite David's enemies mocking that God can't help him, YHWH answers from His holy hill (3:4). In Psalm 15 moral integrity is the basis of a person sojourning in God's tent or dwelling on His holy hill. It is not specified whether this is in heaven or on earth. In Psalm 43 there is a plea for vindication (judgment) from the deceitful and unjust so that the psalmist may go to God's holy hill, His dwelling (v. 3), while Psalm 48 is about the "city of the great King" (v. 2). This psalm is more specific, connecting it to Zion and "the far north" (v. 2 ESV). Weiser suggests the term *ṣāpôn* (north) refers to the holy Ugaritic mountain in Phoenicia as described in the Ras Shamra texts.[35]

The name Zion was first used for the oldest part of upper Jerusalem but came to be used for God's dwelling on earth—a theological name for

34. Goulder, *Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 225. As evidence of this suggestion, Goulder cites the example of Solomon's throne with a lion on each side (1 Kings 10:19) and Ezekiel's vision of a throne-like chariot borne by four living creatures—a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Note that in Ps. 89 this description is followed by an account of shouting and celebration (vv. 16–17).

35. Weiser, *Psalms*, 381.

Jerusalem.[36] It is sometimes referred to as his holy hill or mountain, and although it seems to not refer to heaven, there may be support for its heavenly parallel. André Lacocque has given the fascinating suggestion, taken up by Beale, that the stone "cut out without hands" in the second chapter of Daniel "represents Mt Zion, the temple not built by human hands."[37]

> God has spoken from his sanctuary:
> "In triumph I will parcel out Shechem
> and measure off the Valley of Succoth." (Ps. 60:6; 108:7 NIV)
>
> A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
> is God in his holy habitation. (68:5)

Psalm 60 is an ambiguous description of either the holiness or sanctuary of God (v. 6). It speaks of God dividing the land, echoing Joshua's work after entering Canaan. This is paraphrased in Psalm 108, which begins on a much more positive note.

Psalm 68 features God as Father with jurisdiction over three mountains: Sinai, Bashan, and Zion (vv. 8, 15, 29). A progression is seen moving from one section of the psalm to another. In the first, God is pictured riding a chariot over the desert plains[38] to meet His people at Sinai. In the second, He is among untold thousands of chariots at Mount Bashan (v. 17). In the third section He rides through the heavens to get to His sanctuary (v. 24). The depicted meeting of God with His people becomes more magnificent at each mountain. The picture of God's enemies being driven away like smoke reflects the Ugaritic concept of death.[39] It is describing the Father-God driving away the "wicked" so that evil could never be resurrected or rescued from the underworld—hence the ensuing description of great rejoicing in verses 3–4. Amidst the grandeur of military and kingly might, the Father-God's first concern is the disenfranchised. This is unprecedented in ANE literature.

---

36. Knight, *Psalms*, 116.

37. André Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (London: SPCK, 1979), 124, in Beale, *The Temple*, 145–54.

38. The commonly suggested emendation "riding on the clouds" is creative but not justified. The chiasmic parallel is "when you marched through the wilderness" (v. 7). Note also v. 33, "to the one riding through the ancient heaven of heavens."

39. One of the duties of a "faithful" son was to rescue his father's "smoke" from the underworld. See, for example, M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartìn, eds., *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Von Hani and Other Places* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995); 4. CAT 1.17. Column I. 27–28, in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon Parker, Writings from the Ancient World 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 53; 4. CAT 1.17. Column II. 1–2 in Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 55. The "life" of the dead was depicted as departing through the nostrils "like a breath," "like a sneeze," or "like smoke" before going to the realm of the dead. See 5. CAT 1.18. Column IV. 24–26, 36–37 in Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 66.

Worship at the Throne

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
above the heavens. (Ps. 8:1 NIV)

Being praised in or above the heavens (8:1), even if it is from an earthly vantage point, demonstrates the affinity between the earthly realm and the heavenly. The focal point remains the Creator and the excellence of His name throughout the earth (note the inclusio of vv. 1, 9), but His glory is placed above or in the heavens (v. 1). Notice how this psalm also places value on human life—created to be "a little lower than the angels" (v. 5).

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
Let Your glory be above all the earth. (57:5, 11)

When Saul is pursuing David, the fugitive pleads (in the first half of the psalm) for God's mercy (v. 1), and he responds to his own plea with the confidence that God will send from heaven to save him because of his *ḥesed* (covenant faithfulness).The second half of the psalm is framed by an inclusio (vv. 5, 11) and stresses the majestic honor that God enjoys in the heavens.

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

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

Here God is depicted as seated on high, a reference to His heavenly throne. He is looking down on the earth (vv. 5–6). While verse 4 states that God's glory is above the heavens, as other psalms of praise do, verse 5 affirms that He dwells on high. This parallelism forms the context for the work that God does from His throne in heaven on behalf of His people: raising the poor and needy from the dust and the ash heap, restoring them to the finest of company with princes (vv. 7–8), and giving children to the barren woman, converting her house into a home (v. 9).

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

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

Psalm 148 is a hymn of praise that looks at various aspects of creation and encourages them to praise God "in the heights" (v. 1) and "from the earth" (v. 7). Psalm 150 is the great climax to the psalms that praise God in His sanctuary. This "keynote" psalm is a description of all voices in heaven and in earth accompanied by the entire orchestra of temple music.[40]

THE LORD JUDGES

It appears from our study so far that the judgment theme is intimately bound up with God being King. In the context of God reigning from a temple/palace, the psalm implies that He functions as a King/Priest mediating benefits to a waiting people. This section therefore explores those possibilities by looking at descriptions of (1) God presiding over the heavenly council, (2) His diligence in observing injustice on earth, (3) His hearing the cries for deliverance, and (4) His coming to earth in judgment.

God Presides

> God has taken his place in the divine council;
> in the midst of the gods he holds judgment. (Ps. 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. (89:7 NIV)

The ANE attests to a grand assembly of the gods, with the senior god presiding. In this context the great overlords 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."[41]

Who are the gods referred to in Psalm 82:1? Knight suggests that these minor gods/kings represent all the handmade idols, mental images and ideologies, humanly created power blocks.[42] Therefore, God being seated as the supreme ruler of the heavenly council ensures that He has the last word.

Weiser is convinced there is no tie here between the council that God presides over and El in the Ugaritic Baal myths describe.[43] Instead of the

40. Weiser, *Psalms*, 841.

41. Knight, *Psalms*, 2:54.

42. Ibid., 55.

43. See, for example, 7. CAT 1.1. Column III (CAT col. IV) of the Baal Cycle in Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 88–90.

lesser gods having power over the presiding god, in Psalm 82 God is firmly in control and the "gods" so described are subject to his judgment.[44] "The comprehensive scope of this picture already indicates that a question of worldwide significance is at stake here."[45] The reign of the demi-gods is over, and they stand before the judgment seat of God.[46]

God Sees Earth Events

> The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
> To see if there are any who understand, who seek God. (Ps. 14:2; 53:2)
>
> For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary;
> From heaven the LORD viewed the earth. (102:19)

Nothing that happens on earth remains hidden from the penetrating gaze of God, but in this case what is hidden is the person, any person, who "acts wisely and cares for him."[47] While fools think there is no God (14:1), God looks down from heaven and notices that corruption is widespread and rampant. In this context, David pleads for judgment and salvation "out of Zion" (v. 7).

Psalm 102 brings out something similar. It is a psalm of an afflicted one who asks for help from God, the One enthroned forever (v. 12) in Zion (v. 13), from where He looks down to see the earth (v. 19). Therefore, based upon His eternity and His creatorship (vv. 25–26), God's people will dwell securely well into the future (v. 28).

> Who is like the LORD our God,
> the One who sits enthroned on high,
> who stoops down to look
> on the heavens and the earth? (113:5, 6 NIV)
>
> The LORD looks down from heaven
> He sees all the sons of men. (33:13)

He looks down from the vantage point where He sits enthroned (33:14). Beal suggests that the use of *nābaṭ* here carries the implication of "God issuing blessing from his heavenly temple."[48] Weiser takes a step back and sees a bigger picture, describing God in this context as "the Lord of Nature and of History," implying that all earth's inhabitants are under His

44. Weiser, *Psalms*, 558.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 165.
48. Beale, *The Temple*, 136n.

reign.[49] In comparison to God, who spoke the worlds into existence (v. 9), the talk (counsel) of the nations amounts to nothing (v. 10). In this context God looks down from heaven "that he may deliver [the soul of those who fear him] from death" (vv. 18–19 ESV). The concept of God looking down probably alludes to theophany and emphasizes the "absolute superiority of God over the world," yet it is tempered by His willingness to graciously incline towards them.[50]

God Hears the Cries for Deliverance

> Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;
> Look down from heaven and see,
> And visit this vine. (Ps. 80:14)

> In my distress I called to the LORD;
> I cried to my God for help.
> From his temple he heard my voice;
> my cry came before him, into his ears. (18:6 NIV)

The context of Psalm 80 is a battle, and no doubt raging armies and clashing chariots would have decimated any vine on the battlefield. But 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).

Psalm 18 is David's hymn of thanksgiving after being delivered from his enemies. God heard David's pleas for deliverance and heard "from his temple" (v. 6). The description of deliverance sounds apocalyptic with the earth reeling, mountains trembling, smoke, fire, thick darkness, hailstones, thunder, sea channels opened to view, and the foundations of the world laid bare (vv. 7–15). David then describes his success in battle (vv. 29–45) and concludes by praising God for his deliverance (vv. 46–50).

> Truth shall spring out of the earth,
> And righteousness shall look down from heaven. (85:11)

Referring to a previous time when God restored His people after they were disciplined, the author of Psalm 85 asks for God to again restore and revive His people (vv. 4, 6). Righteousness and peace kissing each other anticipates that prayed-for restoration. In a parallelism of righteousness and peace kissing each other, we see God bowing down and the earth reaching up toward heaven.[51]

---

49. Weiser, *Psalms*, 293.
50. Ibid., 707.
51. Ibid., 574.

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. (Ps. 144:5, 7 NIV)

Psalm 144 is a hymn of David that extols God for giving him past success in war and asks God to grant success again to give the youth a future, wealth, and security (vv. 12–14). David appeals to God to bend, bow down, or part the heavens (v. 5), to stretch out His hand from on high and to rescue him "from the mighty waters" (v. 7 NIV). Although this is another description of deliverance in the face of battle, the verb this time echoes the deliverance of the Israelite people as a whole rather than just Moses being delivered from Pharaoh's hand (Exod. 18:8).

Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion!
When the LORD brings back the captivity of His people,
Let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad. (Pss. 14:7; 53:6)

Chapter 14 is duplicated in chapter 53 and places God looking down from heaven in this prayer for salvation in Zion.

He shall send from heaven and save me;
He reproaches the one who would swallow me up. (Ps. 57:3)

He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet. (18:9 NIV)

This dramatic theophany, a psalm of David, describes the king's desperate plea to God for assistance and deliverance in battle. Maybe there are allusions to the theophany at Sinai,[52] but again there seem to be eschatological undertones with the foundations of the world being uncovered (v. 15).

Justice at Last

God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day. (Ps. 7:11 ESV)

Because God is the righteous Judge (v. 11), David pleads for God to judge both him and his enemies. This psalm forms an eschatological prayer for the day of the death of the wicked (v. 9). Although God may show His anger or indignation at the injustice He sees each day on the earth, He is

52. Ibid., 189.

depicted making preparations for a final eschatological day of reckoning (vv. 11–13).

> Let the heavens declare His righteousness,
> For God Himself is Judge. (Ps. 50:6)

The theophonic nature of this psalm heightens it drama. The devouring fire and roaring tempest are reminiscent of the theophany at Sinai[53] where the Law was originally given. But this psalm seems to have an eschatological feel. Weiser observes that the "cosmic setting gives everything a universal and eschatological emphasis."[54] In broad sweeps the heavens and earth are 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 is not a description of something happening in a corner, but the great, universal day of the Lord referred to in verse 15 as the day of trouble. The heavens are encouraged to "declare his righteousness, for God Himself is judge" (v. 6). Then judgment takes place, with God addressing first 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).

> So that men will say,
> "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
> Surely He is God who judges in the earth." (Ps. 58:11)

Although Psalm 58 does not mention God's throne or the place where He is enthroned, it does acknowledge Him as Judge. This contrasts to the human judges described in verse 1: "Do you indeed speak righteousness in silence?" (The Hebrew is difficult; it is cryptic and uses the word *'ēlem*, which means "silence" or "muteness," to describe the work of those who deal with justice.)[55] This is one of those psalms that makes one wonder. Why is such violence tolerated in Scripture? Why is David pleading for God to break their teeth (v. 6), become like stillborn children (v. 8), burn them in a pot, and take them away in a storm (v. 9)? Maybe he himself does not see it, but David gives the answer in the last verse. God is Judge, not King David. Just as well!

> But God is the Judge:
> He puts down one,
> And exalts another. (Ps. 75:7)

53. Ibid., 395.
54. Ibid.
55. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 82.

From heaven you pronounced judgment,
and the land feared and was quiet. (76:8 NIV)

Psalm 75 does not mention the location from which God sends his decrees; nevertheless it speaks in universal terms (vv. 3, 6). In the face of boasters and evildoers (v. 4), God says, "I will judge with equity" (v. 2 ESV). Then in Psalm 76—although God's dwelling place is said to be in Zion (v. 3)—He utters judgment from heaven (v. 8), drawing a parallel between earthly structures and heavenly realities.[56] This psalm echoes the victory over the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, affirming that the purpose of judgment is to deliver all the oppressed of the earth (v. 9).

Arise, O God, judge the earth;
for You shall inherit all nations. (Ps. 82:8 ESV)

Psalm 82 contrasts the just judgment of God—seated in His place in the divine council—with those on earth who should be providing justice to the weak, fatherless, afflicted, and destitute (v. 3–4). The psalm ends with a plea to God to arise and judge the earth (v. 8).

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns;
The world also is firmly established,
It shall not be moved;
He shall judge the peoples righteously."

For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth.
He shall judge the world with righteousness,
And the peoples with His truth. (Ps. 96:10, 13)

Weiser observes that here we find the "two foundation-pillars of the realization of [God's] salvation—creation and judgment," tying together "the order of Nature in creation and the order of History in judgment."[57] "God's judgment does not merely consist of calling his opponents to account: it also serves to restore his order in the world."[58]

For He is coming to judge the earth.
With righteousness He shall judge the world,
And the peoples with equity. (98:9)

Psalm 98 is a hymn of praise for God's deliverance—He has "made known his salvation" (v. 2)—yet at its conclusion the psalm looks confidently to a future time when God would come "to judge the earth" with

56. In verse 3 the context is deliverance on earth, while in verse 8 the action comes from heaven.

57. Weiser, *Psalms*, 630.

58. Ibid.

righteousness and equity (v. 9). Note that this judgment is awaited with joy and not with fear.[59]

CONCLUSION

There is much more to the subject of the sanctuary in the Psalms than the mere rituals and paraphernalia of the tent in the wilderness. As observed, Psalms instead looks at the grander theme of God's reign and judgment. Not only does God "dwell" in a temple-palace, but his throne seems to parallel the Ark of the Covenant, and instead of being flanked by golden cherubim He is surrounded by four living beings.[60]

First, we noticed that God reigns in heaven and from everlasting. This immediately rules out any earthly structures, as they proved to be rather transient. From His throne He rules the nations (47:8), and His purpose in so doing is justice (9:7). The justice He dispenses is both right and fair (89:14)—in marked contrast to the corrupt and incompetent judges in the human realm.

The location of His sanctuary at times seems ambiguous, as the earthly temple shadowed the heavenly reality and they were inextricably linked. What God decides in heaven is seen as coming from the temple and vice versa. The various labels of this place include Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the North, and the Great City. There are enough references to suggest that the earthly structure functioned—on a very limited scale—as a tiny microcosm of the eternal structure.

As various psalm writers contemplated these themes, their sense of praise produced some majestic pieces. They used the phrase that God should be "exalted . . . above the heavens" (e.g., Ps. 108:5) as they looked forward to God delivering ultimate justice and restoration to the earth.[61] Their praise certainly covered the entire created realm, which is consistent with the scope of God's monarchy.

Second, we noted God's role as One who presides over the heavenly council, ensuring ultimate justice for the inhabitants of earth. It is telling that God is described as looking down from His abode in heaven to observe happenings on earth. The idea of "stooping down" (113:5, 6) is not flattering. We humans like to think that what we do is so important

59. Ibid., 639.

60. Although the wilderness sanctuary only displayed two cherubim (on the "mercy seat"—the cover of the ark of the covenant), in Solomon's temple there were four: the two on the mercy seat and a large cherubim in each back corner of the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:23–28).

61. Immediately following this praise, a prayer begins for God to deal with the injustice brought upon them by their enemies (vv. 7–10).

and so obvious to everyone, but from the divine perspective it is hardly noticeable, so God is described as bending down—as if to a small child—to get a better look. His main focus seems to be those entrusted with maintaining order and justice for society's oppressed. They keep silent when they should be speaking up to protect the oppressed (82:2–4). God reserves special judgment for those leaders.

To the modern mind it seems amazing that the psalm writers actually plead for judgment. The ancients saw judgment as God's way of validating them, especially when they were being oppressed. Thus God hears the cry of His distressed people when they call to Him for help (Ps. 18:16). Judgment to them was salvation, not punishment. They expected God to part the heavens, come down, melt a mountain or two, and save "me" (18:9). That emotional burden may be reminiscent of the "affliction of soul" connected with the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29; Num. 29:7).

This brief exploration of the Psalms suggests that there is still much to uncover. I trust there will be some willing to take that challenge.