What Does it Mean For Jesus to Be Seated at The Right Hand of God?

By Alvin Lam

The purpose of this paper is to seek to understand the meaning of Psalm 110:1, and the significance of Christ being seated at the right hand of God the Father, and prayerfully seek to clarify if Christ is now seated on the throne of David.

The Meaning of Psalm 110:1

Background of Psalm 110:1. Psalms 110:1 is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. Some thought the original context would best be understood as the words of a cultic prophet reporting the declaration of Yahweh to his master, the king. Hence, it is called an enthronement oracle.¹ No clear indications that Psa. 110 was applied with reference to the Messiah by Judaism prior to Christianity.² The kingly motif depicted in this psalm gave it the title of a royal psalm.³ Psalm 110:1 was well accepted from the earliest of Christianity and form the biblical foundation for the doctrine of Christ’s exaltation and session at the Father’s right hand - a position of supremacy and authority.⁴ Evidence of messianic reference is found in traditions dating only since the second half of the third century.⁵ This was apparently a reaction to the early Christian’s use of Psalm 110. Consequently, the rabbis stopped using the Messianic reference with regard to the Psalm until after AD 250.⁶ As a greater understanding of the Messiah and God’s revelation, the NT writers applied this psalm in light of their own context with reference to Jesus Christ.⁷

The Bible’s internal evidence shows that Jesus first quoted this psalm in the Gospels to attack the usual political understanding of a Davidic Messiah. And to establish his claims as the one who is the rightful heir to David’s throne (Lk. 20:41-44; Mt. 22: 42-46; Mark 12: 35-37; 16:19).³ The author of the book of Hebrews referred to this psalm to verify the point that Christ is indeed the better and perfect sacrifice sent from God who is now seated at His right hand(Heb. 1:3, 13; 10:12-13). The apostle Peter too, alluded to this psalm when he wrote his first epistle recorded in the Bible.

The authorship of Psalm 110:1. Most commentators point to David as the one who spoke the

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⁷Ibid, 453.
words. One author suggested that the psalmist could be either Nathan the prophet or Gad, David’s seer. Another suggested that the author of this psalm was a court poet whose tongue was as fluent as the pen of an expert scribe. Johnson suggested that “the force of an early commentary speaking either of David as the original author ("of David") or of David as having received the psalm in some sense." Yet since Jesus acknowledged David’s authorship then there should not be any more dispute over authorship (Mk. 22:35-37).

Likewise, Calvin asserts that having Christ’s testimony concerning David’s authorship is sufficient without any need for corroboration from other sources. Kidner, emphasizing the Davidic authorship, states:

Nowhere in the Psalter does so much hang on the familiar title A Psalm of David as it does here; nor is the authorship of any other psalm quite so emphatically endorsed in other parts of Scripture. To amputate this opening phrase, or to allow it no reference to the authorship of the psalm, is to be at odds with the New Testament, which finds King David’s acknowledgment of his ‘Lord’ highly significant.

**The occasion of the Psalm.** Some have suggested that this be an enthronement psalm acknowledging the earthly king as God’s representative. This psalm shows that the Lord is with the king and assures victory over the king’s enemies. Since the king is God’s choice, he is usually in a special relationship with God. Generally, interpreters of Psa. 110 agreed that the subject of this psalm is an Israelite king-priest, with the anticipation that “the king-priest will totally defeat and subjugate his earthly adversaries after a session at Yahweh’s right hand.” Briggs suggests this to be a “didactic Messianic psalm.”

Ps. 110 may well originally have been employed as an enthronement psalm for the king. Its terminology of a session at the right hand had parallels in the ancient Near Eastern world where the king was often represented next to the tutelary deity of a particular city or nation. Occupying a place on the god’s right hand meant that the ruler exercised power on behalf of the god and held a position of supreme honor. In the O.T. itself Yahweh’s right hand is represented as the position of favor (Ps. 80:18; Jer. 22:24). Of victory (Ps. 20:6; 44:4; 48:10; Isa. 41:10), and of power (Exod. 15:6; Ps. 89:13; Isa. 48:13).

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10Contrary to others, Plummer argues that just because Jesus quoted it does not mean He accepted it as David’s composition. Charles Augustine Briggs, “A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms,” ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark: 1925), 2: 376. Likewise, with reference to Jesus’ utterance of Psa. 110:1, Briggs writes “that Jesus is arguing on the basis of the common opinion as to the author of the Ps., and that either he did not in his Kenosis know otherwise, or else, if he knew, did not care to correct the opinion.”


12Elliott E. Johnson. *Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110,"* 431.


18Andrew T. Lincoln, “Ephesians” *WBC* (Dallas, TX: Word), 61-62.
The reasons for the popularity of Psalm 110:1 among NT writers could be plentiful. Perhaps the one main reason was that the session image presents a supreme Christ without casting doubt upon the glory and authority of God the Father. It also allows Christians to confess faith in the absoluteness of Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior. Leslie C. Allen states: “Over against expressions like “Jesus is lord,” this image intrinsically affirmed a continuing relationship between the exalted Christ and God, precluding any possibility of conceiving Christ as a new deity dethroning an older one.”

**The Significance of Christ’s Seating At The Right Hand of God**

**A Sign of Honor and Authority.** Most conservative scholars would not disagree that the idea of ‘sitting’ in the OT “is a mark of honor and authority.” In such cases a throne or seat was clearly used. “It means he is in the highest place of honor in heaven. The posture of sitting signifies “the finished work of Christ.”

Interestingly, almost universally the right and left hands are used to imply certain things in contrast. In the paganism of the ancient world, people often identified the right with positiveness and virtues (such as greatness, strength, divinity, goodness). The left as that which was limited, weak, demonic, and so forth. Court suggested four principles in the application of the antithesis between the notion of right and left. First, right and left could be literally interpreted as right or left hand. It can also refer to directions. The third principle is that of metaphorical usage. For example, right and left could be used to suggest strength and weakness; honesty from treachery. The fourth principle suggests completeness.

The Hebrew word for *right* is יָמִין (yāmîn). In the Hebrew Scriptures and Ancient Judaism, “right hand” is symbolically associated with superiority, favor, honor, privilege, and preference. The incident in Gen. 48:13-18 where Israel was blessing Joseph’s sons shows that both father and son knew the significance of the right hand as superior to the left.

To have one’s right hand grasped by God is to receive divine protection, encouragement, and strength (Isa. 41:13; 45:1; 63:12; Psa. 16:8; 110:5). Having both the accuser and advocate on his right-hand side was usual for ancient Israelite on trial. Therefore, in both ancient paganism and Judaism, the right side symbolized potency and honor.

19Leslie C. Allen, “Psalms 100-150,” 85-86.
24Ibid, 53-54.
25Ibid, 58.
D. A. Carson suggested that “‘right’ and “left hand” means proximity to the King’s person and an enjoyment of prestige and power.”

Hence, Christ’s position at the right hand of the Father indicates a position of favor and authority. Thus, for Christ to be seated is to be given a place of honor. The significance of the allusion to Psa.110: 1 in Acts 2: 33 is that of vindication, and Jesus’ role of sending the Spirit.

However, one must be reminded that Christ’s ascension was not to David’s throne but a restoration to the position at His Father’s right hand, which He had given up at the time of incarnation (Heb. 1:3; Acts 7:56; Phil. 2:6-8). This is the position which Jesus had occupied before the world was, and which He prayed for in Jn. 17:5. Johnson explains concerning the reference to the thrones:

It is preferable to see David’s earthly throne as different from the Lord’s heavenly throne, because of the different context of Psalms 110 and 132. Psalms 110 refers to the Lord’s throne (v. 1) and a Melchizedekian priesthood (v. 4) but Psalm 132 refers to David’s throne (v. 11) and (Aaronic) priests (vv. 9, 16).

Pentecost writes: “The enthronement on David’s throne is a yet-future event while the enthronement at His father’s right hand is an accomplished fact.”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is thus an assurance of the perpetuity of the Davidic covenant. Acts ii.33 is not primarily associated with present rulership, though that idea is not entirely absent from the wider context Acts ii.36 shows.

A Rest From Work. The idea of sitting carries the strong idea of fulfillment, since sitting implies more of a finished task than a standing position. Thus, for Christ to be seated at the right hand of God symbolizes that His sacrifice on the cross had satisfied God’s demand for justice, and is exalted by God (Heb. 1:3). Bruce remarked:

That no literal location is intended was as well understood by Christians in the apostolic age as it is by us; they knew that God has no physical right hand or material throne where the ascended Christ sits beside him; to them the language denoted the exaltation and supremacy of Christ as it does to us.

This exalted position, according to Paul, is “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that are named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Eph. 1:20). This “seating” does not mean present inactivity, but rather, “a position of honor in the presence of God in spite of a continuing presence of enemies.” In the book of Hebrews the activity implied are priestly in

29Elliott E. Johnson, 434.
31Idem.
32W. R. G. Loader, 203. See Darrell L. Bock, “The Son of David and the Saints’ Task,” 451. Bock argues: “If there is any doubt that to “be seated” means to rule, then what else what it mean for Jesus to function at God’s side as the Mediator of His blessings (Acts 2:30-36)?”
nature. Hendriksen suggested that Christ’s exaltation refer to the extent and degree of this high position. Concerning the essence of Christ’s exaltation, Owen writes:

That the glory and dignity of Christ in His exaltation is singular, the highest that can be given to a creature, incomprehensible; that He is, with respect to the discharge of His office, under the eternal approbation of God; that, as so gloriously exalted, He is proclaimed to the whole creation, are all contained in this expression.

Ellingworth states: “To sit at God’s right hand is therefore to share his power without limitation, though always with the subordination implied in the fact that it is God who gives, and the Son who receives, this supreme status.”

An Intercessory Work. Bock suggested that “Jesus is not sitting passively at God’s side merely waiting for the time of His return. Rather Jesus exercises key elements of the promised rule when he pours out the Spirit of God on His people to enable them to undertake their current tasks.” Contrary to Bock’s view, one sees that although Christ’s sacrificial task has been accomplished and is today seated at the right hand of the Father, He is not in a state of inactivity. Rather, Christ is presently interceding for His people on a regular basis (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 10:12-13). Christ’s present ministry decreed by God is that of a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. This Jesus does by dispensing the blessings of the Holy Spirit.

Hence, Jesus’ seating refers to his exaltation and enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and assuming a present priestly ministry after the order of Melchizedek.

The Thrones Compared & Contrasted

According to the Davidic Covenant, God has promised the throne of David to the descendants of David. However, there are different views regarding the term throne.

The Meaning of Throne. The Hebrew word for throne in general is אֶתְכֶה (Etêkê), or כִּסֶּה (Kissêh),...
meaning chair, throne, seat, seat of honor. The Aramaic equivalent is אַס@K (korsé), also referring to throne.\textsuperscript{45} Ordinarily אַס@K indicates a chair as part of ordinary furniture. One could apply the term to any elevated seat occupied by a person in authority whether they are a priest, a judge, or a military chief. The usual postures were squatting and reclining, which were always regarded as a symbol of dignity.\textsuperscript{46} In the ruling realm, a throne symbolizes superiority and honor.\textsuperscript{47}

Figuratively, when the expression of a royal throne is used in conjunction with King David, it refers to his rule over Israel (2 Sam. 3:10; cf. 14:9). “Thrones” also indicate earthly potentates and celestial beings, and archangels.\textsuperscript{48} Sitting on the royal throne means to be in power.\textsuperscript{49} “To sit upon the throne” implied the exercise of regal power. “To sit upon the throne of another” meant to be the successor. The OT portrays God as sitting on the throne of His universe, signifying His sovereignty, holiness, and majesty (1 Kings 22:19; Psa. 2:4; 99:1; 47:8; Isa. 6:1-4).\textsuperscript{50}

In the Greek culture, θρόνος (thronos) in classical Greek means a chair with an attached footstool. Metaphorically it refers to regal or divine majesty.\textsuperscript{51} It seems that the NT adds little to OT concept about thrones. Betz gave an informative insight to the connection between the words, θρόνος and δύναμις:

> The word dynamis suggests the inherent capacity of someone or something to carry something out, whether it be physical, spiritual, military or political. It also denotes the largely spontaneous expression of such dynamis. Exousia, on the other hand, is used only with reference to people. It indicates the power to act which given as of right to anyone by virtue of the position he holds. Such authority exists, quite independently of whether it can be exercised in given circumstance. Thronos, throne, is also relevant in this context. Originally it meant the seat of government, and then, equally, someone who was in such a position of authority or strength.\textsuperscript{52}

Bruce remarked:

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Therefore, a throne in the OT and NT sense of the word refers to the one in whom power and authority resides.

The Throne of David. Hendriksen views the rule of the Messiah as characterized by grace and truth in the hearts and lives of those who have God as their refuge instead of a literal, earthly or political rule,
meaning the kingdom for Hendriksen is spiritual. Bock, however, views the reign of Christ from the throne of David as having been initially manifested in Acts 2:30-36. Ladd, explains that “in his session Jesus has been made Lord. He has also begun his reign as the Messianic, Davidic King. He has entered upon his reign as Lord and Christ.”

One can trace the concept of Davidic Throne back to 2 Sam. 7. In the Davidic Covenant, God promised David a posterity (i.e., a dynasty of kings), which would have no end. God would establish his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16). The prophets attested to the Davidic Messiah, and understood the kingdom as literal, the one who would eventually rule over all and forever on the throne. God had purposed to channel his sovereignty over his own people through a succession of kings that would be actualized in Jesus Christ - the eschatological “David” (Luke 1:31-32). That line would begin with David and ends with Jesus Christ as the ultimate King who would sit on the throne and rule the earth (Lk. 1:32b; Psa. 89:3-4; 28-37).

As the nature of Jesus’ rule is literal, the kingdom over which Christ would rule is also literal. This is verified by the manner in which the kingdom concept perceived by the Jews is literal and political. The prophetess Anna was said to be waiting for “the redemption of Jerusalem” in Lk. 2:38. According to Rogers, “redemption” refers to the notion and hope for the liberation of the “holy city.” Marshall writes: “The language . . . suggests political deliverance, which is of course not to be excluded from the Christian concept of salvation and formed part of contemporary Jewish hopes.” This can be seen in the coins struck by the Jews as they declared their independence from Rome between AD 66-70. The disciples were looking forward to the coming of a literal kingdom though they did not fully grasp the concept of the kingdom (Acts 1:6). The political climate of the day induced a strong desire in the Jewish people to look forward to the soon coming of the Messiah to liberate them from Rome. Ryrie sums up:

In spite of the degraded political and moral condition of the nation Israel at the time of Christ, the national hope of a kingdom was exceedingly strong. Jewish thought at that time was permeated with the thought of this kingdom. The terms, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, etc., were on everyone’s lips. The concept which the Jews had of this kingdom at this time may be summed up under these five characteristics: earthly, national, Messianic, moral, and future.

With reference to Lk. 1:31-32, Godet states:

The throne of David should not be taken here as the emblem of the throne of God, nor the house of Jacob as a figurative designation of the Church. These expressions in the mouth of the angel keep their natural and literal sense. It is, indeed, the theocratic royalty and the Israelitish people, neither more nor less, that are in question here; Mary could have understood these expressions in no other way. It is true that, for the promise to be realized in this sense, Israel must have consented to welcome Jesus as their Messiah. In that case, the transformed theocracy would opened its bosom to the heathen; and the empire of Israel would have assumed, by the very fact of this incorporation, the character of a universal monarchy. The unbelief of Israel foiled this plan, and subverted the regular course of history; so that at the present day the fulfillment of these promises is still postponed to the future.\(^{62}\)

Thus, with the rejection of Jesus as Messiah, the kingdom could not be fulfilled until God has restored Israel as a nation and has established Christ as king on the earth.\(^{63}\)

**The Throne of God.** In the OT, a variety of imagery exist which emphasized God’s transcendence and earthly omnipresence.\(^{64}\) In the NT, another name for the throne of God is “the throne of grace” where Jesus sits as the Great High Priest pleading for his own.\(^{65}\) Bruce calls it the “antitype” to the “mercy-seat” in the earthly sanctuary:

> It was at the earthly mercy-seat that the work of atonement was completed in token of the day of Atonement and the grace of God extended to his people; the presence of the Christians’ High Priest on the heavenly throne of grace bespeaks a work of atonement completed not in token but in fact, and the constant availability of divine aid in all their need. Thanks to him, the throne of God is a mercy-seat to which they have free access and from which they may receive all the grace and power required “for timely help” in the hour of trial and crisis.\(^{66}\)

**The Contrast of Two Thrones.** Several factors need to be considered in determining whether both the throne of God and throne of David are synonymous or distinct. Several factors regarding the distinction between both thrones are proposed for considerations. First, God established David’s throne only during the twilight of his kingship (2 Samuel 7). By contrast, God’s throne has been in existence before the world began (Psa. 93:1-2).\(^{67}\) Several of David’s descendant have already sat on David’s throne in the course of history, while Jesus is the only one who sits at the right hand of God’s throne in heaven (Psa. 110:1; Heb. 8:1; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22).\(^{68}\) Third, if both thrones are synonymous, the promise given to David that his throne would be established forever, becomes redundant (2 Sam. 7:16). Fourth, Jesus drew a distinction in Rev. 3:21 concerning His throne and God’s throne. Since David’s throne would be Jesus’ throne according to Lk. 1:31-32, then both thrones are not the same.\(^{69}\) Fifth, God’s statement: “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Psa. 45:6-7; Heb.


\(^{64}\)I. Cornelius, “יְרוֹמָה” 2: 674-675.

\(^{65}\)Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the kingdom*, 436.


\(^{68}\)Idem.

\(^{69}\)*Ibid*, 90. Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 401. McClain writes: “That the throne in heaven, to which Christ ascended and where He now sits, cannot be equated with the throne of David, should need no argument, for the two are never so identified in Scripture (cf Rev. 3:21).”
1:8), in great likelihood it indicates recognition of Christ’s throne to be distinct from the Father. Sixth, both thrones are located in different spheres. God’s throne is located in heaven while David’s throne is on earth (Isa. 66:1 cf. Psa. 103: 19; Mt. 5: 34; 23:22; Acts 7:49).

Asserting a different view, Robertson cites 1 Chron. 29:22-23: “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him.” He equates the throne of David with the throne of God, and therefore “Christ’s present reign represents the fulfillment of the Old Testament anticipation in this regard.”

Regarding this, Bateman explains that “whereas Yahweh’s throne is in heaven (2 Kings 8:27-30; Psa. 2:4; 80:1-15; 89: 5-18), the vice-regent ruled over Israel and was dependent on Yahweh (Psa. 80:17; 89: 20-24). Yahweh “the Divine King” of Israel enthroned in heaven, gave the Davidic king, the earthly king” of Israel, a special place of honor and authority to rule over Israel as His vice-regent.” More than that, in the theocratic kingdom, God is the real King. David nor Solomon rules not in his own right but as a co-regent and representative. The king’s authority is thus of a derived nature. This assurance of prestige and power expresses a typically Israelite idea of kingship as derivative and responsible rather than autocratic. So for the Chronicler to say that Solomon ascended the throne of the Lord is correct, but it would be wrong for Robertson to use it as a proof text for the argument that Christ’s enthronement following His ascension refers to the enthronement on David’s throne. Moreover, not one reference indicates the present session of Christ with the Davidic throne.

Walvoord holds that the throne is not a literal throne but a reference to “dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king.” Neither is there any teaching that the throne of the Father is to be identified with the Davidic throne.

**Conclusion**

Thus, what does it mean for Christ to be seated at the right hand of God? First, it means that Christ fulfills the prophetic statement in Psa. 110:1 that He will sit next to God the Father at His right hand. Second, Christ is now seated in a position of great honor and authority, being at the right hand of the Father, having made the necessary sacrifice for sins, is now assuming a different role as the Great High Priest, interceding for His own people. Third, although Christ is now seated on the throne, it is not the throne of David, for His enemies have not been placed under His feet.

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70Idem.

71Idem, 90.


74John F. Walvoord, ”The Fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant” *BibSac* 102 (1945), 163.

75Idem.

76Idem.


Johnson, Elliot E.


Co., 1996.


