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November 17th: Psalm 45 & Acts 17:1-15

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A psalm for the messianic wedding. Paul in Thessalonica and Berea.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 45. To the Choir Master. According to Lilies.

A Mascal of the Sons of Korah. A Love Psalm. My heart overflows with a pleasing theme.

I address my verses to the King. My tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. You are the most handsome of the sons of men.

Grace is poured upon your lips. Therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O Mighty One, in your splendor and majesty.

In your majesty ride out victoriously, for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness. Let your right hand teach you awesome deeds. Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the King's enemies.

The peoples fall under you. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your

kingdom is a scepter of uprightness.

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.

From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad. Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor. At your right hand stands the Queen in gold of Ophir.

Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear. Forget your people in your father's house, and the King will desire your beauty, since he is your lord. Bow to him.

The people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, the richest of the people. All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-colored robes she is led to the King, with her virgin companions following behind her.

With joy and gladness they are led along, as they enter the palace of the King. In place of your fathers shall be your sons. You will make them princes in all the earth.

I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations. Therefore nations will praise you forever and ever. Psalm 45 is perhaps a rather surprising thing for us to find in the Book of the Psalms, a love song.

It seems to be a royal psalm for the specific occasion of a royal wedding. It might also be termed a messianic psalm, as in the case of the Song of Songs, the principal reference of the psalm seemed to exceed the historical individuals who might have initially prompted its composition. Royal or messianic psalms include psalms such as 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144.

This is a very conservative list, however, as there are a great many other psalms for which one could make a case for inclusion. Psalm 45 is notably referenced in the Book of Hebrews, where it is related to Christ, along with Psalms 60, 69 and 80, the music that was supposed to accompany it is given to us, called lilies. It was given to the choir master, who presumably would have directed Levitical choirs in its performance on the happy occasion of the king's wedding.

The psalm opens with the psalmist's description of his part in its composition. The song is an overflow of his heart, which has been stirred by the goodness of the theme. His tongue readily answers to his heart, like the pen of an attentive scribe, delivering its praise with a fluidity that seems almost spontaneous.

He begins by addressing himself to the king in the first nine verses. The king is praised for his handsomeness, his eloquence and wisdom, and his valour. He stands apart from other men by his striking looks.

We might think here of the ways that kings such as Saul and David were distinguished by their pre-possessing or arresting appearance. Saul was head and shoulders above everyone else. David was ruddy and handsome and good-looking.

He won the love of everyone. The king in ancient Israel was often a figure of love and desire, a romantic figure that the people looked to as their sort of husband. Beyond mere physical appearance, however, the king is noted for his gracious words, words that are also remarkable for their fittingness and their wisdom.

The king is eloquent and noble in his speech. As Proverbs 25.11 declares, a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Wise and good words can bring a person renown for their beauty and dignity, not just their physical appearance.

The king is not just a man of fine words and fine countenance, though. He is a mighty man of effective and just action, a romantic and heroic figure who acts in the cause of what is good. He rides out in majesty in the brilliance of his might and glory.

He is skilful at war, not just for his own personal pride, but for the cause of truth, meekness and righteousness. Military might and ability are praised on several occasions in scripture, but the most important thing is that they be used in the cause of something greater than self-aggrandisement. The king is concerned for the justice of his cause.

His fighting is for and governed by truth, meekness and righteousness, virtues that are so easily abandoned or lost sight of in the situation of war. Perhaps even more than the others, meekness or humility is difficult to find in such situations of conflict, and is a surprising thing to see an ancient song praising. This would probably not be among the most prominent of virtues in the minds of most ancient Near Eastern thinkers.

Yet the good king is governed by the cause of meekness, concerned to act as a humble minister to his people, fighting their battles, rather than lording over them. Verse 6 begins with a sentence that has invited much commentary, especially on account of the fact that it is taken up by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 1, verses 8-9. Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever.

The meaning of the reference to God here is not immediately clear, especially as its most natural readings seem so remarkable and surprising. Alan Ross lists five possible readings that have been advanced by various commentators. First, that the claim is that God himself is the throne, the foundation of the kingdom.

Second, that the claim is that the throne is of God, as the throne of Solomon is the throne of the Lord. Third, that the claim is that the throne of the king is eternal, like God. Fourth, that the psalmist is turning to address God himself in praise at this juncture.

However, as Ross observes, this jars with the verse that follows. Finally, that the king himself is being addressed as God. Ross favours this reading, especially on account of

the following verse, which distinguishes between the addressee and the Lord.

As the king was the representative of the Lord and the covenant son of God, he shares in the rule of his divine father and on certain occasions can even be referred to as God. Elsewhere in the story of the book of Exodus, God says that Moses will be as God to both Pharaoh and Aaron. The king is distinguished by the uprightness of his rule.

It is a rule of just judgement, on account of the king's love for righteousness and hatred of wickedness. For this reason God has set him over others, anointing him with the oil of gladness, like a divine coronation. He is a romantic figure, arrayed as a royal bridegroom in splendour, perfumed with costly fragrances and accompanied by the sweet sound of musical instruments in majestic palaces.

His court is glorious, with the daughters of kings as ladies within it. However, the queen consort is set apart from all the other women, resplendent in gold and glory by his side. The psalmist turns to address her, perhaps recalling counsel given to her before her wedding.

She is exhorted to leave behind her past life and give her full honour to her new husband, the king. The king desires her beauty, but the beauty is not merely her physical appearance, but her devotion to him. Her queenly stature will be found in the glory and the honour that she renders to him as her king, in which she will be elevated by his intense love and desire for her.

She is his glory and she will be glorious as she glorifies him. As she processes towards the king, people of great nations offer her gifts, seeking her favour. Her bridesmaids follow her in a joyful train into the palace, adorned with glorious multicoloured robes, woven with gold.

She is dazzling in her beauty and majesty. The psalm concludes with a blessing upon the couple and upon their marriage. While people tend to look back to the glory of their ancestors, this couple will look forward to the glory of their descendants.

The king will be remembered through all generations, nations praising him forever. The application of this psalm to Christ and his church is not difficult to understand. Christians were not the first ones to hear this psalm as a messianic one.

Christ is the glorious royal bridegroom, a theme especially explored in John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Sebastian Smolarch has suggested the presence of allusions to Psalm 45 at the end of the Book of Revelation in its treatment of the marriage supper of the Lamb and the church as the bride of Christ. Jocelyn McWhirter extensively discusses the relevance of Psalm 45 in her treatment of marital dimensions of the Gospel of John, which is replete with allusions to Song of Songs and other marriage themes in the Old Testament text.

She makes the case that Psalm 45 is the key to John's deployment of all of these themes. Many Christians over the years have meditated upon this psalm as something that teaches us about the relationship between Christ and the church. Here, as just one example, is a reflection from St. Augustine.

What beauty is this, if not what he himself created in her? He has desired beauty, but whose? The beauty of a sinner, a wicked, ungodly woman, as she was in the house of her father the devil, and among her own people? No, no. But the beauty of the bride described in the Song of Songs. Who is this who comes up washed in white? She was not white before, but now she has been washed pure white, as the Lord promises through a prophet, Even if your sins are brilliant red, I will wash you white as snow.

The king you are marrying is God. He provides you with your portion. By him you are adorned, by him redeemed, by him healed.

Whatever you have in you that can please him, you have as his gift. A question to consider, what connections can you see between this psalm and the Song of Songs? Acts chapter 17 verses 1-15. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

And Paul went in as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica. They received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and

Timothy remained there.

Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. In the first half of Acts chapter 17, Paul and Silas visit Thessalonica and Berea. Travelling from Philippi, where they had been asked to depart by the magistrates, Paul and Silas and their missionary group arrive in Thessalonica, about 70 miles southwest.

Thessalonica was a major harbour town, the capital of Macedonia, and one of the most prominent and prosperous mercantile centres. Estimates for the population of Thessalonica range from more conservative estimates of around 40,000 to larger estimates of up to 200,000. It was a free city, ruling itself without a Roman garrison situated within it.

The missionaries, as they typically did, began their work in the synagogue. The gospel was given to the Jews first and also to the Greeks, and there were Jewish synagogues throughout Greece at the time. The extent of the diaspora, both in geographical reach and ubiquity, and in numerical quantity, meant that the ground had been well prepared in many places for the message of the gospel.

In virtually every place there would already be people who were knowledgeable in the scriptures. The missionaries were not working with a blank slate, but the foundation of knowledge was already laid for many. While the gospel met with much opposition from the Jews, who often instigated persecution, the early Jewish converts would likely have been the backbone of the youngest churches.

They had the scriptural background to understand the message of the gospel well, and would have been able to instruct Gentile converts. A further thing to consider is the possibility that, travelling as they were, the missionaries, even if they were to use the new form of the Codex rather than scrolls, would have found it very difficult to obtain and bring many scriptural books with them on their travels. It would have been both costly and cumbersome.

A further benefit of starting their mission in various towns with the synagogue is the fact that the synagogue would likely have its own scriptural texts, which could be used for confirmatory witness. Here we see something more of the approach of the missionaries. Going to the synagogue was Paul's custom, much as Jesus' going to the synagogue is described as his custom in Luke 4.16. Luke's description of Paul's reasoning with the people in the synagogue perhaps suggests that much of the teaching of the synagogue operated in a dialogic or question and answer style.

Paul sets out a case for them that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the one who fit the prophecies. We might imagine Paul using various strands of biblical reasoning, several of which we have

already encountered in messages of the Book of Acts to this point. He could have used quotations from the Psalms, such as Psalm 110 in relation to Christ's ascension, or Psalm 16 in relation to Christ's resurrection.

Isaiah 53 could relate to Christ's suffering, death and vindication in the resurrection, and other references from the books of the prophets. Then he could use retelling of the biblical narrative, as we see in Stephen's speech, showing how the story both typologically anticipates and necessitates the Christ's suffering, and that Jesus fits the silhouette that the anticipatory scriptures projected perfectly. There are two stages to this argument, first, presenting the scriptures' portrayal of the Christ, and second, showing that Jesus of Nazareth uniquely fits it.

While in Thessalonica, Paul reasons in the synagogue for three Sabbaths. If we were to presume that this was the full time that Paul spent in the city, it might lead to questions about how to reconcile this with details that we have elsewhere in the epistles to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2, 9 For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil, we work day and night, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaim to you the gospel of God.

In 2 Thessalonians 3, 7-8 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. Beyond this, there is the fact that Paul was seemingly in Thessalonica long enough to receive support from Philippi over a week's journey away, as we see in Philippians 4, 15-16.

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. As Craig Keener notes, during the missionary's stay, they had been able to teach the Thessalonians seemingly fairly extensively concerning the faith, and had also appeared to have appointed leaders.

This suggests a stay longer than three weeks. Of course, the text merely speaks of the duration of Paul's period of Sabbath reasoning in the synagogue. They might have been in the city for some period before that, and some period afterwards.

Paul had a measure of success, especially with the devout Greek God-fearers and the leading women. One can imagine that the status of the uncircumcised in the teaching of Paul concerning the body of Christ would have been especially appealing to such persons. The Jews respond with hostility, inciting a mob to violence and unsettling the entire city.

They attack the house of one of the believers, who was seemingly hosting some of the

missionaries, but they could not find them. As they could not find the missionaries themselves, they brought Jason and some of the other Thessalonian believers to the city authorities instead, accusing them of supporting a movement that was in the process of turning the world upside down. In particular, they focus upon the way that the declaration of Jesus' kingship threatens the claims of Caesar.

The message of Paul and the missionaries was potentially subversive in a number of respects. They taught against idols, false gods and false religions, and the imperial cult would have been among the most obvious targets, whether it was explicitly singled out or not. The language of Christ's kingdom, of his coming and of his divine sonship, was extremely similar to the language used of Caesar.

Yet Christians declared that Christ's title was unique, implicitly presenting Caesar's claims as if they were the parody. While the claims of the Christian faith's subversive posture towards Rome have been rather overplayed by many of late, the Jews of Thessalonica would not have been the first to draw attention to the various ways, indirect and more direct, that the gospel message threatened Rome. Perhaps one of the most notable and obvious ways that it threatened Rome was in the claims that the Christians made about Jesus being crucified under the authorisation of Rome.

The unjust condemnation of Christ and his resurrection were an indictment of Rome's injustice, and challenged its claims concerning itself. The motives of the Jews should be considered here. They are, we are told, driven by jealousy, presumably at the success that the missionaries had with the devout Greeks, and perhaps more especially with the leading women.

Such elite women would have had more social freedom to convert than elite men, and could act as wealthy patronesses, and could exert their influence on behalf of their religious teachers. In the first missionary journey, while in Pisidian Antioch, the Jewish opponents of the missionaries had used the influence of God-fearing elite women to stir up persecution against them from the authorities. If the Christian missionaries successfully converted large numbers of the leading women and devout Greeks, the Jews stood to lose a great deal of their social connections, financial support and influence.

Indeed, it might even turn against them. As Thessalonica was a free city, its inhabitants would have been very nervous about losing its privileged status. Any whiff of sedition would have been extremely troubling to the authorities.

Thessalonica had a temple for the imperial cult, and leading Thessalonians were likely scrupulous in ensuring that Rome's interests were not threatened. They required Jason, as a host of the missionaries, to pay a bond. In contrast to Philippi, here it is one of the early converts, rather than the missionaries themselves, who is persecuted.

Jason courageously suffers on behalf of the missionaries, and on behalf of Christ. In his

first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes them receiving the gospel in much affliction. From Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians, we might also get the impression that a significant number of former pagans were among the earliest converts, not just Jews and devout God-fearers, as he speaks of their turning from idols to serve the living and true God.

From Thessalonica, Paul and Silas are sent away by night to Berea. Berea was about 45 miles west-southwest of Thessalonica, according to Darrell Bach. It was also on the way to Athens.

Once again they began their ministry in the synagogue, receiving a far more favourable response this time. The Berean Jews received the message of the missionaries eagerly, and examined the scriptures to confirm their witness, something that wins them commendation as noble in character. As modern readers of the text, we can easily fall into the trap of imagining the Bereans all flicking through their personal Bibles, perhaps when they go home, but it is entirely likely that the synagogue itself did not contain a full set of the scrolls of scripture, and the text that it did have would likely be in a Greek translation.

Although communal reading of the scriptures would have been common, private ownership was very rare. The process of examining the scriptures quite properly took the form of a communal act of deliberation under the oversight of synagogue leaders. Reading relevant passages from the Torah scroll and other scriptures that they had in their possession, and discussing them together as a community.

The process of examining the scriptures is described as a daily one, probably involving members of the synagogue community during the week, not merely on the Sabbath. In Berea, many of the Jews believed, and once again, a number of Greek women of the elite and some men. However, once again the missionaries are followed by a counter-mission, as Jews come from Thessalonica and whip up the crowds against them.

As Paul was apparently the chief target, Silas and Timothy remained, while Paul proceeded alone to Athens, conducted by some of the Bereans. He went down to the sea, and we can presume boarded a vessel to Athens. The fact that some of the Bereans accompanied him, not merely to the sea, but for the entirety of his journey, is an indication of their nobility and their commitment to hospitality.

A question to consider. Many Christians have described themselves as Bereans on account of their commitment to confirming every teaching that they receive from the scriptures. How might closer attention to the situation of the Bereans help us to follow their noble example even more closely?