Tyndale Bulletin 76 (2025): 47-67
https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.132300
ISSN 2752-7042 (Online)
ISSN 0082-7118 (Print)
www.tyndalebulletin.org

God's Reign in the Psalms and the Kingdom of God[1]

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Abstract

Jesus's use of the language of the kingdom assumes that his audience was familiar with the concept. The most obvious place to seek a background for it is therefore in the Old Testament. Although the term itself is found only infrequently there, it does occur at a few points. By far the richest Old Testament source for understanding the kingdom is the book of Psalms because of its consistent emphasis on the theme of God as king. This motif comes to particular prominence in Book 4. Previous studies of this book have struggled to connect the language here to the kingdom because of the dominance of form critical models, but newer canonical approaches allow us to understand more clearly how the language of God's reign is here applied to the particular needs of the community addressed by that book. This is particularly important in Psalms 93, 97, and 99, which speak of YHWH's reign. Although not explicitly cited in the New Testament, these psalms provide important background to the presentation of the kingdom in the book of Revelation, which likewise uses the language of the kingdom to provide hope for those who struggle. The good news of the kingdom in Jesus's proclamation is therefore not an abstract statement about God's reign but a message that addressed the needs of the community who heard him.

1. Introduction: Psalms and divine kingship

Although the language of the 'kingdom of God' is most obviously present in the New Testament, especially the Synoptic Gospels, it is not unique to those texts. Indeed, most studies of the topic recognise that even if the exact phrase 'kingdom of God' is infrequent in the Old Testament,[2] its roots are to be found

1. Originally presented as the 2024 Tyndale Fellowship lecture in Biblical Theology. I wish to thank Dr Desi Alexander for the invitation to deliver the lecture.

2. Strictly, 'kingdom of God' never appears, but 'kingdom of YHWH' (or a close equivalent) appears fifteen times, and we can take this as an equivalent expression.

there.[3] This point was classically developed by John Bright,[4] who emphasised that the proclamation of the kingdom in the Gospels only makes sense if there is a clear background that could be recognised by the audience. At no point does Jesus define what he means by the kingdom, and the obvious source for both Jesus's and his audience's understanding is the Old Testament.[5] This does not mean that there were no developments in the deutero-canonical material, but Bright is surely correct to insist that we must first understand the kingdom through the Old Testament. That said, it is somewhat surprising that he does not give much attention to the Psalms, since it is here that we most often find the language that affirms God's reign. Martin Selman is right to insist that we should distinguish between those texts in the Old Testament that affirm that YHWH is king and those that affirm he has a kingdom,[6] yet it remains the case that it is the reality of YHWH's reign as king that is fundamental to this theme. We can only speak of YHWH having a kingdom because of the fundamental affirmation of him reigning and thus being a king, and nowhere in the Old Testament is this spoken of more frequently than in Psalms. Indeed, as Selman also observes, it is the Psalms that provided the key background for references to God's reign in Chronicles and Daniel, even though his own study is more concerned with how the Chronicler and Daniel take up material from Psalms rather than Psalms' own contribution to this topic. Perhaps more helpfully, Eric Peels, while recognising the contested nature of the so-called 'YHWH *Malak*' psalms, takes the Psalms as a primary witness to this theme in the Old Testament.[7] However, his main goal is to demonstrate that the theme of the kingdom of God is more important for the Old Testament than has sometimes

3. E.g. Charles Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 2003), 106–107; Sigurd Grindheim, *Introducing Biblical Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 94–97.

4. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Significance for the Church* (Abingdon, 1953). It is notable that Jeong Koo Jeon, *Biblical Theology: Covenants and the Kingdom of God in Redemptive History* (Wipf & Stock, 2017) structures his study around Old Testament texts, tracing the kingdom successively through the main covenants there before then exploring its reception and development in the New Testament. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical–Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Crossway, 2012), 129–587 follow a similar structure. Although valuable, these studies have the disadvantage for our purposes of not providing sustained interaction with Psalms.

5. Bright, *Kingdom*, 17–19.

6. Martin Selman, 'The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament', *TynBul* 40 (1989): 162. https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30539.

7. H. G. L. Peels, 'The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament', *In die Skriflig* 35 (2001): 173–189. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v35i2.554.

been recognised, arguing that we cannot reduce it simply to the presence of certain words or expressions. Rather, he finds that it is a 'root metaphor' for the Old Testament, one that governs many other metaphors in it.[8] As such, exploring the Old Testament's use of this root metaphor is important because it does more than simply provide background for the New Testament. Rather, the Old Testament's own witness is a vital dimension of any biblical theology concerned with the kingdom.

Although Peels is concerned to move beyond the presence of certain words or phrases, he does provide important statistics on the key terms that are worth noting and which suggest that a more detailed study of Psalms and their relationship to the kingdom is in order.[9] In particular, he notes that the noun 'king' (מֶלֶךְ) is applied to God only forty-two times, but twenty-one of these are found in Psalms.[10] Further, Psalm 22:29 (ET 22:28) also applies the noun 'kingship' (מְלוּכָה – *melukah*) to YHWH,[11] while the noun 'kingdom' (מַלְכוּת – *malkut*) occurs a further four times.[12] Even before we turn to the YHWH *Malak* psalms, it is clear from these statistics that the language of God's kingship is particularly rich in the Psalms. When we turn to the verb 'reign' (מָלַךְ – *malak*), with YHWH as the subject, we find only thirteen occurrences in the Old Testament, with six of these found in Psalms.[13] Of the remaining usages, 1 Chronicles 16:31 is a citation of Psalm 96:10, so there are effectively six other occurrences.[14] Hence, although Peels is correct that we cannot reduce our examination of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament to certain terms, it is still striking to note that half of all instances of such direct language about it are found in Psalms.

Moreover, although (to keep the range of texts considered to a manageable range) our focus for this paper will be on the YHWH *Malak* psalms of Book 4, it is important to note that language associating YHWH with kingship is found across all five books of the Psalter. Further, there is a particular concentration of such language in Psalms 146–150 so that the closing hallelujah psalms particularly stress this theme, even though it has, in fact, not otherwise been represented in Book 5 apart from Psalm 145:11-13 – and that leads directly into

8. Peels, 'Kingdom', 181. On this, see further, Mark Zvi Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, JSOT Supp 76 (JSOT Press, 1989).

9. Peels, 'Kingdom', 176.

10. Pss 5:3; 10:16; 24:7-10; 29:10; 44:5; 47:3,7-8; 48:3; 68:25; 74:12; 84:4; 95:3; 98:6; 99:4; 145:1; 149:2.

11. Elsewhere, only in Obad 21.

12. Pss 103:19; 145:11-13. Elsewhere, only 1 Chr 17:14; 28:5.

13. Pss 47:1; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 146:10.

14. Exod 15:18; 1 Sam 8:7; Isa 24:23; 52:7, Ezek 20:33; Mic 4:7.

the final hallelujah. Although it falls outside of Peels's survey, since it lacks the explicit language of divine kingship, we can also note that Psalm 2:6 cites YHWH as having announced that he has appointed his king on Zion. Since the appointment of another king indicates that one is a greater king (cf. 1 Kgs 2:24[15]), YHWH's statement indicates that he is the suzerain king. If so, when one notes that Psalms 1–2 are now generally agreed to form an introduction to the Psalter and Psalms 146–150 its conclusion,[16] then the whole MT Psalter is bounded by the theme of YHWH's kingship.[17] Although many have argued for more detailed structural designs that include some form of narrative through the Psalter, it is sufficient for our purposes to note that these boundaries indicate that the canonical form of the Psalter gives special prominence to YHWH's kingship. As such, the combination of the relative concentration of divine kingship language plus the prominence given to this theme at the Psalter's outer boundaries suggests that it is appropriate to reflect once more on the theme of YHWH's kingship in Psalms and its significance for understanding the kingdom of God within the Bible as a whole. Although there is more to be said, there is thus great value in James Luther Mays's observation that Psalms are 'the liturgy of the kingdom of God'.[18] We cannot trace these elements from Psalms in detail into the New Testament, but some connections to Revelation

15. Similarly, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Yale University Press, 2008), 304, note that the changing of Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:34) treats Pharaoh Neco as Jehoiakim's suzerain.

16. For recent overviews, see Peter C. W. Ho, 'The Macrostructural Design and Logic of the Psalter: An Unfurling of the Davidic Covenant', in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*, ed. David M. Howard Jr and Andrew J. Schmutzer, Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology (Lexham Academic, 2023), 36–62 and Jerome F. D. Creach, '"Happy are All who Take Refuge in Him": The Theological Shape of the Psalter', *Interpretation* 78 (2024): 120–130, https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643231222910.

17. It is necessary to distinguish between different Psalters that existed in antiquity since LXX differs in some important respects from MT, while if 11QPsa[a] is a Psalter then it would attest to a very different structure to LXX. For important critiques of the view of the Psalter as having a particular shape, see David Willgren, *The Formation of the 'Book' of Psalms: Reconsidering the Transmission and Canonization of Psalmody in Light of Material Culture and the Poetics of Anthologies*, FAT 2/88 (Mohr Siebeck, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-154937-3 and Alma Brodersen, *The End of the Psalter: Psalms 146–150 in the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint* (Baylor University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110536096. Although their works make important points, they still allow for a distinctive shape to MT Psalms while rightly resisting the idea that these psalms were specifically composed for their present setting.

18. James Luther Mays, 'The Language of the Reign of God', *Interpretation* 47 (1993): 121, https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430004700202.

can briefly be noted, and there too we see a liturgical presentation of God's reign as good news.

2. Reading Psalms as a book and divine kingship

A key concern expressed by both Selman and Peels[19] about the relationship between Psalms and the kingdom relates to the question of how we are to associate the language in Psalms with the fuller expression that we find in the New Testament. In particular, both raise concerns about how the YHWH *Malak* psalms can be related to this theme. Especially for Peels, this is because the previous attempts to relate these elements depended on the form-critical approach to Psalms in which the major concern was to understand the origins of this language, especially under the influence of Mowinckel's cultic approach to these psalms. The extent of Mowinckel's influence on twentieth-century Psalms studies cannot be overestimated, but in the latter part of the century newer approaches to the Psalms began to emerge, influenced by Brevard Childs and then even more so by his student Gerald Wilson.[20] Since then, a range of so-called canonical approaches have developed,[21] and though in many ways quite diverse, they are united in their interest in the shape of the Psalter. The *Gattung*-driven approach that emerged under the influence of Herman Gunkel,[22] and which was especially formative for the cult-centred model developed by Mowinckel,[23] was particularly concerned to identify the *Sitz im Leben* for any given psalm while generally showing little if any interest in the location of any given psalm within the Psalter. While not all canonical approaches have rejected the importance of *Sitz im Leben*, at least to the extent that it remains transparent in any given psalm, these approaches are generally more interested in how the various psalms are placed in the book (*Sitz im Buch*) and the impact

19. Selman, 'Kingdom', 162; Peels, 'Kingdom', 173–175.

20. See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (SCM Press, 1979), 504–525 and Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Scholars Press, 1985).

21. In some respects, the label 'canonical' is unfortunate, because the approaches it rejects or modifies do not necessarily deny that the Psalms are canon. It might be better to speak of Psalter-based interpretation, but as the term is reasonably established, it is retained here.

22. Herman Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

23. Classically expressed in his *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols (Basil Blackwell, 1967).

this has on how we read that psalm.[24] For our purposes, we can therefore note that even if the origin of the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) remains uncertain, it is possible to ask how it is used within the Psalter, and that such a synchronic question is entirely appropriate. Indeed, from the perspective of biblical theology, it is perhaps the more important question since, whatever its origin, the meaning of language in the canonical text is more important than question of its origin.[25]

If we are to read the language of kingship in Psalms, then our initial concern must be to explore how יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) is used within Psalms. For this, a key observation is that this language is clustered in Book 4 of Psalms and, apart from Psalm 47:9 (ET 47:8), is also entirely limited to Psalms 93–99. The close connections between these psalms were recognised long before the emergence of canonical approaches,[26] but these connections have since been explored in considerable detail, most notably by David Howard.[27] These connections make it likely that, irrespective of various suggestions that require some form of story line to be traceable through the Psalter, these psalms are intended to be read in relationship to one another. That is, their juxtaposition creates links between them, and these links are more important for their interpretation than any proposed cultic background, not least because the literary associations can be tested in ways that suggested cultic backgrounds cannot. That is, the *Sitz im Buch* constitutes clearly assessable evidence whereas a hypothetical *Sitz im Leben* cannot. Within the final form of the Psalter, it is also the case that the wider language of kingship within it impacts how we read Psalms 93–99, addressing one of the longstanding problems in their interpretation.

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24. For an overview, see Jerome F. D. Creach, *Discovering Psalms: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Eerdmans, 2020), 101–119.

25. It should be stressed that this does not mean that such diachronic questions have no relevance, especially since attention to such matters will often provide great insight into the final usage. But where this is not textually transparent and depends on unverifiable hypotheses (as, for example, the various festivals that have been proposed as lying in the background of Psalms), then we are in danger of making the sort of semantic errors that are so powerfully criticised in James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961).

26. For instance, Franz Delitzsch, 'Psalms', in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testamen*t, vol. 5 (Hendrickson, 1996 (original 1888)), 611, considers יהוה מלך to be the 'watchword' of what he calls the 'theocratic psalms'.

27. David M. Howard Jr, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100*, BJS 5 (Eisenbrauns, 1997); cf. Michael G. McKelvey, *Moses, David and the High Kingship of YHWH: A Canonical Study of Book IV of the Psalter*, GD 55 (Gorgias Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463236151, and Robert E. Wallace, *The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter* (Peter Lang, 2007), https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-0752-8.

Taking these elements into account, we can note that the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) can be translated in three different ways:

1. 'YHWH is king', thus interpreting the verb מָלָךְ as indicating a status held by YHWH.
2. 'YHWH has become king', thus interpreting the verb מָלָךְ as representing the specific point at which YHWH became king.
3. 'YHWH reigns', thus interpreting the verb מָלָךְ as enduring.

All three of these are plausible translations[28] and each acknowledges the fact that the subject here precedes the verb, thus putting more emphasis on the name YHWH. Yet none of them is perhaps complete because there is a flexibility to the Hebrew at this point that does not easily map on to English, and each only partially recognises the wider theological claim of Psalms. That YHWH is king can also be expressed through a noun rather than the verb (e.g. Ps 10:16), but we cannot set these two linguistic forms against one another. Rather, we can affirm that for Psalms there is no question about YHWH's status as king. That YHWH has become king is also something which can be affirmed in Psalms. In slightly different language, Psalm 29:10 notes that YHWH sits enthroned, and an enthronement happens at a given point. But because YHWH is king then for Psalms there is never a point at which YHWH has not been king. The translation 'YHWH reigns' captures this element, but slightly loses the dimension of the fact of YHWH being king. Indeed, all three can be seen in Psalm 47:6-9, the other psalm to use the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*). There, YHWH is affirmed to be king (vv. 7-8), though his moment of ascent can also be his moment of enthronement (v. 6). When, therefore, we read that he reigns over the nations while also sitting on his throne (v. 9) then we can see that his reign endures. Within the Psalter, therefore, the sense of יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) might be best translated 'YHWH reigns', but the exact nuances that troubled interpreters trying to tie these psalms to a particular cultic moment can be seen to be resolved by the literary context provided by the book which allows all senses to be true at one and the same time.

The core concern, therefore, is with the fact of YHWH's reign, and it is this which provides a key insight into the language of the kingdom when we reach the New Testament. However, it is important that we do not move to the New Testament too quickly so that the Old Testament's witness is reduced simply to background. Rather, as Brevard Childs insists, attention must be paid to the Old Testament's discrete witness, not least because the Old Testament has a

28. See especially Brettler, *God is King*, 125–158.

significant impact on the New.[29] Although we shall conclude by exploring some of the ways the New Testament takes up the themes of YHWH's reign as it is expressed in these psalms, our primary focus will therefore be to explore their message within the Psalter itself. It must be stressed, however, that attention to the YHWH *Malak* psalms means we are only exploring one aspect of the Psalms' contribution to this theme.

3. The YHWH *Malak* psalms in Book 4

3.1 Orientation

Apart from Psalm 47, all the YHWH *Malak* psalms occur in Book 4. As noted above, these psalms are all closely linked to one another through various repeated themes and language, the most obvious of which is the opening affirmation of YHWH's reign. It should be said that Book 4 is also provided with a literary context within the Psalter. This is most obviously evident from the close of Book 3, where Psalms 88–89 provide a particularly downbeat conclusion, with Psalm 89 complaining that YHWH has not properly honoured the terms of the Davidic covenant, with the nation's displeasure largely matched by that of an individual in Psalm 88. Book 4's role within the Psalter is to provide a means of addressing these concerns through worship, though it must be stressed that the problems are not resolved by the end of the book since, apart from the closing doxology of Psalm 106:48, it ends with an appeal that YHWH gather the community once more so that they might praise him (Ps 106:47). This language is often interpreted as a reference to the exile, and though this is a highly plausible setting it is never made explicit within the Book, meaning that it remains open to being read in other settings of communal doubt and suffering.[30]

The YHWH *Malak* psalms form a collection within the central section of Book 4, Psalms 93–100. The opening section, Psalms 90–92, provides a historical and wisdom-tinged introduction to help the community focus on time through a much longer period, reaching back through Moses[31] to creation, through which to understand YHWH's reign and that a short-term consideration

29. On the methodological stance underlying this, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Fortress, 1992), 97–106. It is notable that when he comes to the Psalms, Childs observes that 'the content of the psalms remain focussed on the rule of God' (p. 192).

30. See Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf. A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2014), 685, https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-00a0.

31. It goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that Moses is a significant framing figure for Book 4, being mentioned in the title of Ps 90 as well as 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16,23,32.

of experience will not allow this to be appreciated properly. Discussion of YHWH's reign in this central section is thus addressed to a community that is suffering and wrestling with issues of theodicy. This in turn leads into the book's final section which integrates themes of YHWH's faithfulness through time, culminating in the two great historical recitals of Psalms 105–106, recitals that even without using the language of YHWH's reign depend on this, especially as they emerge out of the reflection on creation in Psalm 104, which is itself an exploration of how YHWH's kingdom rules over all (Ps 103:19). We shall explore this more fully through the particular psalms addressed below, but the important points to note are that the theme of YHWH's reign in Book 4 is more widespread than just the psalms with language which references it, and that this theme is something which is applied to the particular needs of the worshipping community in understanding the complex situation in which it found itself. Turning to our psalms, our goal is to read each in its specific setting within Book 4 and to note the specific contributions it makes to the theme of YHWH's reign in the larger setting of Book 4 and its place within the Psalter and hence how it provides good news to a struggling community. Declaration of YHWH's reign in Book 4 is ultimately about offering good news to a struggling community. It is language that is applied to their challenges, helping them make sense of their own experience and offering them a way to frame their understanding of their experience through the hope that YHWH's reign provides.

3.2 Psalm 93

Psalm 93 can be classified as a psalm of praise, something it has in common with all the YHWH *Malak* psalms. It is the shortest of these psalms, with a particular focus on the themes of creation and the temple. Indeed, YHWH's reign is here particularly explored through these two themes, though in so doing the psalm is linked to other poems in Book 4's opening section while also preparing for important elements which will emerge through the remaining YHWH *Malak* psalms.

Psalm 93 climaxes with a reference to the temple (v. 5). This provides an important link to Psalm 92:12-15, which had focused on the temple as the place where the righteous flourish in YHWH's presence. As the only psalm with a title associated with the Sabbath, Psalm 92 also provides connections to wider themes of creation, though here they are employed more through the wisdom observation about grass (Ps 92:7). However, the failure of the obtuse to flourish there is contrasted with the flourishing of the righteous in the temple in verses 12-15. Perhaps less directly for Psalm 93, Psalm 92:3 had also pointed to the

goodness of declaring YHWH's faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה – *ʾemunah*), something that will be discovered by all generations in Psalm 100:5 as they enter YHWH's courts, that is, as they enter the temple area. With these two poems forming the bridges between the YHWH *Malak* psalms and the rest of Book 4, they also mean that we now read about and celebrate YHWH's reign in the context of his faithfulness. Moreover, as we will also see in the case of Psalms 97 and 99, the theme of YHWH's reign over the nations is one that gradually becomes more prominent through these poems, so Psalm 100's celebration of all the nations coming into YHWH's presence is a natural climax to this theme.[32] That the nations also discover YHWH's goodness and enduring חֶסֶד (*khesed* – 'kindness') in Psalm 100 in turn prepares for the importance of this theme in Psalms 106 and 107. This theme not only forms a bridge from these psalms to the rest of Book 4; it is also the key link between Books 4 and 5, suggesting again that even if the theme of YHWH's kingship is not explicit at that point, it forms a key theological perspective, one that anticipates its formal return in Psalms 145–146. Although other connections between Psalm 93 and those around it can be examined, these connections make clear that the theme of YHWH's reign is an important one, not limited only to those psalms which explicitly mention it, and this is achieved (in part at least) through a range of linguistic connections between the YHWH *Malak* psalms and other poems around them.

Despite the presence of these important linguistic connections, there can be no doubt that the psalm's opening assertion of YHWH's reign is an important one that initiates something new. Various elements may well have prepared for this announcement, but the importance of these connections is more obviously seen in hindsight. The audience that works its way sequentially through Book 3 and into Book 4 has been prepared for the possibility of an alternative way of interpreting the community's situation through Psalms 90–92, but the assertion of YHWH's reign is a crucial one that introduces an important new element, even if it is also (in light of Psalm 47 in particular) a reaffirmation of an old one. The background from Psalm 47 may well be important because there is a notable absence here that we might initially have thought might be important for the community. Book 3 ended by indicating that the community had suffered military defeat and now experienced verbal abuse from the nations. It might therefore have been appropriate to establish YHWH's reign over the nations. But Psalm 93 does not address this issue at all, though it does arguably establish the conditions for this to happen. Instead, it focuses

32. Cf. McKelvey, *Moses, David and the High Kingship of YHWH*, 67.

on YHWH's relationship to creation.[33] The general ANE view is that creation remained something dangerous and uncontrolled, but that view is immediately countered here. Hence, verse 1 not only declares that YHWH reigns, but it also affirms that the world is firmly established and cannot be moved. Rather than creation being a continued struggle between various forces where one could never be certain of its security, the psalm is clear – YHWH's reign means that creation can never be a challenge to him.

Further evidence for this can be seen in YHWH's regalia. Although the Bible never provides a clear overview of YHWH's garb (in part because this too is a metaphor), it does at times make statements about it which points in some way to his character, as for example in Isaiah 6:1 where the fringe of his robe is sufficient to fill the temple. Here, the emphasis is on how his robes point to his royal majesty, before extending this motif in the last part of verse 1 where the language takes on a more military cast. The point is that YHWH, now also dressed as a warrior (a natural combination for the Old Testament), is prepared to overcome any force in creation that might be foolish enough to oppose him. Since nothing can oppose YHWH, then creation itself must also be secure.

This security is explored in the psalm's second strophe (vv. 3-4), which notes the power of the rivers (נְהָרוֹת – *neharot*) which have lifted up their voice, a voice that is likened to something roaring. Although perhaps less evident in English, reference to the rivers most likely evokes aspects of Canaanite mythology. This is evident from texts at Ugarit where the sea deity (Yam) is also known as 'River'.[34] Here, we might note that YHWH is shown to be mightier than the rivers and the Sea (יָם – *yam*). This observation works well with both a mythological reading, in which case YHWH is more powerful than the Phoenician deities, and a non-mythological one. After all, Israel knew well the power of rivers in the wet season, a time when dry wadis would flood and run powerfully down the hills, while the sea could always be seen as a threat to a largely non-maritime people. But if there is a mythological background (and a choice is not really needed), then whatever power such chaotic forces once held now belongs to YHWH alone.[35] YHWH's reign means that all such powers

33. Cf. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Praise: A Historical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2019), 133–134.

34. See John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (CUP, 1985), 7, 35–37.

35. Dennis Sylva, 'The Rising נהרות of Psalm 93: Chaotic Order', *JSOT* 36 (2012): 482, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089212438006.

are rendered powerless before him.[36] The conclusion of this is then drawn out in the final verse, which notes that just as creation is secure, so also YHWH's testimonies (עֵדוּת – *ʿedut*) are trustworthy, something consistent with YHWH's holiness. If YHWH reigns, then however other powers might be construed, they are subservient to him, and the appropriate response is one of worship.

3.3 Psalm 97

Although the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) is important for this section of Book 4, we do not encounter it again until Psalm 97. This does not mean that the theme of YHWH's reign has been ignored since Psalm 93. Rather, it is explored differently, creating additional context for understanding Psalm 97 within Book 4. Psalm 94 may initially seem an outlier in this section of Book 4 since it lacks any explicit language of kingship, but since YHWH can be addressed as 'judge of the earth' (v. 2) there is clear evidence that he continues to play a royal role.[37] Psalm 95:3 again explicitly affirms YHWH's kingship, emphasising that he is the great king above all gods. This can certainly be understood in light of the mythological background of Psalm 93 as a further affirmation of the themes developed there. Creation itself is somewhat demythologised in Psalm 95 since the concern of verses 3-5 is simply noting that YHWH is the creator, though since the heights of the mountains (where deities were thought to be accessible) and the sea are both said to have been made by YHWH, we have not left the realms of mythology entirely. Indeed, that YHWH is the great king above all the gods treats him like the high god of Canaanite traditions, though within this psalm such gods are of no value precisely because YHWH is the creator and therefore the realms of other deities all belong to YHWH anyway. This element is extended in Psalm 96:4-6 where YHWH is greater than the nations' deities because he is the creator, whereas they are simply worthless (אֱלִילִים - *ʾelilim*). They may give the appearance of being gods, but they have no reality. Hence, the psalm exhorts its audience to proclaim יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*) among the nations (v. 10), while also emphasising the security of creation and that YHWH is its judge – drawing together themes that have developed in Psalms 93–95 while affirming YHWH's reign. Since this instance of the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ

36. Taking this slightly further, Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, '"The Rivers Have Lifted up their Voice": Imagining the Mighty Waters in Psalm 93', *OTE* 32 (2019): 380, https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2019/v32n2a7, suggests that their voices are now raised in praise.

37. We can also note that Pss 94 and 95 are linked through the metaphor of YHWH as 'rock' (Pss 94:22; 95:1); cf. Salvador Fernandes, *God as Rock in the Psalter*, EUS 934 (Peter Lang, 2013), 337, https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-02874-4.

(*YHWH malak*) is the speech that is to be announced in the nations, we can exclude Psalm 96 from further discussion here, though it clearly prepares for Psalm 97, not least as the celebration of all creation (vv. 12-13) prepares for the call for all the earth to rejoice with which Psalm 97 opens.[38]

Psalm 97 thus has close connections with Psalms 94–96, though it also has immediate connections with Psalm 93, connections that go beyond the opening declaration of יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*). This is most importantly evident here in the fact that creation itself is now called to rejoice. This provides an important development from Psalm 93 in that although it is possible that the rivers there lifted their voice in praise (v. 3), here there is no doubt that creation now contributes to the praise of YHWH. YHWH is made manifest in verses 2-6 in language that is typical of theophanies, especially the presentation of YHWH in Exodus 19.[39] Here, we may note the shared motifs of clouds, fire, and lightning. If the language of the mountains melting is evocative of an earthquake, then it too evokes Sinai.[40] The presentation of YHWH's awesome power here may still draw on mythological language, especially as lightning bolts might have more typically have been associated with Baal in the region, though again the point is that it is YHWH's lightning bolts, not Baal's, that light up the world.[41] As with Psalm 93, the creation belongs to YHWH, though this theme is then extended to the nations in verse 6 since the proclamation of YHWH's righteousness in the heavens means that all peoples see his glory. The place of the nations, set aside in Psalm 93 to address the issue of creation, now begins to be explored in terms of YHWH's reign, though of course the importance of proclamation to the nations has been noted in Psalm 96:3.

The implications of this are then explored in verses 7-9. Here, the initial point is again to demonstrate the folly of the worship of idols since those who do so are put to shame. Worshippers who realise that YHWH alone reigns and that anything which distracts from this appreciate that they have followed a foolish path, exalting beings that are worthless (אֱלִילִים –*ʾelilim*). Although the final line of verse 7 is ambiguous, it seems likely that it closes by directing all the

38. Indeed, Ps 96 establishes key links for the whole of Pss 97–99 through key phrases like 'Sing to YHWH a new song' (שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חָדָשׁ). See Howard, *Psalms 93–100*, 142–153.

39. Cf. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Zondervan, 1995), 85.

40. See also Ps 18:9-15, which also uses theophanic language.

41. Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, HZAT (Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 383, argues that this requires this element to be the reworking of Canaanite material, but it is not necessary for the connection to be so formalised, and it could simply be a polemic against a well-known motif.

gods to worship YHWH.[42] Since they have been shown to be functionally non-existent (in that YHWH fulfils any function that might have been attributed to them), the effect of this is also to direct their worshippers to serve YHWH instead. This reading leads well into verses 8-9, which report on Zion's joy at YHWH's acts of justice. This provides further evidence of YHWH's superiority over the gods, something expressed spatially in terms of his exaltation over the gods. Zion's joy is thus a response to his acts of justice, demonstrations of his reign, and therefore that the gods of the nations have no power or reality and can therefore no longer be considered as a threat to it.

The implications of YHWH's reign are explored further in verses 10-12, with an initial exploration of what YHWH's worshippers should do. This is set up in a love/hate binary – those who love YHWH are to hate evil.[43] If love for YHWH is shown by loyalty to his commands (cf. Deut 6:4-5), and since YHWH is defined in these psalms by his justice, then the corollary of this is that they are to hate evil. Love for YHWH is a positive commitment to the justice of his reign, and therefore hatred of evil is the shadow side to this. Worshippers are to honour YHWH, but they also know that he protects the lives of his faithful ones to deliver them from the power of the wicked. Although this is not yet a direct reference to the powerful forces that afflicted the community, it does prepare for mention of the nations in Psalms 98–99. Until then, the righteous can give thanks for the remembrance of his holiness. YHWH reigns, and there is no force in creation that can resist and although the point is not yet explicit it is becoming clear that no political entity can resist his reign either.

3.4 Psalm 99

As with the move to Psalm 97, it is also important to note the links between Psalm 99 and what has preceded it. Here, we may begin by noting that Psalm 98 has brought the theme of the nations to prominence, picking up this motif from Psalm 96:10 so that its implications in terms of YHWH's reign can be worked out more fully. The nations have not been ignored in Psalms 93–97, but it is Psalms 98–99 that develop the implication of YHWH's reign over the nations most completely. In particular, we should note that Psalm 98:7-9 points to YHWH's coming to bring justice for both creation (which would here again include mythological elements) and the peoples. YHWH is the king who comes to judge all. That he has the power to do this is probably because the 'new

42. Alternatively, we could read the verb as perfect, reporting what these deities do anyway (so, Howard, *Psalms 93–100*, 70).

43. NRSV follows a common emendation and makes YHWH the subject of v. 10, but this is unnecessary.

song' that is sung in Psalm 98 is one that responds to a victory that YHWH has won, a victory that has demonstrated his power and which has revealed his righteousness to the nations (Ps 98:1-2).[44] Although it is only a minor feature, we should note in passing that Psalm 98 is the first poem since Psalm 92 to have a superscription. Its one-word title (מִזְמֹר – *mizmor* – 'a psalm') might be passed over fairly quickly, but here it probably serves to provide a small break after Psalm 97. On the other hand, that Psalms 96–97 and 98–99 share the same opening lines means that we should probably read them as two pairs that are read together,[45] with their shared motifs engaging one another. In short, although Psalms 98–99 develop motifs from the preceding psalms, they do not stand apart from them.

As we turn to Psalm 99 itself, we note that it is made up of three stanzas (vv. 1-3,4-5,6-9), with each stanza concerned with YHWH as king and building on the theme of YHWH's holiness. The psalm explicitly comments on YHWH's holiness three times (vv. 3,5,9). A shortened form occurs in the first two instances, with the simple declaration 'holy is he' (קָדוֹשׁ הוּא – *qadosh hu*ʾ) before the extended form 'for YHWH our God is holy' (כִּי־קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ – *ki qadosh YHWH* ʾ*elohenu*). This declaration also links Psalm 99 to Psalm 93, which had closed by observing that holiness was appropriate for YHWH's house.[46] More immediately, it also links to the fact that YHWH's arm, with which he won the victory in Psalm 98:1, could also be described as holy. Within this collection, YHWH's reign, holiness and ability to overcome his foes are all closely linked. Given that the setting for Book 4 is one where YHWH's faithfulness to his covenant or his power to act for it has been open to doubt, the process by which Book 4 has built to this as the climax of the YHWH *Malak* sequence is thus important. It has gradually made clear through worship that YHWH can act for his people, and that he will indeed bring justice. But the stress here on holiness also leaves open another dimension for the community as they come to reflect on this fact and its possible implications for them, explaining why they faced the experiences that they have. It is perhaps important that within Book 4 this will not lead to a confession of sin until Psalm 106:6, so it is also important to state that the declaration of YHWH's reign does not of itself

44. For Ps 98 as a victory song, see Tremper Longman III, 'Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song', *JETS* 27 (1984): 267–274; Ellen F. Davis, 'Psalm 98', *Interpretation* 46 (1992), 172, https://doi.org/10.1177/002096439204600207.

45. For more on the parallels between these psalms, see Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC (Word, 1990), 508.

46. Holiness may also be in view in Ps 96:9, though perhaps we should understand it as requiring that worshippers be garbed in holy attire.

resolve all their challenges even if it is fundamental to it, and indeed the motif of YHWH as a forgiving God (v. 8) also prepares for this.

The opening affirmation of YHWH's reign here is also closely tied to the end of Psalm 98. Here, after the declaration יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*), we immediately turn to the 'peoples', with עַמִּים (*ʿammim*) serving as a linking term between Psalm 98:9 and 99:1. Psalm 98 ends with a declaration of YHWH's coming in order to judge the peoples with equity, while Psalm 99:1 wants the peoples to tremble before him. Such trembling could come about as a result of dread, but it is notable that YHWH reigns as one enthroned between the cherubim, probably referring to the ark in the temple (cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 1 Kgs 6:23-28; Ps 80:1). This links YHWH's rule and judging of the nations to the holiness that befits his temple (Ps 93:5). YHWH's coming is to bring justice and worship, and the peoples are among those who are to participate in that worship. YHWH's reign is therefore not simply for the community addressed in these psalms. It is for all creation, and that includes the peoples, even peoples who had previously proved so challenging for the community. In announcing this, the psalm also wrestles with a profound paradox, which is that the one who is unapproachable in his holiness is also to be worshipped by all.

The second stanza poses some challenges in translation. We cannot here explore these issues beyond observing that the MT, although difficult, can be retained.[47] If so, then we probably have a statement in verse 4 reporting that the king's strength loves justice, with 'strength' then to be understood as a synonym here for YHWH's holiness. This would then suggest that YHWH, as the holy king, expresses his holiness (as manifest in his strength) in justice. YHWH has already executed justice among his people, so the coming judgment of the peoples means that they too will experience what Israel (here called Jacob) has already experienced.

The third stanza includes a brief historical interlude that considers key figures like Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. A unifying feature for them is that YHWH had responded to their prayers to him, though these responses are tied together in the mention of the pillar of cloud. YHWH had given his statutes and decrees, another act as king, and they had kept them. As king, YHWH can expect to be obeyed. Despite this, and here probably alluding to Exodus 32–34, the psalm looks to YHWH as the one who was also forgiving, though with misdeeds punished. For the community of Book 4, this is now a word of hope. They too have been disciplined for sin, but they can also hope that the forgiveness announced here will be effective for them, preparing for the

47. For the options, see Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 526–527.

greater focus on forgiveness in Psalm 103. YHWH reigns, and therefore he has the right to discipline, but he is also one who forgives. As king, he does bring justice, but as the community is called once more to worship YHWH, they can do so knowing that he also forgives.

4. God's reign in Book 4 and beyond

We may tie some of these observations together by again affirming that the language of YHWH's reign in Book 4, and the YHWH *Malak* psalms in particular, has been applied to the needs of the community that worships through it. That is, the presentation of YHWH's reign in Psalms 93–99 is not offering an abstract truth. Rather, it is applied to the needs of the worshipping community that uses these psalms so that as they offer praise, they are also introduced to key themes about YHWH's reign that enables them to reframe their current circumstances. This is because Book 4 never leaves behind the challenging context with which Book 3 had closed, and its own closing prayer is thus the point at which it becomes possible to look beyond that context. But where Book 3 had closed with two psalms which challenged YHWH, wondering if he was indeed faithful to his commitment to his people, Book 4's focus on YHWH's reign has helped the worshipping community to understand that he is creator, and thus superior to all forces that might have been recognised in their world. This has involved interaction with the mythological worldviews that dominated the ANE,[48] treating them as factors that would be genuinely believed by many and yet at the same time demythologising them since once YHWH's reign is properly recognised, then these myths lose their power since YHWH is the great king above all gods. The community cannot be threatened by such powers because they are subject to YHWH. From this, it then becomes possible to see that YHWH's reign is also over all the nations, a point that anticipates Psalm 100 as the close of this section in Book 4 where all the earth comes to worship YHWH.[49] The nations may well have left the community in a state of despair at the end of Book 3, but affirmations of YHWH's reign have carefully addressed these concerns, so that the affirmation of YHWH's reign is not simply a presentation of key theological truths about YHWH, but an application of them specific to the needs of the community.

48. On the key elements of this, see Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2000).

49. See further, David G. Firth, 'Transformation of War Language in the Worship of all the Earth in Psalm 100', *Acta Theologica* 32 (2021): 380–391.

We cannot here trace the motifs from Book 4 into the wider witness of the Bible to the theme of the kingdom of God. However, if we are correct to suppose that the Old Testament background forms a key element to its further proclamation in the New Testament, then we would expect to find similar patterns there. It should be said that the New Testament never quotes any of the YHWH *Malak* declarations,[50] though there is a clear allusion to them in Revelation 19:6. The declaration of God's reign there is expanded from the shorter statement of the psalms, as the heavenly multitude declares Ἀλληλουϊά, ὅτι ἐβασίλευσεν κύριος ὁ θεὸς [ἡμῶν] ὁ παντοκράτωρ (Hallelujah! For the Lord [our] God, the Almighty, reigns). The language here, though not a citation, is certainly a close allusion to each of Psalms 93, 97, and 99 and is rightly presented in most translations as poetry, pointing to its liturgical function. Revelation, it should be noted, is also addressed to a suffering community, and there is a strong possibility that the language here might also allude to Domitian and his claim to be 'lord and god'.[51] The voice of the multitude that declares these things is certainly impressive, sounding like roaring waves and crashing thunder. If Psalm 93:3-4 lies in the background here (at least to some extent), then we now see the effect of the demythologising of such forces there as they are now simply sounds that can be used to describe the effect of the multitude's praise of God.[52] Fanning has argued that the verb ἐβασίλευσεν is ingressive, and thus points to the moment where YHWH has begun to reign, a sense that has a possible background in the phrase יְהוָה מָלָךְ (*YHWH malak*).[53] Yet it is also true that, for Revelation, God has always reigned, even if there might be a point at which this is particularly recognised, thus joining its witness to that of the YHWH *Malak* psalms. Thus, the book of Revelation has set out a careful programme to help its readers appreciate that the forces that opposed the early Christian community, despite their claims to the contrary, lacked final authority. God's reign has been developed, and drawing on the YHWH *Malak* psalms has been shown to address the needs of the community.

5. Conclusion

Discussion of the kingdom cannot, of course, be reduced to a few sample texts like this, especially if Peels is correct in seeing YHWH's reign as a root metaphor for the Old Testament. However, it is important that we attend to the

50. Heb 1:6 could cite Ps 97:7, though it is perhaps more likely LXX Deut 32:43.

51. See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1997), 346.

52. These comparisons are not unique to this point in Revelation – cf. Rev 1:15; 14:2 – so one might argue that John's vision has been preparing for the allusion to this point.

53. Buist Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Zondervan, 2008), 480–481.

particulars of how these texts present God's reign. Here, we need to note that the Psalter remains the single most important direct witness to the language of the kingdom in the Old Testament and that understanding its presentation of this theme is a vital component to understanding it in the New. Nevertheless, we cannot reduce the Psalter, or the psalms considered here, simply to background. Rather, they provide a key context for understanding just why Jesus could be said to announce the good news of the kingdom (e.g. Mark 1:14-15 reports that ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ λέγων ὅτι Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ· μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ – 'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the good news of God and saying "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near – repent and believe the good news"'). The kingdom could be announced as good news because it addressed the real challenges and experiences of the community that heard this announcement. The good news would, of course, go well beyond what we have here in the Psalms. But it is also important to stress that the announcement of the kingdom was good news precisely because it was not a mere abstraction. It was good news because, as in Psalms 93–99, it addressed the real experience of those who encountered it. For the Psalms, and I would argue the New Testament, the kingdom is not simply an adjective to be placed on things but rather good news that addresses the real challenges and difficulties that are faced.

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