



**“THAT *LEX ORANDI* [THE RULE OF PRAYER] MIGHT BECOME
LEX CREDENDI [THE RULE OF FAITH]”
PSALM 110 AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PSALMS**

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In the St. Godehard treasure-house in Hildesheim, there is a wonderful manuscript of the Psalter from the first half of the 12th century. It was written in the English St. Alban’s Abbey north of London and is therefore called the Albani Psalter. Let me show you the initial C, with which Psalm 4 begins.¹ The opening verse says: *“Cum invocarem exaudivit me Deus”* – “When I called, God heard me.” The medieval illuminist turned this verse into a picture. On the left, we see the person praying the Psalm as he shouts to God. He even becomes violent and bores his finger into God’s ear so that God will hear him. From the way the halo is depicted – as an aura of the cross – it is clear that it is Christ who is being called upon here. Christ is the *“Deus”*, God, whom the person praying the Psalm is addressing.

In the following, I shall present a few reflections on how it could come about that the Psalter is used in Christian liturgy and even helped to formulate the Christian confession of faith.

The Connection between the Creed and the Liturgy

In Christian liturgy, the center of the Christian faith and the Christian message is expounded while being celebrated. This internal connection between the Creed and the liturgy finds expression in the short theological formula: *“lex credendi, lex orandi”*.² In free translation we might say: “We pray as we believe – and vice versa, we also believe as we pray.”

Let us remain a little with the Creed and ask ourselves how the first Christians expressed their confession of faith. In order to find an adequate way of formulating their religious experiences and convictions, they had to go back to expressions that already existed. Concretely, the Torah, was for them “the alphabet and vocabulary of faith”. With its help, they could put into words and interpret all the events and experiences with and around Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament, it is said over and over again that the early Christian confession of faith is “in accordance with the scriptures”. In the First Letter to the Corinthians,³ for example, Paul quotes an expression of faith that already existed, and in so doing he passes on to us the oldest known testimony to Easter:

¹ <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/german/translation/trans077.shtml>.

² The expression goes back to Prosper of Aquitania (*Induculus Coelestini*, around 440): “that the Rule of Prayer might become the Rule of Faith” (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*).

³ Written around 54.

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” (1 Cor 15:3-5)

Another graphic example of how the Christian faith experience is “in accordance with the scriptures” can be found at the end of the Gospel according to Luke⁴ in the narrative about the disciples of Emmaus. The risen Jesus accompanies two of his disciples on their way to Emmaus and tells them:

“‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (Lk 24:25-27)

What does “in accordance with the scriptures” mean here? Maybe we can put it this way: on the background of their ancestral religious knowledge, the first Christians read and heard the well-known scriptural texts in a new way when they brought them into connection with Jesus. As Jews, they now read and heard Scripture on a new horizon of understanding. Thus, they discovered in Scripture the things that had happened to them in connection with the life and death of Jesus, as well as their experience of the risen Jesus. Based on their knowledge of Scripture, they could put these new experiences into words and also give them meaning. First came the experience and their previous understanding, and the “fitting” scriptural text that was then “found” followed. The well-known texts read with a new way of seeing resulted in a “new meaning”.⁵ This “new meaning” focuses on Jesus.

Now because this “new meaning” was found in the well-known texts, the claim suggested itself, of course, that this “new meaning” had always been contained in the words of Scripture – and as we saw with Luke, in “all the scriptures” – but that it was only discovered and revealed now “through Christ”.

Thus, although all of Scripture is taken as testimony for the Creed, concretely only a few passages are preferred. These include among others Psalm 110.

Ps 110: The King’s Enthronement and Priestly Dignity

Ps 110 is the scriptural text that is most often quoted in the New Testament.⁶ There are eight literal quotations and more than 20 allusions. Wherever the Psalm is brought to play in New Testament texts, we can get insight into the contemporary way of working with scriptural texts, of using them in the argument and of understanding them.

Let’s look at the text:

⁴ Written between 80 and 90.

⁵ I am placing the words “new meaning” in quotation marks in order to make clear that this means the Christian sense given to the biblical texts. This meaning is obviously only possible based on these experiences of Christ. Without this horizon of understanding, the text does not convey this meaning.

⁶ Ps 110:1 is explicitly quoted in Mk 12:36 par; Acts 2:34f.; Ps 110:1bc in Heb 1:13; Ps 110:4b in Heb 5:6; 7:17; Ps 110:4ab in Heb 7:21. Allusions are more frequent; cf. Mk 14:62 par; 16:19; Acts 5:31; 7:55f.; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 5:10; 6:20; 7:3.11.15.24.28; 8:1; 10:12f.; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22.

¹ Of David. A Psalm
*Thus says the LORD to my lord,
 "Sit at my right hand
 until I make your enemies your footstool."*

² *The LORD stretch forth from Zion
 the scepter of your power:
 "Rule in the midst of your foes.*

³ *The rule is yours on the day of your power,
 in holy radiance.
 Like the dew out of the womb of dawn
 I have begotten you."*

⁴ *The LORD has sworn and will not repent:
 "You are a priest forever
 according to the order of Melchizedek!"*

⁵ *The Lord stands at your right hand,
 shatters kings on the day of his wrath.*

⁶ *He sits in judgment among the nations,
 he heaps the dead,
 shatters heads over the earth.*

⁷ *He drinks from the stream by the path;
 therefore he can lift up his head anew.*

I cannot go into the Psalm's big exegetical problems. In spite of the various textual difficulties, the Psalm seems to speak clearly of two themes. In verses 1-3 it is talking about the king's enthronement, and in verses 4-7 the theme is the king's priestly dignity. With the enthronement, the beginning of the rule of a new king is meant, a king who is legitimized by God and who receives a share in God's rule. Connecting the dignity of the king with the pre-Israelite priestly monarchy in the person of Melchizedek is unusual. It is to be noted that in the second half of the Psalm God has changed his position and now, at the right hand(!) of the priestly king, is fighting for the implementation of his rule and of justice. We can assume that already when the redactor inserted the Psalm into its present context, its meaning had been enriched and broadened in a sense that went far beyond the historical reality of a king in Jerusalem.

The Enthronement of the Messianic King

In the New Testament, Mk 12:35-37a shows clearly that the Psalm could be understood as a text that speaks about a future king. Here I want to begin a short chronological overview on the use of the Psalm and how it is understood in the New Testament.

The Gospel according to Mark⁷ has Jesus himself using Ps 110:1 in his argumentation. He seems to bring up the question as to the understanding of what and who the Messiah is:

"While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool [Ps 110:1]."' David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" (Mk 12:35-37a; cf. also Mt 22:41-45; Lk 20:41-44)

⁷ Probably written shortly before 70.

Here, it goes without saying that Jesus and his partners in the discussion see the Psalm in connection with the coming Messiah. What is questioned is the Messiah's relationship with David, for he cannot be "son of David" and "David's Lord" at one and the same time. These verses also discuss the Messiah-King's relationship with the LORD, with God, who speaks to him and has him take his place at his [God's] right hand.

Then, during the trial of Jesus, the high priest asks him point blank:

"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power [Ps 110:1], and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" (Mk 14:61f.)

In the description in the Gospel according to Mark, the trial of Jesus reaches a climax here. Jesus himself confirms his messianic sending with the help of Ps 110:1.⁸ Moreover, the quotation from the Psalm is combined with Dan 7:13,⁹ so that Jesus as Messiah becomes the eschatological judge who will return at the end of days.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter uses Psalm 110:1 in his Pentecost sermon in order to formulate a similar high Christology:

"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" [Ps 110:1] Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:29-36)

In Peter's speech, Ps 110 becomes a prophetic text that not only confirms Jesus' being the Messiah, but also announces his resurrection from the dead and the raising of his humanity to God. His disciples' experience of Easter is thereby interpreted. The image of "sitting at the right hand", which originates in the rite of coronation, here describes the relationship between God and Jesus: Jesus is "raised" to the same level with God. So here, the word of the Psalm serves to express the high rank of Jesus, whose place is next to God himself so that he can be called "Lord".

The destruction of the enemies also belongs to the Easter context. The enemies who become the footstool of the messianic king are now no longer some threatening foreign nations. Now death as *the enemy par excellence* is meant, as for example Paul also says in 1 Cor 15:24-26:

"Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all¹⁰ his enemies under his feet [Ps 110:1]. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

⁸ Even if we assume that Mark here placed a confession of faith from the time after Easter into the mouth of Jesus, the question arises whether this statement expresses something of Jesus' own awareness.

⁹ "Then I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him."

¹⁰ The addition of "all" presumably goes back to Ps 8:7; cf. 1 Cor 15:27. Ps 8 talks about the human being who is only a little less than God (*elohim*) and under whose feet all things have been placed.

The resurrection of Jesus is interpreted as victory over death (cf. also Heb 1:3; 10:12f.). With Paul, it has an eschatological aspect, for in it the living God already anticipates the beginning of his rule “at the end”. The theocentricity of Paul’s thought is to be noted. It finds its climax in the statement in 1 Cor 15:28:

“When all things are subjected to him [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.”

Here it becomes clear that the Christo-logical interpretation of Psalm 110 ultimately aims at making a Theo-logical statement. At the end, God will reign “over all and in all.”

In connection with the Acts of the Apostles, another observation is remarkable. After his long speech in Acts 7, which is one great look back over the history of salvation, the deacon Stephen has a vision in which he sees heaven open:

“But filled with the Holy Spirit, he [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” (Acts 7:55f.)

Stephen sees Jesus as a heavenly figure who has found entrance into the region of the divine glory and who also shares in this glory. Thus it becomes understandable why, during his stoning that follows, he addresses his prayer – which is again a verse from a Psalm – to Jesus. Dying, he alludes to Ps 31:6: “He prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” Here, a remarkable change has taken place in how the Psalm’s verse is interpreted. The person reading the Acts of the Apostles is reminded of Jesus’ prayer on the cross, as transmitted in the Gospel according to Luke.¹¹ According to this description, Jesus said the same verse of Psalm 31:6 before he died. On the cross, he applied the “Davidic” text to himself and addressed it to his Father in heaven (“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Lk 23:46). Using the same verse of the Psalm, Stephen goes a step further and addresses the word of the Psalm to “Kyrios Jesus”. The verse of the Psalm no longer addresses God, but Jesus who is at God’s right hand. Here we touch for the first time what will be basic in the later Christian interpretation of the Psalms: Not only God, but also Jesus Christ can be understood as “Kyrios” or “Dominus” – which in most cases in the Hebrew text is the Tetragrammaton. This opens up the possibility of also addressing a Psalm as a prayer to Jesus Christ.

That is a broadening or change of meaning, which became typical of the Christian interpretation of the Psalms, especially from the period of the Church Fathers until the Middle Ages. This development in the interpretation of the Hebrew text began with the Septuagint, where the name of God is translated as “Kyrios”. Another step was taken by confessing that God made Jesus “Kyrios” through the resurrection and by raising him (cf. Phil 2:11: “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”; cf. also Acts 2:36 above). I think Ps 110:1 contributed to this development. Through the image of enthronement, which is to say, the raising of the Davidic king to the throne, the Psalm made material available for expressing the relationship between the exalted Jesus and God. The disciples of Jesus interpreted their experience of the risen Jesus as a divine confirmation of his sending and of his claim, and thus as “enthronement at the right hand of God”. But mounting the throne means beginning to rule. With this rule is connected a position the consequence of which allowed Jesus himself to become *Kyrios*.

So far, we have seen that in the Christian interpretation of the Psalms, they could be understood as a prophetic Word of God about Christ (*vox de Christo*) and as a word of prayer to Christ (*vox ad Christum*). But in order to gain a balanced idea of the Christological interpretation of the Psalms, we must add that the Psalms are also interpreted as Christ’s prayer to the Father (*vox Christi ad Patrem*). Christians continue to pray the Psalms in the way Jesus prayed them as a believing Jew. They identify themselves with Christ; they pray “with him and through him”. This is probably the

¹¹ The Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles form a literary unit and refer to one another.

most usual way of understanding and praying the Psalm christologically, since it is closest to the literal meaning. It comes to bear above all in Aurelius Augustine's interpretations of the Psalms (354-430); for him, the Pauline image of the "Body of Christ"¹² was an important key to understanding the Psalms. „Durch die Menschwerdung ist Jesus seinerseits zum Sprecher und Beter der Psalmen geworden. Das sich an Gott (an Gott-Vater) wendende Subjekt der Psalmen ist der Menschgewordene und Menschgebliebene: der irdische Jesus und der erhöhte Christus, und zwar der ganze Jesus Christus, dessen Leib die Kirche ist (Augustinus: ‚Christus totus, caput et membra‘). Damit schliesst das christologische Prinzip zugleich die ekklesiologische Dimension ein.“¹³ [“By becoming human, Jesus in turn became the person speaking and praying the Psalms. The subject of the Psalms who turns to God (to God the Father) is the one who became human and who remained human: the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ, the whole Jesus Christ, whose body is the Church (Augustine: ‘Christus totus, caput et membra’). Thus the Christological principle includes at the same time the ecclesiological dimension.”] If we consider these three interpretative possibilities, we see that Christological interpretation of the Psalms is not one-dimensional, but occurs at various levels.

The Priestly King “according to the Order of Melchizedek”

Let's go back to Ps 110. The Letter to the Hebrews¹⁴ expresses the salvific meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus with the help of Ps 110:4: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” The verse is quoted in Heb 5:5f. and 7:3.11-21. In complicated argumentation, this letter interprets Jesus' giving of his life on the cross as a high priestly service, which brings about the cancellation of sin and thus the redemption of human beings who are subject to death. The death of Jesus and his exaltation are seen as one single process and are described with the image of entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, where the high priest brings about reconciliation through God (cf. Heb 9:24-28).

The Letter to the Hebrews says that the reason for the uniqueness of this priestly service is the uniqueness of Melchizedek's priesthood. According to its interpretation, the priest-king of Salem is a heavenly-eternal figure. For the silence of Scripture lets the author conclude in Heb 7:3 that Melchizedek was without beginning and end – so “eternal”:

“Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”

Thus, in the interpretation given by the Letter to the Hebrews, Melchizedek can become the type, the figure and original form that mark the “eternal”, celestial Son of God, whose death and exaltation represent a unique deed that is potent for salvation.

Thus the second theme of Psalm 110 comes to bear: the king's priestly dignity. As king of righteousness, he realizes his name¹⁵ by implementing this righteousness. God fights at his right hand and thus himself enforces his kingdom, his rule and righteousness. The Letter to the Hebrews connects this idea with Jesus and can thus explain the death of Jesus as God's salvific deed. In the victory over death as his greatest enemy, God himself fought for his Son. By means of the victory

¹² Cf. 1 Cor 12:12-30.

¹³ Notker Füglistner, “Ich sah, dass alles Vollkommene Grenzen hat ...” (Ps 119:96); in: Österreichisches Klerusblatt, 23 (1979), 300.

¹⁴ Presumably written between 80 and 95.

¹⁵ Melchizedek = literally: King of Righteousness.

over death, God realized his rule. But because Jesus is interpreted as “the eternal high priest”, this divine victory has an effect in time and space. The divine salvation that becomes visible in the person of Jesus Christ receives a uniqueness and importance that embraces all dimensions.

And at the same time, with the help of the world of images in Ps 110:4-7, a close connection between God’s deed and the deed of the “priest-king” can be expressed. This connection is an in-one-another that can no longer be separated into individual roles. At his enthronement, the priest-king is told to begin his rule and to put it into practice – and yet the realization of this rule is entirely God’s deed. Here too we can see how the Christological interpretation of the Psalm occurs within a Theo-centric perspective. And God’s deed can be interpreted as a salvific deed in connection with Easter – which is important for the liturgical use of the Psalm. Just as God fought for his people at the Red Sea (cf. Ex 14:13f.), he fights for his Son Jesus and saves him from death.

Ps 110:1.4 as a “Foundational Text” for the Christian Creed and Liturgical Celebration

So far, we have seen that the verses Ps 110:1 and Ps 110:4 are the ones that supplied the New Testament with vocabulary and ideas in order to make important Christological statements. However, I am convinced that we are not dealing only with these two individual verses. The Psalm as a whole is interpreted in the New Testament. The world of images on which the Psalm is based is drawn upon in order to put Jesus’ relationship with God and the salvific meaning of his death and resurrection into words, even if “only” verses 1 and 4 are quoted.

The confession of faith that is expressed with words from Ps 110 is celebrated in the liturgy. That is why Ps 110 is also used in worship. As was already implied, as a song with an Easter theme, it is part of the Sunday liturgy. There is already evidence in the 5th century that the Psalm was used in Rome as the opening Psalm for Sunday Vespers. The Rule of St. Benedict (6th century) adopted that. Since the Psalm talks about the exaltation of the Messiah-King to God, it also belongs especially to the feast of the Ascension.¹⁶

In general, we know little about the liturgical use of the Psalms in early Christian worship. Just as the Psalter was hardly the hymnbook for Jewish liturgy, it was also hardly the first Christians’ hymnbook. Starting in the 2nd century, there is evidence that individual Psalms were used in Christian worship and in private prayer. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the use of specifically Christian hymns was pushed back, as it was suspected that they spread heretical thought. So this new Christian poetry was replaced by Psalms, which were considered to be inspired and thus without doubt orthodox. Starting in the early 3rd century, first independent commentaries and homilies on the Psalms were created. Then from the 4th century on, the whole Psalter was used in the incipient monastic communities as a book for meditation and prayer.

¹⁶ “Sitting at the right hand” also appears in two parts of the Eucharistic celebration. In the great hymn of praise, the “Gloria”, Christ is addressed directly: *Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis* – You are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us; in the Creed, it is said about Christ: *sedet ad dexteram Dei Patris omnipotentis* – He is seated at the right hand of God, the Father almighty (in its core, the Apostolic Creed, an ancient Roman confession of faith, goes back to the 2nd century); *sedet ad dexteram Patris* – He is seated at the right hand of the Father (Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum, the Nicene Creed that goes back to the 4th century Councils and that was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon 451 and declared to be binding).

Hermeneutic Considerations

Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to look at concrete examples from the Church Fathers' commentaries on the Psalms within the timeframe of these reflections. We have limited ourselves to the use and interpretation of Ps 110 in the New Testament. In doing so, we have to make two fundamental observations.

On the one hand, we are in a hermeneutic circle. The Christian Creed expresses itself and celebrates with the help of scriptural texts, which in turn are interpreted and understood on the basis of a Christian pre-understanding. So in the liturgy, the Psalm as an Old Testament text is placed within the Christian context. This new context then throws light on the text, and it is seen and understood in this light. We remain caught in this circle; it is part of every kind of understanding of a text.

From this hermeneutic circle follows a second important observation. Different pre-understandings lead to different interpretations. That presupposes that the text of the Psalm – like every other literary text as well – is an “open” text. It is open in the sense that it develops and surrenders its meaning only in connection with the eyes and question of the person interpreting it. The dynamic connection between the text and its hearer or reader becomes clear in a statement by Pope Gregory the Great (died 604): “The divine words grow with the reader, for every person understands them all the more deeply, the more he plunges into them.”¹⁷ That is to say: the meaning of Scripture expands and changes with the reader's (pre-)understanding.

I hope that with my reflections on Ps 110 I have been able to show a typical Christian way of dealing with the Psalms and to make it more understandable. I think it is exciting and worthwhile to look at the ways in which the Psalms are interpreted in the New Testament and the Church Fathers. It goes without saying that for Christians as well, these ways are not the only ones possible. But they have become and remain fundamental orientations for them. Although they bring something new to the original text, these ways have been experienced as being coherent in themselves and in the biblical context as a whole. That is to say that in theological terms, they were heard as “inspired” text and were thus themselves given canonical rank.

I am convinced that it is important and helpful for our mutual dialogue to know about this. For we are working with a text we have in common, but which has been interpreted differently according to differing religious experiences and pre-understandings. Even if we don't have to and cannot take all the interpretative steps together, knowing about them nevertheless fosters dialogue. Misunderstandings can be cleared up and mistakes can be corrected and avoided.

We began these reflections by mentioning the internal connection between faith and prayer. Perhaps it has also become clear to what extent Christian faith and prayer draws and lives from the Old Testament sources.

translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff

¹⁷ Cf. Gregory the Great, Homilies on Ezechiel 1,7,8 (CCL 142,87): „Divina eloquia cum legente crescunt, nam tanto illa quisque altius intellegit, quanto in eis altius intendit“.