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The Message of Psalm 45*

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## SINGING FOR A KING: THE MESSAGE OF PSALM 45<sup>1</sup>

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Due to its unique characteristics within the Book of Psalms, Psalm 45 is difficult to interpret. The aim of this article is to provide a short overview of the state of the research into this psalm and to evaluate two recent proposals for its re-interpretation. The first of these, with which I will mainly deal, concerns an alternative outline of the message of Ps 45. Simon Chi-Chung Cheung proposed an interesting theological reading of Ps 45 based on its canonical position among its neighbouring psalms.<sup>2</sup> However, both his methodology and his interpretation can be questioned. The second proposal concerns the original *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm. Although Ps 45 is generally considered a royal wedding psalm, James Trotter argued that it can better be situated in an enthronement ceremony.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that attempts to decide on the original setting of the psalm remain inconclusive. Possible reasons for the inclusion of Ps 45 in the canon will briefly be addressed and weighed. In the end, the overarching aim of Ps 45 turns out to be surprisingly simple and straightforward: to sing the glory of a king.

### STATUS QUAESTIONIS

Ever since Hermann Gunkel, Ps 45 has been seen as a royal psalm, featuring a unique relationship between the king and God.<sup>4</sup> Several literary motifs in the Psalter that are usually associated with a king, are found in Ps 45 as well. The kingship is

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the *JHS* reviewers for their suggestions and I am especially grateful to Dr. Paul Sanders (Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam) for his many helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Chi-Chung Cheung, “‘Forget Your People and Your Father’s House’: The Core Theological Message of Psalm 45 and Its Canonical Position in the Hebrew Psalter,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 26, no. 3 (2016): 325–40.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Trotter, “The Genre and Setting of Psalm 45,” *Australian Biblical Review* 57 (2009): 34–46.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 140; cf. Hans Ausloos, “Psalm 45, Messianism and the Septuagint,” in *The Septuagint and Messianism*, ed. M.A. Knibb (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 239–251 (240). On defining the genre, cf. Scott R. A. Starbuck, *Court Oracles in the Psalms. The So-Called Royal*

characterized by military power and supremacy over enemies (vv. 4–6).<sup>5</sup> Some form of eternal life is ascribed to the king (v. 7; vv. 17–18).<sup>6</sup> The king’s reign serves positive ideals or values, such as truth and righteousness (vv. 5, 7, 8).<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Ps 45 has several features which make it stand out among the other Biblical psalms. Notable are the aesthetic imagery of the king and the ornate descriptions of the royal household (v. 3; vv. 9–10; vv. 14–15). These and other aspects of Ps 45 have led to different views on the psalm in general.

Three specific issues have been prominent in the research on Ps 45. Among them, the translation of v. 7a, with the phrase **דַּבְּרָה לְיְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עוֹלָם וָעֶד**, is probably the topic that has been discussed most. The main problem with the most intuitive translation (“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever”) is that the human king seems to be addressed with the divine title *Elohim*. Since it would be unique within the Hebrew Bible to call a human king *Elohim*, many alternative translations and solutions have been proposed, which I will not outline here.<sup>8</sup> The main problem seems to be a biblical-theological one: an ode to a divine or near-divine king does not fit in the general image of kingship in the Israelite religion. Even the other royal psalms do not have such a high conception of the king as to call him *Elohim*. However, this question cannot be evaded only by choosing an alternative interpretation of v. 7a. Whereas many parts of the Hebrew Bible emphasize the difference between YHWH and the human king,<sup>9</sup> Ps 45 as a whole accentuates the latter’s nearness to God. The king of Ps 45 is in many respects addressed in a way in which normally YHWH is addressed.<sup>10</sup>

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*Psalms in their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1999), 67–102.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pss 2:1–3; 18; 20:6–10; 21:2, 6, 13; 101:7–8; 110:1–3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ps 21:5; 61:7; 72:5, 7, 17; 110:4. References to a dynasty can also be connected to this motif (cf. Ps 132:11–12).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pss 18:22–27; 61:8; 72; 99:4; 101.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Johannes Stephanus Maria Mulder, *Studies on Psalm 45* (Oss: Witsiers, 1972); Ausloos, “Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX,” 244–6; Murray J. Harris, “The Translation of Elohim in Psalm 45:7–8,” *Tyn-Bul* 35 (1984): 65–89; Timothy Edwards, *Exegesis in the Targum of The Psalms* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007), 185–6; Marcel Krusche, *Göttliches und irdisches Königtum in den Psalmen* (Göttingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 259–60; Misook Lim, *Königskritik und Königsideologie in Ps 44–46: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zum theologischen Sinn in den kompositorischen "Unterbrechungen" der Psalmen-Trias, gelesen in lectio continua, gedeutet nach dem Prinzip der concatenation* (ATM 29; Münster: LIT-Verlag 2017), 172–4.

<sup>9</sup> This is especially visible in the Deuteronomistic literature, having a general tendency of criticism towards kingship (cf. Deut 17; 1 Sam 8). Lim (*Königskritik und Königsideologie*, 267–8) states that, in post-exilic times, YHWH’s kingship becomes much more important relative to human kingship.

<sup>10</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50* (Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 281–2. Cf. also the final doxology in vv. 17–18. Hans-Joachim Kraus refers to the “prophetisch formulierten Vollkommenheitsaussagen” of Ps 45 (*Psalmen I* [Neukirchen-Vluyn:

This issue directly leads to the second problem: the question of the identity of the king. It is mostly assumed that Ps 45—in this form or an earlier form—was originally composed for a specific, concrete king. Although several proposals have been made, and the majority of scholars suggests a Judean or Israelite king (e.g. Solomon, Ahab, Jehoram, Josiah), a consensus has not been reached.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, the dating of the psalm depends on this identification. Since recent scholarship generally moved away from attempts to identify a specific historical king in Ps 45, the most precise dating is the timeframe of the pre-exilic Israelite or Judean monarchies (10<sup>th</sup>–early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

After the collapse of these kingdoms, Ps 45 could no longer remain relevant to its original purpose. Sooner or later, people started to read the psalm in expectation of a future king: a ‘messianic’ reading arose.<sup>12</sup> The bride of this “zukünftige Heilsfigur”<sup>13</sup> might have been seen as God’s people,<sup>14</sup> or as Sion.<sup>15</sup> Readings such as these, often labeled ‘allegorical’, dominated the further reception history of Ps 45. The Targum interprets the king as Messiah and so does the author of Hebr 1:8–9, the Messiah then being Jesus, the divine Son of God.<sup>16</sup> Pierpaolo Bertalotto has argued that the Son of Man—a figure both human and angelic—in the *Parables of Enoch* is based on the king-figure of Ps 45.<sup>17</sup> The

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Neukirchner Verlag, 1960], 333). Krusche shows that the human kingship of Ps 45 has much in common with the divine kingship in other psalms (*Göttliches und irdisches Königtum*, 367).

<sup>11</sup> Possible identifications of the king have been discussed by Kraus (*Psalmen I*, 333); Raymond J. Tournay (“Les affinités du Psaume XLV avec le Cantique des Cantiques et leur interprétation messianique,” *Congress Volume: Bonn 1962* [Leiden: Brill, 1963], 168–212 [169]); Harris (“The Translation of Elohim,” 65), Richard D. Patterson (“A Multiplex Approach to Psalm 45,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 (1985): 29–48 [33]).

<sup>12</sup> Ausloos, “Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX.” There has been some discussion on whether Ps 45—in its MT form—is already messianic in its intention. In particular, vv. 3c, 7, 8b, 11–12, and 17–18 have been used to argue for this (Ausloos, “Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX,” 239–40). These are the verses which epitomize the high conception of kingship in Ps 45. Tournay (“Les affinités,” 212), argued that Ps 45 has been written around the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with a future messianic king in mind. Ausloos convincingly argued that there “are no indications within the text of Psalm 45 that it deals with an expected, still transcendent, messiah-king.” (246)

<sup>13</sup> Markus Saur, *Die Königspsalmen. Studien zur Entstehung und Theologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 129.

<sup>14</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 54.

<sup>15</sup> Saur, *Königspsalmen*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, *Exegesis in the Targum of the Psalms*, 184–92; Ausloos, “Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX,” 243.

<sup>17</sup> Pierpaolo Bertalotto, “The Enochic Son of Man, Psalm 45, and the *Book of the Watchers*,” *JSP* 19, no. 3 (2010): 195–216. The text is probably of Jewish origin and can be dated around the turn into the Common Era (Bertalotto, “Son of Man,” 196).

medieval Jewish scholar Rashi considers the king of Ps 45 an image of a Torah scholar.<sup>18</sup>

The last major issue—or cluster of issues—concerns vv. 10–16. Several (groups of) women are mentioned, which is another unique feature of Ps 45 within the book of Psalms.<sup>19</sup> Usually, this phenomenon is not treated separately, and the identity of these figures is inferred from an interpretation of the psalm as a whole. ‘Daughters of kings’ (v. 10a) may very well refer to the king’s harem, but is often amended to a singular form, becoming parallel to the שגל in v. 10b. This שגל is interpreted as ‘queen’, ‘queen-mother’ or identified with the bride.<sup>20</sup> ‘Daughter of Tyre’ (v. 13) could refer to the foreign descent of the bride—then being a vocative form to address the bride—or to the city of Tyre, bringing gifts to the bride. Discussing the identities and functions of these women is beyond the scope of this article, but it will be important for the discussion of the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm to see what happens in vv. 11–16. All authors—except Trotter—assume that vv. 14–16 describe a bride’s royal wedding procession, but they diverge on the precise interpretation of these verses.<sup>21</sup>

The interpretation of vv. 10/11–16 also affects the generic classification of the psalm. Most scholars do not dispute the classification of Ps 45 as a royal psalm. Many, however, have highlighted more specific aspects in their discussion of its genre, often based on their reading of vv. 10–16. This mainly concerns the supposed love-related or amorous aspects of Ps 45.<sup>22</sup> For now, it is safe to state that the relationship between vv. 10–16 and the rest of the psalm is one of the most important questions for the interpretation of Ps 45. According to most of the more recent German scholars, vv. 11–16 are a secondary insertion in an earlier song to the king.<sup>23</sup> I will deal more elaborately with this issue below.

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<sup>18</sup> Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), 349–59.

<sup>19</sup> A helpful discussion of the identities of these feminine figures can be found in Reettakaisa Sofia Salo, *Die jüdische Königsideologie im Kontext der Nachbarkulturen: Untersuchungen zu den Königspsalmen 2, 18, 20, 21, 45 und 72* (ORA 25; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 156–9. Cf. also Stefano Attard, “The Bride and her Companions in Psalm 45: Making Sense out of an Allegory,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 10 (2017): 463–75.

<sup>20</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 331.

<sup>21</sup> Christoph H. Schroeder, “A Love Song: Psalm 45 in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Marriage Texts,” *CBQ* 58, no. 3 (1996): 417–32.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd G. Carr, “The Old Testament Love Songs and Their Use in the New Testament,” *JETS* 24, no. 3 (1981): 97–105; Patterson, “A Multiplex Approach to Psalm 45,” 29–48; William H.C. Propp, “Is Psalm 45 an Erotic Poem?” *Bible Review Washington* 20, no. 2 (2004): 33–7. Carr made an extensive comparison between Ps 45 and the Song of Songs. However, the common elements he found are not more numerous or more significant than the differences between the two texts. Schroeder (“A Love Song”) emphasized (presumed) erotic elements, although he does not give an erotic bent to all elements of the psalm.

<sup>23</sup> Zenger, *Die Psalmen*, 278; Saur, *Königspsalmen*, 117–8; Krusche,

### CHEUNG: PSALM 45 AS POLITICAL-THEOLOGICAL EXHORTATION

In his article “Forget Your People and Your Father’s House”, Simon Cheung argues that the ‘marital counsel’ of vv. 11–13 is the core of the psalm and provides the explanation for its inclusion and location in the canonical Psalter.<sup>24</sup> The following quote is a good illustration of both Cheung’s methodological approach and his conclusions:

(...) I would like to investigate the theological import of this psalm by studying its literary-historical sense. It is my argument that this psalm promulgates the theme of “universality” and probably includes an echo of the promise God made to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3). It is also my intention to illustrate (...) that one may find echoes of these main themes in Ps 47, another Korahite psalm. The second observation, in my opinion, offers an explanation for why Ps 45 has a place in the canonical Psalter.<sup>25</sup>

Cheung rightly observes that the king is the indisputable centre of the song and that this king is exalted as far as was possible in an Israelite or Judaeon context.<sup>26</sup> He goes on to explain the canonical place of the psalm, considering ‘universal divine reign’ the overarching theme of Pss 45–48.<sup>27</sup> Whereas Pss 46 and 48 are connected by being Zion psalms, Pss 45 and 47 are linked by allusions to the Abrahamic promise of Gen 12: 1–3. In Ps 47:10, Abraham is mentioned.<sup>28</sup> In Ps 45, the formulation of Ps 45:11 (“Forget your people and your father’s house”) resembles Gen 12:1–3 (“Go from your country, your people, and your father’s house”).<sup>29</sup>

In my view, Cheung’s main contribution to the ongoing debate on Ps 45 is that he offers an alternative to the two classical ways of interpreting the psalm. On the one hand, there are literal readings, that understand the psalm as nothing more than an exaltation of one or more historical Israelite kings. On the other hand, there are readings, originating after the fall of the Israelite monarchies, that consider the king-figure to represent someone else.<sup>30</sup> In this article, I will call these readings ‘allegorical’, without engaging in discussions about the use of this term.

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*Göttliches und irdisches Königtum*, 258. Salo (*Königsideologie*, 160–5) argues against this and only reads vv. 13, 18 and a few isolated phrases as secondary.

<sup>24</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People.”

<sup>25</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 326.

<sup>26</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 326–30.

<sup>27</sup> Other discussions of the canonical position of Ps 45 try to explain its function within Pss 42–49, a string of Korahite psalms. (Saur, *Königpsalmen*, 307–8; Krusche, *Göttliches und irdisches Königtum*, 363–7)

<sup>28</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 338–9.

<sup>29</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 335–6. C.S. Lewis already made this connection in his *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2017), 153–5. Erroneously assuming that the bride is addressed in v. 17, he sees an additional parallel in the promise of descendants.

<sup>30</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 326.

Cheung's alternative is to interpret Ps 45 as a political-theological exhortation, since it

features the marriage of a foreign princess into the Israelite royal family and holds up this bride as the model which all nations should carefully emulate: dissociate from their pagan settings and pledge undivided loyalty to the Israelite kingdom and its God.<sup>31</sup>

This proposal is not only creative, but also escapes the major disadvantages of the two conventional streams of interpretation. The literal reading has its difficulty in explaining how Ps 45 fits in the canonical Psalter and in a Biblical theology. Allegorical interpretations usually attract the suspicion that the interpretation is laid over the text and does not come from the text itself. After all, Ps 45 does not directly invite the reader to read it in an allegorical way. If Cheung's interpretation is plausible, we have a reading that springs from the text and is more 'theological' than the literal interpretation, possibly explaining its inclusion in the Psalter.

#### CRITICAL REMARKS

Obviously, it is conceivable that redactors of the canonical Psalter had common elements of Pss 45–48 in mind during the compilation of the Psalter. However, I strongly doubt that Ps 45:11–13 contains the core of Ps 45 itself, as Cheung argues. To support this, I will follow Cheung's argument and bring to light both a methodological unclarity and some debatable interpretive decisions.

Cheung seems to assume that the psalm's 'theological core' should also be an important linking element for the compilers of the Psalter. However, it may very well be that the theological reason for its presence in the canonical Psalter is not the message of Ps 45 in its own, pre-canonical context. I will indeed argue that the text of Ps 45 itself does not point to Cheung's theological conclusions.

One of the main reasons why Cheung gives Ps 45:11–13 such an important place is his repeated contention that this 'marital counsel' is very unusual.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, he does not explain why it would be so unusual. On the contrary, the advice given to the bride seems very natural to me. When a princess marries a foreign king, it is obvious that she should give up her old familial, cultural, political, and religious allegiances. From a modern, feminist perspective, one can find this morally questionable.<sup>33</sup> But even today it is still considered healthy and natural when people that marry consider the allegiance to their spouse

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<sup>31</sup> Cheung, "Forget Your People," 340.

<sup>32</sup> Cheung, "Forget Your People," 334, 339.

<sup>33</sup> On 334 Cheung cites Nancy R. Bowen, "A Fairy Tale Wedding? A Feminist Intertextual Reading of Psalm 45," in *A God So Near. Essays in Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 53-71 (61).

more important than that to their own family.<sup>34</sup> Of course, this transition may have been difficult for the bride: the marriage presumably was not her own initiative. For this reason, admonitions like that in vv. 11–12 may well have been part of royal wedding rituals.<sup>35</sup>

Before discussing the importance of Ps 45:11–13 in the psalm as a whole, we have to answer one more question. Who is speaking to the bride in vv. 11–12? Cheung merely assumes that the שגל from v. 10 is the one giving advice. Whereas Cheung does not provide arguments for this thesis, Christoph Schroeder presents three.<sup>36</sup> First, the figure of the mother—or mother-in-law—has a role in wedding rituals both in the Sumerian story of the marriage of Sud and in Cant 3:11. Second, the verb נצַבָה (v. 10), being a *nif'al*, “has an admonitory connotation”, and thus would signal that an address by the שגל follows.<sup>37</sup> Third, Schroeder states that vv. 3–16 form a “poem within the poem”, a “fictive reality” in which the singer would not intrude by addressing the bride himself.<sup>38</sup> For me, the latter argument is not very convincing. If the singer addresses the king, why could he not address the bride?<sup>39</sup> In view of the former two arguments, Schroeder could be correct in that an address by the mother(-in-law) is not unlikely. Still, it is not obvious in the text itself, and I would maintain the ‘speakership’ of the singer as the simpler explanation.<sup>40</sup> For the present discussion, the identity of the adviser is not essential.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Saur, *Königpsalmen*, 124.

<sup>35</sup> As Peter Craigie remarks, the “poet captures the sense of loneliness and homesickness in the princess, overwhelmed by the setting and the occasion” (*Psalms 1–50* [Waco, TX: Word, 1982], 340). Schroeder compares Ps 45:8–16 to the mythical marriage of Enlil and Sud/Ninlil, in which the bride is addressed by her mother, wishing her much love, joy and children (“A Love Song”: 429). This Sumerian text does not contain an admonition to forget her past, but shows some form-critical similarities to Ps 45 (*ibid.*, 426), and hence may be seen as a parallel to Ps 45. Cheung also refers to this parallel (“Forget Your People,” 331). The danger of foreign wives infecting the people of YHWH with their own religions is a recurring motif throughout the Deuteronomist writings, cf. 1 Kgs 11:1–13 (Solomon); 21:25–26 (Ahab).

<sup>36</sup> Salo (*Königsideologie*, 156–7) gives a similar line of reasoning.

<sup>37</sup> Schroeder, “A Love Song”: 428–9.

<sup>38</sup> Schroeder, “A Love Song”: 431–2.

<sup>39</sup> An overview of different structure proposals can be found in Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry II: Psalms 42–89* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 40–1.

<sup>40</sup> It is very well possible that there are different ‘voices’ singing in Ps 45, especially if it would have been used in a ritual or liturgical context, but any elaboration would remain hypothetical. Cf. Saur: “Formal ist der Text (...) aus der Perspektive eines Ich-Sprechers zu interpretieren, der am Anfang und am Ende des Textes greifbar wird.” (*Königpsalmen*, 114) Adam S. van der Woude argued that the text becomes more logical from a metrical perspective when some elements (v. 13: ‘daughter of Tyre’; v. 14: ‘the king’s daughter inside’; v. 16: ‘king’) are read as performance indications rather than parts of the song.



A more important point concerns the alleged relationship between Ps 45 and Gen 12. According to Cheung, two elements of Gen 12:1–3 resonate in Ps 45:11. First, a foreigner exchanges his or her former context of living for a new one. Second, this change ensures good fortunes for this foreigner.<sup>41</sup> I believe, however, that the connection is not as strong as Cheung states. The two passages have no literal agreement, apart from the phrase **בית אביך** (“the house of your father”), which is a very common phrase. Ps 45 has no other clues that point to a connection with the book of Genesis or the figure of Abraham. Moreover, the theme of Israelite kingship is uncharacteristic for the book of Genesis. For these reasons, the thesis that “the psalmist demonstrates the way God realizes his promise to Abraham in the context of a political marriage” must be considered an artificial theological construct.<sup>42</sup> Cheung does not meet the burden of proof to demonstrate a historical relationship between these texts.<sup>43</sup>

This problem expands into Cheung’s discussion of Pss 45–48. Following Jean-Luc Vesco, he assigns to them the common theme of “dominion over the whole world”.<sup>44</sup> According to Cheung, these four psalms form “interlocking pairs”: Ps 46 and Ps 48 are both Zion psalms, Ps 45 and Ps 47 both stress the universalistic aspect of the Abrahamic promise.<sup>45</sup> It is true that Ps 45 and Ps 47 have some important themes in common: the defeat of the nations and the kingship.<sup>46</sup> But whereas Ps 45 praises the supremacy of the (human) king, Ps 47 sings about God’s kingship over the nations. For Cheung, the most important common aspect is obviously the alleged reference to Abraham. This reference is more defensible in Ps 47 than in Ps 45, since Ps 47 mentions Abraham and Jacob. But again, a scholarly explanation of the psalm must involve more than only the possibility of a relation. The equivocal links with Gen 12 and Ps 47 do not necessarily imply that vv. 11–13 form the core of Ps 45.

Cheung had introduced his methodology as follows: “To explore the theology of the psalm is perhaps one of the ways to answer the prevailing question, ‘Why is this ode of royal wedding included in the canonical Psalter?’”<sup>47</sup> I have argued that his argument actually works the other way around. From an intertextual reading of Pss 45–48 and Gen 12, Cheung deduces the alleged core of Ps 45. At this point, we have to return to Cheung’s original question, now split into two parts: (1) What is the message

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(“Psalm 45:11–18: Ein neuer Interpretationsversuch,” in *Loven en Gelooven*, ed. M.H. van Es *et al.* [Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1975], 111–6).

<sup>41</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 335–6.

<sup>42</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 336.

<sup>43</sup> On the difference between intertextuality and allusion/influence/echo, cf. Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet reads Scripture. Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3–10.

<sup>44</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 337.

<sup>45</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 337–9.

<sup>46</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 339.

<sup>47</sup> Cheung, “Forget Your People,” 325.

of Ps 45 itself (section 4); (2) why was it included in the canonical Psalter? (section 6) After the discussion of the first question and before the discussion of the second, I will evaluate James Trotter's article on the original setting of Ps 45. (section 5)

### THE MESSAGE OF PSALM 45

In my view, the rarely disputed label of 'royal psalm' is indeed the most suitable one for Ps 45. A more specific classification runs the risk of over-emphasizing certain aspects of the psalm. Any explanation needs to make sense of the whole. In this poem, we do not have to find one key verse or aspect to unlock the text as a whole. We should rather look for the simple principle that pervades every bit of the psalm.

In all parts of the psalm, the poet describes the all-compassing and multi-faceted glory of the king. This glory is expressed in the king's appearance (vv. 3, 9), his military power (vv. 4–6), his commitment to the just cause (vv. 5, 7, 8), his impressive court, including harem and queen (vv. 9–10), a glorious bride (vv. 14–16), and an offspring of rulers (v. 17). Not in the least, the king's glory is expressed by describing his nearness to God (vv. 3, 7, 8). In reaction to this impressive image, the foreign bride is to submit herself completely (vv. 11–13), and the poet sings of the monarch's eternal fame (v. 16). Taking such a holistic view on the psalm's meaning implies that there are no sharp contrasts between erotic, military, courtly, and (possibly) marital parts of Ps 45. Cheung rightly observes that its content is that the bride should completely submit herself to the king and that this is "redolent of the theme of "universal dominion", which pervades the whole psalm."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the counsel to the bride is only one of the demonstrations that the king reigns and should reign over everyone. The ritual of vv. 11–16 expresses the bride's submission to the king (vv. 12, 16) and is embedded in the praise of the king. As their marriage is likely political, the advice may also reflect a political power shift.

Taking the address to the bride as the core message of the psalm overemphasizes the importance of this address and is influenced too much by disputable parallels. Vv. 11–13 describe the predictable, expected reaction to the king's glory: submission. In my view, this is also a convincing literary argument against those who consider 'love' or 'marriage' the main theme of Ps 45.<sup>49</sup>

Cheung's approach is an example of reading too much Biblical theology into the transmitted text. The focus of Ps 45 is less specifically Biblical, Jewish or Israelite than its inclusion in the canon may suggest. YHWH's role is limited to confirming the king's kingship on the basis of the latter's beauty and justice (vv. 3, 8).<sup>50</sup> Like the other royal psalms, Ps 45 should be seen as an

<sup>48</sup> Cheung, "Forget Your People," 334.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. note 22.

<sup>50</sup> This is the most common interpretation of the repeated *על-כן*, although Krusche turns it around, making the greatness of the king dependent on God's blessing (*Göttliches und irdisches Königtum*, 259). Salo

example and expression of Ancient Near Eastern ‘sacred kingship’, in which the king is considered to be nearer to the divine world than ordinary human beings. This idea existed in many different forms in different cultures, and the topic of a specifically Israelite ‘royal ideology’ is disputed.<sup>51</sup> Still, it is unsurprising to see the figure of the king being depicted as superhuman or even as a god.<sup>52</sup> As others have noted, the language of Ps 45 cannot just be dismissed as mere ‘court style’.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the royal psalms witness to the fact that even in the post-exilic, Judaeic circles in which the Psalter was compiled, the institution of the Israelite kingship was an important theological concern. They are too prominent just to be remnants of an outdated ideology.<sup>54</sup>

To summarize, we can conclude two things about the royal exaltation of Ps 45. On the one hand, it surpasses any praise for a king in the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, Ps 45 and the other royal psalms have many elements in common and they all are expressions of some form of Ancient Near Eastern sacred kingship.

### WEDDING OR CORONATION?

Before discussing the canonical position of Ps 45, some attention should be devoted to the original *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm and James Trotter’s understanding of it. We can safely assume that

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shows that it is uncommon in Ancient Near Eastern royal ideologies to found the legitimacy of the king on his personal qualities (*Königsideologie*, 204). In most of the other royal psalms, YHWH has a more active role than in Ps 45. In Ps 18, YHWH himself is the warrior, fighting for the destitute king. In Pss 20 and 21, YHWH himself provides for military victory. Also in Pss 2 and 110, YHWH ensures the power of the king.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Sacred kingship’ has been treated thoroughly by several Scandinavian scholars, with regard to both the Hebrew Bible and the rest of the Ancient Near East: Geo Widengren, *Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1955); Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); Trygve N.D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah. The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (Lund: Gleerup, 1976); Krusche, *Göttliches und irdisches Königtum*, 20–45. It is important to mention Salo in this context: in her reconstruction of a Judaeic royal ideology she shows in detail how the king’s characteristics in Ps 45 fit in the wider Ancient Near Eastern context (*Königsideologie*, 165–204).

<sup>52</sup> On the nuances of royal divinity in the Ancient Near East, cf. Salo, *Königsideologie*, 175–94.

<sup>53</sup> Mettinger, *King and Messiah*, 102–3; Oswald Loretz, ‘Politische Theologie des Königtums in Ugarit, Kleinasien, Assur und Israel: das juristische Theorem ‘The King’s Two Bodies’,’ in *Psalmstudien: Kolo-metrie, Strophik und Theologie ausgewählter Psalmen* (BZAW 309; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2002), 381–402. Loretz considers the scholarly tradition of problematizing Ps 45:7 a result of Jewish or Christian bias: a divine king only becomes an issue from a strict monotheistic perspective.

<sup>54</sup> Starbuck, *Court Oracles in the Psalms*, 205–12. Unfortunately, Starbuck himself does not provide a theological reasoning for the presence of Ps 45 in the canon (114).

Ps 45 was used in the rituals of the Israelite monarchy, or at least reflects them in some way. Although almost all scholars believe that the psalm is about a royal wedding, there are no unambiguous references to a marriage ceremony.

James Trotter provides a twofold argument for his thesis that Ps 45 deals with a coronation rather than a royal wedding.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, he considers many of the things that are said to the king in the first half of the psalm as closely related to coronations in Biblical and extra-Biblical sources. This includes the mention of the king's beauty, the praise of just and righteous rule, the anointing of the king, and the address of the king as a god. On the other hand, elements that are traditionally understood as referring to a wedding do not need to be read that way. It is easy to imagine that the queen and her companions would play an important part in an enthronement ceremony in all its grandeur, showing allegiance to the king.

A considerable advantage of Trotter's argument is that it takes the literary and theological context of divine kingship seriously. If Ps 45 had been passed on to us without vv. 11–16, it would doubtless be labelled as an enthronement hymn.<sup>56</sup> Ps 45 and other royal psalms use coronation imagery and shape "the ideal of kingship."<sup>57</sup>

However, I do not consider Trotter's arguments decisive. The considerable ritual role of the queen/bride and her companions demands sufficient explanation, especially because it is not common in Ancient Near Eastern enthronement songs. If it were only about a pledge of allegiance, why would other parties and officials not declare their allegiance to the king?<sup>58</sup> And why would the foreign descent of the queen be emphasized (v. 11) if it was not on the occasion of her entrance into the royal household? Besides, a wedding ceremony would end naturally when the bride enters the king's palace (and bedroom), whereas such an entrance would not be an obvious finale of a coronation (v. 16).<sup>59</sup>

In the end, it is not too difficult to argue both for or against Trotter's thesis. The many colourful and poetic details of Ps 45 can be bent to multiple interpretations, using many purported parallels to these elements. For example: an 'anointing with oil

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<sup>55</sup> Trotter, "The Genre and Setting of Psalm 45."

<sup>56</sup> In the Ancient Near East, this could be not only an actual coronation but also a ritual re-enactment of the enthronement. There is, however, no positive evidence for such a ceremony in the Israelite monarchies (Mettinger, *King and Messiah*, 305–8; Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, 100–1). As I already mentioned, vv. 11–16 may even be a later interpolation into the psalm.

<sup>57</sup> Trotter, "The Genre and Setting of Psalm 45," 45; Salo, *Königs-ideologie*, 165–204; Manfred Dietrich, "Buluṭ Bēli 'Lebe, mein König!' Ein Krönungshymnus aus Emar und Ugarit und sein Verhältnis zu mesopotamischen und westlichen Inthronisationsliedern," *UF* 30 (1998): 155–200. Dietrich cites several enthronement hymns and connects them to Ps 72.

<sup>58</sup> Cheung, "Forget Your People," 326.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Schroeder, "A Love Song," 424.

of gladness' (v. 8) could well be part of an enthronement.<sup>60</sup> It can also be imagined as part of a wedding ceremony.<sup>61</sup> Or is it just a poetic metaphor for the divine legitimation of king, without a direct relationship to a specific ritual?

The real difficulty with establishing the original setting is that Ps 45 as a whole is unparalleled in its *combination* of 'king praise' and 'female ritual', both within the Bible and within the Ancient Near East. Peter Craigie already remarked that there "are no precise parallels to this type of psalm elsewhere in the Psalter, so that little internal comparative evidence can be used in the interpretation of the psalm."<sup>62</sup> The wedding is strangely embedded in a more general ode to the king. In this light, it is understandable that some consider vv. 11–16 a later insertion in a more general royal hymn.<sup>63</sup>

However, assuming this addition is not necessary to make sense of Ps 45 as a whole. Ps 45 could very well celebrate a royal wedding to a 'minor wife', an addition to the harem.<sup>64</sup> This would also explain the sudden transition from v. 10 to v. 11, which is a major argument for the later addition of vv. 11–16. In v. 10, the queen(-mother) and the 'daughters of kings' (the current harem) are already present to await the bride, a new figure on the royal stage. Ancient Near Eastern royal marital relationships were probably quite asymmetrical. Another 'harem addition' would just be a nice occasion to praise the near-divine king, possibly even more than to celebrate the wedding as such or the specific bride.

It is nevertheless not possible to establish a *Sitz im Leben* with any certainty. Probably, the text was not tied to one specific occasion or type of ceremony.<sup>65</sup> An additional problem is that the text of Ps 45 likely underwent some transformation between its original performance and its inclusion in the Psalter. Reconstructing the genesis of a text of which only the final version is known is methodologically quite difficult.<sup>66</sup> The poem may well have been made more generally applicable, thereby losing references to its specific context of origin.<sup>67</sup> The mere fact of the transmission of Ps 45 points to its continued use or importance. At least we can assume that the name of the addressed king was removed from the original poem. As Scott Starbuck remarked, a

<sup>60</sup> Trotter, "The Genre and Setting of Psalm 45," 42.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Mettinger, *King and Messiah*, 217–21.

<sup>62</sup> Craigie, *Psalms*, 337.

<sup>63</sup> Saur (*Königpsalmen*, 128–31) elaborates on this thesis, explaining the canonical position of Ps 45.

<sup>64</sup> Van der Woude, "Psalm 45," 114; Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (London: Bloomsbury, 1982), 124–5. Saur (*Königpsalmen*, 128) also mentions this interpretation.

<sup>65</sup> The flexibility concerning *Sitz im Leben* would also partially explain the difficulty of establishing a clear *Gattung* of royal psalms, cf. Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, 19–66.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> John I. Durham, "The King as 'Messiah' in the Psalms," in *Review & Expositor* 81, no. 3 (1984): 428; Schroeder, "A Love Song": 417–8.

song that aims at remembrance of a king's name (Ps 45:18) would likely also mention this name. Moreover, all extrabiblical Ancient Near Eastern royal hymns contain the name of a specific king.<sup>68</sup> All these propositions, however, remain in the realm of hypotheses. We can conclude that to a major extent, the present text of Ps 45 eludes a narrow definition of its original *Sitz im Leben*.

### PSALM 45 IN THE CANONICAL PSALTER

Finally, I will consider possible reasons for the canonical inclusion of Ps 45. It should first be said that historical certainty or even likelihood concerning this complex process of religious tradition is probably never to be reached. Many factors may have played a role, about which we can only guess.<sup>69</sup> I already showed that Cheung's explanation is highly hypothetical as well.

Could a messianic interpretation be a plausible explanation? If the text of Ps 45 was already read as messianic by the time it was included in the Psalter, we might find traces of this in the Septuagint. Joachim Schaper indeed argued that the LXX translation of Ps 45 betrays the beginnings of its messianic interpretation.<sup>70</sup> However, Hans Ausloos disagreed and contended that the LXX version of Ps 45 is actually very close to the MT, having the same ambiguities.<sup>71</sup> Both the MT and the LXX do not unequivocally describe the king as a future messiah instead of an exalted historical king. In the reception history of the Hebrew Bible, many literary characteristics of Davidic kings have been applied to messianic figures.<sup>72</sup>

As we have seen in the *status quaestionis*, clear messianic interpretations emerged only around the turn of the era. In earlier stages—mirrored in MT and LXX—we can see that the text leaves the possibility of a messianic interpretation open, but it does not point to this interpretation. In fact, Ps 45 is perfectly explainable as only referring to a historical, human king. Therefore, we cannot positively state that Ps 45 was included in the Psalter because of a messianic reading.

Is there a viable alternative? I have argued that the ideology of Ps 45 should not be put up against other Biblical conceptions of kingship too soon. Some of the royal psalms certainly leave openings for criticizing the king (cf. Ps 72). However, Ps 45 is not alone in leaning towards the opposite side and demanding complete submission (cf. Pss 2; 110).<sup>73</sup> And although Ps 45 is

<sup>68</sup> Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, 68.

<sup>69</sup> Starbuck, for instance, hypothesizes that Ps 45 was included only because it belonged to a pre-existing collection of the greatest hits of the Korachite singers (*Court Oracles*, 109).

<sup>70</sup> Joachim Schaper, *Eschatology in the Greek Psalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 78–83.

<sup>71</sup> Ausloos, "Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX," 246–51. Before Ausloos, Harris ("The Translation of Elohim," 88–9) already argued for the vocative translation of LXX Ps 44:7.

<sup>72</sup> Durham, "King as Messiah," 429–31; Ausloos, "Psalm 45, Messianism and the LXX," 243.

<sup>73</sup> Lim argues, on the contrary, that even Ps 45—by presenting an

unique in some respects, its theology fits into the frame of the royal psalms and the prevailing image of kingship in the Ancient Near East. Consequently, Ps 45 may have ended up in the Hebrew Bible for similar reasons as the other royal psalms. A plausible reason for this has been put forward by Scott Starbuck.

According to Starbuck, the (exilic or post-exilic) omission of the kings' names in these psalms shows that the 'office' of the Israelite kingship is the main, overall concern of the royal psalms.<sup>74</sup> It seems likely that exilic and post-exilic Israelites/Jews wanted to preserve a theology of kingship. While it remained part of their authoritative traditions and ended up in the Psalter, the Israelite kingship received new theological meanings. The promises and blessings related to kingship were appropriated by the community as a whole.<sup>75</sup> The figure of the king could later become an eschatologically expected messiah.

A more specific explanation has been proposed by Reettakaisa Sofia Salo. According to her, the redactors of the Psalter interpreted the figures of the king and bride as YHWH and the 'Daughter of Zion', a designation for Jerusalem. She derives this from the canonical context—Pss 46 and 48 in particular and the Korahite Psalter in general—in which Zion and the kingship of YHWH are important themes.<sup>76</sup> The advantage of this hypothesis is that it explains the canonical position of Ps 45 within the textually tangible frames of the Korahite and Elo-histic Psalms rather than the genre of the royal psalms, which is less anchored in common textual markers.

A disadvantage is that it fits less with the text of Ps 45 itself, which is open to re-interpretation, but primarily sings about what we would call a human king. Although her proposal is methodologically more sound than Cheung's, Salo also tends to impose meanings on Ps 45 that do not spring from the text itself—which is, of course, a risk of canonical and intertextual readings in general.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, as Misook Lim has demonstrated, Ps 45 contrasts with its neighbouring psalms rather than that it can be bent to fit in the same theology.<sup>78</sup>

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image of the ideal king—can be read as critical towards a specific king (*Königsideologie und Königskritik*, 258–9). However, this suggestion has no basis in the text of the psalm itself.

<sup>74</sup> Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, 204. This corresponds to a general trend in the tradition.

<sup>75</sup> Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, 211.

<sup>76</sup> Salo, *Königsideologie*, 163–5. Her hypothesis is partly based on Zenger (*Die Psalmen*, 279), according to whom the husband of the Daughter of Zion could not only be YHWH but also a messianic king.

<sup>77</sup> A major methodological tension is that between reading a psalm on its own and reading it as situated in the Psalter. Lim (*Königskritik und Königsideologie*, 4–26) gives a helpful overview of the history of this tension in Psalms research.

<sup>78</sup> Lim, *Königskritik und Königsideologie*, 257–60, 265–72. Lim even argues that Ps 45 functions in its context in such a way that Pss 44 and 46 criticize its ideology. To me, it seems unlikely that Ps 45 would have been preserved mainly as a target for criticism.

For these reasons, I would prefer Starbuck's less specific explanation of the inclusion of Ps 45. A part of a living tradition, Ps 45 may well have functioned on its own accord as a very particular icon of kingship, even in an era when it was already inserted in collections of psalms with slightly different overarching themes. After all, even when uniting or re-interpreting older traditions, the editors of the Hebrew Bible tended to preserve the particularities of these traditions.

### CONCLUSION

Ps 45 as a whole turns out to have only one simple aim: to praise the glory and power of its protagonist, a historical king considered near-divine. All details serve only to paint this general image. In this light, Simon Cheung's claim that Ps 45:11–13 gives away the core of Ps 45 is an overinterpretation. There are no indications in the text to see the psalm as an encouragement for foreign peoples to declare allegiance to the Israelite or Judaeon kingdom and religion, in line with Gen 12:1–3.

In determining the original setting of Ps 45, methodological caution is also necessary. James Trotter rightly observed that many of its details are ambiguous and could fit in more types of royal occasions than only a wedding. Still, his thesis that Ps 45 is a coronation hymn is not without problems either. The actual problem turns out to be that Ps 45 is unparalleled in its combination of royal praise and harem advice. For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate claims regarding a specific *Sitz im Leben*. The most probable hypothesis that can be put forward is that Ps 45 was intended to celebrate the king's glory on the occasion of an addition to his harem.

Because of its high conception of kingship, many assume that Ps 45 was included in the canon because of a messianic interpretation. However, no traces of such an interpretation are found before the turn to the Common Era. It is therefore more likely that Ps 45 was initially included in the Psalter for the same reason as the other royal psalms: to preserve a theology of the institution of Israelite kingship in exilic and post-exilic times. Possibly, some editors read it—within the Elohist and Korahite Psalters—as a symbol of the relationship of YHWH and the Daughter of Zion. However, Ps 45 should primarily be seen as an icon, keeping a notion of (semi-)divine kingship alive. In the course of time, new interpretations of the kingship theology arose to maintain the relevance of the ideas around kingship while adapting to new political circumstances. This would include—in later times—the expectation of a future messianic king.