

“Son of David”

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The Greatest of All Time became the scapegoat for our sins.

Matthew 22:41-46; Psalm 110

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The GOAT

For college football fans, this past weekend was about bragging rights between rivals. In medieval Italy, cities competed for bragging rights in other ways. Florence decided in 1296 to build the biggest and finest cathedral. The project would require 140 years – just to finish the building – then centuries more to add the artwork. All of these efforts required hiring the greatest architects, builders, and artists.

In 1501, they commissioned Michelangelo, at age 26 already the most famous and best paid artist of the Italian renaissance, to sculpt King David. It took him three years, but some say his statue of David is the finest sculpture ever carved.

He carved a 14’ tall nude statue of David as he prepared to face Goliath. David is young, perfect in form, and confident in God as he stares down the giant. But you can also see why Goliath would see vulnerability – no armor, no sword, no threat.

In other words, the Greatest of All Time artists created the Greatest of All Time statue of the Greatest of All Time kings. Sports fans have abbreviated “Greatest of All Time” to GOAT since Muhammad Ali’s wife, Lonnie, incorporated a company called G.O.A.T., Inc. in 1992, to preserve and extend her husband’s legacy.

Now sports fans refer to various legends as the GOAT in their sport. They sometimes vigorously debate who’s the GOAT. Names like Serena Williams, Michael Phelps, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Tom Brady, Simon Biles, and others have been called the GOAT. A couple of years ago, Jeopardy held its GOAT tournament, pitting Ken

Jennings, Brad Rutter, and James Holzhauer against each other. Sometimes GOAT is used metaphorically. I might tell you that my wife is the GOAT of Dutch Apple Pie. It's not a compliment if someone says, "You're the GOAT of leaving dishes in the sink."

From the Jewish perspective, David is the GOAT among kings of Israel. He towers over all the other options. The kings who followed David were compared to him, favorably or unfavorably. Of his own son Solomon, it is written, "He did not follow the LORD completely, as his father David had done" (1 Kings 11:6). Later, "Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done" (1 Kings 15:11).

David was the pattern they were to follow. His legacy is military, political, and spiritual. Almost half (73) of the psalms are associated with David - in contrast to only two with his son Solomon and none with the kings of Judah after that. David's most memorable lapses of character – the Bathsheba and Uriah affair – are largely forgotten in the subsequent record.

Psalm 110

Psalm 110 is one of the 73 with the title, "Of David." Scholars ancient and modern say that phrase doesn't necessarily mean it was written by David, but let's set that point aside for the moment.

Royal imagery abounds in this psalm, as does a legacy of power. When your "enemies" become "a footstool for your feet" (1) that's military success. Your "mighty scepter from Zion" (2) indicates a king ruling in Jerusalem. This king has "troops" who are "willing" and "arrayed in holy splendor" (3). All of this is expressed poetically in the first three verses.

The military/political theme continues in verses 5-7. "He will crush kings on the day of his wrath" (5), he "will judge the nations" (6), and he "will lift his head high" (7). The overall sense of this psalm is that it is appropriate for the GOAT of kings.

What makes the subject of this psalm stand out is verse 4: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'" The office of king and priest did not normally coalesce. There were what America's founding fathers would later call the separation of powers. A king needs spiritual advisors to hold him accountable, and a priest should not hold ultimate political power.

This is the only reference to Melchizedek in the Old Testament after the book of Genesis when he is introduced. He was a contemporary of Abraham, and he is called both "king of Salem" and "priest of the Most High God" (Genesis 14:18). Some Jewish interpreters saw the entire psalm as a tribute to Abraham.

By the time of Jesus, many Jews saw Psalm 110 as a reference to Simon Maccabee. You may recall the story, because it's connected to the Jewish holiday of

Hanukkah (which begins tonight). The Greeks were attempting to force their language, culture, and religion on every territory they conquered. They might have succeeded in Palestine had it not been that Antioch Epiphanes sacrificed a pig on the altar of the second Jewish temple. Simon Maccabees was high priest, but at that point he became the self-appointed commander-in-chief of a rebellion. He and his family then combined political and spiritual leadership in Israel for the next century.

But Maccabean/Hasmonean rule finally fell to the Romans about 60 years before Jesus was born. By the time Jesus grew up and began his public ministry, there was no longer a need to associate this psalm with Abraham or Simon Maccabees or anyone else. It was a “psalm of David” – a psalm by David about his rule as the GOAT.

At the time of Jesus, there was consensus among Jewish legal scholars on two key points about David the GOAT of Israel’s kings. First, David was the author of Psalm 110. Second, the Messiah would be a descendant of David – not just figuratively but literally. All this fulfilled the prophecy of the patriarch Jacob who, as he was dying, blessed each of his sons. To Judah he said,

*The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his. (Genesis 49:10)*

Whose Lord

Jesus didn’t often engage the religious leaders of his day on theological issues. He did on practical matters, most notably challenging their understanding, practice, and enforcement of the Sabbath laws. In large part he agreed with their theology – their view of God as Creator, as Judge, as both holy and merciful.

But Jesus carefully avoided the topic of the Messiah with the religious authorities until the right time came. He did accept the confession of Peter and the others that he was the Messiah (Matthew 16:18). But he did so in a setting as far away from Jerusalem as he ever traveled and in private with the Twelve. He also immediately followed that confession with the puzzling prophecy that he would be killed in Jerusalem. That made no sense to them at all. A dead Messiah? What good is that?

By the time we come to Matthew 22, however, it’s time. It’s time for him to challenge the religious leaders on their own turf on a wide range of topics, in the temple courts, in the hearing of the throngs who gathered there for the Passover. They were also more than ready to challenge him. Both Jesus and the religious leaders were primed for a fight, but with different motives and goals.

On the Tuesday between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, Jesus spent a good bit of the day engaging those religious leaders. Most of the initiative is on their side. When

they stopped embarrassing themselves with questions for him, Jesus posed his own for them. He set up the dilemma first by asking them what was for them a no-brainer: “The Messiah – whose son (descendant) is he?” (42)

“David’s, of course” (42). Duh.

The rest of Jesus’ argument rests on the assumption that David wrote Psalm 110. (Of course, it wasn’t then numbered 110, but it was in their psalter.) Jesus affirms that this is inspired Scripture – David is “speaking by the Spirit” (43).

“What David says,” Jesus continues, “is ‘the Lord said to my Lord.’” In Greek and English those two words are the same. Not so in Hebrew. The first is the divine name, YHWH, clearly a reference to God. The second doesn’t even have to be capitalized. It might refer to God, but it could refer to a human master, superintendent, or owner. It definitely refers to a superior.

Hear this from David, Jesus is saying. What does the psalm say? “God (YHWH) said to my superior.”

Jesus continues, “If Messiah is David’s ‘lord,’ how can he be David’s son” (45)? In other words, If David is the GOAT, how can Messiah be even greater than the GOAT?

They have no answer, and they stop asking questions (46).

The Goat

What do you suppose is the most popular Old Testament verse in America? Maybe Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Or Isaiah 40:31, “Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.” Or Jeremiah 29:11, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

None of those verses is even quoted in the New Testament. Psalm 110:1 is the most quoted verse in the New Testament. When you throw in verse 4, Psalm 110 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament.

The part of verse 1 that’s most often quoted, though, is not the opening – “The LORD said to my Lord.” It’s the next part, “Sit at my right hand.” New Testament writers love this image of Jesus’ authority at the right hand of God. The writer of Hebrews loves that – as well as the part about the Messiah being “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus is the priest-king of Psalm 110. He’s greater than the GOAT. That’s what Advent is all about.

Before Lonnie Ali redefined the word, there was another meaning of “goat” we haven’t discussed. If you were the “goat” in a basketball game, it was your fault your

team lost. This meaning of goat is short for scapegoat. That's a common term in culture at large, but most people have no idea its origin is the Bible (Leviticus 16).

The first coming of Jesus is about Jesus as the (scape) goat. The second coming will demonstrate that he supersedes the G.O.A.T. king of Israel. David was only a foretaste and anticipation for the Messiah, the Son of God, who would give his life for the world. The GOAT would become the goat. He would rise again, ascend to the right hand of the Father, and return in power and great glory. This is Advent – looking back and looking ahead.

During Advent we renew our commitment to follow Jesus. But how? There are so many distractions to what Christmas is all about. We've conceded December to family, decorations, parties, and presents – none of which are evil in themselves. But they make it hard to take on “one more thing” – like deep self-examination and life change.

Fortunately, the Christian faith marvelously adapts to any culture. Advent may not be the best time for lots of new answers. But it's the right time to ask good questions. It's a great time to ask whether our discipleship has become too lazy, too distracted, too compromised. It's a great time to start asking how 2022 will be different. We all know how “New Year's Resolutions” work out when we wait until January 1 to begin the process of change.

I'm choosing to make a daily discipline of reading one chapter of a new book called *Do It for a Day* (Mark Batterson) starting December 1. The book is about starting good habits and breaking bad ones. We'll be talking about it all month long.

Use December to start that list and begin making a plan. Jesus the “goat” is always ready to cover the past with grace. Jesus the GOAT is ready to empower us to launch into a future of deeper intimacy and fellowship with him. Amen.