

# Is “God Inhabits the Praises of His People” Really Biblical?

Zac Hicks January 24, 2012 [Worship and Pastoral Ministry](#), [Worship Theology & Thought](#) [86 Comments](#)

I reluctantly lift up the truce-flag of exegetical honesty. I desperately *want* it to say it. Many worship leaders (including myself) have *quoted it* as saying it. It would be a great proof-text-style summary verse for a very important aspect of the theology of worship. But the fact is that the translational evidence leans heavily against us being able to say that “God inhabits the praises of His people” is an accurate rendering of the Hebrew of Psalm 22:3. Now, it is certainly a *possible* translation, but it is not the one that makes the best sense of the poetry. Before we unpack this, let’s look at why it would be so valuable for it to say what it doesn’t say.

## Why I Wish It Says What It Doesn’t Say

This verse, for worship leaders, is akin to that elusive “one verse” that proof-texts the Trinity for many Christians. It’s an exegetical silver bullet. “God inhabits the praises of His people” is a one stop shop articulation of the core of Christian worship: *that God chooses to manifest Himself uniquely in the context of gathered, corporate worship generally and perhaps in the singing<sup>1</sup> of God’s people particularly*. In an effort to elevate singing to nearly “sacramental” status (many have observed that evangelicals [probably due in part to the influence of Pentecostal theology on the whole of evangelicalism] have made congregational singing the “third sacrament” of Protestantism because of how much weight we give to experiencing God’s presence in the midst of singing), this verse would be a slam dunk argument in less than ten words.

Does God *really* inhabit the praises of His people? You better believe it. We would just need to work a little harder and ponder Scripture more broadly and systematically to unearth this rich theological/doxological truth. Psalm 22:3 just doesn’t say it as clearly as we would hope.

## Why It Probably Doesn’t Say What I Wish it Would Say

Hebrew poetry is different than English poetry. Typically, English poems use rhyme at the ends of phrases alongside other wonderful poetic devices, but Hebrew poetry was more often concerned with other elements of style, like balanced metrical patterns. Hebrew meter is often defined by “units” (not necessarily syllables) in how meter is counted and added up. A phrase which groups these units is called a “colon”—one line of poetry. Two lines paired together are called “bicola,” while three grouped lines are called “tricola.” Scholars will often shorthand syllables and cola with little equations like this (Psalm 22:1, 12):<sup>2</sup>

*(1) My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?  
My moaning is of the distance of my salvation! (4+4)*

*(12) Don't be distant from me,  
for trouble is near;  
there is certainly no helper! (2+2+2)*

Verse 1's equation reads "4+4," meaning, "there are four (Hebrew, not English) units in the first line and four units in the second line of this bicola." Verse 12's equation reads "2+2+2," meaning, "there are two units in each of the three lines of this tricola."

All this is important to the translational debate surrounding 22:3. This verse is a bicola, but the question is whether it is 3+2 or 2+3. In this five-unit bicola, the word in the middle could either be grammatically tied to the first colon (making it 3+2) or the second colon (making it 2+3). The middle word is *yoshev*, the verb for "sit, dwell, inhabit." Various translations will render *yoshev* as "inhabit" (KJV) or "enthroned" (NIV, NASB, ESV). If *yoshev* were part of the first colon, the translation would be something like:

*You are enthroned as holy; (3)  
The praise of Israel. (2)*

If *yoshev* were a part of the second colon, the translation would be something like:

*You are holy; (2)  
Inhabiting/enthroned on the praises of Israel. (3)*

Hopefully, even in somewhat straightened English, you can see the difference in meaning depending on where the key verb fits. Either is plausible. How do we decide?

John Goldingay, siding with the translation of the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and Jerome's *Vulgate*, offers what is to me a convincing case that the former 3+2 rendering should be preferred over the latter:

*The idea of Yhwh's sitting enthroned in the heavens or in Zion is a familiar one (2:4; 55:19 [20]; 80:1 [2]; 99:1; 123:1; cf. 99:1-3 for the association with Yhwh's being the holy one; also Isa. 57:15). Likewise, the idea that Yhwh as Israel's praise is a familiar one (Deut. 10:21; Jer. 17:14), but the idea of Yhwh's being enthroned on or inhabiting Israel's praise is unparalleled, and if either of these is the psalm's point, one might have*

*expected it to be expressed more clearly. The fact that 3-2 is the more common line division supports the conclusion that LXX construes the line correctly.*<sup>3</sup>

In other words, two things stand out:

1. The content of the 3+2 rendering is more “normal” for the way Scripture talks about God elsewhere. (God as “enthroned Holy One” is a common attribution, whereas God “inhabiting/enthroned on Israel’s praises” is an utterly unique phrase.)
2. 3+2 is apparently more common than 2+3.

This argument isn’t air tight. It’s just sensible, given the data. It’s still possible that the other translational option is correct, but it is less reasonable. If I’m honest, I really *want* to believe the less reasonable option, but if I’m truthful, it’s not the best choice. So while it doesn’t seal the deal, the “reasonable doubt” I now have leads me to not want to misquote Scripture. Here I side with the NIV and Goldingay (and Jerome and LXX), over against great translations and scholars like the NASB, ESV, and Peter Craigie.

## **Leading with Rigorous Integrity**

Why have I taken so much time to dissect Hebrew minutiae on a blog post? Ultimately, it comes down to integrity. Will I approach the Scriptures as honestly as possible, and will I model that honesty thoroughly before the people I lead, even when it eliminates what I considered a major tool in my “worship theology shorthand” arsenal? Sometimes (and I am guilty of this, too), we allow a little mis-exegesis to slide because “it’s just too good.” But if we desire to be trustworthy as pastors, teachers, and leaders, we need to try to be as exegetically honest as possible, even as Christ forgives and washes His blood over all our shoddy best efforts.

(By the way, how did I come up with this? Do I sit around reading my Hebrew Bible? No way. The punch line of this little exercise is that, upon seeing so many varying translations of this key verse, I decided to dive into the Hebrew, aiming at proving the validity of “God enthroned on the praises of His people.” Quite the opposite occurred, much to my chagrin.)

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