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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Words at Jesus' Baptism

E. L. WENGER

Not a few students must have been attracted by the statement that has become a commonplace of exegesis, that the words which Jesus heard at the baptism were an echo of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, but have later been puzzled as they tested the matter for themselves. Two difficulties arise: (i) While the words, 'Thou art my son' in Mark, exactly quote Psalm 2:7, the following phrase, 'in thee I am well-pleased', is verbally quite different from Isaiah 42:1, though the idea is in principle the same. Not much attention need be paid to this difficulty, for in oral tradition verbal changes even in familiar passages of Scripture may easily occur, and the gospel-writers, it must be remembered, did not have modern facilities of access to concordances to check their quotations! (ii) The other difficulty is more serious. The word 'beloved' does not occur in Psalm 2:7, though this is sometimes quoted carelessly as if it included it. Nor does it occur in Isaiah 42:1 in any version of the LXX known to us. In 12:18 Matthew quotes this passage with 'beloved' (*agapetos*) as the equivalent of 'elect'. This may mean that Matthew has a Greek version unknown to us, or may it not mean that the word has been included there by assimilation with the words at the baptism? (Note that the phrase 'in thee I am well-pleased' is included in the words at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5), which are not in the Marcan record of that event: presumably again by assimilation from the words at the baptism.)

The word 'beloved', then, is not taken from either Psalm 2:7 or Isaiah 42:1. The invaluable marginal references in the Bible Society's Greek Testament indicate a likely source: Genesis 22:7. Abraham is instructed, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, *whom you love . . .*' This clue opens up several interesting lines of thought: (i) First, if the words at the baptism have a triple origin, their roots are in the Psalms, the Law, and the Prophets, respectively. At the baptism Jesus sees himself in the line of fulfilment of *all* the O.T. Scriptures. (ii) Second, it bears on the question: Did Jesus hope for a positive response to his message, or did he from the beginning know that death was inevitable? Is there any truth in the notion of the Galilean idyll, or was he born only to die?

Miss M. D. Hooker's valuable study of 'Jesus and the Servant' points out that the modern critical linking of the four servant songs as a corpus, however valuable theologically, is misleading for the exegesis of the N.T. Jesus was no 'higher critic', and there is no particular reason why Isaiah 42:1 should have been interpreted by him in the light of Isaiah 53 rather than in the light of Isaiah 52 or 54 or of Isaiah as a whole. The dominant note of much of Isaiah is success, especially in the chapters that form the immediate context of this passage. Indeed the first servant song, which is the immediate context, ends on a note of success: 'He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.' The second song in chapter 49 faces disappointment but ends on a hopeful note, which is struck in verse 4 and confirmed in verse 6. Even the third song, which faces suffering in 50:6, either ends or is given an epilogue with a note of determination and confidence in God's vindication in verses 7-9.

In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, which Christian piety with its hindsight has seen as a figure of the death and resurrection of Jesus (e.g. Hebrews 11:19), the beloved son did not in the end have to die. It was only obedience to the point of willingness for death that was required. The story is of deliverance by divine intervention from death.

This points to a hope that Jesus had at the beginning: the hope that he might raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel, and that Israel as a whole might fulfil the servant's role of a light to the nations: the hope expressed in the parable that they might 'reverence the beloved son'. As the servant at the beginning had hopes of success and only later did the fatal costliness of his mission become clear, so Jesus may well have begun with hope. One might even ask whether the cry of dereliction gained some of its poignancy from the contrast with what happened to Isaac at his moment of death.

This helps to clear the air of an almost masochistic emphasis in some Christian thinking on the *suffering* servant, as though there were virtue in suffering for 'its own sake'. The important emphasis in Christian thought is on the servant, his goal to establish God's justice with its certainty of ultimate fulfilment, and his obedience. Suffering is not sought, but, in the actualities of the human situation, it is involved in the obedience. This is specially relevant to the nature of missionary service. Missionaries are not called to go out to die: it would be morbid to think in those terms: they are called to go for the sake of God's kingdom and to *serve*: whatever suffering is incidental to that is accepted gladly for the sake of the kingdom.

(iii) A third line of thought concerns the significance of the Temptations of Jesus. While in each case the clinching answer which Jesus gives to the Tempter is derived from the Law (Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13, 16), the forms of the temptations are taken from the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets. The temptation,

when hungry in the wilderness, was to grumble as Israel, God's beloved son, had grumbled at the privation, or to act independently as Moses, God's servant, had acted to meet the need: the form of the temptation is from the book of the Law, and is in contrast to Abraham's readiness to trust his 'beloved son' to God's providence: 'God will provide,' he said (Genesis 22:8).

Then there is the temptation to use secular means, the rod of iron, Psalm 2:9. Another psalm is the prayer for Solomon, David's beloved son, that 'his enemies may lick the dust' (72:9): Solomon did indeed enter unholy alliances for political ends. And the most insidious temptation, backed by the devil himself quoting scripture (Psalm 91:11-12), takes its form from the prophet Malachi. If John the Baptist is the messenger, is not the Son the one who shall suddenly appear in the Temple in judgment (Malachi 3:1)? In the temptations Jesus was surveying all the things written of God's beloved Son, discerning what belonged to the partial insights of prophets and what led on to God's new way, alert for every word proceeding from the mouth of God in obedience and trust in him alone.

Other lines of thought might be developed. The main thesis here is that the words of baptism did not at the beginning indicate to Jesus the destiny of the Cross, but showed him that he came to fulfil all the Scriptures, to establish God's rule among the nations by the way of obedience, trust and gentleness, assured that his 'recompense' is with his God. It was as he continued his ministry that other passages of Isaiah came home to show him the hardness of men's hearts (6:9-10) and the implication of the words which required him to pour out his soul to death (53:12).