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IS MATTHEW 16:18 AN ANACHRONISM?

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In a recent lecture of Prof. James Drummond, D.D., Principal of Manchester College, Oxford, he argued that Jesus could not have used the words attributed to him in Matt. 16:18, because the ecclesiastical conceptions were too advanced for his time. They were, he said, the addition of a scribe from a later period. This view is held by other scholars also. Leaving out of the question any reference to the divine nature or foreknowledge of Christ and looking at the matter purely from the historical point of view, one can justify the use of the ideas in this passage by the Master. The chief thought here is the perpetuity of the Messianic Kingdom. Now in 2 Sam. 7:8-16 the Kingdom is promised to David forever, through one of his sons, who will build a house for the Lord and whose throne will be set up forever. The Septuagint in 2 Sam. 7:13 reads: *Αὐτὸς οἰκοδομήσει μοι οἶκον τῷ ὀνόματί μου, καὶ ἀνορθώσω τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ ἕως εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.*

In Psalm 89 (88 in the Septuagint) the writer is lamenting the apparent failure of Jehovah to keep this promise. He recalls the covenant made with David (Ps. 89:3) in the words of Jehovah: "Thy seed will I establish forever, And build up thy throne to all generations." (Ps. 89:4). The Septuagint renders: *Ἔως τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐτοιμάσω τὸ σπέρμα σου, καὶ οἰκοδομήσω εἰς γενεὰν καὶ γενεὰν τὸν θρόνον σου.* He responds to the words of Jehovah: "And the heavens shall praise thy wonders, O Jehovah; Thy faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones." (Ps. 89:5). The Septuagint there reads: *Ἐξομολογήσονται οἱ οὐρανοὶ τὰ θαυμάσια σου, κύριε, καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν σου ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ἁγίων.*

The writer complains, however: "But thou hast cast off and rejected, thou hast been wroth with thine anointed."

(Ps. 89:38). The Septuagint has τὸν χριστὸν μου for "thine anointed." He knows no man who "shall deliver his soul from the power of Sheol" (Ps. 89:48). The Septuagint has ἐκ χειρὸς ᾄδου for "power of Sheol."

Now it is not claimed that the writer of this Psalm had in mind the spiritual kingdom of the Messiah. Clearly he was wrestling with the problem of the promise of perpetuity made to the throne of David. But it is remarkable that all the distinctive terms used by Jesus in Matt. 16:18 occur in Psalm 89. The Psalm discusses the perpetuity of David's throne; Jesus discusses the perpetuity of the Messiah's Kingdom. Jesus felt himself to be the Son of David as the Messiah was acknowledged to be (Mark 11:10; Luke 19:40). There was no difference of opinion between Christ and the Pharisees as to whether the Messiah was to be the son of David (Matt. 22:41-46), but rather as to the character and personality of the Messiah. If it be admitted (for it is a commonplace in the Gospels) that Jesus proclaimed a spiritual kingdom, not a literal, visible kingdom of David (Luke 17:21, for instance), it is surely not straining a point to say that Jesus could see the Messianic application of the promise to David.

Let us then put Matt. 16:18 beside Psalm 89. Jesus said to Peter Σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς. δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν κτλ.

Now in the Psalm (verse 4) we have the figure of building the throne with which compare building the house in 2 Sam. 7:13. Jesus does not use throne (θρόνος), but rather ἐκκλησία with οἰκοδομήσω. This is a slight mixture of images, but the very word ἐκκλησία appears in Ps. 89:5 though not in the precise sense as used by Jesus. In the image of Jesus ἐκκλησία is not in the etymological sense of assembly, but rather in the sense of οἶκος, house of God, people of God, as we have it in Heb. 3:6. Οἶκος in Numbers 12:7 was used for the people of God in which Moses was a servant. Peter himself (1 Peter 2:5) writing to the Christians of Asia Minor will call them a

spiritual house (*οικοδομησθε οικος*), a probable reminiscence of the words of Jesus to him.

Ἐκκλησία thus is a natural adaptation for the idea of the people of Christ, the Kingdom of Christ as he calls them in Matt. 16:19, the very next verse. It seems clear that Jesus makes no real distinction between *ἐκκλησία* in verse 18 and *βασιλεία* in verse 19. The two terms are practically one in the special sense given to each by Christ in this passage.

Peter had called Jesus by the momentous title Messiah, Christ, *χριστός*. This term is applied to David in this way Psalm 89 (verses 38 and 51). Moreover, Sheol, Hades, occurs in both places. In Ps. 89:48 we have *ἐκ χειρὸς ᾄδου*, while in Matt. 16:18 Jesus spoke of *πύλοι ᾄδου*. But the Gates of Hades is a common image in ancient Greek and occurs in the Septuagint text of Job 38:17 where we have *πύλαι θανάτου, πυλωροὶ ᾄδου*.

In a word, the historical atmosphere of Matt. 16:18 is not that of a later ecclesiastical development. It finds its most natural and simple explanation in the spiritual interpretation of the idea of the Kingdom of David and many of the very words of Psalm 89, not in the way of literal quotation, but in the apprehension of the Psalm as a whole with the use of the most striking words and images condensed into two short verses.

Christ replies to Peter in the language of Psalm 89 which had been used about the perpetuity of David's throne. David's Greater Son interprets that language in the terms of the Messianic Kingdom or Church against which the gates of Hades shall not prevail. This is the sense in which God will keep His promise to David as to the perpetuity of his throne and about which the Psalmist was sore troubled. The historical interpretation of Matt. 16:18, therefore, demands that we look to Christ's knowledge of the Old Testament rather than to a later scribal interpolation as the true setting of the language of these verses. Thus understood the language is not anachronistic, but historically pertinent.

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