



## Christ in the Psalms

Dr R. E. H. Uprichard gave this address at the 1987 Irish Reformed Conference at Drogheda.

There are at least two ways of viewing the portrayal of Christ in the Psalms. One way is to observe how, in a remarkable number of places, the birth, baptism, entry to Jerusalem, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus are all reflected in the Psalms. It is possible also to discern facets of our Lord's character as, for example, his condescension, zeal and patience. Another way of approaching the subject is to examine quotations and allusions to the Psalms found in the New Testament which apply to Christ. These are clear indications of the Messianic concept in the psalter.

Useful though these approaches may be, it may prove even more instructive to concentrate on the major themes of prophetic development of Messianic thought in the Old Testament, the presentation of Christ as King, Suffering Servant and Son of Man. Each of these aspects is represented in the Psalms and the Psalms contribute thereby to the overall picture of Old Testament Messianic expectation. We enter the exciting world in which Jesus instructed his disciples concerning all that was written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, with the hope that as we study this theme our hearts will burn within us like those on the road to Emmaus.

The idea of a Messianic King was fresh minted in David's experience from his encounter with the covenant God. God promised David on oath that there would always be one of his posterity on the throne. The covenant thus developed a future Messianic regal aspect. Its perspective in the Psalms is of a King-priest who would carry out his work as an anointed Saviour. The 'royal psalms' echo this theme within a covenant context of David and David's son Solomon. Psalm 110 in particular is a solemn oracle where the royal and priestly function of the Messiah is stressed. The King is clearly sovereign. He is Lord in the place of privilege and authority at God's right hand. His kingdom expands, his troops are active and successful in battle, his enemies are routed. Peter expounds this psalm in terms of Christ's exaltation and of the supernatural phenomena on the day of Pentecost. 'Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear' (Acts 2:33). The Messiah's sovereign rule is evident in Christ's exaltation.

The priestly aspect is equally important. 'The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek' (Ps. 110:4). The idea of royalty is still present for Melchizedek means literally 'King of righteousness'. The superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood is emphasized by the writer to the Hebrews. Melchizedek is superior to Abraham both in terms of time and function. Without predecessors this 'priest of the most high God' meets Abraham returning from battle. Melchizedek blesses Abraham and receives gifts from

him, the actions of a superior toward an inferior. Thus Christ a priest of the order of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priests the successors of Abraham.

However, the remarkable thing is the way in which this King-priest Messiah is anticipated in the Psalms as an anointed Saviour. This shows the work of the King-priest in the life and ministry of Jesus. Psalm 2 records the unsuccessful revolt of the nations against the Lord's anointed King. Their failure is largely due to the King's privileged position. 'I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance"' (Ps. 2:7,8).

The Voice from heaven at Christ's baptism and transfiguration included the words from Psalm 2, 'You are my son'. Luke particularly develops the theme of anointing by the Spirit at Jesus' baptism. He recalls that Jesus was thirty years old, the age at which priests were ordained, when he was baptized, that the Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, that he encountered Satan in temptation 'full of the Holy Spirit', that he returned to Galilee 'in the power of the Spirit', and that he read from the Scriptures in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, the words, 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me'. Luke clearly saw Jesus' baptism as the anointing of the Son by the Spirit to Messianic office.

Psalm 118 is a processional psalm possibly used at the Old Testament feasts in Jerusalem. At the various stages of the procession it is possible to view the Messiah in the imagery of the temple gate, the corner-stone of the temple and the King-priest who comes to perform the sacrifice at the altar. Something of this is evident in the New Testament references to the psalm. The 'rejected capstone' of Ps. 118:22 is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than any other verse from the Psalms. Jesus' entry to Jerusalem amidst the shouts of 'Hosanna' obviously recalls this Psalm and depicts the anointed Saviour on his way to the final act of self-sacrifice. The concept of the Messianic King-priest is complemented by prophecies of an anointed Saviour which are fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus.

The idea of the Suffering Servant figures prominently in the prophet Isaiah. There is a similar theme though by no means so pronounced in the 'passion psalms'. Indeed, the prospect of a Suffering Messiah was never prominent in the Old Testament expectation. It was only through the teaching of Jesus himself and his emphasis on this aspect that the idea of a Suffering Messiah came to the fore. Nevertheless the Psalms do in a limited way contribute to the subject. They portray an obedient servant whose intense sufferings are vividly described.

Psalm 40 anticipates the obedience of the Messiah. The obedience is of a superior kind. It recognises the insufficiency of mere sacrificial observance, four major categories of Old Testament sacrifice being mentioned. It involves an absolute and total commitment to God's will. God has literally 'dug open' the psalmist's ears to hear and heed his command. Alternatively, if the translation 'pierced' is accepted it may allude to the slave's reluctance to accept his offered freedom and his desire to serve his master in perpetuity, which was permitted under Jewish law. It is also a willing obedience. God's law is so much within the psalmist's heart that he longed to do God's will.

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This quality of obedience is emphasized by the writer to the Hebrews expounding Psalm 40. Referring to this specific passage he reminds his readers that Christ speaking through the psalmist 'sets aside the first', mere sacrificial observance, in order 'to establish the second', his willing obedience to do what God wants. This is the same quality of obedience as that which we find in Isaiah's Servant.

As in the case of the Messianic King, however, the Servant's obedience is complemented by his sufferings. These sufferings reflected in the 'passion psalms' are again clearly identifiable in the ministry of Jesus, notably in his crucifixion. The vividness of detail and intensity of experience which mark Psalm 22 and other 'passion psalms' are striking.

Jesus' cry from the cross for ever identified Psalm 22 as Messianic, certainly in his own thinking. The verbal analogies and detailed resemblances between the psalmist's experience of scorn, pain, thirst and nakedness and Christ's experience of crucifixion are remarkable. The emotional experience and physical condition which are common to both this psalm and the crucifixion show prophecy and its fulfilment in the clearest way imaginable. The principle of suffering obedience in Ps. 40 which becomes the practical reality in Psalm 22 finds vivid and detailed realisation in the crucifixion story. Again, it is not simply a case of the principle being enunciated, the details can be found in Christ's own life and ministry.

From the earliest time 'Son of Man' literally 'Son of Adam' stressed the fleshly frail and yet dignified aspects of a human nature which had been made in the image of God. It was only later toward the close of the Old Testament period that the prophecy of Daniel gave 'Son of Man' a supra-human meaning. Eventually, Jesus chose 'Son of Man' as his favourite term of self-description and filled out its meaning with a content of suffering akin to that of Isaiah's Servant, a suffering to be followed by a subsequent glory.

The concept of Son of Man in the psalms tends to depict the Messiah as the God-man who, even in his human nature, defies death.

Psalm 8 describes the Son of Man as being made 'A little lower than the heavenly beings' and yet 'crowned with glory and honour' as lord over creation (Ps. 8:4,5). The writer to the Hebrews quotes this passage referring it to Christ's condescension and to his human nature. However, the purpose of Christ taking a human nature is emphasized. It is in sharing our humanity that Christ shares our death and so destroys the devil who holds the power of death. Christ assumes our humanity that he might also be a merciful and faithful high priest and might thus make atonement for the sins of the people. The Messiah stoops to conquer. Christ as Son of Man humbles himself so that he might be the exalted lord over all creation.

This theme of the humbled yet exalted Son of Man, which is hinted at in Psalm 8, is the common message of the entire New Testament. The humiliation and exaltation of Christ are stressed by Jesus in his own teaching on the Son of Man as recorded in the gospels, John in his gospel of an incarnate Word, Paul in Philippians 2:5-11, in particular, Peter in his first letter and in this teaching in the letter to the Hebrews. Among the earliest anticipations of this theme in Scripture are the Messianic tones of Psalm 8.

Psalm 16 prophesies the resurrection of the Messiah. 'Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay' (Ps. 16:9,10).

Both Peter on the day of Pentecost, and Paul quoting this passage at Pisidian Antioch deny that it could refer to David, since David was dead. Peter explains it as an affirmation of David's faith in God's covenant promise. God had promised David on oath that he would place one of his descendants on the throne. David here assumes the role of a prophet and proclaims the resurrection of Christ. The Son of Man, the human Jesus, God's Holy One is neither abandoned to the grave nor sees decay. The Son of Man is Lord of life as well as being Lord over creation. The principle of the condescending and exalted Son of Man finds concrete expression and fulfilment in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. The Son of Man in the Psalms mark an early stage in the revelation of the Messiah's ultimate glory.

Thus, we can trace the contribution of the Psalms at all three levels of Old Testament prophecy, the Messiah as King, as Suffering Servant and as Son of Man. It is a contribution not only in principle but also in practice. It alludes not simply to the theme in general but anticipates in vivid detail the actual events of Christ's life and work. Whatever was written about Christ in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets, there is much in the Psalms to give God's people continuing delight as they sing the praises of their Messiah and to make their hearts burn within them as they consider these prophecies and their fulfilment.

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