

How Do We Determine the 'Messianic' Material in the Psalms?

The Revd Derek Kidner, author of the Tyndale Commentary on the Psalms, takes a brief look at this important question.

To be assured that this is a worthwhile question we may remind ourselves of our Lord's well-known saying in Luke 24:44, 'that everything *written about me* in the law . . . and the prophets *and the psalms* must be fulfilled'. In this summary of such Old Testament oracles Jesus speaks of Himself ('me', verse 44) as 'the Christ' (45), *i.e.*, the Messiah, using that term here to embrace the whole range of titles and metaphors which He and His apostles apply to Him: *e.g.*, 'Son', 'God', 'Lord', 'King', 'Priest', 'Servant', *etc.*

Obviously our guide to the recognition and handling of this material must be the New Testament, which expounds Christologically passages from psalms as varied as numbers 2, 8, 16, 18, 22, 34, 35, 40, 41, 45, 68, 69, 97, 102, 110, and 118. But it also points us, by implication, beyond this list by its occasionally surprising choice of Messianic texts. Some of its quotations can only be seen as Messianic if one first understands that *all* that is said of the Davidic King in the psalter is said ultimately of Christ – except, of course, where David is confessing his failure to live up to his high calling.

A couple of examples may make this clear, both from Psalm 18, one of the most personal of David's psalms. Hebrews 2:13 quotes as Messianic the words, 'I will put my trust in him' (Ps. 18:2 = 2 Sam. 22:3, LXX); and Romans 15:9 quotes as Messianic also Psalm 18:49 (LXX): 'I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name'. Now, as I have said elsewhere (*The Psalms*, Tyndale Commentary, p. 24), 'the special interest of these phrases for us is their *lack* of special interest. They do not force us, by some striking claim or paradox, to look for a supernatural

figure to fulfil them: they fit David perfectly.... The fact that neither of these authors troubles to state, let alone to argue, that the psalm is Messianic suggests that the New Testament takes it for granted that all Davidic and royal psalms have this added dimension. This tallies with the similar handling of the psalms in the preaching of Peter and in the gospels. What Christ once said of Moses he could equally have said of David: 'he wrote of me'.

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If this is so, it presents us with an almost embarrassing wealth of material, and a consequent temptation to neglect the primary sense and context of the psalms. Two things seem worth saying about this. First, that certain great hymns give us a lesson in respecting this primary sense while drawing out its fuller implications. An excellent example is James Montgomery's 'Hail to the Lord's Anointed' (on Ps. 72). Another is H. H. Milman's 'Ride on, ride on in majesty' (indebted to parts of Pss. 45 and 118). But secondly, that the New Testament has so rich a selection of Messianic terms and sayings from the psalter, that our best course is to study this authoritative material in depth (see, *e.g.*, the list of quoted psalms in the second paragraph, above; or start with Hebrews 1, 2, 7, 10), rather than make our own tentative additions to it. However wide the Messianic stream in the psalter, here is the deep water channel.

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concerned to affirm that in Christ God was fully present *pro me*. In the humiliated Jesus God is certainly to be encountered. It was faith alone which could penetrate the veil to discover in him the nearness and realness of God. There is something to be said in confirmation of Bonhoeffer's thesis; for it is a fact to which the New Testament itself bears witness that it is to faith as a gift of divine illumination that this reality of Christ is disclosed.

At the same time it cannot be that the Christ of faith is other than the Christ of fact. He in whom dwelt the fullness of the Godhead *bodily* cannot be finally explicable as a wholly human person in whom God was present truly. However Bonhoeffer may assert that the real issue of a Christology centres on the 'Who?' question – Who is Jesus Christ? – the 'Where?' or the 'How?' question cannot be thus silenced. For to say that in the human person of the humiliated Jesus God is 'haveable' and 'present' cannot avoid the 'How haveable?', and 'Where present?' enquiry. These inescapable issues of a comprehensible and comprehensible christological doctrine Bonhoeffer does not condescend to an-

swer, in the belief, it seems, that they are not legitimate questions. But they most surely are, and because they are, must consequently have consideration.

Notes

1. James Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary*, 1970, p. 134.
2. John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 1960, p. 264.
3. John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: a Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, p. 27.
4. P. 75.
5. Godsey, *op. cit.*, 266.
6. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, vol. 1, Fontana Edition, 1970, p. 210.
7. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 125.
8. Bethge, *Biography*, p. 84.
9. P. 124.
10. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 1963, pp. 64f.
11. P. 26.