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THE KING AS THE PRESENT MESSIAH

Can the Word "Messianic" be used of the King of Israel?

WHEN we put this question as the sub-title to the chapter, we do not intend to return to the interpretation of the primitive Church, where it was held that the Psalms witness directly to Jesus as the Christ. Neither Psalm 2 nor 110 is concerned with Jesus. The warlike figure, breaking the heads of his enemies like the gigantic Pharaoh on Egyptian wall-pictures, has, directly, nothing to do with the crucified Mediator of the New Testament. Indirectly, a connection can be established; but this will not become apparent until we have finished the rapid survey which we intend to give in this book. The king of the Psalms is the victor over Death, like Christ of the New Testament, but between the two several important changes in the figure of the Messiah take place. The king in Psalms 2 and 110 and in the Psalms of the Righteous Sufferer, in short, the king of the Enthronement Festival, is a type, a prefiguration of the New Testament Christ. But the Psalms do not deal directly with Jesus.

Our question is one concerning a definition. What must we understand by "Messiah"?

Scientific literature on this subject in recent years has no clear terminology. For example, Graham and May¹ speak of the kings in the Ancient East in the second millennium B.C. as "Messianic": "They stood as incarnations and symbols of the fructifying, protecting, and healing powers of the consort of the mother-goddess"; and they declare, "In whatever particulars it may differ from the earlier messianism, that which is reflected so prominently in the Old Testament is a lineal descendant from it". Further, they refer to Breasted,² who traces the origins of Messianism back to Egypt.

Engnell and Widengren do not agree completely on this question. Engnell says,³ "By 'messianism' I mean elaborate

king ideology, not 'eschatological' messianism". This view he has later⁴ explained in detail: "Sacral or divine kingship is the accepted term for an institution, simultaneously of a religious and political kind, found in a majority of different cultural areas, and meaning that the king 'by the Grace of God' in his own person incarnates the god and in the cult plays the part of the god. At the same time, however, he also represents, in a special manner, the Collective, the Whole, the People, and so stands between man and god as the Mediator on whom everything and everybody depends. On him depend victory and well-being, rain and fertility, nay the entire integrity of Nature and Human Life, the natural order of the cosmos, which he maintains against the Chaos Powers above all through his cultic functions. In the ideology connected with his person these relations are reflected. And when they are cultivated into such a degree of purity that the king stands as an ideal figure with expectations of salvation bound up with him, then we already have reached a state about which the term 'Messianism' must be used—a term which accordingly need not necessarily have an eschatological aspect."

This definition has, as far as we can see, disarmed the criticism of Widengren.⁵ Widengren wanted the first short definition of Engnell to be widened, stressing the state of the king as Saviour, Son of God and as the "Envoy" ("Apostle") of God, as Incarnation of the Cosmic Law. These conceptions are included (at least to a great extent) in the more elaborate definition of Engnell just quoted.

Against this definition, Mowinckel and others have voiced a rather strong opposition.⁶ They have emphasized that in order to have a clear conception of what is meant by "Messiah" and "Messianic", we must have a clear definition, and that this is only possible if we use the words with a clear "eschatological" meaning. Mowinckel says that "whoever says 'Messiah' also says 'Eschatology'; and an ancient Oriental Eschatology as Gressmann and Sellin imagined has never existed".

In this discussion, I have taken sides with Engnell and Widengren. The question is mainly a terminological issue. The word "Messianic" in popular as well as scientific speech commonly carries an "eschatological" meaning. The words

“eschatology” and “eschatological”, on the other hand, are not always clearly defined. About thirty years ago, Hölscher tried to clear up the matter. He defined the terms as denoting the great drama at the absolute end of the world and the beginning of a new one, and claimed that they should be used exclusively of the period treated under the heading “Eschatology” by Christian Dogmatics—“*De Novissimis*”.⁷

It must, however, be acknowledged that the difference between the “cultic” and the “eschatological” interpretations of the Enthronement Psalms is not very great. The characteristic feature of the cultic interpretation is that Salvation—at all events in principle—is an actual fact of the present day. “*Consummatum est!*” could very well be the concluding words of the ritual combat of the Creation Play, with the sufferings and the victory of the Divine King. Creation is Salvation which is repeated in the ritual. Salvation is a possession, but it must be won again every year. That is the meaning of the Ritual. The fact of Creation is fundamental for the assurance that the world stands secure, is in steady equilibrium through the victory over the Dragon, the Powers of Evil, the Sea, the Nations, Sin, Death, and the Devil. The Preacher of this victory is the king. He has personally fought on the side of his God, has given Yahweh’s oracle that victory is certain. In the lamentations of the Creation Ritual, he himself suffers the excitement of the combat and prays with his people for the victory of their God. In the corresponding Psalms of Thanksgiving, he praises God for the fulfilment. The Psalms experience in living actuality what Eschatology expects. Therefore, the king of the Psalms and of Eschatology is in the main the same;⁸ they are both bearers of Salvation. That some people want to restrict the word “Messiah” to the Saviour of Eschatology is based only on a praiseworthy desire for clarity of expression.

When we know what we mean, and are sure that we shall not be misunderstood by readers and listeners,⁹ it will be much more in tune with the material which we have to investigate and describe to use the expressions “Messiah” and “Messianic” of a figure which changes through the ages, but still retains certain essential characteristic features even through changed circumstances. The words may very appropriately be used of

the pre-exilic Israelite sacral king and even of the ancient Oriental divine king; they may also be used of his “lineal descendant”, the eschatological Son of David of later Judaism and equally of the Son of Man. We shall be able to see how the Early Church utilized the ancient material to build up its dogmas of the Trinity and Christology. This change, this *Gestaltwandlung*, took place through the catastrophes of Israelite and Jewish history, which made the assurance of the ancient days unsafe and converted it into expectation—the belief that the fulfilment would come in the future. The connection with the cultic calendar was severed. Under the influence of the religion of Israel with its strongly historical orientation, the ancient Oriental conception of life as a circle was broken. The circle—with its constant repetitions of the same events—was replaced by the straight line of History, at the end of which the New Creation is expected and hoped for. The New Creation is described by means of elements drawn from the ancient Enthronement Festival. To use Mowinckel’s words from *Psalmstudien II*, Israel made its way “from experience to hope”. The Saviour, the Divine King of Eschatology, is, however, phenomenologically the same figure as the Davidic sacral king, the Son of God—even *’lôhîm* (Psalm 45: 7).¹⁰ Both may therefore be called “Messiah”, corresponding to the title used of the king by pre-exilic literature (e.g. 1 and 2 Samuel and Psalm 2: 6), “the Anointed of Yahweh”.

If, then, we can describe the pre-exilic and the ancient Oriental king as a “Messianic” type, we must now add that the conception of “primeval” or “primordial” Man is also an important component of the picture.¹¹