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## THE MESSIANIC EXPECTATION IN THE PSALTER\*

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RECENT studies of the Psalms have tended to disparage and discredit their religious values in two important aspects. In the first place, the extent and importance of primitive survivals in various Psalms have been stressed beyond all sober reason. Here Mowinckel<sup>1</sup> is chief among sinners. For one thing, the Norwegian scholar finds magical elements in plenteous abundance. Furthermore, in his exhaustive and learned investigation of those Psalms which he connects with the rite of Jehovah's enthronement, he constantly and repeatedly finds occasion to characterize this or that feature with the adjective "primitive." His readers can only with difficulty escape the conviction that in general the hymns of Zion keep pretty consistently on a very low spiritual level.<sup>2</sup> Gunkel, accordingly, is moved to emphatic protest against such gross distortion of perspective. "Mowinckels grundlegender Irrtum darin zu bestehen scheint," he asserts, "dass er die geistige Hohenlage der Psalmisten unterschätzt und Israels Geistesleben überhaupt und das der Psalmisten insbesondere zu primitiv auffasst."<sup>3</sup> In all this Mowinckel is, of course, simply keeping step with much of our contemporary scholarship, whether in the Psalms or elsewhere. The current preoccupation with early origins, immensely

\* The Presidential Address delivered at the meeting of The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, December 28, 1937, at Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

<sup>1</sup> *Psalmstudien*, I-IV, Kristiania, 1921-24.

<sup>2</sup> See, e. g., II, 301.

<sup>3</sup> *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 1928, 30.

valuable as it is in itself, is always exposed to the peril of sacrificing a just appreciation of later and more highly developed religious values. Some of our ablest Biblical scholars seem to forget, furthermore, that a religious vocabulary of necessity remains much the same even after greatly advanced ideas have entirely supplanted crude beginnings. Because of this scholarly *lapsus animi* every reader of recent literature on the Psalms must needs be alert to make liberal allowance for the tendency to misinterpret as primitive survivals some of the noblest ideas in the Psalter.<sup>4</sup>

The other serious spiritual flaw in recent Psalm literature, and the one which more specifically concerns us in this paper, is the related trend toward minimizing both the extent and religious importance of the Messianic element in the Psalter. This has resulted in the wrong of giving a purely secular interpretation to many Psalms, especially the so-called Royal Psalms. Practically all recent commentators, whether Mowinckel, Gunkel, Hans Schmidt<sup>5</sup> or another, err in this respect. There seems to be abroad a strangely perverted and sadistically exaggerated sense of honesty in estimating our sacred writings, according to which one ought always to choose the less worthy and less religious of two possible interpretations of any given passage. Whenever in the Psalms the word "Messiah" appears, every nerve is strained, and every device of a forced exegesis utilized, in order to make it refer merely to the secular king and his mundane affairs. Even where the whole context is saturated with the characteristic motifs of Israel's dynamic and intensely religious Messianic expectation, one must never admit that the Messiah is meant. Likewise in the so-called Enthronement Psalms, the dominant Messianic theme is more or less ignored in favor of a purely ritualistic and formal interpretation. Apparently, too close and specialized absorption in the search for possible remnants of early and superstitious cult practices has blinded some scholars to the large and permanent religious implications of

<sup>4</sup> See F. C. Porter in V. Ferm, *Contemporary American Theology*, II (1933), 221 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Die Psalmen*, 1934.

the subject matter. Even granting that the loftiest ideas of the Psalms have their roots, like all religious concepts, in primitive beginnings, it is the greatest possible disservice to focus attention almost solely on these, thus in effect concealing the high dominant note of trust and faith in an exalted God who ultimately shapes human history after his righteous and kindly will. Most current exegesis, then, stands a far cry away from the more fruitful Messianic emphasis of earlier scholars like Stade, Kirkpatrick and even Briggs. If so great spiritual loss is involved in present-day interpretation, we might almost be excused for preferring to be wrong on certain minor details with these early scholars rather than right with our nearer contemporaries.

But it may be replied that, even in the case of the Biblical scholar, the search for pure truth must not be deflected by too great concern for an edifying influence upon the souls of his readers. Professor Cadbury strikingly meets this objection in his presidential address of a year ago. "No more than the inventor of poison gases in his laboratory," he declares, "can the Biblical scholar remain in his study indifferent to the spiritual welfare which his researches often seem to threaten or destroy."<sup>6</sup> A perfectly valid observation, I think all will agree. But I wonder whether we are not warranted in going still farther, and holding that, if our results are merely destructive, the suspicion is justified that our theories may be basically wrong. At least, whenever we find ourselves replacing order with chaos, and established values with near worthlessness, it behooves us to reexamine both our premises and our conclusions.<sup>7</sup> So far as the reputedly secular or purely ritualistic Psalms are concerned, I am persuaded that a more thoroughgoing reconsideration of the available evidence will clearly demonstrate that these are

<sup>6</sup> *JBL*, LVI (1937), 14 f.

<sup>7</sup> As illustrations of spiritual mischief wrought by mistaken theories stubbornly persisted in, consider the futile attempts to solve the insistent problems of such prophetic writings as Ezekiel, Second Isaiah and Habakkuk by cutting them into pieces. In each case, the loss of religious values consequent upon making torsos of these books is in itself a warning that scholars may have been on the wrong track.

in general definitely religious documents. In particular, there is a great deal more of Messianism here than we have come to believe. If this seems like retrogression to more conservative positions, one may answer that, in a surprising number of cases and in every area of life, first impressions are found to be right. Perhaps Stade, then, was not so far wrong when he spoke of 36 Psalms with direct Messianic content besides 52 with less specific references to that hope.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the underlying thesis of the present paper is just this: *We must look for more rather than less of the Messianic expectation in the Psalter.*

So far we have spoken in rather general terms of the Messianic expectation. The question arises: Just what is this Messianism? And again: Are we right in regarding this variety of thought as essentially and deeply religious? After all, there is a fairly common impression that the Messianic hope represents a somewhat narrow kind of fierce nationalism, a blot upon Israel's religious life rather than its chief ornament and glory. Perhaps the attempt to define and describe the term will throw some light upon the other question of its spiritual worth.

At once the extreme inclusiveness of the Messianic expectation impresses, and perhaps confuses, the student. It notoriously comprises many types of hope, and a startling array of individual features, embodied in an amazing variety of literary forms. In an all too sketchy and inconclusive chapter on Messianic Psalms in his recent book, *A Fresh Approach to the Psalms*, 1937, Oesterley points out that Messianism soon merges into Eschatology, and ultimately we get the bizarre pictures of the Apocalypticists. He summarizes: "In a word, Jewish Messianic teaching is an extraordinary mixture of diverse elements."<sup>9</sup> Kent opposes to that narrower definition of the term Messianic, according to which it is limited to those prophecies in which the Messiah actually appears, the wider and commonly accepted application to "all those prophecies in the Old Testament and in late Jewish literature which describe the noble destiny that

<sup>8</sup> *Akademische Reden und Abhandlungen*, 1907, 63, under the title, "Die messianische Hoffnung im Psalter."

<sup>9</sup> P. 186.

God has in store for the race and the different agents and agencies by which that destiny is to be realized."<sup>10</sup> Three principal varieties of the Messianic expectation are distinguished by this scholar: (1) The kingly and national type, prevailing in such early passages as the Song of Deborah, the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49), and the Balaam oracles; (2) The apocalyptic and catastrophic type, which looks for vindication in the "Day of Jehovah," and finds its most pathetic frustration and disillusionment in the ill-starred Messianic program of Haggai and Zechariah; and (3) The ethical and spiritual type, which in the fifth century comes to immortal expression in the ideal atoning "Servant" of the Second Isaiah. All these varieties, of course, constantly cross-fertilize one another in the religious life and writings of Israel, especially, as is to be expected, in the later period. One has only to add to the literature just now mentioned, such products of the Messianic expectation as Malachi, Joel, Habakkuk, Zechariah 9-14, Ezekiel,<sup>11</sup> Daniel, Isaiah 2 1-4; 9; 11, and the appendices to the earlier prophets—not to speak of such extra-canonical books as Enoch and The Psalms of Solomon—to realize what an extraordinary quantity and diversity of thought and literary material centered about and grew out of this movement.<sup>12</sup>

As already hinted, Isaiah 34-66 (omitting, of course, the historical chapters 36-39) is the "fullest and finest exposition of the national hope and had great influence in lifting this hope up to its new supernatural level."<sup>13</sup> In these highly developed poems, Israel's supreme literary genius has organized the most worthy elements of Hebrew Messianism into a new and richer synthesis, the whole dominated by the figure of the "Servant of Jehovah." "Here for the first time the national hope was given a definite religious content, universal application, and

<sup>10</sup> *Sermons, Epistles and Apocalypses*, 1910, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Probably to be dated c. 225. See my discussion in *Quantulacumque*, 1937, 265-284, entitled "Crisis in Ezekiel Research."

<sup>12</sup> See the summary of the Messianic hope in H. P. Smith, *Religion of Israel*, 1914, 247 f.

<sup>13</sup> F. C. Porter, *Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers*, 1905, 23.

enduring literary form."<sup>14</sup> As from a great spiritual reservoir, succeeding writers in the Old Testament, the non-canonical books, and the New Testament drew thence their highest inspiration. Thus was there set up in the late fifth century<sup>15</sup> a definitive and normative Messianic ideal for the generations to come. Let us set down in order the principal features of the Messianic expectation of the Second Isaiah: (1) The necessary preparation of Israel, at present unworthy, for its glorious day of liberation and spiritual triumph; (2) The vicarious atonement to be effected through suffering must be understood and accepted by the people; (3) The nation is to act as a missionary witness to the Gentiles; (4) The coming chastisement of the hopelessly and deliberately wicked; (5) The ingathering of multitudes of the Gentiles as loyal and willing members of the redeemed community; and (6) A new earth in which justice and goodwill are to prevail under the universal kingship of the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> All this against the background of the highest concept of God yet attained: he is absolute, alone, moral, gracious, forgiving, creator of the ends of the earth and man's intimate life companion.

Enough has perhaps been said to show that the higher types of Messianism represent the very acme of Hebrew religious thought. In view of the notable volume and especially the peerless quality of the literature it inspired, as well as because of the intrinsic spiritual worth of its animating ideas, this is far from being something for which one need apologize. Judged by its demonstrated fruits the Messianic expectation, in its completed catholicity and universality, stands at the very forefront of Hebrew and Christian religion. It is no accident that the New Testament makes this its dominating strain. Would it not be a pity, then, to deny any Psalm that deserved it, admission to this charmed circle of the Messianic hope?

Where, now, do the Psalms belong with relation to this outstanding religious movement in Israel? That certain Psalms

<sup>14</sup> C. C. Torrey, *Our Translated Gospels*, 1936, p. xxix.

<sup>15</sup> For the date, see my article, "Some Recent Interpretations of Second Isaiah," *JBL*, XLVIII (1929), 362-377.

<sup>16</sup> With this summary cp. Torrey, *op. cit.*, pp. xxix-xxxvi, and his *Second Isaiah*, 1928, 111-150.

clearly voice the Messianic expectation is universally granted. But a considerable number, such as the Royal Psalms already mentioned, have been placed on the border line, and are by most given a secular interpretation. Is this view right?

In seeking an answer, we owe careful consideration to the general background of the Psalms. In particular, the fact that the Psalmists belong as a whole to the inner circle of Hebrew piety suggests a close connection with the similarly minded prophetic group. To be sure, there are a number of Psalms whose affinities are with the wisdom literature or with the Law. But in the majority of cases we discover conceptions of God's greatness, his moral nature, his care for mankind, his full forgiveness and kindness, which infallibly link their writers with the prophets. Now the prophets were always clear about the divine purpose running through history. More and more, as confidence in earthly rulers was shattered, they lifted their hope and program into the eternal, supernatural realm. In the late period of the second temple, when our Psalms were collected and most of them written, prophetic literature was increasingly dominated by the conviction that God's gracious purpose is invincible and will prevail. The whole warp and woof of thought becomes Messianic; all else is, as it were, but incidental embroidery. In Second Isaiah itself, and in such dependent passages as Isaiah 9 and 11, the expectation is that the coming Messiah, who is at once divine and human (cp. Is 9 5, "Mighty God"; Mal 3 1 ff.; Dan 7 3),<sup>17</sup> will act as God's agent. In view of this strongly Messianic background does it not seem reasonable that, in cases of possible doubt, we should interpret individual Psalms in agreement with it, especially as many other Psalms reflect even more clearly the same expectation?

But if the background of the Psalms is controlled by Messianism, what we may call the foreground (i. e., the post-canonical Old Testament period and that of the New Testament) is ruled by this type of thought in still more decided degree. Enoch and The Psalms of Solomon both have the Messianic hope for major theme. All four of the Gospels concern themselves not with

<sup>17</sup> See Torrey, *Our Translated Gospels*, pp. xv-xxii.



Jesus the man, but with Jesus the Messiah foretold by the prophets and long awaited by faithful Jews. In like manner Paul's sermons and letters center about Jesus as the fulfiller of the Messianic expectation. So also prevailing in the rest of the New Testament writings. Are we to conclude that these careful students of their own nation's history and literature were mistaken in holding that their sacred Scriptures, including the Psalms, were strongly steeped in Messianism? And apart from certain quoted passages which are obviously non-Messianic, are we not compelled to give first place to their verdict as to the Messianic import of certain of the Royal and other Psalms? Remember they had the Jews, in and out of the Christian church, to correct them instantly if they seemed to twist the meanings of their sources. In modern parlance, they "couldn't have gotten away with it," unless the passages they summoned as proof texts were quite generally accepted in the sense in which they used them. That the Jews who opposed Christianity were quite ready to criticize after this fashion is demonstrated by the disputes with them recorded by New Testament and early Christian writers. Once the Christians had taken over the Messianic hope, including its universalism, these Jews withdrew from certain of their earlier emphases. Despite Second Isaiah, it was insisted that salvation was limited to themselves and those who became Jews through proselyting. In particular, the Suffering Messiah was too much like Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, apparently, arose the strange Rabbinical doctrine of the First and Second Messiahs, the former being regarded not as the son of David but the son of Ephraim; he it was who suffered and died.<sup>18</sup> However, at the time, soon after the death of Jesus, when the Aramaic records were written down, the whole of Second Isaiah's comprehensive Messianic program seems to have been accepted as orthodox Jewish as well as Christian doctrine. So far as the Psalms are concerned, we have no sufficient occasion to doubt that the traditions of Messianic interpretation common to Jew and

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiv, xxxviii f.; cp. Stade, p. 30.

Christian alike represented on the whole the intent of the original authors.

With what mental attitude, then, shall we approach the interpretation of Psalms which seem to suggest possible Messianic meaning? In view of the uniformly Messianic context and background of the Psalmists, looked at from any direction one pleases, it would appear that the overwhelming presumption is that such Psalms are Messianic. It seems monstrous to suppose that the collectors of these sacred hymns were actually duped into including within the sacred corpus pieces which had practically no religious connotations. Whenever our scholars wax eloquent over the divinity hedging about a king, and conclude that Psalms mentioning the Messiah therefore refer to an earthly ruler, they are practically giving away their case; for it simply means that, if they are right, the Messianic idea prevailed very early and was even applied to earthly kings. But in the period when most of the Psalms were composed (including some of those which authorities date before 586 B.C. simply because they interpret them as referring to secular kings of Israel), most pious Jews were at one with their prophetic literature in its disillusionment about earthly sovereigns. If help was to come at all, it must come through a divine-human Messiah doing God's bidding and not his own will. Permeating the piety of the later Jews was this hope of God's kingdom, which in Isaiah 26 19, Daniel 12 2 f., and possibly Ezekiel 37 even develops into a doctrine of the resurrection. It had much the same influence as the later Christian belief in the future, being always present and coloring all of life and thought. Consequently it is extremely probable that there exist in these hymns of ancient Israel resultant casual and cryptic allusions to the Messianic expectation which elude us because we are relatively unacquainted with the particular expressions and formulae which inevitably carried home the thought to every pious Israelite. Even the "I" of the Psalms seems as much the expression of the common hope as that of the individual. The Psalmist could not conceive of himself as standing apart, but rather as a member of the beloved community sharing its

faith in the Messianic deliverance. Perhaps our proper mental set toward this problem may best be expressed in the words of J. M. P. Smith, who speaks of the Messianic hope in the Psalms as "in one form or another bursting forth on every page like a fountain of pure water from the well spring of life."<sup>19</sup>

To recognize these Messianic passages when we meet them still remains a difficulty for us unimaginative Occidental moderns. Stade<sup>20</sup> suggests three concrete and practical tests: (a) Do other Psalms have the same expressions in an undoubted Messianic sense? (b) Does the remaining content of the Psalm in question make probable a Messianic reference? and (c) Compare parallels from the Prophets. Of these, the last, he holds, is the most convincing criterion. If all three agree, then we have approximate certainty.

As we seek to determine whether or no certain Psalms are Messianic, it would manifestly be quite unreasonable to demand that a given Psalm, in order to be ranked under that grouping, must exhibit all the types of Messianic expectation, or even every feature of any one type. Always, of course, the critical principle of "the balance of probability" must prevail. The question should be: Does this or that Psalm fit best into the Messianic category?

It is obvious that, in the space at our disposal, we cannot examine all of the 150 Psalms in order to determine which of them should be classed as Messianic. At best this paper can be but a prelude to the study of the Messianic Expectation in the Psalms. Let us, however, briefly apply the principles enunciated to two or three Psalms whose Messianic import is sometimes denied.

Psalm 2: The second Psalm is included by Gunkel<sup>21</sup> among the Royal Psalms (i. e., Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144 1-11, cp. 89 47-52), and is therefore interpreted by him as referring in exaggerated court style to a Hebrew king living before 586 B.C. On the other hand, J. M. P. Smith characterizes

<sup>19</sup> *The Religion of the Psalms*, 1922, 86.

<sup>20</sup> P. 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Die Psalmen*, 4 ff.; *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 140 ff.

this as "the most definitely messianic of the psalms."<sup>22</sup> Who is right? I cannot but believe that Gunkel's exegesis is forced. His reference to the divine sonship in other religions is weakened by his admission that such a belief was not possible in quite the same form in Israel. The Psalm, in fact, bears many marks of the Messianic expectation. The word "Messiah" occurs in v. 2. This Messiah is, as hinted in the Messianic "Mighty God" of Isaiah 9 6, a son of God (vv. 7, 12); apparently a "preëxistent divine spirit incarnated in a man of human parentage."<sup>23</sup> As in Habakkuk 3 13, the Messiah is pictured in that characteristic part of his activity which has to do with the Messianic world conquest. In vv. 6, 8 he is given the nations as his inheritance, just as in the Messianic Isaiah 55 4 f. With so many of the characteristic ideas and expressions of Messianism present, I cannot see how one can reasonably deny that this Royal Psalm so-called is decidedly Messianic.

Psalm 22, with its many details of suffering, was interpreted by Jesus' followers, along with Isaiah 53, as predicting the Messianic death on the cross. Whether the Psalm was originally intended as Messianic is a fairly difficult problem. Not only Isaiah 53, but Isaiah 50 4-9, Zechariah 9 9 and ch. 13, as well as Daniel 9 26, picture a Messiah who is not only humble but persecuted. Therefore it is quite possible that the Christian interpretation, offered in the face of imminent Jewish correction, was correct. This is strongly supported by the typical Messianic picture of the subjugation of nations and the universal worship of Jehovah in the closing verses of the Psalm (vv. 22-31).

Psalm 45. This so-called royal marriage Psalm is now usually included among the secular Royal Psalms. Certainly it comes nearest of all to a possible secular interpretation. As opposed to this, we must remember that both the Targum and the New Testament refer it to the Messiah.<sup>24</sup> There was, furthermore, nothing forced or unnatural for Biblical writers to use the language of the marriage relationship to celebrate the glory and

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, 88 f.

<sup>23</sup> Torrey, *op. cit.*, p. xx; cp. his article "Χριστός" in *Quantulacumque*, 317.

<sup>24</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1897, II, 243 f.

attractiveness of the Messianic king. It would appear that this is an imaginative scene, in which the glorified Messiah is depicted as praised by the peoples of the earth (v. 17). It seems impossible that any Jewish writer would have used the extravagant language of vv. 6 and 7 with reference to an earthly ruler. Briggs<sup>25</sup> avoids the clear Messianic meaning by excising vv. 6-7a as a gloss. But this is too obviously one of his characteristic harmonizing devices. The Psalm is surely Messianic.

Similarly, Psalm 72 and many others reflect the motifs and language of the Messianic expectation. Such hymns are most naturally referred to the Messiah. In like manner the Enthronement Psalms (according to Gunkel: 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99; according to Mowinckel: 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100), where Jehovah is represented as king, must be classed as primarily Messianic. After all, what did it mean to have Jehovah as king in Jerusalem? Nobody ever imagined, except possibly in prehistoric eras, that he would literally sit on a throne in the capital city. If God was to rule at all, it must be in the person of his representative and agent upon earth, the Messiah. For reasons of caution, all this literature is reluctant to arouse the questioning of the foreign masters of the land by too explicit references to a ruling Messianic king. This it is, of course, which increases the difficulty of interpretation for us today.

It would obviously be possible to go on much farther with this investigation. But I trust the importance of the problem has at least been suggested, and that the thesis that we must expect to find more rather than less of the Messianic hope in the Psalter has been established. It is not so much a question, therefore, as to where this expectation is to be found in the Psalms. Rather the question is: Where is it not?

<sup>25</sup> *Psalms (ICC)*, I, 384.