

David W Fletcher, Spring 1979

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THE DEITY OF CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

Speaking of Jesus Christ, the writer of the book of Hebrews depicts him as saying, “Behold I have come (in the roll of the book it is written of Me) to do Thy will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7; cf. Psalm 40:6-8). Jesus recognized that His humble, obedient life would be the active counterpart of God’s written *torah*, God’s written will, that was set forth in the “roll of the book.” Jesus appealed to this fact when debating with unbelieving Jews: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Indeed, the whole of the Old Testament cries out, “The Messiah is coming!” Early Christians recognized this, and in their preaching and teaching about Jesus, God’s Anointed One, they made great use of the Jewish Scriptures and especially the Psalms.

The Psalms portray several events in the life of the Messiah: His appointment to sonship (Psalm 2:7; cf. Matthew 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35); His teaching in parables (Psalm 78:2; cf. Matthew 13:35); His righteous indignation concerning money-changers in the temple (Psalm 69:9; cf. John 2:17); His rejection (Psalm 118:22-23; cf. Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7); His betrayal (Psalm 41:9; cf. John 13:18-19); His reproach (Psalm 69:9; cf. Romans 15:3); the parting of His garments (Psalm 22:18; cf. Matthew 27:35); His being forsaken by God (Psalm 22:1; cf. Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34); His death (Psalm 31:5; cf. Luke 23:46); His resurrection (Psalm 16:8-11; cf. Acts 2:25-28; 13:35); and His

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work after His ascension (Psalm 68:18; cf. Ephesians 4:8).¹ The Psalms also portray several characteristics of the Messiah: He is God's Anointed (Psalm 2:2; cf. Acts 4:26); He is made a little lower than God (Psalm 8:5; cf. Hebrews 2:9); He is of the seed of David (Psalm 132:11; cf. Acts 2:29-30); He is a king and a priest forever (Psalm 45:6; cf. Hebrews 1:8-9; Psalm 110:4; cf. Hebrews 7:21); and He is the son of God seated at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1; cf. Matthew 22:44; Acts 2:34-35; 1 Corinthians 15:25). But the greatest and boldest attribute of King Messiah in the Psalms is His deity—He is equal to and none other than God Himself.

The portrait of a royal wedding, Psalm 45 is addressed to the King (v. 1).² A possessor of fairness and grace, one whom God has blessed forever, the King is called “Mighty One.” These royal compliments suddenly blossom into divine honors: “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows” (vv. 6-7). These words are strong; they are so strong that attempts have been made to soften them. Alternate translations of verse six have been suggested. The *Revised Standard Version* translates, “Your throne is a throne of God,” and the *New English Bible* translates, “Your throne is like God's throne, eternal.” But the natural sense of *elohim* in verse six is vocative (cf. the Septuagint and Hebrews 1:8). Is this to conclude that the monarch is addressed as divine?

¹In connection with these events in the life of the Messiah, it is worthy of note that even Satan perceived the Messianic implications of Psalm 91:11-12 and used such to tempt Jesus (see Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:10-11).

²The primary reference is to Solomon; the ultimate reference is to Christ.

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Briggs suggests, “This is not strange to ancient poetry. The great kings reflect the divine majesty, and in a sense partake of the divine nature. [Compare Psalm 8:6, Psalm 82:6, and John 10:35] where *elohim* is used for the exalted monarchs and heavenly intelligences.”³ Solomon is depicted as a righteous king and as God (that is, in God’s image), and no injustice is done to the one true God (see Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6). Weiser, though, denies any possibility of deification of this king and says:

It cannot be proved from any Old Testament passage that a deification of the king took place such as was practiced by the Egyptians and the Babylonians. The insurmountable distinction between Yahweh and the king, between God and man is everywhere maintained and is explicitly expressed also in v. 7. The designation ‘divine king’ signifies in the O.T. the function of the king as the righteous ruler rather than a specific quality. It is in this sense that he becomes the representative of God in the midst of the people through his anointment as king.⁴

But Weiser misses the basic thrust of the passage. The king himself, not merely his office or his function, is glorified and deified. In the words of Kidner, “This king is no figurehead but the embodiment of all that gives kingship its unique glory: its claim to combine immemorial continuity . . . and compelling personal glory . . . in one man.”⁵

Since Solomon was of *elohim* that would “die like men” (see Psalm 82:6), the passage of necessity points to someone greater and to someone divine. The psalmist points to one: who is

³Charles A. Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 141.

⁴Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, 5th rev. ed., trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962), 363.

⁵Derek Kidner, *Psalms* (London, UK: InterVarsity, 1975), 171.

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“outstanding among ten thousand” (Song of Solomon 5:10; cf. v. 2a); of whom it is said “never did a man speak the way this man speaks” (John 7:46; cf. V. 2b); who is “gentle and humble” (Matthew 11:29) yet rides forth “conquering and to conquer” (Revelation 6:2; cf. vv. 3-5); and who is called “Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11; cf. v. 4). The psalmist points to this one. He is Jesus. This the writer of Hebrews affirms: “But of the Son He says, ‘Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever . . .’” (Hebrews 1:8-9). Here God is speaking of the God-anointed and God-appointed God. In any other context except that of the incarnation (cf. John 1:1-2, 14), Psalm 45 loses great significance.

Another Psalm that has God speaking to God is the one-hundred-tenth. Here David “falls down and worships the Man who stands before him.”⁶ He writes, “The Lord says to my Lord:⁷ ‘Sit at my right hand until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet’” (v. 1). Jesus vividly points out to the Pharisees the implication of David addressing the king as “my Lord” (see Matthew 22:41-45; cf. Mark 12:35-37). Christ is greater than David and even divine. This latter fact is attested by the power and authority conferred upon Messiah by Yahweh: “Sit at My right hand until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.” New Testament writers proclaim the deity of Jesus with these words.⁸ Not only is Jesus greater than David (Acts 2:34), He is greater

⁶Kidner, *Psalms*, 393.

⁷This is literally “the oracle of Yahweh to my lord.”

⁸Note that the Sanhedrin considered the words of Jesus in Mark 14:62—“you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven”—descriptive of deity, and they charged Jesus with blasphemy (v. 64; cf. Acts 7:55ff.).

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than the angels, because “to which of the angels has He ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand . . .?’” (Hebrews 1:13). Jesus received this honor at the completion of His earthly task “having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, [He] sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:11). The one whom man rejected, God glorified: “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand” (Acts 5:30-31). Jesus is even now “at the right hand of God” (Romans 8:34) interceding for us, and here he rules (1 Corinthians 15:25) and awaits the time when “his enemies be made a footstool for His feet” (Hebrews 10:13). So in this one verse (Psalm 110:1), the divine person of Christ is displayed. As Kidner suggest, “Together with verse 4 it underlies most of the New Testament teaching on His glory as Priest-King”⁹ (see Hebrews 5:6; 7:21).

Psalms 97, 102, and 68 speak immediately of God in their Old Testament context but are applied to Jesus by New Testament writers. Psalm 97 addresses “the Lord Most High” who is “exalted above all gods” (v. 9). He is “righteousness and justice” (v. 2) before whom the earth trembles and the mountains melt (vv. 4-5). Because of His majesty and glory, even the fictitious gods of the heathen and all the angels are called upon to bow down before Him: “Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images, who boast themselves of idols; worship Him, all you gods” (v. 7). The epistle to the Hebrews shows this statement to be a command of God occasioned by the coming of God’s Son into the world: “And when he [God] brings the first-born [the Son] into the world, He says, ‘And let all the angels of God worship Him’” (Hebrews 1:6). According

⁹Kidner, *Psalms*, 393.

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to the author of Hebrews, to Christ belongs the worship due only Yahweh and even is called forth by Him.

Psalms 102 is a plea of an afflicted man to God for mercy. He begs, “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Thy years are throughout all generations” (v. 24). The supplicant’s God is able to save because He is Maker of heaven and earth (v. 25), everlasting (v. 26), and immutable (v. 27). These very words describe not only Yahweh but also the Son (Hebrews 1:10-12).¹⁰ These words are fitting of Him through whom “all things were created” (Colossians 1:16), who “remains forever” (John 8:35), and who “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Psalms 68 is a representation of God as Deliverer and Savior of His people. Following a fanfare of praise (vv. 1-6), God marches from Sinai to Jerusalem routing all the kings in His path (vv. 7-18). Having won the war, God enters His city and puts the rebellious under tribute: “Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captive Thy captives; thou hast received gifts among men, even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there” (v. 18). The remainder of the Psalm shows God’s people enjoying the benefits of His conquest. Paul quotes this passage in Ephesians 4:8 in reference to a greater conquest, the conquest of Christ. Having ascended into heaven, Jesus gave gifts to men, namely those of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:33). Jesus once again is seen as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s work in history, for He indeed is God.

¹⁰Based on the Septuagint reading, the prayer of the psalmist ends with verse 22 and the next words begin God’s answer to the supplicant. On this reading, God Himself addresses the Messiah as “Lord” in verses 25ff., and this is how the author of Hebrews understood the passage. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 21ff.

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Other Psalms indirectly attribute divinity to Christ by ascribing to Him characteristics belonging only to God. First, Messiah is worthy of worship. A fundamental principle of both Old and New Testaments is this: “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only” (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13). Angels (see Revelation 19:10; 22:9) and men (see Acts 10:25-26; 14:11ff.) deserve no such honor. But worship is given to Messiah and even is commanded for Him by Yahweh: “Worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way” (Psalm 2:11-12). The fact that Jesus accepted worship (see Matthew 8:2; 14:33; John 20:28) testifies to His divinity. Second, Messiah possesses universal dominion (see Psalm 72:8) and eternity (see Psalm 72:17) something belonging only to God (see Psalm 90:2; 1 Timothy 6:16). Jesus likewise has these qualities (see 2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 11:15). Third, Messiah has power over death. Psalm 16:9-10 and its prophetic reference to the resurrection of Jesus (see Acts 2:29ff.; 13:34-37) points to someone greater than man, since this passage in the Psalm could not find its total fulfillment in the person of David. The Psalm indirectly asserts the deity of Christ by authenticating His power over death.

Another indication of the deity of Christ in the Psalms might be several incidental statements about the “Lord” (*Yahweh*) in the Old Testament that are quoted by New Testament writers in reference to the “Lord” (*kurios*) and possibly to be applied to Jesus.¹¹

¹¹The following Psalms with their New Testament counterpart are given as examples: Psalm 24:1 with 1 Corinthians 10:26; Psalm 62:12 with 2 Timothy 4:14, Matthew 16:27, and Romans 2:6; Psalm 118:6 with Hebrews 13:6; Psalm 44:22 with Romans 8:36; and Psalm 34:12-16 with 1 Peter 3:10-12.

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These Psalms portray the Messiah as King, but they also speak of the Messiah as divine or as God. This is the testimony of New Testament writers who, from a firm belief about Jesus of Nazareth and his work among early Christians, can only interpret these Old Testament passages in such a lofty and exalted manner.

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