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Problems of Messianic Interpretation

By ALFRED VON ROHR SAUER

As Christian scholars consider problems of Biblical interpretation, it is well that they pause and take note of areas of agreement that have been reached, and also spell out differences that still exist. It was pointed out recently that a considerable area of agreement has been reached in this field among exegetes of various denominations.¹

Both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic scholars concur in the following points: (1) It is necessary to establish the correct text of Scripture by the use of textual criticism. (2) The literary form of a given passage must be determined. (3) The historical situation which produced the text must be examined. (4) The interpreter must determine the literal sense of the passage, that is, what the original writer wanted to say to the people of his day. (5) The interrelation of the two Testaments must be taken into account in interpreting them. It is gratifying to note these areas of agreement in the basic principles of Biblical interpretation.

But there also are some important areas in which the interpretation of the Scriptures does not present such a united front. Bultmann, for instance, holds that modern man cannot understand the myth of the Gospel. But Wood hastens to add that Bultmann's demythologizing is merely a different form of remythologizing.² Another contemporary interpreter, Blackman,

states that the real ore in the Holy Scripture must be extracted from the stone and the rubble, that the kernel of the Bible has to be dug from the surrounding shell.³ However, Blackman's fellow countryman, L. S. Thornton, maintains that the Bible needs to be accepted as a whole, that it is like an onion from which layer after layer may be peeled off without ever reaching anything like a core.⁴ It was that great specialist in the literature of the intertestamental period, R. H. Charles, who wrote early in the 20th century: "Prediction is not in any sense an essential element of prophecy, though it may intervene as an accident."⁵ This position contrasts very strikingly with the more recent view of Theodore H. Robinson, who wrote in 1959: "Biblical scholarship is coming more and more to recognize that prediction was an essential, perhaps the essential, element in Old Testament prophecy."⁶

The last-named problem area, that of prophecy, and especially of Messianic prophecy, is one that calls for careful study. The following paragraphs attempt to clarify and resolve some of the issues. In approaching this problem it is well to turn first of all to the New Testament, where

³ E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), pp. 174, 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵ Quoted in Harold Henry Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1953), pp. 1 f.

⁶ Theodore H. Robinson, "Prophecy," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, CLXXXIV (January 1959), p. 37.

¹ James D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1958), pp. 168 f.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 173.

a number of significant statements are made concerning the relationship of prophecy and fulfillment.

In Acts 1:16 Peter brings out a basic truth when he reminds the brothers that the Holy Spirit *did speak beforehand*. That the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand will be granted by most interpreters; *how* the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand is a matter concerning which there is need for further study.

In 1 Peter 1:10, 11 the apostle emphasizes not only that the prophets spoke of the grace which was to come but that their speaking required *research* and *investigation* on the subject of salvation. Even the prophets had to check in order to see *which person* and *which time* the Holy Spirit had in mind when He predicted the suffering of Christ and the glory which was to follow.

That the New Testament believers were slow to understand the prophetic statements is indicated in Luke 24:25-27. There our Lord was constrained to rebuke the Emmaus disciples because they had been so slow to believe all that the prophets had spoken. And then He proceeded to interpret to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures, which they had not understood. That same Easter evening the Lord opened the understanding of the disciples so that they might understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:45)

The same need of explanation and interpretation is reflected in the incident of Philip and the eunuch of Ethiopia (Acts 8:30-34). When Philip asked the eunuch whether he understood what he was reading, the eunuch answered, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Moreover, the eunuch wanted to know whether the

prophet described himself as such a humble, uncomplaining lamb or whether he had some other person in mind. Finally, in Heb. 5:12 the apostle reprimanded the believers for lack of good exegetical technique. He told them that they needed someone to teach them again the first principles of God's Word. If the disciples and other early Christians needed special instruction in order correctly to interpret the Christological thrusts of the Old Testament, we should not be surprised that we have our problems in this area today.

In the understanding of Messianic prophecies some help is afforded the interpreter by dividing the material into several categories. This was the technique of August Tholuck in the 19th century. He distinguished three kinds of New Testament quotations of the Old Testament: direct prophecies, typical prophecies, and applications of Old Testament statements.⁷ It is not always an easy matter to understand the way the New Testament quotes the Old Testament passage. What Wood has said of the entire Bible may well be applied to the New Testament's quotation of the Old Testament—that there is in it not only an essential simplicity but also a deep profundity and even a perplexing obscurity.⁸ We may also correlate Tholuck and Wood and say that there is an essential simplicity in the direct prophecies, there is a deep profundity in the typical prophecies, and there is a perplexing obscurity in the application of Old Testament statements in the New Testament. Let us take a closer look at each of these three categories.

⁷ Leonhard Goppelt, *Typus; die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1939), p. 11.

⁸ Wood, p. 2.

DIRECT PROPHECIES

A direct prophecy may be defined as one in which the author looked directly at the Messianic age and in which his readers understood his prophecy as Messianic. That there are such prophecies is recognized by Christians as well as by Jews.⁹ We shall examine three of them. In Micah 5:2 there is a prophecy concerning the birthplace of the Messiah. There is no problem in the prophecy itself. It states that Bethlehem is *little* to be among the clans of Judah. But the fulfillment of the prophecy which is cited in Matt. 2:6 states, "You, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are *by no means least* among the rulers of Judah." On the surface there seems to be an outright contradiction between Micah 5 and Matt. 2. The former says that Bethlehem is the smallest, the latter says that Bethlehem is not the smallest. This is a good illustration of the way in which the New Testament in the light of fulfillment gives a different emphasis to the original text of the Old Testament. At Micah's time Bethlehem was known only as the small home town of David. But with the birth of the greater David in Bethlehem the town's status was reversed; indeed it became the greatest among the clan towns of Judah.

In the next rectilinear prophecy, Mal. 3:1, the prophet announces the coming of the Lord's messenger who will prepare the way before Him. The following chapter (4:5) calls this messenger and way-preparer Elijah, the prophet. The New Testament speaks about the fulfillment of these prophecies in several passages, especially

John 1:21 and Matt. 11:14. When John was asked in the first text whether he was Elijah, he answered in the negative. But in the second text Jesus closed his long discourse on John the Baptist by identifying him with the Elijah who was to come.

On the surface again there appears to be a contradiction, for John said that he was not Elijah, and Jesus said that John was Elijah. Yet there is a cogent reason for this difference. John was merely the anonymous voice of Is. 40:3; he was speaking as that self-negating one who needed to decrease while his Lord increased (John 3:30). Far be it from him, he would say, to identify himself with that Elijah who was to come! If identification would be made, it had to come from the Master Himself.

The third direct prophecy has to do with the humble king of Zech. 9:9. The daughter of Zion is bidden to rejoice because her triumphant and victorious king is coming to her, coming in His humility and mounted on an ordinary ass. St. Matthew described this prophecy as fulfilled when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:5). Two significant facts need to be noted here. On the one hand, the humble king of Zechariah combines the features of the royal figure who is the Messiah in the proper sense (Is. 9:6; 11:1; Micah 5:2) and those of the meek figure who is presented in the Servant Songs (Is. 42:49; 50:53). On the other hand, as Edgar has pointed out, the act of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was a public proclamation or confirmation on the part of Jesus that He was indeed the Messiah.¹⁰ When the people saw the Palm Sunday procession, they

⁹ S. L. Edgar, "New Testament and Rabbinic Messianic Interpretation," *New Testament Studies*, V (October 1958), 47 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48 f.

should have been able to identify the figure of Jesus as that one of whom the prophet had spoken.

The essential simplicity of these first three prophecies and their fulfillment is quite apparent. We may conclude this section by stating that there were such phenomena as direct prophecies of the Messiah, that the prophets were aware of the significance of their statements, and that the people understood in some sense what the prophets meant to say.

TYPICAL PROPHECIES

There is depth of profundity in the next category of Old Testament texts — the typical prophecies. They differ basically from the direct prophecies in that they have an *immediate* meaning for their own day and an *ultimate* meaning that points toward the Messianic age. According to Eichrodt, types include "persons, institutions or events of the Old Testament that are looked upon as divinely appointed models or previews of corresponding great things in the New Testament history of salvation."¹¹ Goppelt points out that such types are established by typological correspondence and typological progression and that typology is *the* way of interpretation that is characteristic of the New Testament.¹²

In Dodd's opinion the prophets of old said that the meaning of the contemporary catastrophe would become clear only in a great future event of "absolute judgment and absolute redemption." The New Testament writers in turn said that this event

of "absolute judgment and absolute redemption" came to pass in Christ's life, crucifixion, and resurrection.¹³ Wood speaks of a threefold control that should be applied to such identification of types: (1) Does it have a persistent tradition in the church? (2) Does it have a basis in the literal meaning of the Old Testament text? (3) Does it have its foundation in entire passages rather than in isolated words?¹⁴

Three examples will illustrate what is meant by typical prophecies. In the controversial Immanuel prophecy of Is. 7:14, the eighth-century prophet says that a maid will conceive and bear a son and call his name Immanuel. In its original context this prophecy was spoken to King Ahaz, and it meant that a *maid of that day* would have a baby which she would name Immanuel. The name of this child, Immanuel, meaning God with us, would be a guarantee to Ahaz that his enemies, Rezin and Pekah, would be defeated. Inasmuch, however, as Ahaz had rejected the Lord, the same conqueror who would subdue Rezin and Pekah would also overrun the land of Ahaz, namely, the Assyrian king.

Thus the prophecy had a distinct contemporary accent. It told Ahaz what would take place *in his day*. The first gospel, however, says that when the virgin Mary, the betrothed of Joseph, was found to be with child, this was the fulfillment of those words spoken by Isaiah some 700 years earlier. The contemporary maid was thus interpreted as a type of the ideal future maid, just as the Immanuel of that day

¹¹ Walter Eichrodt, "Ist die typologische Exegese sachgemässe Exegese?" *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, LXXXI (November 1956), 642.

¹² Goppelt, pp. 244, 239.

¹³ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 129 f.

¹⁴ Wood, p. 167.

was also a type of the coming Immanuel. To a certain degree the ideal mother and child of the distant future corresponded to the mother and child of that day. But in fulfillment the true virgin and the true God-man progressed far beyond the original mother-and-son pattern.

Less controversial, but of comparable dimension, is the well-known prophecy of the voice at the beginning of Isaiah II. Although the Hebrew original does not locate this voice in the wilderness (Is. 40:3), both the Septuagint and Matt. 3:3 call it the voice of one who is crying in the wilderness. Certainly it was the voice of a prophet, but of which prophet? Primarily the voice was that of Isaiah II calling upon his people to prepare the way for the Lord. Yahweh was coming from Jerusalem to Babylon to lead his people home, and it was fitting that the highway for such a great king should be smooth and level.

All of this was obviously prophetic imagery and meant that the people were to prepare the highway of their hearts and lives for their Lord's entry. Such a call to repentance, however, was given not only by Isaiah II but also by the prophets of repentance who followed him, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. All these men therefore were voices of Yahweh. The chain of voices reached its climax in *the Voice* par excellence, the voice of John the Baptist, whose purpose was to prepare the way for the coming of Christ into the hearts and lives of His people.¹⁵

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of typical prophecy as it is illustrated in Is. 40:3, see August Pieper, *Isaiah II* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1919), pp. 12—16. Among other things Pieper writes: "Because the Christ of the cross is the climax of the entire dispensa-

The present writer sees a further example of typical prophecy in the familiar text of Ps. 2:7, "I will tell the decree of the Lord; He said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'" Who is the "I" in this quotation? It is the historical king of Judah. According to traditional interpretation it was David, but it may have been some other king of the Davidic line. This king testifies that on the day on which he ascended the throne at Jerusalem Yahweh adopted him as His son. It was quite common for an Oriental king to say that on the day of his enthronement he became the adopted son of the deity. So the psalm text has much in common with the descriptions of enthronement ceremonies elsewhere in the ancient Near East. But the psalm differs from these other texts in that it looks ahead beyond the king of that day to another King, an ideal King, who is yet to come. It is this ideal King, Jesus Christ, in whom the Letter to the Hebrews sees the fulfillment of the psalmist's statement, for it says, "So also Christ did not exalt Himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by Him who said to Him, 'Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee'" (Heb. 5:5 RSV). Jesus Christ was the Son of God not by adoption but in deed and in truth. In this view the statement in

tion of grace, therefore all prophecies of grace are directed essentially to Him. Because the Christ of Judgment Day is the climax of all manifestations of judgment, all prophecies of judgment apply essentially to Him. But both kinds of prophecies include on the same plane events that are similar to the great climaxes, but precede them in time. . . . Thus the oldest literary prophet, Obadiah, puts the coming judgment over Edom together into one with the Day of the Lord over all the heathen (v. 15) and with the last Judgment (v. 21), and after him this becomes stereotype for all of the prophets."

Psalms 2 refers to a king living at that time, but through that king the phrase looks at Him who will be the Son of God in an ultimate and real sense.

It is clear that the three texts just considered are basically different from those which were discussed in the preceding section. The direct prophecies did not speak specifically of a contemporary personality, rather they looked forward to a future deliverer. The typical prophecies, on the other hand, always spoke primarily of a person of that day who was a type of the ideal figure still to be revealed.

APPLICATIONS

The final section of this study takes us from the area of Scriptural simplicity and profundity into one of perplexing obscurity. It involves those Old Testament passages which are quoted as being fulfilled in the New Testament but which in their original Old Testament context do not look like prophecies at all. These texts provide us with a record of something that happened in history and that had meaning in history. In the New Testament, however, these historical statements are completely recast by the Spirit of God in the light of fulfillment and are shown to have relevance to what takes place in the life of our Lord. In explanation of this category we might cite the view of Torm that the New Testament writer clothed his thoughts in Old Testament words even when in the original context the words had a different meaning.¹⁶ These historical statements differ from the typical prophecies of section two in this: In all probability no contemporary of the original statement would have

grasped the application given to the text in the New Testament.

Three examples will help to explain what is meant by the New Testament application of an Old Testament historical statement. Among the most quoted texts of Jer. 31 are the verses that describe the pathetic lament of Rachel over her children (15-17). There Yahweh says that a voice of bitter weeping and lamenting was heard in Ramah. It was the voice of Rachel weeping on behalf of her children. She refused to be comforted for them because they were gone. In Jeremiah's day these words clearly meant that Rachel, the titular mother of the northern kingdom, was in mourning over the fall of that kingdom in 722 B. C. The Assyrians had waged war against the Ephraimites, and after a 3-year siege Sargon had taken the capital city of Samaria and had carried its inhabitants into captivity. That is the meaning of the strictly historical reference in Jer. 31:15.

It is therefore somewhat perplexing to note how Matthew (2:18) applies this text in the New Testament. He says that when Herod the Great slew all the male babes in Bethlehem, this was in fulfillment of what had been spoken by the prophet in Jer. 31:15. How can such a historical statement of the Old Testament be connected by the New Testament with the fulfillment of a prophecy? Edgar regards this as an example of the way the early Christians searched the Old Testament for passages that spoke of Christ.¹⁷ Here, he argues, the zeal of the New Testament disciple "got out of hand" and moved him to cite a passage with "a complete distortion of context." A less radical analysis

¹⁶ Cf. Goppelt, p. 17.

¹⁷ Edgar, pp. 51 f.

would hold that by the Holy Spirit's direction Matthew interpreted the slaughter of the innocents as fulfilling, filling out, or bringing out the full meaning of the historical statement of Jeremiah. In applying the original text to a new situation, the evangelist, as it were, recast its meaning in the light of the New Testament fulfillment. In all likelihood, however, the Old Testament hearers of Jeremiah's message understood it only as referring to the elimination of the 10 tribes and were quite unaware of the meaning which Matt. 2:18 would later attach to it.

An analogous approach must be followed in interpreting the next text, Ps. 8:5 in the light of Heb. 2:7. Psalm 8 is essentially a creation hymn. The poet admires the magnificent view of the heavens at night and contrasts this creation of God with another creation of much smaller dimension—man. While man, however, is recognized as a puny creature, he does enjoy a distinction which the created heavens do not enjoy. He is made a little less than God, that is, he is made in God's own image. He is made God's viceroy or lieutenant on earth, in charge of the entire creature world. As a matter of fact, Ps. 8:5 constitutes one of the finest Old Testament commentaries that we have on Gen. 1:26-28. It confirms and elucidates the fact that by implanting His image in man, God gave him dominion over all of the other created beings, sheep and oxen, fish and fowl, etc. It is clear, then, that the psalmist was speaking of the *entire human race* and marveling that it was the recipient of God's image.

Looking at the quotation of Ps. 8:5 in Heb. 2:7, we note three points: First, man is not made a little lower than God but

rather a little lower than the *angels*. Secondly, the author of the letter interprets "man" not as the entire human race, but as one man, namely, Christ. Thirdly, being put a notch below the angels is interpreted not as referring to the image of God but rather as referring to Christ's brief state of humiliation. How may this quotation be harmonized or explained in the light of the original text? For one thing, the Letter to the Hebrews quotes the psalm from the Septuagint, which has the reading "angels" rather than "God." This need not constrain us to say that because the Septuagint and the New Testament quotation have "angels," therefore the original reference of the psalm text must also be to angels. In fact, we can be quite sure that the original reference of the psalm is to God and not to the angels.

Under the Spirit's guidance, however, the author of Hebrews used the Septuagint reference to the angels because he wanted to show that the man Jesus Christ was superior to all angelic beings. Thereby the reading "lower than the angels" became part of the Word of God for his readers with just as much validity as the reading "lower than God" was the word of God in the original psalm. Furthermore, in the context of the redemptive theme of God's being mindful of man and remembering him (Ps. 8:4), and in the light of the New Testament fulfillment of this text, the author of Hebrews took a statement that referred to the entire human race in Ps. 8:5 and applied it to Christ as the representative man and said that for a little while, namely, in His humiliation, God made Him a little lower than the angels. Thus it pleased the Spirit of God to recast the creation statement of Ps. 8:5 and

to clothe it with redemptive significance in Heb. 2:7.

The last example, Hos. 11:1, is the introduction to one of the great Fatherhood of God passages in the Old Testament. The prophet takes us back to the birth of the Israelite nation in Egypt and says that in delivering His people from the house of bondage Yahweh was like a father lovingly calling His son to Himself. As Ephraim's father, Yahweh taught the little fellow how to walk (Hos. 11:3). When the beginner became tired from his exertion, the father took him up in his arms and carried him. When the walker gained a measure of confidence, his father lovingly obliged and allowed him to tag along on a leash. To show the lad his affection, the father again picked him up and snuggled the boy's cheek to his own. When prolonged exertion aroused the child's appetite, the father affectionately bent over him and gave him his food. Such, says the prophet, was the love which Yahweh exhibited when He called His son Israel out of Egypt.

At first glance any relationship between this lovely pericope and the Christ of the New Testament might appear to be extremely obscure. And yet the first evangelist tells us that when Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus remained in Egypt until the death of Herod the Great, this was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet when He said, "Out of Egypt have I called My Son" (Matt. 2:15). It ought to be clear that what St. Matthew means by filling out or bringing to completion this statement of Hosea is not a fulfillment like that of a direct prophecy or of a typical prophecy. Rather he wants to apply to Christ what Hosea had originally said about the people of Israel.

By whose authority did the first evangelist and the writer of Hebrews make such New Testament applications of Old Testament historical statements? They did this by the authority of Jesus Himself, as Edgar has pointed out.¹⁸ In a number of instances Jesus applied to Himself statements of the Old Testament which had relevance for their own day but were in no sense prophetic. We note, for instance, that two ancient psalmists complain about their enemies of that day that they "hate me without a cause" (Ps. 69:4 and Ps. 35:19). Jesus, in turn, applies this statement about unfounded hatred to the opposition which His enemies raised against Him in His own day. He maintains that His own experience in a unique way fills out or completes the meaning of what the psalmists went through (John 15:25). Another psalmist lamented that his closest friend, who was trustworthy and who ate of his own bread, lifted up his heel against him (Ps. 41:9). In this instance Jesus referred the psalmist's statement to His own close friend and disciple, Judas Iscariot, and thus established an entirely new identity for the associate who turned traitor (John 13:18). After Jesus had thus referred a number of historical laments in the Old Testament to Himself and to His time, His followers, led by the Holy Spirit, quite naturally followed His example. Matthew applied Jer. 31:15 and Hos. 11:1 to the life of Jesus, and the author of Hebrews applied Ps. 8:5 to the Lord's humiliation, as we noted above. Had anyone challenged the validity of these applications, the New Testament writers would certainly have said that they were doing only what the Master had done before them.

¹⁸ Edgar, pp. 51 f.

One final question may be raised in connection with the three classes of Old Testament texts that have been discussed in this article. The interpreter may ask, Which are the guidelines that determine the choice of one or the other of these textual categories? How do I know whether I am dealing with a direct prophecy, a typical prophecy, or the New Testament application of an Old Testament text? The answer is that the original Old Testament text and its context must determine what the text meant at that time. If the literal sense of the passage clearly refers to an ideal deliverer of the future *and not to any contemporary figure*, then a direct prophecy may well be involved. If the literal sense permits an identification of the deliverer with a leader of that day as well as with an ideal figure of the future, this may suggest a typical prophecy. If the literal sense has to do with an incident or circumstance

which is relevant for the people of that day and which has nothing about it that is inherently predictive or prophetic, but which is interpreted Messianically in the New Testament, then the interpreter may regard this as the application of an Old Testament passage to a New Testament situation.

The interpreter should always be given the privilege of putting a given Old Testament text into the category which he deems best. If, for example, he chooses to regard Jer. 31:15 and Ps. 8:5 and Hos. 11:1 as direct prophecies or as typical prophecies, rather than as New Testament applications, this choice should be allowed. At the same time he will not insist that his choice is the only valid one; he will also grant his fellow interpreters the same freedom which he enjoys as he permits Scripture to interpret Scripture.

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