

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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VOLUME 5, NUMBER 2

“THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST”

Richard V. Horner

There are several reasons why the Hebrew Scriptures were understood to be central to the Christian faith from the beginning, but none is more important than the Messianic hope that those Scriptures had created by the time of the birth of Jesus. From the first pages of the five books of Moses through the Prophets and the Writings, the Hebrew Scriptures point to someone through whom God would bless the seed of Abraham and, through that seed, all the nations of the world. The passages that do this work are often puzzling and mysterious, and they are not easily interpreted. They deserve much more attention than we can give them here, but even a brief look at them will give us a glimpse of the heroic figure to which they point. Because this special person was to be anointed by God, he came to be known as the Messiah, or Anointed One. The Greek word for Messiah is Christ, and it is important to remember that the name Christ is simply the Greek way of referring to the Hebrew Messiah.

Because the Hebrew sacred texts predicted this Messiah, and because early Christians saw Jesus as that Messiah, it is understandable that both Jewish and Gentile Christians saw the Hebrew Scriptures as foundational to their faith. For Christians the Hebrew Scriptures became the Old Testament, predicting the coming of the Messiah, and the story of Jesus became the New Testament, developed around the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment

of those predictions. He was the Messiah, or Christ, who was to come. He was that heroic figure who, in agreement with the scriptures, was the anticipated son of Eve, the eternal king, a priest forever, a sacrificial lamb, the great shepherd, the messenger of the covenant, the rising sun, a child and yet a savior in whom the LORD God himself had come into the world.

The Seed of the Woman

One finds the first of these Messianic passages in the account of the fall of Adam and Eve in the third chapter of Genesis. As God pronounces the curse on the serpent he speaks about someone whom He identifies as the seed of the woman. “I will put enmity between you and the woman,” God tells the serpent, “and between your seed and her seed.” Then, still speaking to the serpent, God says, “He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3.15). Without question this is a puzzling passage and only hints at

what was to come, but it does demonstrate that from the very first pages of the Scriptures, one finds the hope of a coming hero or savior who would put things right. He would see to it that the one who had brought defeat to the garden would be defeated himself. The serpent would work harm as he had already done, but finally the seed of the woman would strike the serpent’s head.

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His Anointed

The second chapter of the book of I Samuel records another remarkable passage of hope in the prayer of Hannah, a faithful Hebrew woman who for many years had been unable to bear a child. Upon hearing the news that she was about to have a son, Hannah offers a wonderful prayer of rejoicing that warrants attention for many reasons, but for now, consider only her concluding words. Given the news Hannah had just received, one would think that her prayer would have focused on the child to whom she was about to give birth. As Hannah prays, however, her words and her vision go well beyond her own child. She concludes by saying that the LORD God “will give strength to His king and will exalt the horn of His anointed” (I Samuel 2.10). Hannah is thinking of the LORD’s anointed, and she identifies him specifically as God’s king. There is no reason for Hannah to think that her own son would be anointed as king, so her statement is striking for that reason alone, but her comment about the anointed king is striking for another reason. In Hannah’s day there was no king in Israel. The monarchy had not yet been established. Yet, in a moment of inspired prayer, Hannah speaks of a coming king who would be strengthened and anointed by the LORD.

The Eternal King

After the monarchy was established in Israel, the image of a special, anointed king in the line of David plays a larger and larger role in the Scriptures. Although frequently linked to specific kings at the times in which these prophecies were first given, the descriptions of a king often evoke the image of a greater king, a Son of God, whose throne and kingdom would never end. Speaking to King David, Nathan the prophet says, And it shall come about when your days are fulfilled that you must go to be with your fathers, that I will set up one of your descendants after you, who shall be of your sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build for Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he shall be My son; and I will not take My loving kindness away from him, as I took it from him who was before you. But I will settle him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever (I Chronicles 17.11-14).

In some ways this passage refers to David’s son Solomon, who built the Temple in Jerusalem, but as Hannah’s language transcended her own son, so Nathan’s language transcends Solomon. The prophet’s language looks beyond his own time to a king whose throne would last forever and who would be known as the Son of God. Furthermore, not only would this coming king be established on his throne forever, but he would also be established in God’s house forever.

A Priest Forever

To be established in God’s house opens up the possibility that the anointed one would be not only a king who rules a kingdom but also a priest who oversees the house of God. Psalm 110 presents exactly this picture. The first half of the psalm presents someone whom David calls Lord, an enigmatic figure who appears as David’s Lord and king. But the psalm does not stop here. The one who appears in the first half of Psalm 110 as Lord and king appears

in the second half of the psalm as eternal priest. “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, / ‘Thou art a priest forever / According to the order of Melchizedek’” (Psalm 110.4). This psalm is full of puzzles and mystery, not the least of which is the curious figure of Melchizedek, but the text does clarify that the priest in view would be of a special order and that his priestly role would be without end. Whatever else this psalm is doing, it is pointing the reader beyond David to someone who was still to come, someone

who would play both a majestic and a sacred role, anointed forever as both king and priest. (For a fuller consideration of the complexity and richness of this psalm, see *Reconsiderations* 1.2.)

God with Us

Of all the Old Testament prophecies, probably none gives a fuller, richer picture of the Messiah than the book of Isaiah. Isaiah provides numerous additional insights, but probably the most significant is that, in the mysterious figure that was to come, the LORD God himself would be present. For this reason, chapters six through twelve of the book of Isaiah have been named “The Book of Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.” The Emmanuel theme comes specifically from the fact that in chapter seven we are told that a young girl would give birth to a child whose name would be Emmanuel (Isaiah 7.14).

By naming the child,
the prophet demonstrates
that this will not be
just any child.

Two chapters later, the prophet expands on this picture of a child in whom God himself would be present:

The people who walk in darkness / Will see a great light; / Those who live in a dark land, / The light will shine on them.... For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; / And the government will rest on His shoulders; / And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9.2 and 6).

By naming the child, the prophet demonstrates that this will not be just any child. Among other things, he will be called the Mighty God, the Eternal Father, and the Prince of Peace. In the verses that follow we learn that he will be in the lineage of David and, once again, that his kingdom will be eternal. "There will be no end" to his rule, Isaiah tells us, and when he comes he will reign "on the throne of David and over his kingdom... from then on and forevermore" (Isaiah 9.7).

A Sacrificial Lamb

The latter half of the book of Isaiah gives us one of the most extended descriptions of the messianic figure in all of Scripture. It appears in chapters fifty-two and fifty-three, and the text appears in full on page five of this issue of *Reconsiderations*. The passage begins in the past tense, but this practice is not unusual in the prophetic literature. Nor is it unusual for a predictive text to switch tense midway through and to begin talking about the present or the future, as this text does. As with the opening chapters of Isaiah's prophecy, this passage tells us a lot about the Messiah. It tells us that the coming one would be a man of sorrows and familiar with grief or pain. Far from being glorious and winsome, he would be unattractive, despised, and forsaken. Most centrally, he was to be "pierced through for our transgressions [and] crushed for our iniquities" (53.5). He would be a lamb of sacrifice that would die "as a guilt offering" (53.10). Yet, in this role he would prosper. Not only would he justify many, somehow he would even see his own offspring and receive a great inheritance. On the one hand, then, he would be despised and rejected, a suffering servant on whom God's judgment would rest, and yet he would fulfill the will of God.

Notice that the early chapters of Matthew and Luke are, in effect, Old Testament narratives.

The Shepherd

While the book of Isaiah presents the Messiah as a lamb, the prophet Micah presents him as a shepherd. As with other passages that identify the coming one as ruler and king, Micah notes that he would bring a rule of peace that would stretch to the ends of the earth. In keeping with the image of this Messiah coming as a child, Micah also provides the detail of the place of his birth.

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, / Too little to be among the clans of Judah, / From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. / His goings forth are from long ago, / From the days of eternity.... And He will arise and shepherd His flock / in the strength of the LORD, / In the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live in safety / Because at that time He will be great / To the ends of the earth. And this One will be our peace (Micah 5.2, 4-5a).

Without question this passage is puzzling and mysterious, but once again it paints a picture of a great

ruler who would serve "in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God," a shepherd who would care for his flock and bring them peace. The passage adds the simple detail that this anticipated ruler would come from an otherwise unremarkable town called Bethlehem.

The Rising Sun

If you have never read consecutively from the prophecy of Malachi into the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, you might want to do so in the coming week. Though the Hebrew Scriptures place the Writings after the Prophets, Malachi appears as the last of the prophets in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old Testament. In the Christian Scriptures one moves directly from Malachi into the first chapters of Matthew, and the connection is striking. Malachi tells us that the appearance of the LORD was to be anticipated by someone who would prepare his way. In keeping with the picture that the book of Isaiah paints in chapter forty, Malachi writes,

'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming,' says the LORD of hosts.... 'For

behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; ... But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall' (Malachi 3.1; 4.1, 2).

The theme of the covenantal promises of God, by which he cares and provides for his people, runs throughout the Scriptures, and here we read of a "messenger of the covenant," apparently fulfilling God's covenantal promises to his people. We also glimpse the image of one who comes not just as a Son of God but also as a "sun of righteousness that rises with healing in its wings." The prophet mixes his metaphors and gives us a picture of the burning heat of the sun soaring across the sky on the wings of God's healing.

These passages afford only a glimpse of the Old Testament hope of a Messiah. We could easily add other passages, including ones that might not catch our attention at first glance but begin to take on deeper meanings as we think about them in the context of this Messianic hope. Like the passages we have just considered, these additional passages can be found from the earliest to the latest of the biblical texts. They range from the promise to Abraham and his seed, in whom all the nations of the world would be blessed, to Daniel's enigmatic but powerful image of a "Son of Man." Several more psalms also come to mind. They speak of a king who is God's Son (Psalm 16); of an unnamed, forsaken individual whose hands and feet have been pierced (Psalm 22); and of a Holy One who will not be allowed to experience decay in the grave. There are also images, objects, rituals, episodes, and themes that run throughout the ancient history of Israel. One thinks of the Tabernacle and of the first and second Temples, of their furnishings and of the rituals and practices that characterized worship on a daily and yearly basis. One thinks of episodes such as the outpouring of water from the rock in the wilderness and of all the rich development of such images throughout the Old Testament.

The Son of Mary

One does well to keep this ancient Hebrew context in mind in celebrating the birth of Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. Notice that the early chapters of Matthew and Luke are, in effect, Old Testament narratives. Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy that places the birth of Jesus within the flow of Hebrew history, and the early chapters of this gospel repeatedly emphasize the ways that events in Jesus' life fulfill the Messianic predictions of the Old Testament. Luke's narrative also unfolds as an episode in Old Testament history. Zacharias and Elizabeth, to whom Luke immediately introduces his readers, are an elderly Jewish couple who are deeply

rooted in Hebrew tradition. Zacharias is a priest who performs regular duties at the Temple, and Luke effectively draws his readers into the Old Testament life of this couple and into the birth of their son John. Mary's story, in turn, also appears in an Old Testament context. We are not surprised, therefore, when the announcement of the birth of Jesus echoes the passages we have just considered. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High," the angel tells Mary. "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1.32-33).

When Mary breaks out in prayer, this Old Testament context becomes apparent again. Like her relative Elizabeth, Mary's thinking was deeply shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures, and so her "Magnificat" resonates with the song that Hannah had offered many centuries earlier. It also echoes Hannah's hope. So does Zacharias' prayer that appears in Luke's account a few verses later. When Zacharias opens his mouth in praise, again the themes of the Messianic hope of the Hebrew Scriptures emerge. Zacharias praises "the Lord God of Israel," for he "has raised up a horn of salvation for us / In the house of David His servant." Zacharias notes that the coming Lord will bring salvation through the forgiveness of sins and that by God's mercy "the Sunrise from on high shall visit us" and will "shine upon those who sit in darkness." In each of these images Zacharias draws on important Old Testament passages that we can recognize, and he does so deliberately, noting specifically that all of this is "as he said through his holy prophets of long ago" (Luke 2.68-79).

To celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, then, is to join Mary, Zacharias, and others in celebrating the fulfillment of the Messianic hope of the Old Testament. It is to recognize Jesus as the Christ or Anointed One, as the Seed of Abraham in whom all nations would be blessed, the heroic figure who, according to the Scriptures, was the anticipated son of Eve, the eternal king, a priest forever, a sacrificial lamb, the great shepherd, the messenger of the covenant, and the rising sun with healing in its wings. To celebrate Christmas is to celebrate the birth of the Christ, born a child and yet a savior, Emmanuel, in whom the LORD himself had come into the world. It is to join the Hebrew shepherds, the Gentile magi, Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and all the humble hopeful who first celebrated the birth of the baby Jesus as the hope of Israel and the hope of the world.

Dr. Richard V. Horner is Director of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville

PASSAGE FROM ISAIAH

The latter half of the book of Isaiah gives us one of the most extended descriptions of the messianic figure in all of Scripture. It appears in chapters fifty-two and fifty-three.

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

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| <p>13 Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up
and greatly exalted.</p> <p>14 Just as many were astonished at you,
My people,
So His appearance was marred
more than any man
And His form
more than the sons of men.</p> <p>15 Thus He will sprinkle many nations,
Kings will shut their mouths
on account of Him;
For what had not been told them
they will see,
And what they had not heard
they will understand.</p> <p>1 Who has believed our message?
And to whom has
the arm of the LORD been revealed?</p> <p>2 For He grew up before Him
like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance
that we should be attracted to Him.</p> <p>3 He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows
and acquainted with grief;
And like one
from whom men hide their face
He was despised,
and we did not esteem Him.</p> <p>4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves
esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.</p> <p>5 But He was pierced through
for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being
fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.</p> <p>6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us</p> | <p>has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused
the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.</p> <p>7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent
before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.</p> <p>8 By oppression and judgment
He was taken away;
And as for His generation,
who considered
That He was cut off
out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people,
to whom the stroke was due?</p> <p>9 His grave was assigned
with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man
in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit
in His mouth.</p> <p>10 But the LORD was pleased
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself
as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD
will prosper in His hand.</p> <p>11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.</p> <p>12 Therefore, I will allot Him
a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty
with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself
to death,
And was numbered
with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.</p> |
|--|---|

SPRING EVENTS AT THE CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER

CULTURE SEMINAR

Don't miss the next installment of the Culture Seminar, as we continue on the theme of "Augustine for Today." **Dr. John Cavadini**, Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, will give a lecture entitled "Redeeming the Passions" on Thursday, February 16, at 4:00 p.m. in the Keene Faculty Center, located in Dauer Hall on the UF campus.

MONDAY NIGHTS

The Study Center classroom is the place to be on Monday nights at 8:00, next semester. **Dr. Richard Horner**, the Director of the Christian Study Center, will lead two consecutive six-week classes. We invite you to come and join in the conversation.

"Intersections: The Biblical Text, the Christian Tradition, and the Modern Mind"
January 23 - February 27

In each session of this class, we will juxtapose Biblical texts, thinkers in the Christian tradition, and modern minds, putting them "in conversation." For instance, with the help of Augustine's and Luther's commentaries on the Psalms, we will put David's confession in Psalm 51 in conversation with Michel Foucault's "Preface to Transgression." Other participants in this class will include C. S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, Albert Camus, and Richard Rorty. We may even send Blaise Pascal to the movies.

"Jesus and the Psalms"
March 20 - April 17

Jesus and the Apostles, who wrote the New Testament, assert that the Psalms point to and find their fulfillment in Jesus. In this class we will look at the way that Jesus and the Apostles developed this understanding, and we will look at several specific psalms and the New Testament passages that relate them to Jesus.

CINEMA AT THE CENTER

On the fourth Friday of each month, the Study Center will host a movie screening, followed by a discussion led by **Bruce Kirby**, Director of the Cambridge Study Center in Lakeland. We are sure you will find Mr. Kirby's approach to film criticism engaging and helpful.

ALSO FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

InterVarsity Graduate Christian Fellowship's Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship
Featuring **Ken Meyers**, Director, Mars Hill Audio, March 4, 2006.

Creekside Community Church College Bible Study
Wednesdays from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m.

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship
Thursdays from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m.

In celebration of the Christmas season, we offer for your meditation a poem written by Robert Southwell (1561?-1595), a poet and Jesuit missionary. Ben Jonson declared that he would have happily destroyed his own verses if he could have composed the following poem. We reproduce it here in its original sixteenth-century form.

THE BURNING BABE

As I in hoarie Winters night stooode shivering in the snow,
 Surpris'd I was with sodaine heate, which made my hart to glow;
 And lifting up a fearefull eye, to view what fire was neare,
 A pretty Babe all burning bright did in the ayre appeare;
 Who scorched with excessive heate, such floods of teares did shed,
 As though his floods should quench his flames, which with his teares were bred:
 Alas (quoth he) but newly borne, in fierie heates I frie,
 Yet none approach to warme their harts or seele my fire, but I;
 My faultlesse breast the furnace is, the fuell wounding thornes:
 Love is the fire, and sighs the smoake, the ashes, shames and scornes;
 The fewell Justice layeth on, and Mercie blowes the coales,
 The mettall in this furnace wrought, are mens defiled soules:
 For which, as now on fire I am to worke them to their good,
 So will I melt into a bath, to wash them in my blood.
 With this he vanisht out of sight, and swiftly shrunk away,
 And straight I called unto minde, that it was Christmasse day.

Poem and anecdote taken from Literature Online: <http://lion.chadwyck.com>

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Poem: "The Burning Babe" by Robert Southwell, p. 7

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*Bruce Kirby, Director of the Cambridge Study Center, Lakeland
January 27, Study Center Classroom*

Please check our website at www.christianstudycenter.org for the latest information and previous issues of *Reconsiderations*. If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call us at 352-379-7375

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