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*DAVID'S SON AND DAVID'S LORD.*

(MARK XII. 35-37.)

THE series of questions put to Jesus by His adversaries is closed by one in which He turns and silences them. In Mark it is represented as His answer: to whom or to what is not defined. It was a question evoked by the circumstances in which He found Himself; it was His reply to them, and to the persons with whom they had confronted Him. It is addressed not so much to those who had questioned Him as to the people in general; it is an appeal, so to speak, to the people, by way of exhibiting the theological incompetence of the scribes. In Matthew, on the other hand, it is directly addressed to the Pharisees. He asked them, *What think ye concerning the Christ? Whose son is He?* and it was when they answered, *David's*, that He proceeded, *How then does David in spirit call Him Lord?* With their reverence for scripture and prophecy they ought to have been prepared with a solution for this problem; and their inability to answer showed the people, who listened with delight, how little ground His adversaries had for assuming an attitude of superiority to Jesus.

But merely to foil His adversaries cannot have been the whole purpose of Jesus. The words He quotes from the 110th Psalm came to have an extraordinary importance in the Christian Church. They are more frequently quoted in the New Testament than any other scripture, and they furnish the regular description of our Lord's exaltation. They are evidently meant to suggest something very significant about the Christ: what is this, and how is it related to the opinion of the scribes? To answer the question it is necessary to go back to the psalm.

The traditional interpretation and application of it is well known. The Davidic authorship is assumed (as in the

title), and the psalm becomes purely prophetic. "When king David thus spoke, he had been anticipatively rapt into the far future, where he saw scenes and heard words, which would no doubt occupy him long in 'searching what and what manner of time,' and what and what manner of event, 'the Spirit of Christ, which was in Him, did signify' (1 Pet. i. 11). He was gazing, though most likely he knew it not, on a scene that was consequent on the death, burial, and resurrection of his illustrious Descendant. The scene is laid in heaven; and its chronology, when sacred history holds up its torch that we may see, is coincident with the triumphal ascension of our Lord. While David gazed on the Royal Personage whom Jehovah welcomed to His side, he forgot his own little royalty, and spoke as the humblest seer that ever lived might have spoken, 'Jehovah said to *my Lord.*'"<sup>1</sup> It is generally recognised now that a view so purely supernatural as this, so unhistorical, so wanting in any intelligible connexion with experience, cannot be received. A prophet's visions of the future are not like magic lantern slides, in which anything may appear, with or without relations to reality. A more scientific reading of the psalm yields more solid and not less inspiring results.

The title, to begin with, falls away. The Psalmist hears an oracle of Jehovah addressed to his lord, *i.e.* to the king of Israel. The king, therefore, as in many other psalms, is not the author, but the subject; it is not a Psalm of David. The oracle addressed to the king is, Sit on My right hand; in other words, Share My Divine sovereignty. According to Old Testament ideas, this language is not extravagant or fantastic. The king of Israel was God's king (Ps. ii. 6); both Saul and David are called "the Lord's Anointed" (LXX. *χριστὸς κυρίου*, 1 Sam. xxiv. 10; 2 Sam. xix. 21); the book that told the story of Israel's wars was

<sup>1</sup> Morison on Mark *ad loc.*

“the book of the wars of Jehovah” (Num. xxi. 14). The king is assured of Divine help, and of the loyalty of his people. The Lord will send the sceptre of His might from Zion, that He may rule in the midst of His enemies; and in the day when He musters His armies in holy garments (or, as Jerome has it, on the holy mountains), a multitude will present themselves to Him, innumerable as the morning dew-drops, and all in the freshness of youth. This is the first part of the psalm, and might have been written with any pious and popular king in view, David, Jehoshaphat, or their latest successor.

It is followed by a striking sentence which, like “Sit at My right hand,” came to have an extraordinary significance under the New Testament. “The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek.” This might almost be described as the text of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In that epistle, as Prof. Davidson shows, a priest for ever, and a priest after the order of Melchizedek, are probably synonymous terms; what the apostolic writer is interested in is the inviolable and intransmissible priesthood of Jesus. But in the Psalm a priest after the order of Melchizedek must rather be one whose priestly is combined with royal dignity; the person addressed is for ever a king and a priest in one. But is there any person in Israelitish history to whom such words can be applied? Is there any instance of the combination of kingly and priestly honours in the same individual? Such a combination is not recognised in David, nor indeed in any pre-exilic king; it can only be found in some one who, as in the Asmonæan days, was at once high priest and ruler of the State. And this may be fairly described as the prevailing opinion of scholars. It is not refuted by the ascription of perpetuity (a priest for ever) to the dignity in question. Not to mention passages like 1 Kings i. 31, Nehemiah ii. 3, there is a striking illustrative parallel in

1 Maccabees xiv. 41: "Also the Jews and priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet." Some person in Simon's position is the natural subject and starting-point of the psalm, which closes with a description of the Priest-King's victories in war.

Such is the modern—it is not too much to say the scientific—interpretation of the psalm. It is not written by David, nor about David. It is the work of an unknown poet, in a much later time; and it celebrates one who was at once the King and the High Priest of Israel, the darling and the hope of his people. But the original application has been lost; we do not know, and the Jews in the time of the gospel did not know, what historical person was before the writer's mind. Accordingly, the psalm was generalized and idealized; it was read as applying to God's King, the embodiment of the hope of Israel; that is, it was treated as Messianic. That this is legitimate will not be questioned except by those who deny that there is a Divine ideal exhibited in the union of kingship and priesthood in one person. When Jesus says that "David" calls this ideal King "Lord," he takes the title of the psalm simply as it stands. When He says that David calls Him Lord "in the spirit," He asserts that the psalm is really a piece of revelation; He gives His own word for it that there is a Divine ideal, a Divine promise, embodied in it. A Messiah, therefore, must come, and a Messiah greater than David—that is as plain as scripture can make it: whence then (this is the problem for Jesus' adversaries) whence is the Messiah David's *son*? Why, our Lord asks, is the title Son of David given by the scribes as a sufficiently characteristic designation of the Messiah, when the main thing (on David's own showing) is that the Messiah is something far higher than David, viz., David's and Israel's Lord?

Even yet one can hardly pass over the question supposed

to be at issue between Jesus and the critics as to the authorship of the psalm. That He believed the psalm to be written by David I should think it impossible for any fair-minded reader to doubt: He lived in a world where there were not two opinions about the matter, and it is hardly exaggerating to say that it was part of His true humanity that He should think on such questions as others in His situation naturally thought. But what He is engaged in teaching here—and it is for this only that we can claim His authority—is not the authorship of the psalm, but the greatness of the Messiah. This is exhibited in the psalm, undoubtedly, and the scribes who acknowledged the psalm to be a Divine revelation to David should have been the first to see it: but Jesus was inwardly and independently conscious of His Messiahship, and of His greatness in the Messianic character; and nothing turned for Him—or turns for us—on having that greatness confessed in anticipation by David. He knew that He was greater than Solomon, greater than Jonah, greater than the temple, and greater than David too: and He remains greater, though He shared the opinion of His contemporaries as to the authorship of the 110th Psalm, and used it to bring His greatness into relief for them. Nothing whatever, for His greatness, depends upon the authorship; and it is almost as wicked as it is misjudged to say, as a well-known preacher has said, that “Christ ceases to be an authority at all if David did not write this psalm.” Christ is a supreme authority, indeed, the only authority, about Himself, let us think of the psalm as we may; His witness to the truth, however, is not of the nature of miscellaneous information: it is gathered up in this one word—*I am the truth*. And here it is to His true Messianic dignity, so overlooked and misconceived among the Jews, though so obvious in Scripture, and so present to His own mind, that He directs attention.

A more serious question is raised by those who would argue that Jesus here repudiates Davidic descent. David himself, so the argument runs, calls him Lord, and that too under Divine inspiration. Lord, therefore, He must be ; but how can He then be son ? The son can never be lord of the founder of the family ; the latter must retain the supreme dignity. To be David's Lord, as the psalm requires, the Messiah must *not* be his son. This argument, I should say, is too simple, and in face of the Old Testament and the New alike proves too much. Prophecy attaches the Messianic promises to the house of David, and as Canon Gore writes in his Dissertations, "it is certain that the claim of Jesus to be of the royal house was acknowledged at the time and by the later Jews" (p. 38). It was certainly part of the apostolic gospel (Rom. i. 3 ; Heb. vii. 14 ; Rev. xxii. 16 ; 2 Tim. ii. 8), and it is difficult to believe that it can have become so if an express protest against it had stood in a part of our Lord's teaching which found place in all the synoptic Gospels. To deny it would not have been in the least to instruct the scribes : it would only have contradicted a constant element in the Old Testament promise, just as its denial now contradicts the passages quoted above, and some others, in the New Testament fulfilment. But if the question of Jesus does not deny the Davidic sonship, it is certainly meant to lessen the significance ascribed to it by the Jews. They spoke of it as if it were the great and essential characteristic of the Messiah : Jesus brings into relief a characteristic of the Messiah which is infinitely more significant, and makes us feel that in comparison with it the Davidic descent is as nothing. Not that it is not real, but that side by side with something else it is quite overshadowed, and hardly counts.

The form of the narrative in Matthew brings this out most clearly. Practically the question at issue is, How is the Messiah to be identified ? The scribes identify Him in

one way : they say He is David's Son. Jesus identifies Him in another way : He is David's Lord. And He appeals to the 110th Psalm to support His method of identification, and to convince the scribes that on their own principles there is at least a problem before them. It is not necessary to assume with the critics alluded to in the last paragraph, that it is an insoluble problem, and that Jesus bids us choose sonship *or* lordship as the criterion of the Messiah ; but at any rate it is a real problem, and possibly everything will be done if we can discover the value of the terms.

The scribes, then, put in the forefront of their Messianic conception the Davidic sonship. The Messiah must be a descendant of the great king, who remained, more than any other, the ideal hero of the nation. Perhaps we ought not to lay too much stress on the purely genealogical side of this. "Jewish ideas of genealogy were largely *putative*." The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke no doubt satisfied those who drew them up as proofs of the Davidic descent of our Lord : yet there are points at which every modern reader feels them artificial or obscure. If the scribes had been satisfied with the Messianic pretensions of Jesus upon other grounds, it is not likely they would have found difficulties in His family tree. Hence it is probable that in Davidic sonship they included not only a genealogical but a political filiation ; the Messiah would be found in one who revived the traditional glories of the Davidic sovereignty, and in that way received an outward historical legitimation. If this were by long association part of the meaning of "David's Son," we do not wonder at our Lord using a form of argument which suggests, at a hasty glance, that the Messiah could not be the Son of David at all.

In His own consciousness, on the other hand, Messiahship rested not upon Davidic, but upon Divine sonship. Its basis was that greatness which He felt in Himself, and which He saw in the psalm. We have hardly grounds to



go upon in the passage if we try to describe this Divine sonship more closely. We cannot say that it involved a consciousness of pre-existence, such as we find in John viii. 58, xvii. 5. As little can we say that it involved a consciousness of the supernatural birth. Perhaps we should rather be justified in assuming that Jesus had present to His mind, as He spoke, His coming exaltation to God's right hand. This is what the psalm directly suggests; this is what it is constantly used by the apostles to describe; and we know that our Lord, whose death was at hand, habitually thought and spoke of His death and His exaltation together. But it is difficult to see how this could be brought in any way into an argument with the Pharisees, or an appeal to the people. I should rather think that what the passage as a whole invites us to say is no more than this: that Divine sonship was incomparably more to Jesus than Davidic. He does not deny the latter; but it was far nearer to His soul, and far more to it, that God was His Father, and had anointed Him to be Lord of all, than that David was His remote ancestor, and He Himself David's legitimate heir. The Davidic descent undoubtedly had its value, though it may not be easy for us to appreciate it, as it is not easy for us to appreciate anything historical which lies out of our own sphere. We can understand that His birth was no chance, but determined by prophecy and by providence; and that in consequence of its taking place in that particular line He inherited the highest traditions of Israel more completely than if He had sprung from another family; but after all that is little. It was the Divine sonship which was the immediate and decisive certainty to Him, which assured His greatness, and determined the nature of His Messiahship and His kingdom. Jesus disparages the Davidic descent that He may lift the minds of the people to His unique relation to God: the main thing for Him and for us lies here. To be descended

from David is nothing; it is everything to have all things delivered to Him by the Father (Matt. xi. 27), to sit on God's right hand (Mark xvi. 19), to have all power given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matt. xxviii. 18). All this constituted the Messianic consciousness in Jesus, and if it was hid from the wise and prudent, it was revealed to babes.

What we ought to find, therefore, in this passage is a warning. We must not seek to identify the Christ in wrong or inappropriate ways. He must have marks to lead us to Him; but it is possible to be mistaken about the marks, and to refuse Him because He does not satisfy conditions that are really unconnected with His vocation. It would be a mistake of this kind if we were to say, "Jesus cannot be the Christ, He cannot be the Hope and Saviour of men, He cannot be any kind of authority at all, if He believed that David wrote the 110th Psalm while the fact is not so." It ought to be apparent to every one that this particular species of infallibility is quite irrelevant to the vocation of the Christ, and that to demand it from One who claims to be the Saviour of the world is to show that we have no sense of His real greatness. The credentials of the Christ are of quite another kind, and it is more than a pity if we are blinded to them—as the scribes were blinded to the truth as it was in Jesus—by traditional prejudices of this sort.

Positively we may say that our Lord teaches here that He is to be identified not so much by historical as by spiritual marks. Granted that He is the Son of David: still, that does not carry us very far. It does not carry us so far as to call forth faith in Him as our Saviour. We know very little of Jesus if we only know that He is the descendant and heir of David: it is a higher sonship than that—a unique relation to God—which makes Him the Messiah. The Fourth Gospel abounds in illustrations of this:

indeed we may almost say that it is a constant part of our Lord's teaching there. The Jews are about Him, eagerly discussing His claims, demanding His credentials, trying Him by all the notes or marks of Messiahship in their minds. In one place we find the Davidic descent made the test. "Some said, This is the Christ. But others said, What, doth the Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the Scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was? So there arose a division in the multitude because of Him." The division was inevitable. The certitude of faith is not to be obtained by investigating the genealogy of Jesus. On another occasion the criterion of Messiahship is found in the miracles. "When Christ cometh, will He do more miracles than these which this man hath done?" There is a certain relevance in this; when we consider the character of the miracles, or signs as John calls them, they can fairly be described as "the works of the Christ" (Matt. xi. 2), and used to identify Him. Our Lord Himself used them thus when He said to the Baptist's disciples, Go and tell John the things which ye do hear and see; and to a sceptical audience elsewhere, Believe Me for the very works' sake. But this is not the prevailing mode in which He presents Himself to men. He never enters on the subject of credentials, historical or other, unprovoked. He stands before men, all through the Fourth Gospel, presenting Himself in characters which either bring their own evidence with them, or have no evidence at all. He does not say, "I am the son of David," "I was born in Bethlehem," or anything which needs external proof, but "I am the bread of life, I am the living water, I am the light of the world, I am the way, the truth, and the life." We know what bread and water and light are; they need no certificate or attestation; and if the Person who so speaks is bread and water and light to our souls—which is a thing for experi-

ence, not argument, to decide—then we have the highest possible evidence that He is the Christ of God, the Saviour of men.

The 110th Psalm shows the two great characters in which Jesus appears to us, and it is as we recognise the one or the other that we come to believe in Him as the Christ. One is the royal : Jesus shows that He is the Christ by His power of winning an ascendancy over men. He was born with this power in Him, and no doubt it was to this that the tempter made his appeal when he showed Him a short cut to sovereignty. Of course others have had this power too, and some in an almost incredible degree. But the born rulers of men, from the first Cæsar to the first Napoleon, ran no risk of being taken for Messiahs ; there is too much in the use of their superiority which is demonic rather than Divine. But it is a real mark of the Messiahship of Jesus, and one by which He may be properly identified as God's King, that He has this power of winning ascendancy, moral, perpetual, and universal, and that He uses it in pure love and holiness as the Redeemer of men. No one knows Him as Lord who has not found out this ; and without this, no creed is worth anything, however true, and no doctrine of His nature or endowments, however high. We know who Jesus is, and whose son He is, only when His life has created a new moral standard for us, and when, exalted at God's right hand, He is sovereign in our souls.

And we may say as much of the other character in which He appears in the prophetic psalm—the priestly. It is true that Jesus never calls Himself, nor any other, by this name ; but the ideal of the Psalm is accepted by Him, as it is in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the essential function of priesthood is claimed when He says, " I am the way . . . no man cometh unto the Father but by Me." This then, is another real mark of the Messiah, spiritual, too, and not historical, that He brings us to God. The

sinful man with whom Jesus has prevailed to arise, and trusting in His love, His atonement, His intercession, to go to the Father, does not need to ask any question as to who Jesus is. Like the Samaritans among whom our Lord once stayed, he knows that this is in truth the Saviour of the world.

These are the grounds of certainty, and the modes of knowing the Christ, which should always keep the main place in our minds. We are too ready to let questions of quite inferior consequence, often of no consequence at all, thrust them aside. In a hundred forms we let difficulties about the Davidic sonship blind us to the Divine. But the great thing is first, simplest, easiest. We may never know that Jesus was the Son of David at all; we can only know that He was believed to be so by persons who were interested in Him, and had the ordinary evidence of such facts accessible to them. But we can experience in our own souls that He is a Priest and a King, that He brings the sinful to God, and establishes His own ascendancy over them. And these are the only infallible signs of the Lord's Anointed.

JAMES DENNEY.