

**CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

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## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

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# **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

## **1. Introduction**

This series of studies will examine some of the references to the Lord Jesus Christ in the Psalms. Each article will consider a different aspect of the Lord's nature or work which is spoken of in the Psalms and will look at the way in which the Psalm is picked up and applied to Him in the New Testament.

This first article is an introductory exploration of some of the issues involved.

### **Direct References to Christ in the Psalms**

When the Lord Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples after the Emmaus road incident, he reinforced the word He had spoken to them before the crucifixion that all the statements made about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms had to be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). This last category includes the Psalms as we have them and there are many of those which Jesus applies to Himself. For example in Luke 20 Jesus specifically states that part of Psalm 118 and Psalm 110 speak of Him (verses 17 and 42-43 respectively). Other New Testament writers also, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit explicitly say that the words spoken in certain Psalms are prophecies relating to Christ (for example in Acts 2:25ff).

### **Indirect references to Christ in the Psalms**

In other places in the New Testament the terminology of particular Psalms is picked up and used in such a way as to demonstrate that they find their ultimate fulfilment in the Lord Jesus. These "indirect" references are also very important and they come in a number of categories :

#### *(i) References to the king of Israel*

In 2 Samuel 7 we read of God's promise to David concerning the establishment of his line on the throne of Israel. While the promises have a primary reference to Solomon their ultimate fulfilment will be in Christ (as Peter explains in his speech in Acts 2). The relationship between God and Israel's king is described in this passage as that of a father to a son and all kings of Israel, no matter how flawed, were, in one sense at least, a type of Christ. As a result of this, some commentators, for example Kidner in the Tyndale commentary on Psalms 1-72 (p24) go as far as to suggest that each time David or the king in his line appears in the Psalms (except where he is confessing failure as in Psalm 51) there is to some extent a foreshadowing of Messiah.

#### *(ii) References to a suffering servant*

Paul in Philippians 3:10, speaks of the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings, in referring to the persecutions he himself was enduring. Similarly, it has been argued, since the King in the Psalms is a type of Christ, so the persecutions endured by the Psalmist are, in a real sense, a

foretaste of Christ's sufferings. So C S Lewis suggests that since Christ tasted death for all men the expressions of sufferings in the Psalms whether of the righteous (as in Psalm 2) or the guilty (as in Psalm 40:15) are His voice (Reflections on the Psalms p106).

### *(iii) Commonplace references*

In addition to these two main categories there are instances where the words of the Psalmist are taken up in the New Testament and applied to Christ in commonplace circumstances. For example Hebrews 2:12 puts David's testimony of praise to God uttered in Psalm 22:22 into the mouth of Christ, though there is nothing in the words themselves which would require them to be spoken by Messiah. This could suggest the close identification of David and his greater Son, although it could mean simply that the writer has used the Psalmist's words to express his own thoughts.

### *(iv) More remote references*

Many writers have identified more remote references to the Lord Jesus in the Psalms. Some Psalms, although not applied to Christ in the New Testament nonetheless relate to circumstances far beyond their immediate setting. For example, Psalm 50:1-6 describes the coming of God to the earth, the establishing of His throne in Zion and His calling of the people to judgment. This can only refer to the second advent of Christ and the words in verse 3 suggest Paul's warnings in 2 Thessalonians 1:7. Psalms 96-99 also suggest the rule of Christ on earth although they are not specifically identified as such in the New Testament.

There are two main dangers looking for indirect references to Christ in the Psalms. First, there is the obvious risk of speculation by reading more into such passages than is warranted by the context. Some schools of thought see the Psalms as a whole as expressing the purposes of God for Israel through Christ, and interpret them accordingly. Taken to extremes this approach can abuse the original context and can become wholly subjective.

The second risk is that of mis-applying material in the Psalms because the fact that some parts of a particular Psalm are Messianic does not mean that the whole Psalm speaks of Christ. For example Psalm 69:4 is taken up in John 15 as referring to Christ's suffering, but verse 5 of the Psalm speaks of the writer's "folly" before God, which patently has no application to the Lord Jesus.

In an attempt to avoid these dangers, application of the Psalms to the Lord Jesus in this series of studies will be limited to those with direct New Testament authority.

## **How much did the Psalmists appreciate ?**

It is interesting to consider the extent to which the Psalmists were aware of the importance of their prophetic utterances. In Hebrews 2:6-8 the writer applies Psalm 8 to the Lord Jesus and anticipates the time when everything will be under His feet. But it is not at all apparent from the Psalm itself that the writer had any inkling that it spoke of Christ. It appears as a statement of awe that the mighty creator God would stoop to care for poor humans and has been used in that

way by believers for many centuries. There would therefore appear to be a double meaning in some of the Psalms - a local and an eschatological application. It would be idle to speculate how much of this the Psalmist realised as he wrote.

There is no doubt that many prophets did not fully understand what they were writing about. In 1 Peter 1:11 the apostle speaks of the prophets "trying to find out the time and circumstances" of the events of which they wrote. Their understanding was incomplete, yet there is no doubt (as Peter goes on to say in verse 12) that they were fully aware that they were not writing purely for their own benefit.

This is borne out by Peter's use of the Psalms in Acts 2:25-35, where he quotes Psalm 16 and 110 and shows that David was speaking as a prophet about the Lord Jesus Christ. In Psalm 16:10 David rejoiced that the Lord would not let His Holy One (apparently himself) see decay. But, as Peter points out, David did see decay, but being a prophet, he spoke, not of himself, but of his descendant, whom God had promised would sit on his throne. David "seeing what was ahead" (Acts 2:31) spoke of the resurrection of the Christ. So there was obviously some appreciation by David at least, that he was not writing solely for the immediate situation. He was not under the illusion that he himself would never "see decay".

In fact the prophetic utterances in the Psalms are expressed in terms of the Psalmists' own experience, but the Holy Spirit has guided their thoughts to express truth of a different dimension.

### **An immediate and an ultimate fulfilment ?**

It would appear that many of the Psalms do have a "double meaning". Some of them were obviously written for a current situation. Psalm 2, for example, was probably recited at the coronation of Israel's kings and gave the people great cause for celebration. But, examined in the cold light of day it would appear to be little more than empty rhetoric. Apart from briefly during the reign of Solomon there is no time in Israel's history when her relationship with the surrounding nations corresponded to the description of Psalm 2. However, the circumstances described there will appear when the Lord returns to set up His kingdom.

Psalm 72 is dedicated to Solomon and is a prayer for God's blessing on his reign. It is filled with optimistic statements about the pity he will have on the weak (verse 13) the tremendous prosperity (verses 3,7 and 16), his popularity at home (verse 15) and abroad (verse 17). In fact, of course, Solomon bled the people to fund his extravagant projects and when he died, it was the determination of his son Rehoboam to continue and even extend his father's policies which led directly to the separation of the house of Judah from the house of Israel (2 Chronicles 10). Although the potential existed for Solomon to behave in accordance with Psalm 72 the prophetic words in this Psalm will find fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in many cases, if not all, there is a local, limited application of the Psalm, but these prophetic writings point forward to the One who will be the ultimate fulfilment of all Scripture.

### **The present series**

Although this series of studies will consider only direct references to Christ in the Psalms, the

scope is vast and our coverage will, of necessity, be limited. Nevertheless we hope to examine references to His earthly work and ministry, His glorification and aspects of His nature as king, creator and priest.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **2. Jesus Christ - Born of human descent**

#### **The Son of Man**

Psalm 8 reads as a hymn of praise to God for His excellent glory, manifest in both the earth and the heavens. (verse 3)

The Psalmist's reaction to such a display of power is not just awe at the beauty of it all but a sense of wonder that such a God should care about man. David has no doubt that He does care. He addresses Him in the first verse as "O Lord our Lord". These are two different words in the Hebrew. The first identifies Jehovah, the God of Israel and the second is the word used to indicate the position and authority of the person being addressed. So David is speaking of the great Creator in covenant relationship with Israel.

But His care is evidenced in more than His covenant with Israel. Verses 4-8 set out the position to which He has appointed man - a little lower (or for a little while, lower) than the heavenly beings ; he too is crowned with honour and glory by being given dominion over all the animal creation.

However, Hebrews 2:6-8 indicate that these truths relate to more than mankind in general as verses 4-6 of the Psalm are applied in that passage to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the context there is dominion, not over this world, but over that which is to come. The point is made in verse 5 that angels will not rule over that world : that place will be taken by the son of man, of verse 6. He, as the writer says in verse 9 has been "crowned with glory and honour" because He suffered death for everyone. This idea of the Lord's glorification as a result of His voluntary humiliation is also developed in Philippians 2:5-11.

And why was it necessary for Him to become "a little lower than the angels" ? Verse 14 explains. The purpose of the incarnation was to destroy him who wields the power of death - namely Satan (see also 1 John 3:8). Christ became man since His death as man was the only way that humanity could be redeemed. In Paul's theology especially, there is a contrast between the first Adam, who brought death on the human race and the "second Adam" who rescued us. See, for example Romans 5:12-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22,44-49.

And God has placed everything under His feet, and although, as Hebrews 2:8 observes, we do not see this as a reality in the world around us, yet by faith we can see Him, crowned with glory and honour by the Father and can anticipate the day when at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess His Lordship. Daniel, in his vision, anticipates that day when "one like a son of man" will be given authority over all creation, and establish an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14,27)

The Lord Jesus Christ without ever ceasing to be God, became man to break the power of death. During His earthly life He repeatedly referred to Himself as "Son of man" (for example Luke 9:26). His manhood was an indispensable part of God's purpose of salvation. John, in his first and

second epistles speaks against the heresy that the Lord Jesus was not truly man (1 John 4:2 ; 2 John 7)

But the Lord Jesus Christ was not just any man. He was of a particular lineage. The Psalms indicate that He was not only the Son of man - He was the Son of David.

### **The Son of David**

In Psalm 16 David displays his quiet trust in the Lord as his refuge (verse 1), the provider of his inheritance (verse 6), his counsel (verses 7 and 8) and his hope for eternity (verses 9-11). It is a beautiful poem of unwavering confidence and hope, reaching its climax in the expectation in verse 10 that he, God's Holy One, will not see decay. If David had been speaking of himself as he wrote these words, then he was to be seriously disillusioned, since he, in common with all men, did see decay.

But David was not speaking of himself. Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, quoted verses 8-11 of Psalm 16 and pointed out that David could not have been referring to himself when he said this since he did taste death and his tomb could still be visited. No, Peter said, (verse 30) David was prophet and spoke of the descendant that God had promised would sit on his throne. David anticipated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, his son, who would not see decay, or be abandoned to the grave.

"Son of David", like "Son of Man" was a title used often of the Lord Jesus when He walked this earth. In the opening verse of the New Testament, He is introduced to us as "Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham", and His link with both these stalwarts of God's chosen people, is established.

Throughout the Gospels there is the understanding that the Messiah is the Son of David (e.g. Matthew 12:23 ; 22:41-42) and the signs and wonders, as well as the teaching of the Lord Jesus were to present His credentials as David's greater Son. In fact, the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, described in Matthew 21:1-11, was done in fulfilment of Zechariah 9:9, which spoke of the king of Zion, of Jerusalem coming to them on a donkey. This was not lost on those present, who hailed the Lord as "Son of David", praising Him who came in the name of the Lord (verse 9).

### **God's plan of redemption**

Adam's failure in the Garden of Eden brought condemnation on all mankind and also on creation itself. We are subject to a law of sin and death which operates in our personalities and we are under a sentence of death for what we are, irrespective of what we do. Christ died as our substitute, in our place and that substitution was only possible if He was truly human - the judgment resulting from the first man's conduct was cancelled by that of the second (Romans 5:17). God's purpose was that the Lord Jesus Christ should succeed where Adam failed and that purpose was achieved by that life of thirty three years culminating in the death on the cross .

But the aspect of God's purpose which was in operation at that time was directed through the

nation of Israel, who were to be the means for the establishment of His earthly kingdom.

The emphasis of Israel in the passages we have considered is very strong. David in Psalm 8 sees the God who has glorified the "son of man" in His covenant relationship with Israel. David's words are taken up and related to Christ by the writer to the Hebrews and Hebrews 2:16 indicates that God's help and deliverance is offered, not to angels but to Abraham's descendents. Peter's audience on the Day of Pentecost when he applied David's prophecies in connection with the throne of Israel to Christ, consisted entirely of Jews from Israel and elsewhere (Acts 2:5,14,22,36).

God's redemptive purposes were to be worked out through Christ, both as Son of Man and as Son of David. And Israel were to be the vehicle for the administration of His rule on the earth under the leadership of the Son of David. So Christ's pedigree is established through David's line and all the prophecies made to David find their fulfilment in Him.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **3. Jesus Christ - The willing sacrifice**

#### **The Lord's deliverance of David**

In many of his Psalms David prays for deliverance from serious problems either of his own making (as in Psalms 38 and 51) or from the actions of his enemies (as in Psalm 35) and then, when deliverance comes, launches into a hymn of praise to the Lord for His goodness and care.

Such a hymn comes at the start of Psalm 40, where David, having waited patiently for the Lord (verse 1) has been saved from a slimy pit (verse 2). We are given no details of the incident to which David is referring or its cause and some have speculated a serious illness, or physical danger. At any rate, David glorifies the Lord for His rescue (verses 2 and 3) and His innumerable wonders (verse 5) and predicts that many will come to trust the Lord from having seen David's experience (verse 3).

#### **David's response**

But in verses 6-8 David goes further. Such a great deliverance calls for the sacrifice of himself to God. What does God really want from man ? Some have suggested that verse 6 indicates a repudiation by David of the whole sacrificial system, but David is really making the point that ritual as such is meaningless without the appropriate attitude of heart and mind. He makes the same point when he is at his lowest ebb in Psalm 51:16-17.

The imagery of verses 6-8 go beyond David's immediate situation, however, and they have clear reference to Messiah. There are two aspects of this :

#### *1. The undesirability of animal sacrifices and sin offerings*

In verse 6 David affirms that burnt offerings and sacrifices were not required. Instead, "my ears you have pierced." Several explanations have been offered for this puzzling comment. Some have referred to the Hebrew practice of piercing a slave's ear if he wished to remain for life with his master. It is therefore taken to indicate the Psalmist's commitment to the Lord in gratitude for the deliverance mentioned earlier. But this practice only involved piercing of one of the slave's ears, not both. Alternatively it could refer to the "awakening" of the Psalmist's ear by the word of the Lord, as in Isaiah 50. However, this is a strange remark to make in the context of animal sacrifices.

When we look at the Septuagint translation, this phrase is rendered "a body you have prepared for me" and this is also the way it is translated in Hebrews. In that case the meaning is clear : the animal sacrifices pale into insignificance compared with this "body" prepared for the writer by the Lord. The writer's sacrifice is himself, either literally or metaphorically.

#### *2. The coming of the obedient one as described in the scroll*

David's exact meaning in verses 7 and 8 is not clear. Again, he could be referring to himself. David had many failings but his desire was to do the Lord's will. David is described by the Lord as "a man after my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14 ; Acts 13:22). David himself said that he had hidden God's word in his heart, to prevent him from sinning (Psalm 119:11). However, the reference to the writing in the scroll goes beyond Samuel's prophecy to Saul that he would be succeeded by someone after the Lord's heart. It is the coming itself rather than the obedience which seems to be written of in the scroll and the opening phrase "Here I am, I have come" is extremely powerful, suggesting the arrival of someone very special. Clearly the words David was inspired to write go far beyond his own situation.

## **The Messianic fulfilment**

The writer to the Hebrews, in chapters 9 and 10, discusses the relationship of Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross to the sacrifices of the Old Testament and he makes a statement which must have been devastating to a Hebrew brought up in the traditions of the law : it is impossible for animal sacrifices to take away sins (Hebrews 10:4)

For these animal sacrifices were types, pointing forward to the real sacrifice who was to come. He came to set aside the first, and replace it with the second (Hebrews 10:9) And it is in this context that the author quotes Psalm 40:6-8 with reference to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are two main points which emerge from the passage in Hebrews:

### *1. The superiority of Christ's sacrifice*

The animal sacrifice system had been instituted by the Lord Himself, but as the early verses of Hebrews 10 demonstrate, they were not realities themselves. In fact they could never take away sins. If they had been effectual, there would have been no need for the Lord Jesus to have come to die. The animal sacrifices could have continued in perpetuity.

Why then, did God introduce such a system for the Hebrew people, if it gave them no real benefit ? He did so because these sacrifices provided beautiful pictures, foreshadowing the true sacrifice - the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death once and for all is the only means by which our sins may in reality be taken away. An examination of the Old Testament sacrifices and a comparison of these with the work of the Lord Jesus is a magnificent study far beyond the scope of this article. By considering the instructions mediated through Moses we can learn much of the true nature of the Lord's work, especially in His relations with the people of Israel. Those who faithfully obeyed the Lord in the keeping of His commands, sacrificing animals as they were taught by Moses, anticipated the Coming Christ - the ultimate sacrifice. We look back on His work, and can rejoice in the fact that sin is now done away with once and for all (Hebrews 9:26).

### *2. The voluntary nature of Christ's sacrifice*

As we read the quotation from the Psalm in Hebrews 10 we cannot help being struck by the willingness with which the speaker offers Himself to God. The body prepared for the Lord Jesus

- a body in human likeness in appearance as a man (Philippians 2:7-8), yet a body without the taint of sin, was created for the express purpose of being sacrificed. Christ came ready to do the will of His Father, as had been written in the volume of the book - the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Gospel records bring out the calm dedication of the Lord to His Father's will (e.g. Luke 22:42 ; John 5:30) and the realisation that His death was in fulfilment of Scripture (e.g. Matthew 26:24, 54). In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord rebuked Peter for attacking the high priest's servant and revealed that at any time He was able to call down angels to help Him. But, knowing that such an action would abort the fulfilment of Scripture, He was not prepared to do so (Matthew 26:53).

## **Conclusion**

In one sense we have a great advantage over the prophets of the Old Testament. Their vision was clouded and they could not always clearly see the reality of which they spoke. Yet they wrestled with the truths God had revealed to them and proclaimed them faithfully for the benefit of those who were to come, who would be in a better position to understand (1 Peter 1:10-12).

The Lord gave His ancient people pictures and types to help them better to grasp His purposes. From our position, with the benefit of hindsight, and with the New Testament Scriptures in our hands we can look back at these elements and see their fulfilment in Christ.

## CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

### 4. Jesus Christ - Betrayed, humiliated and crucified

#### Psalm 22 - "The Crucifixion Psalm"

Reading Psalm 22 for the first time, the Christian is struck with a growing feeling of wonder and excitement that these words, written so long before the event, so clearly seem to describe the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. We have the opening words of the Psalm, quoted by the Lord on the cross ; the scorn and derision heaped on Him (verse 6) ; the insults hurled at the victim, suggesting that since he trusts the Lord, he should ask for the Lord's deliverance (verse 8) ; the description of the physical agony of the experience (verses 14-17) ; the casting of lots for His clothing (verse 18).

However, notwithstanding these parallels, some writers have suggested that it is unlikely that this work was written as a prophecy of the crucifixion. But there are passages in the New Testament which give us authority for applying the Psalm to the events of our Lord's passion.

#### *1. My God..why have you forsaken me ? (verse 1)*

These words, contained in the opening verse of Psalm 22 were quoted by the Lord Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:46). The Psalmist, feeling abandoned by the Holy One of Israel, who, historically had delivered his people (verses 4 and 5), declares that he is less than man, despised and rejected first by men and now by the God of his fathers. The Lord Jesus, in a similar frame of mind, rejected by the people He had come to save, abandoned, betrayed and disowned by His followers, suffered the ultimate alienation of His Father turning His back on Him as He took upon Himself the sin of the world. The declaration of the Psalmist also finds echo in that most moving of Messianic prophecies - Isaiah 53, especially verses 3 and 4.

It seems almost to trivialise the sacred to suggest, as some have, that the Lord Jesus, traumatised, was quoting Hebrew poetry. He was doing much more than that : by quoting this Psalm He applied its words directly to Himself. The Psalmist was, of course, writing, in the first instance, about his own situation, but this was a pale shadow of the experience of the One who was to come to fulfil his prophetic words.

#### *2. They divided my garments .. and cast lots for my clothing (verse 18)*

When a person's clothes have been disposed of, he has ceased to exist as a person. Many who have suffered bereavement have felt themselves unable to sell or give away the clothes of their loved ones : to do so makes the negation of the person complete and final. Yet the Lord suffered the added indignity of seeing those who had crucified Him gambling for His clothes. This aspect is described in all four gospels, but John 19:24 confirms that this happened for the purpose of fulfilling Psalm 22.

In these two uses of Psalm 22 we can see that the Lord Jesus in His words from the cross, deliberately applied this Psalm to Himself and His situation, while at the same time others, with

no interest in prophecy and its fulfilment, found themselves spontaneously acting in such a way that the Scriptures were fulfilled. One way or another, God works His purposes out.

However, Psalm 22 is not the only Psalm to describe the events in connection with the Lord's death.

### **The betrayal**

One of the great mysteries of the New Testament is Judas and his relationship with the Lord Jesus. Did Jesus know he would betray Him ? John 6:64,70 indicates clearly that He knew from the beginning. Why then did He choose him as a disciple ? The subject is beyond the scope of this article, but part of the answer lies in Luke 22:22 : it was part of God's plan. Yet Judas was no puppet in the hands of fate. He was still morally responsible for his actions.

As the time of the crucifixion approached, Jesus dropped the bombshell on His disciples that one of them would betray Him. The incident is described in all four Gospels but in John 13:18, the Lord specifically says that this whole tragic episode is in fulfilment of Scripture. And the prophecy is contained in Psalm 41:9.

Not all of this Psalm can be applied to the Lord Jesus - there is reference to deliverance from illness in verse 3, and the suggestion in verse 4 that this is due to sin on the part of the Psalmist. Nevertheless certain aspects of the Psalm can be related to the Lord's experience - the deceit in the tongues of His enemies when they came to speak with Him (verses 6-7) and, on a positive note, the confidence of the Psalmist in verses 11 and 12 that the Lord is pleased with him (see Luke 3:22) and will vindicate Him in His presence for ever (see John 17:5).

### **Not one of his bones shall be broken**

At a first glance, Psalm 34 is an unlikely one to have application to the Lord's crucifixion. It describes the confident, happy trust of David in His Lord. He praises Him for past deliverance and the giving of strength in times of need. Then in verse 20 he makes the general statement that the Lord will deliver a righteous man, protecting all his bones, so that none of them would be broken.

Part of the gruesome practice of crucifixion was the breaking of the victims' legs after a certain period of time, to hasten death. However, John 19 tells us that when the soldiers came to Jesus, they found that He was dead already, so that, instead of breaking His legs, they pierced His side with a spear (incidentally thereby fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy). This, John 19:36 says, was to fulfil the prophecy contained in this Psalm.

But why was it necessary that none of Jesus' bones was broken ? The answer to this lies in another wonderful Old Testament picture of the Lord - that of the Passover lamb. Exodus 12 tells us that when the children of Israel were preparing to leave Egypt, they were given strict instructions on the way the lamb was to be dealt with. It had to be a male, without any defect (verse 5), the blood was to be splashed on the doorposts and lintels as a protection against the destroyer (verse 23). One of the instructions was that none of its bones was to be broken (verse

46).

These requirements applied equally well to the Lord Jesus - even the time of year that the crucifixion took place was appropriate. He was a man in the prime of life, without any blemish. In fact the Lord Jesus Christ is referred to as a "lamb without blemish or defect" in 1 Peter 1:19, and in 1 Corinthians 5:7 He is actually described by Paul as "our Passover lamb". The truth given to the Israelites in picture form found reality in the Lord Jesus. It was important that none of the conditions for the Passover lamb should be broken in its fulfilment. Thus the Lord's enemies found themselves unwittingly fulfilling the conditions laid down for Him so long before.

### **Other examples**

The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus and the events leading up to it were really the focal point of His earthly life and different aspects of it are spoken of in many Old Testament passages. Some of these are in the Psalms and we have considered three of them in this article. There are other aspects of these momentous events which are spoken of in the Psalms and those who wish to follow them up may do so. See, for example, the fatal consequences of Jesus' zeal for his Father's house (John 2:17 ; Psalm 69:9), the fact that He was hated without a cause (John 15:25 ; Psalm 35:19-21; 69:4) and the prediction of Judas's fate (Acts 1:20 ; Psalm 69:25 ; 109:8).

However, the cross was not the climax of the Lord's work. We worship One Who is risen from the dead, and in our next article we will consider how this subject is dealt with in the Psalms.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **5. Jesus Christ - Risen and ascended**

When Peter addressed the Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost the message that he wanted to convey above all others was that Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jews had handed over to the Romans to be crucified, had been raised from the dead. This is the key issue of the Christian message : without it the Christian faith is just another system of ethics. In verse 24 he states firmly that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead and to demonstrate this, he quotes the prophecy of David in Psalm 16:8-11 concerning Christ. The Psalm is written in the first person but, as Peter shows in verses 29-31, David could not have been writing about himself, because he did see decay and his tomb could still be visited. Instead, David, being a prophet, saw what was ahead and spoke directly of the resurrection of Christ, his descendant. It is important to realise that Peter is not simply using the words of the Psalm to make his point. He says in verse 25 that David was speaking about Christ.

But Peter is not the only one who uses this Psalm to illustrate the resurrection of Christ. Paul also, preaching in the synagogue in Antioch, quotes from Psalm 16. In Acts 13:34-37, he proves that the Old Testament had spoken of the fact that He was going to be raised to endless life. He does this, first, by quoting Isaiah 55:3, promising the fulfilment of the blessing promised to David, and then by quoting Psalm 16:10, which Peter also quoted. Like Peter, Paul points out that David had obviously not been speaking about himself, because when he had served out his life, he died and was buried. However, by contrast, the One God raised from the dead never saw decay.

#### **He is at my right hand**

Psalm 16, speaks, then, of Christ and His resurrection, and as we look at it, we can see something of this. It is the song of one who trusts in the Lord, who takes refuge in Him (verse 1) and who prizes Him above everything else (verse 2) including the false gods he sees around (verse 4). He rests secure in the Lord's leading and in the marking out of his paths for him (verses 5 and 6). The "cup" assigned to him by the Lord in verse 5 appears to be a pleasant one to drink from the context, but the Lord Jesus spoke in other terms of the "cup" He had been given to drink by His Father (e.g. in Gethsemane). Nonetheless, His commitment to following His Father meant that He was determined to drink that cup if it had to be so.

Verse 8 is the first verse of the Psalm to be quoted by Peter in Acts 2, and it is a strong statement of confidence. The writer's confidence in God stems from the fact that He is at his right hand (i.e. to help and support), and for that reason he will not be shaken. This follows on from verse 7, we read of the constant dialogue between the Lord Jesus and His Father. The relationship between them, of which the Lord often spoke (e.g. in John 10:15 ; 14:9-11 ; 15:23 ) was extremely close, and a realisation of this helps us to understand the anguish of the Lord's cry from the cross, as His Father turned His back on Him, as He became sin for us. Nevertheless, we must always remember that Jesus' trust in His Father was not misplaced. God raised Him from death and because He was obedient to His Father to the point of death on a cross, highly exalted Him, giving Him a name that is above every name (Philippians 2:9)

## **Eternal pleasures at your right hand**

Up to the first part of verse 11, David is speaking of resurrection. However, the closing sentence of the Psalm looks beyond this to the ascension of Christ to His Father. Here the place of being at the right hand of His Father suggests being at the place of approval, bearing out Paul's words in Philippians 2. The imagery in this Psalm is similar to the Lord's prayer to His Father in John 17:5, where He anticipates the restoration of the glory which He experienced in the presence of God before the world existed.

The idea of ascension is also picked up by Peter in his Acts 2 address. Having shown that David was speaking of the Lord Jesus, who did not see decay, he confirms that he and the other disciples were witnesses to these facts (verses 31-32).

From that point he takes us up to the present, by speaking of the Lord's exaltation to His Father's right hand (as in Psalm 16) and the promised Holy Spirit (John 14:15ff), had been poured out.

Again he contrasts David with the Lord Jesus (verse 34). David did not fail to see decay ; nor did he ascend into heaven. The Lord did both and David spoke of Him.

Another Psalm is quoted in verses 34-35. This time it is the opening verse of Psalm 110. This Psalm anticipates the setting up of the millennial kingdom, when the Lord will reign from Jerusalem (Zion) over the nations of the world. By this quotation, Peter is obviously anticipating the great day in the future when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). That day is still to come, since, at present, we do not see all things in subjection to Him, but, as the writer to the Hebrews explains, we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory because He suffered death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

## **Both Lord and Christ**

Peter had demonstrated that this Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jews had crucified, had been made both Lord and Christ. David the prophet, on the face of it writing about himself, had in fact spoken both of Christ's resurrection and His ascension to the Father's right hand. The climax of Peter's sermon in Acts 2:36 was devastating to his hearers. The despised carpenter of Nazareth, whom they, as a nation, had rejected, had, in fact been the One spoken of by David all along. In his second sermon, in Acts 3, Peter emphasizes three times (in verses 18, 21, and 24) that the events surrounding the coming, death and resurrection of Christ had been spoken of through "all the prophets".

Israel's tragedy was that they did not recognise Him and the book of Acts largely tells the story of the reclamation of the message of the gospel of Christ to that nation. However, at the end of the book, they were still not convinced, and in Acts 28:28 Paul announces that the salvation of God was now to be sent to the Gentiles.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **6. Jesus Christ - Glorified : The capstone**

Psalm 118 is a song of thankfulness to the Lord for deliverance. The writer (probably David) praises God for His enduring love in saving him from his enemies and the Psalm was probably written after a military victory. In verses 22-23 he makes the statement that:

*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.*

The "local" interpretation of this could be that the writer is referring to himself, perhaps rejected by some or all of his people, but subsequently vindicated by the Lord Himself and given victory. David experienced several such situations and could be speaking about himself. On the other hand, there are indications in the Psalm that the writer is speaking as representative of the nation (e.g. in verses 2-4,15) so the "stone" could refer to Israel herself, persecuted by her enemies, being raised up by the Lord to a position of prominence among the surrounding nations.

While this may have been the situation for which the Psalm was penned, verses 22-23 are picked up in a number of places in the New Testament and applied directly to the Lord Jesus Christ, persecuted and rejected by the rulers of that same nation. The "stone" is Christ Himself.

#### **The testimony of the Gospel writers**

All of the synoptic gospels record that the Lord applied this Psalm to Himself (Matthew 21:42 ; Mark 12:10 ; Luke 20:17). He did this at a late stage in His earthly ministry, after His rejection by the religious leaders of Israel had reached an advanced stage. The Lord had just told the parable of the tenants in the vineyard, which concludes with the destruction of the tenants and the giving of the vineyard to others. All three Gospels tell us that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that He had spoken the parable against them. At the end of the parable the imagery changes: the wicked tenants become builders and the son of the owner becomes a stone. The message is clear. The Jewish leaders, whose rejection of the Lord Jesus culminated in His crucifixion, would one day realise their error, by which time it would be too late. His glorification, like that of the Israel of Psalm 118, had been accomplished by the Lord Himself (see Psalm 118:23, also quoted in the Gospels).

Matthew and Luke describe how the Lord brought out the judgmental nature of the encounter with this "stone" by stating that those who fall on this stone will be broken to pieces and that those on whom the stone falls will be crushed (Matthew 21:44 : Luke 20:18). These statements have echoes of other Old Testament passages. In Isaiah 8:14, a passage applied directly to the Lord Jesus in 1 Peter 2:8 (see below), the Lord Almighty is described as

*a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.*

and in Daniel's vision the coming everlasting kingdom of God to the earth is described in terms of a rock, cut without hands which would crush all the earthly kingdoms (Daniel 2:44).

So in both cases the Lord Jesus identifies Himself firmly with the Lord Almighty in terms of His relationships with man and His coming kingdom. Rejection of the coming king will result in destruction.

### **The testimony of Peter**

At his appearance before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:11, Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, also quotes Psalm 118:22 with reference to the glorified Christ, in this case attributing the healing of the crippled beggar to the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus. He speaks directly to the Jewish leaders in a similar manner to the Lord Jesus, implying that they are the builders who have rejected Him.

However, it is in his first epistle that Peter (2:4-8) develops more fully the picture of the Lord Jesus as a stone. He does this by bringing together three Old Testament passages - Psalm 118 and two passages from Isaiah.

Peter's message is that the Lord Jesus is a living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and acceptable to Him (verse 4). The Jewish believers to whom he was writing, are also "living stones", being built into a spiritual house (verse 5). There are two groups of people mentioned by Peter here: those who believe and those who do not (verse 7). To the former group, the Stone is precious, as it is to God, and to them Isaiah 28:16, quoted in verse 6, applies: they will never be put to shame. To those who reject Him, the two judgment passages of Isaiah 8:14, quoted above and Psalm 118:22, apply.

Peter was writing for a situation in which the young Christian church was finding itself almost as a "sub-group" within Judaism. The message was primarily (though not exclusively) addressed to the nation of Israel and the Jews of the dispersion. Mainstream Judaism had not accepted the Lord Jesus as Messiah, so how was it possible for this fringe group to be right about this matter? Peter quotes this Psalm to show the principle, established in the Old Testament, of the Lord overturning the verdict of the "builders", and not only using the stone in the building but raising it to the most important place. The fact that this principle had already been applied by the Lord Jesus to Himself only added weight to Peter's argument.

The context of Isaiah 8:14 is a warning to the prophet not to follow Judah in trusting to treaties with the surrounding nations. Instead, the Lord Himself was the One to be feared, but in relation to both houses of Israel, He will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall (verse 14). This last verse is the one quoted here by Peter and he does so with the authority of the original prophecy. God is the rock, causing disaster to the houses of Israel and Judah. Peter had heard Jesus speak of Himself as just such a stone and he here confirms the final fulfilment of the prophecy. And he has the authority of Isaiah to apply it to the nation.

### **The testimony of Paul**

In Ephesians 2, Paul speaks of the glorious position now enjoyed by Gentile believers as members of the body of Christ and contrasting it with their position as foreigners and aliens

(verse 19) in the previous dispensation. Now, they were fellow citizens and members of God's household, and the whole body of God's people is described here as a holy temple, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the chief corner-stone (verse 20). Paul, writing to Gentile Christians seldom quotes the Old Testament, but the allusion here is clear. The Lord Jesus has the primary place in all God's "structures", even though the world has rejected Him.

### **Still the same today**

The application of this verse in Psalm 118 speaks directly to us across the centuries. The position, fundamentally, is unchanged. The Lord Jesus cannot be ignored. To those who accept Him He is precious, and is a rock and a fortress, but those who reject Him find that He does not fade away : He becomes a stumbling-block, causing offence and difficulty. For the last two thousand years men have tried to banish Him and His cross by argument, by ridicule and by persecution of His followers, without success. How could they succeed? The Lord Himself has made Jesus Christ the capstone and the day will come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **7. Jesus Christ - Creator and sustainer of the universe**

In the opening chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, the writer sets out the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ to angels. In verse 4 His superiority is stated and in verses 5-14, a series of Old Testament statements made by God about angels or about the Son give examples of that superiority.

Within this section is a statement in verses 10-12, which is drawn from Psalm 102. In the early part of the Psalm, the writer expresses a feeling of rejection by God and the practical consequences of that rejection. However, in verse 12 of the Psalm, the Psalmist is reminded of the unchangeableness of God, in contrast to himself, and, praising Him for His strength and compassion anticipates His appearing in His glory (verse 16) to restore Zion. Verses 25-27 are quoted in Hebrews and relate to the Lord's role in the beginning, in Creation, and His future role when the heavens and the earth will "wear out like a garment", and will be "discarded", like clothing by the One who never changes.

#### *Who is "God"*

But who is "God" in this context ? Some commentators have argued that the reference in both the Psalm and Hebrews is to God the Father and that what Hebrews 1 is saying is that the eternal duration of the throne of the Son, spoken of in verses 8-9 is being set in the context of the eternal nature of God Himself and His control over the destiny of the universe. On the other hand the entire passage is teaching the glories of the Son and He is the One being addressed in these verses. Which view is correct?

If this were the only passage which spoke of these things, it might have been difficult to decide. But, there are other passages in Scripture which attribute the functions and characteristics expressed in Hebrews 1 to the Lord Jesus. There are three points which must be addressed.

#### **1. His role in the beginning, in Creation**

Psalm 104 tells us that "In the beginning", the Lord laid the foundations of the earth and created the heavens. This reminds us of Genesis 1:1 where we read of God creating both heavens and earth, "in the beginning". When we look at the opening words of John's gospel we see that the creative power in the Godhead was the Lord Jesus Christ. John introduces us to "The word", who was with God in the beginning, and who was God (John 1:1). This One was responsible for the creation of everything that has been made (verse 3). And He became flesh, and dwelt among us. The same apostle, in his vision on Patmos saw the Lord Jesus riding forth to war on a white horse (Revelation 19:11-16), and the name given to Him in that vision is the "Word of God" (verse 13). The vision continues with a description of Him as having a "sharp sword" coming out of His mouth, to strike down the nations, apparently speaking of the power of His words. When He was on earth, also the Lord Jesus accomplished much merely by speaking the word - e.g. the healing of the nobleman's son (John 4:50), the calming of the storm on the lake (Mark 4:39) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:43). When we read the six-day account of the creation of the world as we know it in Genesis 1, we read that it was accomplished by the spoken word of God.

The creation, in the beginning, was the work of Christ.

## **2. His role as master of the destiny of the universe**

Psalm 104 also explains that this same Lord will change the heavens and the earth and discard them like clothing. He is in control over all the changes in the universe, and their final destiny. The New Testament, speaks of the control exercised by the Lord Jesus over the universe at present and His future role in its dissolution. In Colossians 1, where Paul has just echoed the words of John, attributing the creation of all things to the Lord Jesus (Colossians 1:16), he affirms that, not only so but "in him all things hold together" (verse 17). The created order owes its continued existence, as well as its origin, to Christ. And when we examine Colossians 1 we see that all things were not only created by Him : they were created for Him (verse 16). The destiny of the universe and everything in it is in the hands of Christ.

## **3. His unchangingness**

Hebrews 1, echoing Psalm 102, indicates the unchanging nature of the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 12). This sentiment is repeated in Hebrews 13:8 where we read that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. In what respect is He the same? The answer to this question lies in Psalm 102. There the writer, under pressure, feeling rejected because of his sin, places his confidence and hope in the unchanging nature of his God. He sits enthroned forever and the writer grasps at this to affirm God's compassion for Zion (verse 13), His response to the prayer of the destitute (verse 17) and the hearing of the groans of His people (verse 20). By meditating on the Lord's unchanging nature, His unfailing love and constancy the Psalmist was able to find hope for the future.

*Where is our hope?*

Since this speaks of Christ, it is these aspects of His nature which are unchanging. At times the pressures of the world can almost overwhelm us and we wonder if anyone is in control ; at times our own weakness and failure almost makes us doubt whether we can be accepted by the Lord. Fortunately the destiny of the world does not lie in the hands of politicians and our destiny does not depend on our own efforts. Both are under the control of the One who created all things and sustains all things by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). Like the Psalmist of old, He is the One in whom our security lies.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **8. Jesus Christ - King and Son**

There are two Psalms describing the king of Israel, reigning in power and justice, which are applied in the New Testament to the Lord Jesus Christ. In both cases, the application emphasises the fact that He is the Son and that He is reigning on His throne. However, the subject matter in these Psalms is very different, with one being addressed as a warning to the king's foreign vassal nations and the other a song of joy from His Israelite subjects.

#### **The king secure in Zion**

Psalm 2 is one of the most interesting of the Messianic Psalms. It was written by David (Acts 4:25) and the message of the Psalm is a plea to the nations of the earth, warning them of the futility of rebelling against the Lord and his Anointed One (verse 2), the king whom He has installed on His holy hill of Zion (verse 6). This king apparently rules over these nations (verse 3) and they are resenting this. However, rebellion against the king is useless because He is all-powerful and has been installed on His throne by the Lord Himself. The relationship between God and His king is so close that God describes Him as His Son and offers Him the nations as His inheritance. The kings of the earth would therefore be better to make their peace with Him (verses 10-12).

#### **The king's marriage**

Psalm 45 describes a royal wedding with first the royal bridegroom being addressed and then the princess bride, praised in her turn. The first 9 verses glorify the great king, blessed by the Lord, victorious and reigning in truth, humility and justice, a lover of righteousness and a hater of wickedness. As a result of these qualities he has been set above his fellows by God Himself. However, great though these praises are, verse 6 is the most startling,

*Your throne, O God will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.*

The Israelite kings in Old Testament times were never deified. To do so would have been blasphemy, and various attempts have been made to dilute the meaning - e.g. "Your throne is like God's throne..." (NEB). However, the Psalmist in verse 7 speaks of "God, your God", presumably to distinguish Him from the "God" on the throne and when we turn to the New Testament usage of this verse we find the divine nature of that king is re-inforced.

#### **The Messianic fulfilment**

In the first chapter of Hebrews, the writer is describing the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to the angels. As part of his case in verses 8-9 he quotes Psalm 45:6-7 to demonstrate that such a statement was never made about angels, but only about the Son. The scene described in this Psalm gives us a picture of Christ's kingdom.

Psalm 2 was probably used in Israel at the coronation of her kings, but it really anticipates someone much greater than David, Solomon, or any of their successors. No king, apart from Solomon for a brief period of time came anywhere near enjoying such dominance over other nations as is envisaged in this Psalm. The New Testament use of the Psalm indicates that it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts 4:25-26 we read of the aftermath of the first persecution suffered by the disciples after Pentecost, and their reaction is to pray using the words of this Psalm. They saw a parallel between the words of that Psalm and situation they were in : Herod, Pilate, the Romans and Israel had all conspired together against Jesus and had executed Him. But the ultimate fulfilment of this Psalm is millennial rather than relating to the first advent.

In Revelation 2 and 3, the Lord Jesus dictates letters to seven churches. In these He promises rewards for overcomers. The rewards are different, but in 2:26-27, the glorified Christ promises to give "him who overcomes" authority over the nations, with the power to rule them with an iron sceptre and dash them to pieces like pottery. This is a quotation from Psalm 2 and in Revelation 2:27 the Lord Jesus indicates that He is delegating to these overcomers the authority He Himself has received from His Father. As we read Psalm 2 the suggestion of the king being granted authority by God Himself is very strong.

### **A millennial fulfilment**

In trying to piece together the information in these Psalms and understand something of its ultimate fulfilment it is necessary to draw together a number of other passages of Scripture.

As we read the descriptions in the Old Testament of the kingdom God will set up on the earth, the similarity with the sentiments expressed in Psalm 45 is apparent. In Isaiah 9:6-7, for example, there is the prophecy of Christ's birth, where reference is made to reigning on the throne of David and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness. Isaiah 16:5 also describes a descendant of David sitting on a throne, ruling in justice and righteousness. The same theme is contained in the Psalms : in Psalm 89, we learn of God's promises to David that his throne would last forever and in Psalm 132 the Lord Himself declares that He has chosen Zion as His permanent dwellingplace (verses 13-14), and there David's throne, with God's anointed one on it, will be set up.

These different writers are describing the same kingdom : the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, God Himself, will reign on the throne of His father David ruling Israel and the nations in justice and righteousness. His throne and His kingdom will never end. This is not a throne in heaven : it is a throne set up on the earth, located in Jerusalem, reigning over living nations on earth, and it will be established when the Lord Jesus returns to the earth at His second coming.

The book of Revelation tells us that this kingdom will last for a thousand years during which time Satan will be bound (Revelation 20:1-2). At the end of this period, however, Satan will be released and he will then rally the nations in one final doomed rebellion against the Lord and His rule (Revelation 20:7-10). It is this endgame which is described in Psalm 2.

In Revelation 20:4 we read that those who had not worshipped the Beast and had been put to death for it, were raised to life at the start of the thousand years and reigned with Christ for that

period of time. This promise to those who overcome had also been offered in Revelation 2:26-27, but there it is described using the words of Psalm 2.

Psalm 2, then, describes the scene towards the end of the thousand year reign as the restlessness of the nations grows. The Lord urges them not to rebel as the king is unassailable. Revelation tells us what does happen : the judgment on these nations is complete, the new heavens and the new earth are revealed and God's purposes, to the extent that they have been revealed to us are brought to a conclusion.

### **Comfort for the Lord's people**

As we see the growing arrogance of evil in the world today we may wonder if it is out of control. But here we do have reassurance. The Lord's purposes are set out for us in Scripture. We can see the Old Testament predictions and the ways in which they are picked up and fleshed out in the New Testament. And above all we see the Lord Jesus being raised to that position of extreme power and authority. And for those who are in Him, that is the greatest proof of our ultimate security.

## **CHRIST IN THE PSALMS**

### **9. Jesus Christ - King and Priest**

The Messianic nature of Psalm 110 is very clear. In His discourse with the Jewish leaders (e.g. in Matthew 22:5) the Lord Jesus confirms that the opening verse of the Psalm is speaking of Messiah. This same verse is stated to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ by Peter in Acts 2:34-35. Furthermore, the position of Christ at God's right hand is referred to in several New Testament passages, e.g. (Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1).

The Psalm itself shows Messiah reigning in the power of the Lord as king over Israel (verse 2), and subduing the surrounding nations (verses 1,5-6).

But in verse 4 the Psalm also shows Messiah as a priest as well as a king, a combination of offices which was unheard of in Scriptural Judaism. However there is sound authority for this claim in this case, for not only is His kingship backed by the might of God Himself, but His priesthood is confirmed as eternal by an unchangeable oath of the Lord. This priest is not in the Aaronic line, but in the order of Melchizedek. No further explanation is given in Psalm 110, and Melchizedek is mentioned in only one other place in the Old Testament - Genesis 14:18-20.

### **Melchizedek and Abraham**

In Genesis 14 we read that when Abraham returned from rescuing Lot from King Kedorlaomer, he was met by Melchizedek, who is described as "King of Salem" (i.e. Jerusalem). Although a Gentile, he was "priest of God Most High". This is obviously the Lord, since Abraham in verse 22 refers to Him by the same title. Melchizedek blessed Abraham in God's name and Abraham gave him a tithe of "everything". We are given no further information on him and it is the epistle to the Hebrews which explains the significance of this meeting, and of Melchizedek as a picture of Christ.

In Hebrews Psalm 110:4 is quoted twice as being fulfilled in Christ. In Hebrews 5, Christ's priesthood in the order of Melchizedek is introduced to us for the first time. The important issue here is the calling of God to such an office. No one can take it upon himself (verse 4) - he must be appointed by God, as Christ was (verses 5 and 6). Verses 7-10 also make it clear that it was following the "perfecting" of Himself through suffering and obedient Sonship that He became the source of eternal salvation - a salvation administered through the function granted Him by God - as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

This must therefore be a high order indeed, and in Hebrews 7 the writer explains the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek and demonstrates the superiority of Melchizedek's and therefore Christ's priesthood to that of Aaron.

### **Melchizedek and Christ**

Hebrews 7 opens with a description of the historic meeting of Abraham with Melchizedek contained in Genesis 14. Parallels are suggested between Melchizedek's kingship and that of Christ. Apart from the geographical location of their headquarters (Jerusalem), Melchizedek is described as king of righteousness and also king of peace (verse 2). These are also a fitting description of the coming reign of the Lord Jesus and there are several passages in the Old Testament which speak of the Messianic kingdom in these terms. Isaiah 11, for example,

prophecies that the reign of Christ will be characterised by righteousness (verses 4 and 5) and goes on to talk of the peace of that reign, with all the nations rallying to Him (verse 10) and the wolf and lamb living together (verse 6)

However it is in the Lord's role as priest that Melchizedek comes more strongly into focus. Hebrews 7 continues, based on the statement at the end of chapter 6 that Jesus has become a high priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek, by showing the superiority of this priesthood over the Levitical priesthood and discussing the consequences of this. Four distinct points are made to emphasise the superiority.

### *1. The eternal nature of the priesthood (verse 3)*

Melchizedek appears in Scripture as from nowhere, and then disappears again. Whether the writer to the Hebrews means that Melchizedek was not of human descent, or simply that these are unknown is immaterial. The point made is that there is no line of succession in this priesthood. It is eternal : and the "Jesus", who went before us (6:20) is now described as the "Son of God", eternal and unchanging. This idea is picked up again later in the chapter, e.g. in verses 12-17, as Christ's human ancestry is discussed. He was of the tribe of Judah (verse 14), who were not the priestly tribe. His priesthood, therefore, was not based on human succession, but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (verse 16). Because He lives for ever there will never need to be another priest (verse 24).

### *2. Abraham's deference to Melchizedek (verses 4-10)*

Under Old Testament law the Israelite people had to give tithes to the Levites. Hebrews 7 argues that although at the time Abraham met Melchizedek, the Israelite nation had not been formed, the fact that Abraham, the father of that nation gave tithes of the plunder to Melchizedek means that, in recognising his superiority, the Levites, through Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek, the greater priest. This is tortuous reasoning, suggesting in effect that the Levites recognised Melchizedek's priority but the conclusion, that Christ's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood, is inescapable.

### *3. The perfection of the priesthood (verses 11-19)*

This aspect is extremely important and follows on from the teaching in chapter 5, referred to above, which demonstrates that it was in the perfecting of Christ by His full obedience through suffering that He was designated High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The reason why this was necessary was that the Levitical priesthood could never bring people to perfection. Paul in several places demonstrates the weakness of the law (e.g. in Romans 3:20). The law was not only powerless in helping us to become righteous, it had a negative effect by awaking in us the desire to do what was prohibited (Romans 7:7). Something further was needed and was supplied by God in Christ. Where there is a change of priesthood there is a change of the law (verse 12) and the weaker is set aside by the greater (verses 18-19).

#### *4. The oath founding the priesthood (verses 20-22)*

The priesthood of Christ, in contrast to others, was founded upon an oath of God (verses 20-21). Here for the last time Psalm 110:4 is quoted, in this case to emphasise that the appointment to this eternal priesthood is based on an unchangeable oath of God. The security of the covenant stemming from this is infinitely greater than that of the earlier dispensation.

The writer goes on in chapter 8 to talk about this new covenant made with the houses of Judah and Israel in fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy. This is the reason he has been so careful to demonstrate comprehensively the superiority of the priesthood of Christ to that of Aaron. He has been writing to Hebrew Christians, who were still zealous for the law (e.g. see Acts 21:20). The climax of his argument is to state that the new covenant's superiority would make the old one obsolete (8:13). If he had stated the case too bluntly or with insufficient supporting argument, it might have been rejected. But he has now argued his case and it is irrefutable : The New Covenant was a worthy successor to the Old. Its superiority lay in the better promises on which it was founded and the greatness of the One who is mediator of it (8:6).

#### **The Greatness of Christ**

The closing verses of the seventh chapter re-affirm the greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ and the security afforded to believers because of His perfection. There is no need for a succession of priests because He lives for ever (verse 23). His moral perfection means that (unlike other high priests), He has no need to offer sacrifices for His own sins before going on to meet the needs of others. His sacrifice was a once and for all event, and was, in fact the sacrifice of Himself - the spotless lamb of God, who took away the sins of the world (John 1:29).