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Quotations in the New Testament from the Psalter

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A GRADUATION THESIS

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"QUOTATIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM THE PSALTER".

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1. Introduction.

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The New Testament writings abound in quotations from the Psalter. It is difficult to determine the exact number of times that the Psalter is cited. Various numbers have been given by different writers. Toy in his "Quotations in the New Testament" finds 137. Van Dyke in the "Story of the Psalms" says that out of the 283 times the Old Testament is quoted in the New, 116 of these are from the Psalms. Prothero also estimates the number at 116. It is difficult to put an exact number because it is often hard to distinguish between a quotation and a mere similarity of expression. We can be sure of at least 56 beyond all doubt. For there are 56 places in the New Testament where sentences, corresponding to sentences found in the Psalter, are introduced by such phrases as "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken in the Scripture" and "as David saith in the book of the Psalms" and "as the Psalmist sayeth". Concerning these 56 instances introduced by these

and similar formulae, there can be no doubt. There are thirteen others which we are reasonably sure in calling quotations, because, although not introduced by any formula, they bear such striking resemblance to passages in the Psalter as to justify the use of such a term. But as to the rest of the 137 which Toy gives, we must remember that similarity of expression is not necessarily quotation. No one has a monopoly on words or phrases, and it would be strange if the New Testament writers did not often express their thoughts in language similar to previous writings without any thought of consciously quoting from them. A number of cases will thus necessarily remain where we cannot be sure that the author intended them as a quotation. Such a number as Toy finds (137) can only be obtained by seizing upon every similarity of expression and calling it a quotation. For example, Toy thinks that when Jesus said "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth"(Matt.5:5), He is quoting from Psalm 37:11. It is true that we find there these words,"The meek shall inherit the land". But it does not seem reasonable to distort this into a quotation. Undoubtedly the thought and language of the Psalter colored the writings of the New Testament. But that is not quotation. Or to take a more extreme case,-"My God, why

hast thou forsaken me?" We have come to consider them as quoted from Psalm 22:1. Yet it cannot reasonably be denied that it was a natural exclamation under the circumstances, and that Jesus may or may not have had the Psalm in mind.

We have then for a working basis fifty-six quotations. As to how we shall regard the others it depends on how strictly we draw the line between quotations and mere similarities of expression. Of the fifty-six introduced by the formulae we can be certain. Of the rest we can accept or refuse as seems best. For our present purpose we shall take some of the most representative of these fifty-six, and from them learn what we can regarding the place the Psalter had in the minds of the Apostles, and their methods of interpreting it.

11. Sources of New Testament Quotations.

There were three versions of the Old Testament at the time of the New Testament writers.

1) The Hebrew. But by this time Hebrew was already obsolete as a spoken language, having been superseded by the Aramaic. This latter was the vernacular of Jesus and His Apostles. And as a written lan-

guage it was little known. Toy, after an exhaustive study of the subject, says that the New Testament writers never quoted directly from the old Hebrew.

2) The Greek. The LXX, begun in Alexandria about B.C. 275 and finished about B.C. 130, quickly became recognized as the standard version. The Evangelists, writing in Greek, to people acquainted with Greek, would naturally use this version. Such was the case. The great majority of quotations are from the LXX.

3) The Aramaic. There are a great many differences between the quotations and the original. Some of these may be explained by the free manner of quoting or by the inaccuracy of the memory. But in order to explain the other cases, Toy has assumed that there was a popular Aramaic version. "That an oral Aramaic version of the Old Testament existed in Palestine in the first century of our era is almost certain".* To this version some few of the quotations may be assigned.

III. Rabbinical Interpretation.

Without attempting to go into detail in this subject we may say that the methods of interpretation current in the

* *"Quotations in the New Testament", Introduction, p. 14.*

first century had two main characteristics:-

1) They revealed the most profound reverence and regard for the Old Testament as the verbally inspired word of God. The law and the prophets had entirely completed the cycle of revelation and nothing more was desired. Hence the anger of the Jews at Jesus who presumed to come with a fuller revelation. The great lesson which the Babylonian captivity had taught Israel was that their sole guide was to be the law and it was to be observed to the letter. Therein was the national and individual hope. Not one jot or tittle was to pass away or to be disregarded.

2) It was pursued in an unscientific and unscholarly manner. Moses wrote the law and David wrote the Psalms. The history of criticism was not to be written for many centuries. They took the liberty of seizing upon words and making them carry any meaning regardless of the original sense of the words. Frequently sentences were given a double meaning. In fact some of the rabbis regarded the Psalter as Messianic from beginning to end.

"It was quite usual in the centuries before and after Jesus to tear quotations from the Old Testament out of their context and to weld together into one quotation the most heterogeneous passages in which the same word happened to

occur. All the exegesis of the Midrash goes to prove this.* In short, as Toy sums it up, "the whole method of exegesis may be summed up in the principle that every sentence and every word of the Scripture was credited with any meaning it could possibly be made to bear". Thus to an unscientific view of the origin and composition of the Scriptures, was added an unscholarly treatment of it which led into all manner of absurdities.

IV. The Disciples' Methods of Interpretation.

In their teaching of the great truths of life, the New Testament writers were men of all time and every age. In their methods of interpreting the Old Testament they were men of the first century, and they interpreted it as did their contemporaries. The modern view of the Psalter is as truly modern as present day astronomy or biology. There is no reason why we should expect the Apostles to rise above the local conditions to our present day critical knowledge of the Psalter. Jesus Himself adopted the current views of His time, and attributed the law to Moses and the Psalms to David. To freely admit this fact, is the only rational position to take. The most we can say is that the Apostles

* *Delitzsch, "Whose Son is Christ", p. 39.*

did not wander off into any of the idle speculation and endless vagaries so common to the rabbis. That they did interpret the Psalter along the two general lines mentioned above, we shall see by a brief examination of some particular quotations. We shall find that the New Testament writers followed the ordinary rabbinical methods in ways that may conveniently be classed under these four heads:- 1) Interpreting the Psalter as prewritten history; 2) In debate; 3) In exhortation; and 4) Miscellaneous. We shall take a few examples from each of these classes.

V.

A. The Psalter as Prewritten History.

These quotations have to do mainly with circumstances connected with the life of the Messiah. In many places, after some incident in the life of Christ, we have the words "that the Scripture might be fulfilled which saith", followed by some words from the Psalter. These are mostly from the so-called Messianic psalms. In John 2:17, 19:24, 13:18, 15:25; Mt. 13:35; Acts 1:20 we have the most conspicuous examples of this.

John 2:17 furnishes an interesting illustration of

that Apostle's methods and is worthy of some little consideration. After relating how Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple, he says, "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'zeal for thine house shall eat me up'." John is here quoting from Psalm 69:9, which Briggs assigns to the time of Nehemiah. The Psalm is the complaint of a man in some great sorrow or trial who is being persecuted and ridiculed by the ungodly because of his loyalty to Jehovah and to His Temple. But the LXX, from which John quotes, reads, "The zeal for thine house hath eaten me up". In quoting this passage, John has changed the tense of the verb from the past to the future and reads it, "καταφάγεταί με". This he does in order to bring out what he thought was the predictive idea of the Psalmist, and to make it point to the coming Messiah, instead of referring to a certain past situation. This gives us an idea as to how John regarded these Messianic Psalms. They were prewritten history, depicting even in detail the life of the coming Messiah. Some scholars have tried to dodge this fact, in interpreting the words "that it might be fulfilled". They have insisted that the words mean rather "so that it was fulfilled" and that the New Testament writers were merely stating a similarity existing between the situation they were describing and the

words of the Psalm. There is however no exegetical basis for such an interpretation and certainly no rational considerations for it. We must take the words literally and believe that to the New Testament writers it meant indeed a literal fulfilment of prophecy.

Again, John's use of the Psalter is clearly seen in 19: 24. After telling how the Roman soldiers divided Christ's garment but cast lots for his robe, he says it was done that the Scripture might be fulfilled. The words which follow are from Psalm 22: 18. This Psalm was the outcry of a man surrounded by enemies so cruel and heartless that they stripped his garments from him in their rage. There certainly could have been no double meaning in the Psalmist's mind, much less any idea of prophecy. It was simply a description of an individual experience. But we can see how natural it would be to associate these words with this event in Christ's life, and how easily it might be regarded as a fulfilled prophecy. And such it was to John. (The Synoptic writers tell of the dividing of the garment, but no reference is made to the Psalm. Doubtless the parallelism did not occur to them).

Again in John 13: 18, Jesus is said to have quoted from Psalm 41: 10, with the formula "that the Scripture might be

fulfilled". Psalm 41 describes a sick man, suffering from a severe illness, but most of all because one of his intimate friends had forsaken him. The parallelism between this and the act of Judas is at once apparent, though it cannot be carried out in any of the rest of the Psalm. Here, of course, the question enters in as to just how exact a reproduction of Jesus' words the Gospels give us. But, even so, we have no reason to think that Jesus' use of the Psalter differed from that of His disciples. In fact the few cases we have recorded, where He quotes from the Psalter (granting them to be the exact reproduction of His words), show that Jesus followed the ordinary rabbinic methods.

Two other quotations used as prewritten history are found in Acts 1:16,23. They are used in connection with the betrayal of Christ by Judas. It was hard for the disciples to understand how Judas, who had been chosen by Christ, should at last betray Him. The solution finally reached was that it was a part of God's plan, and that "the Scripture must needs have been fulfilled"(Acts 1:16). Luke is here reporting the speech of Peter on this occasion. And in this speech, Peter, commenting on the death of Judas, quotes from Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8 and shows that these things occurred because God had foreordained it so in His

Scriptures.

These few examples show us how the Apostles regarded the Messianic Psalms. We today can see no rational consideration for regarding them as prewritten history. No doubt the Messianic ideal colored all the sacred writings of the Hebrews and, perhaps unconsciously to themselves, they wrote with the thought of the Messiah in mind. Yet we cannot believe that in the minds of the authors there was any other thought than to describe a present particular situation. Nor can it be consistently held that unconsciously to themselves, their writings were inspired by God to reveal in detail the actual life of the coming Messiah. A little reflection shows that these stray references hidden away in the Psalms can hardly be intended for prophecy. God does not reveal His plans in such a manner. Such being the case, the interpretation of the Psalter as prewritten history of the life of Jesus, loses its force for us, as far as proving anything about His Messiah-ship is concerned.

But to the Apostles it was conclusive testimony. Together with the rabbis, they regarded these Messianic Psalms as pointing toward the coming Saviour of their race. Luke 24: 44 throws an interesting side-light on this. They were fully acquainted with the language of the Psalter. So when

He, whom they believed to be the Messiah, came, they were keen to find in the Psalter some words which would apply to Him and prove Him to be the Messiah of prophecy.

B- The Psalter in Debate.

The reverence in which the Psalm were held by all the Jews made them a powerful instrument in debate. Disputation of this sort was a frequent occupation of the rabbis. Endless arguments were constructed upon Scriptural passages. In the Gospels we find that Jesus and His disciples used the Psalter frequently for this purpose. The majority of the cases recorded are where Christ Himself uses the Psalter in debating with the Jews.

Once the Jews were about to stone Him (Jn.10:34) because, they said, He made Himself equal to God. Christ asks "Is it not written in your law,'I said ye are gods'?" The Psalm from which these words are quoted (82:6) was intended as a rebuke to the corrupt judges of Israel. So lofty was their position, in that they represented the Great Judge, that they were even called gods. Here Christ adopts a rabbinic mode of argumentation,- that of from lesser to greater. If these mere judges could be called gods, how much

more right He had to call Himself the Son of God. If the argument seems to us rather forced and the application strained a little, we must remember that it was not so to the Jews. They were familiar with rabbinic disputations, and the argument was so forceful as to silence them.

Again, in Matt.22:44 (also Lk.20:42 and Mk.12:36), Jesus quotes from a Psalm in debate. The Jews had sought to confuse Him by asking certain technical questions. He turns on them with the question as to whose son the Messiah was to be. When they replied "David's", he asked them to reconcile their statement with David's words in Psalm 110:1, "The Lord said unto my Lord 'Sit thou on my right hand'". How could David address his own son as Lord? Originally this Psalm 110 was an address to a king who, after conquering his enemies, was to be made a high priest. The historical situation into which this Psalm fits most appropriately is the Maccabean age. For then it was that a Levitical dynasty sat upon the throne of Israel - priest and king. Most scholars agree in assigning it to this period. By the time of the Christian era the Psalm was regarded as Messianic. Hence it was an effective instrument for Christ's purpose here, which was to meet the Jews on their own grounds and to rebuke their idle speculation.

Again, when Christ was entering Jerusalem the scribes became indignant at the hosanna's of the children. He challenged them with these words (Matt. 21:16), "Did ye never read 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise'?" This is quoted from Psalm 8:2. This Psalm is a hymn of praise to Jehovah because of His great power. The verse in question shows how He uses feeble things to show forth His power. Clearly the idea of the Psalmist is that of strength and power. But in the Greek version it is rendered "praise", and it is the LXX which Jesus uses here.

It is in these debates that we have most ample illustration of the almost fanatical reverence of the Jews for the Old Testament Scriptures. It was because of this reverence that they could be used so effectively in debating religious questions. If by any possible manipulation of the text, an argument could be based upon it, then the final word had been said. God's verbally inspired revelation was for the Jew the court of last appeal. "Is it not written in your law?"- there was nothing more to be said.

C- In Exhortation.

In several places we find the New Testament writers weaving in a verse from the Psalter in the midst of some

hortatory address. If we can find any passages from the Psalms at all, used in the sense of the original, clearly it will be in this group, and not in connection with any historical event. For we hold that the Psalms were called forth by some particular occasion, and while historical events do not repeat themselves, yet the emotions and expe-riences of the human heart are forever recurring. And we find it to be the case that generally in these quotations found in the hortatory parts of the Epistles the author uses them in much the same sense as the original.

A word might well be said here as to the real use of quotations from our modern standpoint. They are not designed primarily to <u>prove</u> anything, as was usually the case with the rabbis. In dealing with the Messianic Psalms we have seen that the attempt to prove the Messiahship of Je-sus from the Psalter meets with little success. Or again, as a means of clinching an argument in debate, we have felt its lack of force. But the real value of a quotation is its suggestive power. When Lincoln quoted from Psalm 19, in his Gettysburg address, "As was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, etc.", he was not trying to prove anything. He was merely suggesting a great fundamen-al truth. In such cases, the context has little bearing on

the quotation. We do not expect the analogy to walk on all fours, and do not insist on similarity of conditions in any strict degree.

So we find in this group that the Apostles quote from the Psalter more in accord with our modern ideas. The author of Hebrews, e.g., exhorting his readers to be contented (Heb. 13:6) cites from Psalm 118:6, "The Lord is my helper etc." This Psalm is a song of thanksgiving for some recent national blessing that has come to Israel. As to just what event it was that called forth the Psalm is not known. But there is the same great truth underlying both passages, and it seems quite in harmony with our own ideas of interpretation.

Again, in Rom. 8:35 Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" In answering the question he makes use of Psalm 44:22. This Psalm is a nature Psalm. It is assigned by most scholars to the Maccabean age, and was called forth by some great national disasters. The thought of the Psalm is that it is because of fidelity to Jehovah that His people are killed all the day long. The Apostle fittingly quotes the words to describe the suffering of the early Apostles.

D- Miscellaneous Quotations.

There are a few citations from the Psalter which, because of their peculiar usage, deserved to be classed in a special group.

In the third chapter of Romans Paul is in the midst of his great argument to show that not only are Jews and Gentiles under sin, but men of all nations. Beginning with the tenth verse, and introduced by the formula "as it is written", there follows a long quotation, continuing to the nineteenth verse. This long quotation is composed of eight verses from the Old Testament, and seven of these are from the Psalter. They are all strung along in succession, joined by nothing except the common idea of the depravity of man which runs through the verses. This is strictly in accord with rabbinical practice. Edersheim says,* "A favorite method of the rabbis was that which derived its name from the stringing together of beads (charaz) when a preacher having quoted a passage from the Pentateuch, strung on to it another and like-sounding, or really similar verse from the prophets and the Hagiographa". (This quotation in Rom. 8: 10 would indicate that the first quotation did not necessarily come from the Pentateuch, as here it comes from the

* *"Life and Times of the Messiah", Vol. I., p. 449.*

Psalter itself.) If we take these quotations and examine them separately, we find that in this "charaz" they have been wrenched out of their context to prove a theological doctrine. Verse 13, e.g., is quoted from Psalm 5:9. This Psalm was a morning prayer to God, and the verse quoted is a description of the Psalmist's enemies who are persecuting him. But here it is brought in to prove the natural depravity of man. How far this string of quotations was intended to prove, or simply to suggest, we have no means of determining. As a means of suggesting the sinfulness of man they are well adapted for their purpose. As a direct proof of the fact they have little weight with us today. Yet, doubtless, the idea of positive proof was uppermost in the mind of the Apostle. To one with such a view of the Psalter as he had, it was indeed convincing proof of his statement.

Another passage which shows how, very often, a sentence was taken out of its original setting and made to carry a far different meaning is Rom. 15:3. In the midst of an exhortation toward mutual helpfulness, the Apostle cites Christ as the supreme example of this, and quotes from Ps. 69:9, "The reproaches of them that reproached thee, fell upon me". Here Christ is pictured as addressing man, and as declaring that it was the reproaches or sufferings of others

that He bore. Now in the original, we have the words of a godly man addressing God. He says he has to bear the reproaches against God. Between the two passages - the original and the quoted - there is therefore only one thing in common - that of bearing a reproach for which the bearer was not responsible. If it be replied that this likeness was strong enough to justify the quotation in the light of present day standards, we may yet question the propriety of so distorting the original setting to obtain such an end. The truth is, the quotation must be judged, not by present day standards, but by the rabbinical methods current in the Apostle's time. The next verse (Rom.15:4) throws an interesting side-light upon the way the Apostle regarded the Old Testament,-"Whatever things were written aforetime were written for our learning". It was a pious, reverent Jew who made these citations, one to whom every word of the Old Testament was freighted with precious truth and meaning.

VI. Conclusion.

In modern thought the Psalter is a collection of songs which were inspired by some special crisis in the life of the individual or nation. They are sublime expressions of

faith and trust in God - aspirations for clean hands and a pure heart. Their sanctity lies not in the fact of their being in the Canon, but in their appeal to that which is highest in us. Whatever authority they may have for us lies in this subjective appeal. From such a standpoint as this, we must confess that the Apostolic use of the Psalter seems forced and unconvincing.

It will remain so, as long as we estimate it from our modern view-point. To understand the way the Apostles used the Psalter we need to keep in mind that it was to them the verbally inspired word of God, and that their methods grew out of this fundamental conception. It is not a case of "faulty exegesis", as Toy calls it. They were interpreting it with the light they had, and it seems faulty to us only because we are looking at the Psalter from a different view-point.

If there is any fact to claim our attention it is not that these methods were followed. The striking fact is what the Apostles did <u>not</u> do. It is noteworthy that while they used the ordinary rabbinic methods they never departed into any of their endless arguments and idle speculations. With the rabbis, exegesis was an end in itself; with the Apostles, it was a means to an end. Not that they followed

the rabbinic methods, but that they followed them so little is the remarkable fact. And the reason for this is without doubt to be found in the fact that the greatness of their message kept them from descending to the realm of speculation. "The Apostles were preserved from the extravagances of Jewish exegesis by the regulative norm of the Gospel". It is a powerful tribute to the atmosphere of sanity which radiated from the life and teachings of Jesus into the lives and teachings of His Apostles.

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Paul E. Secrest.

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