THE SON OF GOD AS ISRAEL : A NOTE ON MATTHEAN CHRISTOLOGY

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In his influential book, Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom, Jack Dean Kingsbury put forward two major theses concerning Matthew's use of the title, 'Son of God'. The first is that 'Son of God' is the most prominent and important christological title and that all the other titles are subordinate to it. The second is that the Christology of 'the first main part of the gospel', which Kingsbury takes to be 1.1-4;16, may be summarised in this fashion: 'Jesus, in the line of David (1.21), is the Son of God (2.15; 3.17), that is to say, he has his origin in God (1.20) and is the one chosen to shepherd the eschatological people of God (2.6) for, empowered by God for messianic ministry (3.16-17), he proves himself in confrontation with Satan to be perfectly obedient to the will of God (4.3-4, 5-7, 8-10) and, as such a one, he saves his (God's) people from their sins (1.21)'. This is, in Kingsbury's words, 'representative of the way in which Matthew would have us define the predication Son of God'.[1]

While Kingsbury's original contribution has met with a friendly reception in many quarters, it has not escaped criticism. Most prominently, David Hill, in three different articles, has taken issue with Kingsbury's method and disputed several of his central assertions.[2] Hill has made the following points, among others.

(1) Kingsbury never provides a rationale for one of his methodological presuppositions, namely, the assumption that a single christological title must be understood as 'foremost' or 'pre-eminent'. Even when one grants the prominence of 'Son of God' in the First Gospel, and even when one grants that 'Son of God' gives us, so to speak, God's own view of things, what is the good reason for subsuming all the other titles under this one title? In Kingsbury's estimation, 'Son of man', 'Lord', 'Messiah', 'Son of David', and the other christological appellations serve largely to give content to the one truly adequate appellation, 'Son of God'. But the justification for this approach, which has no explicit textual support, is far from evident.

(2) A second criticism made by Hill is that Kingsbury has not done justice to Matthew's identification of Jesus with the Servant of Deutero-Isaiah. Appealing to texts such as 3.17; 8.17; 12.18; and 17.5, as well as to the work of B. Gerhardsson[3], Hill contends that the title, 'Servant', and its associated themes do more than just enrich Matthew's portrait of Jesus as the Son of God. Kingsbury concentration on one title has led him to underestimate the importance of another title.

(3) The approach to Christology through titles may not be adequate. Hill writes: 'Because he (Matthew) portrays Jesus by means of a story no one category-teacher, healer, Wisdom incarnate, triumphant Son of man, not even Kyrios or Son of God - **is adequate** to contain that Jesus reverenced by the Church, the Jesus on whom Matthew then reflects in his book'.[4] In other words, 'Christology is in the whole story'. This is, admittedly, a point Kingsbury anticipated: 'In principle, I concur with the oft-repeated assertion that the question of christology is larger than the analysis of titles of majesty'.[5] In practice, however, Kingsbury does tend to construe the narrative so that instead of serving to reveal Jesus it rather serves to define a title.

Although Hill's criticisms have called forth more than one rejoinder from Kingsbury[6], in my opinion the critique stands. Hence I am inclined to agree that the quest to find Matthew's pre-eminent christological title is not as helpful as Kingsbury seems to suppose. I also find the attempt to subsume all the christological titles under the one title, 'Son of God', to be misconceived. But it is not the purpose of this essay to enter further the interesting debate between Kingsbury and Hill. I desire instead to raise some questions about Kingsbury's proposed definition of 'Son of God' (see above).

The first difficulty one has is this: Kingsbury confines himself to the text of Matthew. In discussing 'Son of God' he never asks what the title meant in ancient Judaism, in early Christianity, in the Gospel of Mark, or in the Hellenistic world in general. He simply looks at Matthew. This determination to stick to the text alone

proclaims: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. These words probably show the influence of both Ps. 2.7 and Isa 42.1, in which case Jesus is here both the Son of God and the Servant. But is there not more? Is Jesus not also here identified in some sense with Israel? Apart from the fact that Jewish texts sometimes apply both appellations, 'Son of God', and 'Servant', to Israel[9], the wider context encourages such a suggestion. This is because the story of the baptism is preceded and followed by passages in which Jesus is the counterpart of Moses[10] and because 3.13-17 introduces the temptation narrative, in which Jesus the Son repeats the experience of Israel in her desert wanderings(see below). All this suggests new exodus. Indeed, and as I have argued elsewhere, Mt 1-5 in all its parts may well display a developed exodus typology.[11] The gospel opens with events which recall the birth and childhood of Moses. Then there is the baptism, which parallels Israel's passing through the waters. There follows next the temptation, in which Jesus re-experiences the desert temptations of Deuteronomy. Lastly, there is 5:1-2. where Jesus, like Moses, goes up on a mountain and then delivers words of Torah. So seemingly every major event in Mt 1-5 has its complement in the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt. If so, it follows that when Jesus emerges from the waters and is called God's Son, the interpreter is bound to detect what is also present in 2.15, namely, the typological identification of Jesus with Israel.[12]

(3) The temptation (4:1-11). In response to the devil's three temptations, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, from Deut 8.3 in 4.4, from Deut 6.16 in 4.7, and from Deut 6.13 in 4.10. This is the key to the narrative. Whether, as Gerhardsson has argued, the text arose out of reflection upon Deut 6-8,[13] clearly Jesus is here replaying the experiences of Israel in the desert. Having emerged from the waters of a new exodus at his baptism Jesus next enters the wilderness to suffer a time of testing, his forty days of fasting being analogous to Israel's forty years of wandering. Like Israel, Jesus

is tempted by hunger. And, like Israel, Jesus is tempted to idolatry. Especially instructive for understanding our story is Deut 8:2-3: 'And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord'.

In tempting Jesus, the devil twice addresses him with these words: 'If you are the Son of God....' The immediate reference is to the voice at the baptism. At the same time, 'Son of God' is appropriate because it is the title Jesus shares with Israel (Exod 4:22-23; Deut 1:31; 32:5-6; 18-20; Hos 11.1). Note especially Deut 8,5: "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you (Israel)'. In Mt 4:1-11, Jesus is tempted as the Son because he is re-enacting the experience of Israel, God's son, after the exodus.

To conclude: in Mt 1:1-4,16 Jesus the Son of God is the embodiment of true Israel. He not only fulfils Israel's history but recapitulates it. In being called out of Egypt, in passing through the waters of baptism, and in suffering temptation in the wilderness, Jesus the Son of God is Israel personified. This entails that in at least one respect Kingsbury's definition of 'Son of God' is inadequate. It should be modified so as to reflect the identification of Jesus with Israel, which is one of the leading themes of Mt 1-4.

One final point. Perhaps I have not yet caught on to what some of the modern literary critics are up to. Nevertheless, Kingsbury's failure to observe the typological dimension of Matthew's Son of God Christology is, so it seems to me, due to his dogged insistence upon looking solely at the text of Matthew. If he had instead

is perhaps understandable. In any event it accords with some recent trends in Biblical studies, especially in the United States. Influenced by certain movements in modern literary criticism, many exegetes now focus almost wholly on the text as it stands, by-passing the traditional problems of source-criticism, tradition-criticism, and redaction-criticism. Now without being so bold as to deny the legitimacy of this new enterprise (which I may not really understand), I do wonder whether it does not sometimes make for impoverished interpretation. Surely those who read or heard Matthew's text for the first time had, on some previous occasion, run across the words, 'Son of God'. Our evangelist did not invent them. And just as surely, previous acquaintance with the term would inevitably have coloured understanding of it. Thus, if the narrative gives content to the title, it is no less true that the title gives content to the narrative. This is why it seems to me a bit odd when one confines oneself to the text as whole-heartedly as does Kingsbury. Matthew's gospel has a background. Should we not be eager to explore it? After all, the First Gospel comes to us from a very different time and a very different place, and if we are not to follow the deconstructionists and like-minded others who bid us to give up altogether the pursuit of authorial intention, must we not seek to understand how Matthew's words and phrases were used in other first-century texts? My point comes down to this. In the study of Matthew's christological titles, it is important to know how those titles were used in Matthew's world. This is a subject which Kingsbury has, to all appearances, failed to broach. That it is an important subject is made clear by the next observation I wish to make.

Perhaps the major problem with Kingsbury's definition of 'Son of God' is its failure to take into account a very important theme that runs throughout Mt 1-4. According to Kingsbury, and as already noted, in 1.1-4;16 'Son of God' means that Jesus has his origin with God, is the one chosen to shepherd the eschatological people of God, is empowered by God for messianic ministry, is perfectly

obedient to the will of God in confrontation with Satan, and is he who saves his people from their sins. What this definition leaves altogether out of account is the narrative's typological equation of the Son of God with Israel. Let us look at the texts.

(1) The second formula quotation (2.15). After the wise men leave Bethlehem, an angel appears to Jospeh and commands him to take 'the child and his mother'to Egypt. The evangelist then informs us that Joseph obeyed, and further that 'this was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son". The application to Jesus of this Scripture, Hos 11.1, strikes most modern readers as gratuitous. In its original context, the OT verse unambiguously refers to Israel: 'When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt have I called my son'. Did Matthew not know this? Did he not realise that Hos 11. was not a messianic prophecy but a proclamation of the Exodus? Before dismissing our author as a third-rate exegete, one should consider this: while Hosea was much mined for early Christian testimonia,[7] Matthew was evidently the first to connect Hos 11.1 with the story of Jesus.[8] This implies that he knew the verse in its OT context and was therefore not naively oblivious of the change of reference when he applied the verse to Jesus, not to the nation. What then was he thinking? Almost certainly he took himself to be following the Christian tradition according to which Jesus repeated or recapitulated in his own person certain experiences of Israel. The idea is fundamental to Q's temptation story (Mt 4:1-11 = Luke 4:1-13) and is common enough in primitive Christianity. It may even have roots in Jesus' own ministry, if there is any truth to T.W. Manson's collective interpretation of the Son of man. In any case, the use of Hos 11.1 in Mt 2.15 presupposes the typological equation of Jesus the Son of God with God's son Israel. It is as the Son that Jesus takes up the role of the people of God.

(2) The voice at the baptism (3.17). When the baptised Jesus climbs the banks of the Jordan a voice from heaven

explored the OT background of certain verses and considered the Jewish texts in which Israel is God's 'son', he might have offered a different definition of 'Son of God'. The lesson would therefore seem to be that one must look not only at texts but through them, to the world from which they emerged.

Notes:

1. J.D. Kingsbury, Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom (Philadelphia 1975) 52.

2. D. Hill, 'Son and Servant: An Essay on Matthean Christology', JSNT 6 (1980) 2-16; idem, 'The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Response to Professor Kingsbury's Literary-Critical Probe', JSNT (1984) 37-52; idem, 'In Quest of Matthean Christology', IBS 9 (1986) 135-142.

3. B. Gerhardsson, 'Gottes Sohn als Diener Gottes: Messias, Agape und Himmelsherrschaft nach dem Matthausevangelium', ST 27 (1973) 73-106; idem, 'Jesus livré et abandonné d'après la passion selon Saint Matthieu', RB 76 (1969) 2066-277; idem, 'Sacrificial Service and Atonement in the Gospel of Matthew', in Reconciliation and Hope, ed. R. Banks (London, 1974) 25-35; idem, The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew (Lund 1979).

4. 'In Quest of Matthean Christology', 140.

5. J.D. Kingsbury, 'The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Literary-Critical Probe' JSNT (1984) 4.

6. In addition to the article cited in n.5 see J.D. Kingsbury, 'The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Rejoinder to David Hill', JSNT 25(1985) 61-81.

7. Cf. C.H. Dodd, According to the Scriptures (London 1952) 75-78.

. Allison, Son of God, IBS 9, April 1987.

Notes (contd)

8. R.E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (New York 1977) 219[221.

9. E.g. Exod 4.22-23; Deut 1.31; 8.5; 32.5-6; 18-20; Isa. 41.8; 44.1-2; 21; 48.20; 49.3; Jer 30.10 MT., Hos 11.1; Bar 3.36.

10. For the material in Mt 1-2 see W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, ICC (Edinburgh forthcoming) vol. 1, Excursus 1. On 5.1-2 see next note.

11. D.C. Allison, 'Jesus and Moses (Mt 5.1-2)', ExpT (forthcoming).

12. For further discussion see W.D. Davies, The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount (Cambridge 1966) 26-45.

13. B. Gerhardsson, The Testing of God's Son (Mt 4.1-11) Early Christian Midrash (Lund, 1966).