

The Name of Jesus (Yeshuah) and the Psalms

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Full disclosure of God's nature and character is given in Jesus Christ who has manifested his name: "Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are one" [John 17.11]. Although name here is attributed to the Father, it is shared by the Son, his revelation. The incarnation of God in the world revealed his inner being and relationship to mankind. Right at the beginning of Matthew's account of the Incarnation we have the bestowal of Christ's name by the angel Gabriel: "You will conceive a son and call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" [1.21] (It should be noted that in the Old Testament, a name was given at birth or shortly thereafter. Only in New Testament times is it given with circumcision on the eighth day). This passage is interesting to read in Hebrew transliteration, for it elicits the close association between the name Jesus and his mission to save: "...Jesus (Yeshuah) will save (yosheyah)" (*The New Testament in Hebrew and English*, London (no date given)).

The Gospels depict Jesus Christ as a person endowed with perception and penetrating insight. A sense of mystery hangs over him, a sense of unmistakable otherness that is not subject to analysis. Awareness of his proper name surely had to play a role in Christ's realization of personal divinity and mission in the days before his public ministry. Christ's Jewish contemporaries found both their God and self-identity in God's past acts and in their hope for a future restoration of their lives and character. They viewed the present as a time of preserving what God had done as summed up in the Law and in the fulfillment of the promises. As a result, the present became relatively insignificant. However, Jesus proclaims that the "kingdom of God is at hand" [Mk 1.15], a statement which had roots in his reading of scripture, especially the psalms.

For some historical observations on the name Jesus, refer to the following:

"The name Jesus was common among the Jews up to the beginning of the second century AD. Early Christianity adopted the current Greek form of the Hebrew Yeshuah to Iesous. Among Palestinian Jews and also among the Jews of the diaspora the name Jesus was widely distributed in the pre-Christian era and in the early part of the Christian era. Josephus (first century AD) gives no fewer than nineteen bearers of the name Jesus. It is even borne by one of Christ's ancestors, Joshua (Luke 3.29). By the end of the first century AD, the name Jesus died out among the Jews." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by G. Kittel (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965), p.284 ff.

The psalter formed an integral part of the Jewish liturgy of Christ's time. It implores God's deliverance, decries injustices, threatens punishment and promises reward for the righteous. Thus every feeling and hope of Israel, as well as each pious Jew, is expressed here. ("There is no single experience of the soul of Israel that is not put into words there [the psalter]. The psalms are the fullest expression of God's revelation in the Old Testament.")

The Psalms by P. Drijvers, New York, 1965, p.4). Composed after the saving events of Israel's history, the psalms manifest the collective tensions and aspirations of the Jewish people, and this in turn illumines the Gospels.

We may assume that part of Christ's religious upbringing at Nazareth was learning to read scripture in the Hebrew language. Although he must have received some training in the local synagogue, his parents--and they were, to be sure, no ordinary parents--complemented his training at home. At the heart of Jewish spirituality lies the psalter, around which this family's prayer life revolved as with the case for any devout Jewish household of the time. Although the Gospels record no words of Joseph, Jesus' father, it is intriguing to imagine this dreamer [cf. Matthew 1.20], named after his Old Testament prototype, teaching his son how to read and interpret the scriptures. On the other hand we have Mary. She is recorded in Luke's Gospel as keeping the events associated with her son's birth close to her heart: "But Mary kept (suneterei) all these things, pondering them (sumballousa, literally, 'placing together for comparison') in her heart" [2.19]. The Greek verb suntereo means to keep or preserve closely, to protect. It implies that Mary assimilated the significance of all these events associated with her son's birth. Principle among these events was, of course, the angel Gabriel's command to call her son Jesus, that is, Savior. Mary must have transmitted her ability of keeping and of pondering to Jesus in the process of his education and learning to read scripture in the Hebrew language.

Coupled with Joseph's propensity for dreams, the inclination to linger over the Hebrew text of scripture acquired from Mary must have wielded a powerful influence in Jesus' consciousness as a young man. Towards the end of his life, we see something of this keeping or remembrance handed down from Mary: "Holy Father, keep (tereson, from tereo, which is related to suntereo regarding Luke 2.19 above) them in your name" [John 17.11]. The Father's name is, of course, the revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ. The keeping takes up and perfects the keeping learned from his mother, Mary, and he wishes to have his disciples participate in it. Only now it is Jesus' express wish to have his Father effect the keeping of the disciples, that is, to "situate" them in his name.

Christ became more aware of his unique character while he was learning about the history of his people. The frequency at which the Hebrew verbal root of his name, Yeshuah (Jesus) occurred in the psalter certainly must have impressed him. (It should be noted that the word yashah means "to be spacious, ample, broad;" figuratively, 'to be opulent.' The significance of 'ample space' is in Hebrew applied to liberty, deliverance from dangers and distresses, as on the other hand, narrowness of space is frequently used of distresses and dangers." Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon by S. Tregelles, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971, p.374).

We may assume that this frequency of yashah, in light of Jesus' parents religious training, assisted to awaken in him an awareness of his role of Savior. This Hebrew verb occurs one-hundred and thirty-four times in the psalter alone, both as a verb and as a noun, quite an extraordinarily high frequency for so short a book. The verbal root yashah occurs in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. These references must have impressed Jesus Christ as well. Although such references are valuable in themselves, the scope of this article is confined to the psalter. To share this experience of Jesus discovering the verbal root of his name, one should examine the one-hundred and thirty-four excerpts from the psalter listed in this article. Of course, this is simply a personal view with no basis in contemporary scriptural studies, but it evolved from my own reading of the psalms in the original language.

The Hebrew verbal root has been transliterated in this list to suggest something of the effect Christ felt when reading these very same verses (Reading these verses is in the tradition of monastic lectio divina as briefly explained in this Home Page's Introduction). For Jesus, this experience of finding his name in the psalms must have been like seeing his own face in a mirror. The meeting point of figure (the psalter) and reality (Jesus Christ) reaches fullness in Christ's messianic awareness. This sacred place, so to speak, enables all Old Testament history to come together and find unity. In the words of Henri DeLubac, "The entire dialectic of the two Testaments is drawn together: The New Testament in its entirety is brought forth by the Old, while at the same time the Old Testament in its entirety is interpreted by the New...Jesus is aware that he is fulfilling the religion of Israel, and that it becomes completely spiritual in him" (The Sources of Revelation, New York, 1968, p.40).

By an awareness of the root yashah which suggests his role as Savior, Christ takes up Mary's keeping and pondering and passes this two-fold contemplative activity to his disciples so that they might absorb the mystery of Christ's revelation in the flesh. Subsequent generations of the Church, in turn, kept and pondered

over the name Jesus in order to appropriate it. For example, the name of Jesus to St. Bernard of Clairvaux "is honey in the mouth, music in the ear, a song in the heart" (On the Song of Songs, Spencer, Massachusetts, 1971, p.110).

In other places of his Commentary on the Song of Songs, Bernard describes the name of Jesus as a kind of medicine and backs up this insight with biblical quotations. In the person of Bernard we have one instance taken from the Church's long history where a person realizes, like the historical Jesus, the significance of this name. We may envision Jesus Christ himself reading scripture (like Bernard and others) drawing out a whole string of biblical references pertaining to his name. Thus he was able to shed further light on his proper identity as Savior of humankind. We may say that Christ indeed "grew and waxed strong in the spirit, filled with wisdom" [Luke 2.40] while pondering all those one-hundred and thirty-four references to his name in the psalter!

The realization of "being Savior" (Yeshuah) came to its fruition after Christ's passion, death and resurrection. On the road to Emmaus we see Christ attempting to impart this realization to his disciples. However, he had to rebuke them for their slowness to understand the recent events in light of scripture [cf. Luke 24.45]. He proceeded to interpret "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (ta peri autou)" (verse 27). Later in verse forty-four Christ elaborates the Old Testament prophecies pertaining to his person by saying "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." The psalms to which Christ is referring here may be found in numerous commentaries. However, it is enlightening to see how the one-hundred and thirty-four verses from the psalter containing the verbal root yashah might amplify this statement. Christ was, in a sense, teaching his disciples how to read and interpret scripture on the road to Emmaus. Their response was "Did not our heart burn within us while he opened to us the scriptures" [verse 32]? In other words, did not our hearts burn within us while Jesus opened to us the hidden meaning of these one-hundred and thirty-four verses from the psalter containing the verbal root yashah, "to save?" Later when the disciples invoked the name of Jesus in their ministry, they do so on the basis of this name's capacity to reveal God's nature and character.

The Gospels display Jesus with a clear sense of mission and goal. The divine sonship is present in all Christ's activities, and to interpret his mission, he possibly used these verses from the psalms pertaining to yashah. A spiritual messiahship tends to be uncovered...revealed...in them, a fact which also pervades the New Testament like leaven to prepare us for the full revelation of his divinity. With the apostles, however, their enlightenment as to the significance of the name Jesus (Yeshuah) came about after experiencing the reality which had first occurred. Then they referred back to the obscurity of the psalms as well as other books of scripture to see the deeper meaning which, in turn, they related to their experiences to discover it in a greater depth of mystery.

To give a better appreciation of the one-hundred and thirty-four verses in the psalter containing the verbal root yashah, they are broken down into six basic categories at the end of this article. The first group contains those verses pertaining to God who effects salvation (fifty-eight verses). Here God's relationship as Savior/saving is stressed, and they must have been of special importance in the awakening of Christ's divinity and mission to save. The second group indicates those psalm verses petitioning God to save or rescue (forty-two verses). These passages depict Christ's humanity in relationship to God the Father, for they are mostly cries of a man to implore God's salvation and mercy. The third group has those references expressing jubilation or joy at experiencing salvation (twenty-three verses). We may apply them to Christ giving thanks to his Father for his mission to save, yashah. They are directed more properly to the Father as Source (Begetter) of salvation, that is, to the One who bestows the reality of salvation (seven verses). It shows the folly of looking for deliverance in places, persons or things other than in Jesus or Yeshuah.

The fifth grouping is unique in the sense that words here are attributed directly to God the Father. While only three such verses are found in the psalter, they show the Father as utterer of yashah. This verse ("Why are you so far from helping me?") is traditionally applied to Christ upon the cross. Occurring as it does at the conclusion of Christ's earthly existence, this verse shows the fulfillment of the preceding five groupings in that it was uttered by the Savior working out our salvation. Perhaps we may say that at this point (Christ on the cross) Jesus had a full comprehension of his name as traced in the psalter. After all, it is a psalm with the verbal root yashah quoted by the Savior, Yeshuah, and this cry of despair is to be considered in light of Psalm twenty-two's victorious conclusion.

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