

## “AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE POWER”

by DAVID FLUSSER

While the questioning of Jesus by the High Priest is itself deserving of a full treatment, our present concern is more restricted: we shall attempt to show how the famous Dead Sea Scrolls can shed new light on Jesus' answer.

In this sad session, two witnesses came forward and said: “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.’” (Matt. 26:61) The High Priest then asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah?’ I would suggest that this question was itself prompted by the content of his testimony. Jesus had said that he would rebuild the Temple (Gr., *naos*; Heb., *hekhal*) of God. According to Zech. 6:12, “the man whose name is the Branch... shall build the Temple (*hekhal*) of the Lord.” The common opinion, also expressed in the Targum, was that this Branch would be the Messiah. Jesus replied to the question about his Messiahship by saying that “from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the Power.” (Luke 22:69)<sup>1</sup>

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This article is an original contribution to *Immanuel*.

1. Luke explains ‘the Power’ by speaking about ‘the power of God.’ The words “from now on” are lacking in Mark 14:62, but they are a “minor agreement” between Matt. 26:64 and Luke 22:69. The words “you will see” in Mark 14:62 (and Matt. 26:64, who combines them with the original “from now on”) are illogical and out of place. They are taken from the Synoptic Apocalypse (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27), as is also the mention of His coming on the clouds of heaven. All this is lacking in Luke.

It is well known that Jesus alludes in this answer to Ps. 110:1: “The Lord says to my lord, sit at My right hand.” It is significant that Jesus also quotes the beginning of the Psalm in another saying, in which he speaks about the question of Messiahship (Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42–43).<sup>2</sup> A recent study<sup>3</sup> contains the very interesting suggestion that, besides Ps. 110, Jesus’ answer to the High Priest is also influenced by Ps. 80:18: “Grant your help to the man at Your right hand, the son of man You have taken as Your own.” Here, both God’s right hand and the son of man are mentioned.

But why does Jesus use the hypostatic term ‘Power’? The key to this is to be found in the description of the Messianic figure in Isa. 9:5 (6). His titles begin with the words פלא יועץ אל גבור (Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God). In his commentary to Isaiah,<sup>4</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrihus (c. 393–c. 466) rightly compares these titles with Gen. 32:30, in which Jacob, after having wrestled with the angel, called the name of the place Peniel (the Face of God) saying, “For I have seen God face to face.” Indeed, the component *El* occurs in many angelic names (e.g., Gabriel). With regard to the word “Wonderful” in Isa. 9:5, it should be remembered that in Judges 13:18 the angel answered Manoah’s question about his name with the words, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” Thus, the designation of the human child in Isa. 9:5 as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God” hints at the angelic component of the child’s nature.

Nevertheless, it is natural that the designation “Mighty God” for a human being was quite astonishing to Jewish readers, and that they tried to eliminate this difficulty. The Septuagint correctly translates the word *El* (God) as ‘angel,’ but the Greek translation of the full title of this Messianic figure is incorrect, partially because the translator misunderstood the Hebrew text.<sup>5</sup> The Aramaic Targum translates the difficult words literally, but Theodoret of Cyrrihus protests against “those around Aquila (evidently a reference to Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion) who translated ‘the Mighty God’ by *ischuros dunatos*’ (the strong mighty one) while in Hebrew it is written ‘*elgibor*!’” I venture that this evasive translation already appeared in the Jewish version of the Septuagint from the first century C.E., which was used by Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion. Medieval Jewish exegetes found an ingenious solution to this problem. In his commentary to

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2. It is remarkable that in the Testament of Job, a Jewish pseudepigraphon written in Greek, Job says (33:3): “My throne is in the supramundane, and its glory and majesty is on the right side of the Father” (*Testamentum Iobi*, ed. S.P. Brock, Leiden, 1967, p. 43).

3. Paul J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša*’ (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Monograph Series. 10.), Washington, 1981, p. 136, and see there n. 21.

4. Theodoret de Cyr, *Commentaire sur Isaïe*, vol. 1, par Jean-Noël Guinot, Paris, 1980, p. 326. See also p. 4 and note 2 there.

5. J.L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah*, Leiden, 1948, pp. 65, 118–9, cf. p. 23.

Isaiah, Abraham Ibn Ezra mentions those who interpret Isa. 9:5 in the following way: "He (God), who is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, will call his (the child's) name Prince of Peace." This interpretation was adopted by Rashi and R. David Kimhi, but Ibn Ezra does not accept it; he thinks that all of these titles refer to the child, who later became King Hezekiah, so that he interprets the words 'Mighty God' as meaning that Hezekiah was mighty. Thus, Ibn Ezra's understanding fits that of Aquila and his colleagues.

But among the Jews of the Second Commonwealth there existed another interpretation which enabled them to avoid an identification between the 'Wonderful Counselor' and 'Mighty God' in Isa. 9:5. According to this view which, although it does not fit the original meaning, is grammatically correct, the Messiah is a Wonderful Counselor *of* the Mighty God. Evidence for such an interpretation is found in an Essene hymn in the Thanksgiving Scroll (1QH 3:2–18). It has already been noted that this hymn is an important contribution to the understanding of chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation.<sup>6</sup> This hymn describes the birth of a man-child. It is hotly debated whether the child is itself meant to be the Messiah or whether the author of the hymn used a Messianic motif in a symbolic way, but a solution to this problem is not important for our purposes. One thing is clear: the Essene hymn reflects a description of the Messiah. In 1QH 3:10, the male child is described as "Wonderful Counselor with His Might" (פלא יועץ עם גבורתו). This is a clear allusion to Isa. 9:5. Indeed, implicit here is an interpretation of Isaiah that the Messiah is (or shall be) God's counselor or, in other words, that the Messiah in his task as a wonderful counselor will be together with God's Might.<sup>7</sup> "Might" or "Power" is the translation of the Hebrew *gevurah*; in Greek, *dunamis*. This term is used as a hypostatic description of God Himself both in Judaism and in the New Testament, but the Dead Sea Sect never dared to coin pure hypostatic terms such as 'Glory' or 'Power',<sup>8</sup> even if they were very close to this concept.

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6. E.g., Roger D. Aus, "The Relevance of Isaiah 66:7 to Revelation 12 and 2 Thessalonians 1," *ZNW* 67 (1976), pp. 252–268, especially pp. 262–263.

7. It is true that the wording in the Scroll permits one to think that "His Might" refers to the might of the Wonderful Counselor, but such an understanding is virtually impossible. Not only would it be poor Hebrew, but the words "wonderful counselor with His might" are clearly based upon an exegesis of Isa. 9:5, where we read about the "Mighty God." Moreover, the idea that the Messiah in his function as a counselor is together with God makes good sense.

8. For a fuller discussion of this problem, see D. Flusser and S. Safrai, "The Essene Doctrine of Hypostasis and Rabbi Meir," *Immanuel* 14 (1982), pp. 47–57.

Avoidance of purely hypostatic terms is restricted to the Dead Sea Sect alone and not to the broader movement from which it originated. In the Ethiopic Book of Enoch 14:20, the Great Glory is seated on the throne (but in another treatise — Enoch 104:1 — we read in both the Ethiopic and the Greek texts about the Glory of the Great One). The Great Glory is parallel to the Great Power in Acts 8:10 and in Rabbinic mystical literature. See Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1965, pp. 67–69 and 133, who also quotes Jesus' words before the High Priest.

They thought that the Glory and Power originate in God, who is their source and who grants them to His elect ones. In our case, they interpreted Isaiah's "Mighty God" as God who possesses the Might, the Power. But then, when one says that the Messiah is together with God's Power one has said that the Wonderful Counselor is with God Himself. On the other hand, those who lacked the Essene's theological inhibitions and did use pure hypostatic terms would have said that the Wonderful Counselor is with the Power. All these considerations lead us to the logical conclusion that the exegesis of Isa. 9:5 mentioned is not an Essene creation, but was only accepted by them, especially because it is also very probable that "Wonderful Counselor with His Might" in our hymn is a more or less symbolic term.

Let us now return to Jesus' answer to the High Priest: "From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the Power" (Luke 20:69 and par.). We have seen that Jesus alludes to the opening of Psalm 110, which verse inspired him to speak about the sitting at the right hand. Possibly, he also remembered Ps. 80:18, which speaks not only about God's right hand but also about the son of man. Jesus' mention of the Son of Man was necessary, because he always used this term when he spoke about the future Messiah. We now see why he also mentioned God as the Power. This relies upon the interpretation of Isa. 9:5, as preserved in IQH 3:10. The Messianic title, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God" is there interpreted as "Wonderful Counselor with His Might (or Power)." According to this exegesis, the task of the Messiah shall be to be a wonderful counselor with God's Power: he will be together with God. It is not far-fetched to assume that Jesus knew this exegesis of Isa. 9:5 and combined it with the allusion to Ps. 110:1. It may even be that the interpretation of Isa. 9:5 in the Thanksgiving Scroll was already influenced by Ps. 110:1; there, we read that the Wonderful Counselor will be *with* God's Power: this could mean that his place as God's Counselor will be at the right hand of the Power.

We have already suggested that the description of the Messiah in IQH 3:10 is not specifically sectarian. Thus, if Jesus' answer to the High Priest reflects the interpretation of Isa. 9:5 found in the Essene writings, this does not imply Essene influence upon Jesus. What is more significant is that the saying is not only based upon Ps. 110:1, but also upon a peculiar interpretation of the Messianic titles in Isa. 9:5. This is natural, because the context is that of Jesus' answer to the question as to whether he is the Messiah. Today, those scholars who doubt Jesus' Messianic self-awareness consequently reject the originality of those of Jesus' sayings which do have a Messianic connotation. While it is true that Jesus' answer to the question of the High Priest is not unequivocal, it seems to me that it is impossible to doubt that these are Jesus' own words and that Jesus has spoken here about the Messiah, whom he identified with the Son of Man. All those who know Jesus' way of speaking cannot deny the authenticity of the saying. It com-

bins the typical simplicity of the literal meaning with hidden allusions to various biblical verses. It is difficult to imagine that any member of the early Church could have invented the words: "From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the Power." The multidimensionality of these words show that they are Jesus' *ipsissima verba*.

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