THE QUOTATION AT JOHN XII 34

BY

BRIAN MCNEIL
Cambridge, England

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The fourth evangelist portrays at Jn. xii 31-34 a clash in Jerusalem over Jesus' claims about himself. Jesus is endorsed by the voice of the Father from heaven (xii 28), and proclaims: 'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'. The crowd check this assertion against their own messianic expectations, and object: 'We have heard from the law that the Christ remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man?'

According to A. J. WENSINCK, the word ἀξωόνα as used here corresponds to 'the Talmudic יסمواد, "to receive a מדרש, opinion, tradition, from", and hence "to receive (traditional) teaching from", especially on a point of halacha; and so simply "to be taught", "to learn from"' 1). The Jews, then, are claiming that Jesus does not match up to the authoritative teaching that ד χριστός μένει εἰς τὸν αἰώνα.

The scriptural passage which the fourth evangelist had in mind here is singularly elusive. There are certainly passages which were interpreted as predictions of the eternal reign of God's Messiah, and such New Testament passages as the prophecy of the angel Gabriel at Lk. i 32 f. indicate that this idea was alive in the first century A.D.:

'He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end'.

(The only new feature of this prophecy is its application to Jesus.) There seems, however, even given a fairly wide interpretation of νόμος, to be no passage which claims explicitly that the Messiah will remain for ever. F.-M. BRAUN suggests that 'une fois admis

que le Messie serait chargé d'instaurer un royaume perpétuel, il était logique de penser qu'il demeurerait toujours 2).

It is, however, worth asking whether there is not an Old Testament passage which would directly explain Jn. xii 34. W. C. van Unnik 3) lists the passages most commonly offered as solutions to this question: Ps. cx 4; Is. ix 6 4); Ezek. xxxvii 25; Dan. vii 4 LXX; and in the pseudepigrapha, I Enoch. xlix r; Pss. Sol. xvii 4; Orac. Sib. III 49 f., 767 f. His own solution, undoubtedly the best if we assume that Jn. xii 34 refers to a Septuagintal text, is Ps. lxxxix 37, τὸ στέφαμα αὐτοῦ εἷς τὸν αἰῶνα μενεῖ 5).

I should like to offer the suggestion that when the crowd say that the Messiah remains for ever, the evangelist has in mind Is. ix 5—not in the Greek,

οἱ παροικοὶ ἐγεννήθη ἡμῖν, οὕς καὶ ἑδοθεὶ ἡμῖν, οὐ ἦ χρή ἐγεννήθη ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱμου αὐτοῦ, καὶ καλείται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Μεγάλης βουλῆς δέχεται· ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐξειλήθην ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄρχοντας, εἰρθήνην καὶ ὑγίσθην αὐτῷ

nor in the Hebrew,

כִּי יְלִדֵל לִבְרָכָה בַּתָּרְכָּלְתֵיהּ
הַמְּשָׁרָה עִלֵּי-שֵׁכָּמִים יְרוּם סְפָר שְׁפֵלָם
יִצְחָק כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יָדְרָא אַבִּיגֵל יָדְרָא אַבְרָי

but in a version close to that of the Targum 6),

הָאָמַר נָבִיא לֶהָתָה דְּרוּדֵי אֲרַי רְבֵי אַתְלִילְד

‘For to us a child is born, and to us a son is given, on whose shoulder is the government, and his name will be called, “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”’ (R.S.V.)

2) Jean le Théologien II : les grandes traditions d'Israël et l'accord des Écritures selon le quatrième Évangile, Paris 1964, p. 104.


4) In the MT, LXX, and Targum this verse is numbered ix 5, and this is the numeration I follow hereafter.
