PLANTING CHRISTIAN TREES IN JEWISH SOIL*

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Part I

This paper aims to show how Matthew has done away with the Jewish messiah who is to redeem Israel from the Nations. In his place, he has provided a Christian messiah who is to redeem the disadvantaged and the gentiles from the Jewish leaders. This is the meaning he gives to the juxtaposition of Jesus’ enthusiastic messianic procession into Jerusalem and his confrontations with the highest Jewish authorities as he enters the precincts of the city. The narrative is driven by Matthew’s unique use of the term “Son of David.”

The Hallel Psalms (centered on Ps. 118:21), mentioning yeshua in the context of “salvation from foreign domination,” are slightly colored by Matthew to present a thoroughly Christian model. The very term used by the Psalmist to beseech redemption from the nations—hoshia na—has been reworked to mean “Praise to the Son of David.” Matthew uses this messianic title throughout his Gospel in scenes primarily meant to glorify Jesus over and against Jewish scholars and rulers. That having been said, we can stand utterly amazed that Matthew’s literary forms, exegetical techniques, and methods of portrayal are thoroughly Jewish, thoroughly Rabbinic (if we can use that term), and thoroughly synagogual. That paradox stands at the center of Matthew 21.

Why does Matt. 21:9 identify the “one who comes” (Ps. 118:26) as the “Son of David,” whereas no gospel parallel gives this identification? My answer considers some other related conundrums. In the beginning of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, Matt. 21:9, the crowd recites Ps. 118:26, “Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” while a few chapters later in 23:39 we read: “For I say to you, You will not see me from this time till you say, Blessed be

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the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Furthermore, in Matt. 21:9 the crowds welcome Jesus as he rides his messiah-charged animals to Jerusalem, but in the next verse, 29:10, we read, “And when he came into Jerusalem, all the town was moved, saying, Who is this?” The people in the Temple have no idea who he is until informed by the followers from the previous scene. We have two episodes viewed through an intersitial forward movement of donkey canter, prayer cantor, then ahead backwards to old conflict scenes. Time is divided between now and future expectancy. The symbols here of reciting Psalm 118 and holding palm branches mark the ambiguity in the narrative and even in the ritual itself. Herein lies the Matthean view of sonship on either side of the threshold of the Kingdom. On one side are the Jewish verbs: people do Jewish things. On the other side are the Christian nouns: people experience Christian things. Let me deepen these motifs of chronological and eschatological time in terms of two other Jewish Temple celebrations. We will discover here how Matthew’s understanding of the key scenes in chap. 21 are completely sensitive to Jewish hermeneutics.

The Passover seder rituals revolve around two poles. The first relates the Israelite experience of past slavery in Egypt. The second concerns the experience of Israel’s future redemption from current persecutions. The Passover celebrates the past by anticipating the future. The School of Shammai lumped together both of these motifs at the seder by reciting Ps. 114:1—“When Israel came out of Egypt, the children of Jacob from a people whose language was strange to them”—together with Psalm 118:26—“Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The undivided recitation of these Psalms conflates the dual motifs. For the School of Shammai the meal follows after the recitations and as such the paschal meal (sacrificial ritual) has messianic import. On the other hand, the School of Hillel interrupts the two halves of the Psalm recitations by the ritual Passover meal. The meal, and this is contemporary practice, simultaneously ends the Egyptian exodus suffering motif and begins the redemptive eschatology motif. The covenantal meal separating the two halves of the ceremony is the fulcrum of confluence of the themes.

An introduction (first known in writing, but apparently much older, from the Seder of Amram Gaon, ninth century) to the Passover seder is still current. This ha lachma anya poem combines the two above themes: the Egypt and messianic motifs plus a mid-ritual sacrificial/feast demarcating both features: 1) Redemption from the affliction in