

The Issue of Christ in the Old Testament

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The Old Testament provides a Messianic vision through prophetic conveyance. The OT prophets furnish insight into Israel's history but do not advance the storyline of the Old Testament. Instead, the OT's audience is given help in understanding Israel's history on a deeper level. The more significant number of the prophets are preexilic and deliver forewarnings to both Israel and Judah regarding the dangers of rejecting God. The smaller number of prophets, exilic and postexilic, echo Israel's returning to the land. Summarizing the prophets emphasizes God's judgment, salvation, and reign over his people.

This idea leads to another feature of the prophets. There will be a new ruler over all creation. Though both Israel and Judah suffered exile, this condition was not permanent. God had not abandoned them and promised that Israel would return to their land. His promise of the woman's seed to bruise the head of the serpent was not withdrawn. The consummation of God's promise to Abraham of heirs, land, and blessings would be fulfilled, as would the promise of a reigning Davidic king where a new creation and new exodus are a reality, resulting in God making a new covenant with his people.

At this point, a critical question sets Jews and Christians at odds— is Jesus the Messiah? The OT motif of the Davidic dynasty evolved into the New Testament's grounds of eschatological hope and proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah. This hope strengthened behind most of the OT's writing, with the NT building further on developing this eschatological nature of hope. Liberating the national promise of a new king from a larger hope is not easy, given OT texts. However, the greater anticipation added up to gathered individual promises, specifically the linking of a future monarchy inviting an eschatological meaning in Isaiah 11:1-9. In addition, the rearrangement of the royal psalms that referred to individual Davidic kings has been collected and reinterpreted for forthcoming royal hope in Psalms.

What was the ancient's familiarity when they heard the word Messiah? For Christians, the word is traditionally identified with Jesus but has proven to be more complex than this

simple equation. In the ongoing dispute of messianism in the OT, two questions arise. Is there an expectation, and what kind? Mowinckel's minimization of messianic expectation in the OT viewed God's anointed primarily as the king, a political figure.¹ Contrasting this idea is Ringgren's view of a figure beyond the people of Israel linked with the royal psalms and OT servant passages.² Further discussions suggest not over-reading these related texts but with the understanding that there is more than simply a fulfillment by a figure of the time or Israel's people. There is a variety of possible people who are designated or thought about in some way to be God's anointed. Is. 45:1, for example, mentions Cyrus the Persian. King David is specially mentioned, and various prophets and others are also mentioned. However, in the OT, is there a kind of messianic expectation as portrayed in the NT, delivering a unique and specific person as God's only Messiah? Given this point, there is significant variation in scholarly thought.

The debate remains between the nature and significance of messianism for early Judaism and Christianity. One of the most disputed points is its meaning and origin. Two questions are fundamental to this continuing dialogue. What is the extent of messianism's role in shaping the theologies of various expressions of Judaism and Christianity? Was messianism a fundamental principle in ancient Judaism, as it symbolized Christianity? Given the framework of Christianity and its Messianic fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the analysis of first-century Jewish Messianic expectations is significantly considered. The ennoblement of a Davidic dynasty is ancient, with the messianic trajectory originating with the emergence of royal ideology in the expression of Israelite kingship. "Not all Jews had an expectation for such a figure, and for those who did the figure's mission or task varied. Also, the term "messiah" was not always used to denote this expected figure."³ These principles are

¹ S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (New York, NY: Abingdon, 1954).

² H. Ringgren, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (SBT 18; London: SCM Press, 1956).

³ Derek Dodson and Katherine Smith, *Exploring Biblical Backgrounds: A Reader in Historical & Literary Contexts* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 189.

rooted fundamentally in the ancient Near East in general as they are in Israel's activities and religious beliefs. "The Jewish national hope anticipated a glorious destiny for Israel, the 'good times coming' when God's blessings would reveal to all his favor toward his people."⁴

Though several possible conceptions exist in messianism, Christian scholars imposed the idea of "*the Messianic hope*" of the Jews as the specific expression appropriated from Judaism to interpret the person of Jesus to their contemporaries. This idea, though an early Christian interpretation of Jesus, is not the general consensus of messianism. *Messiah*, or *anointed*, is an Old Testament expression used for kings, priests, and, as a metaphor, for prophets. "The Old Testament itself does not link the word with its expectations of future deliverance, and *Messiah* is not a particularly prominent concept in the intertestamental literature."⁵ Often God's actions are direct and without reference to a human mediator. The Samaritan's *ta'eb* speaks of a prophet like Moses, expressed also as reformer and restorer (John 4:25). Here, Beale and Carson make an interesting point, "The woman's affirmation, 'He will explain everything to us,' is consistent with the fact that the Samaritans, rather than looking for the royal Messiah from the house of David (as did the Jews), apparently expected a "teaching" Messiah."⁶ The Psalms of Solomon 17-18, suggest the son of David as the coming king and "the anointed of the Lord." The book "originated from a group of Jews who criticized the (Jewish) leadership of the Hasmoneans and loathed the newly Roman rule."⁷ The Qumran *Rule of the Community 9.11* anticipates the arrival of an eschatological "prophet and the messiahs of Aaron and Israel." "The second excerpt (mid-first century BCE) describes how the priest, and the messiah will preside over the community's sacred meal 'in the final days,'"⁸ while the *Rule of the Congregation* speaks of the "messiah of Israel" and

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 551.

⁵ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 552.

⁶ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 440.

⁷ Dodson and Smith, *Exploring Biblical Backgrounds*, 189.

⁸ *Ibid.*

“priest” who has precedence reflecting the post-exilic community of the priests of Levi (through Aaron), and the governor (and hoped for king) from the tribe of Judah (through David).⁹

Longman’s view of messianism in the OT proposes that a specific messianic expectation rises only in the late post-OT times. However, the roots are seen much earlier and associated with texts looking forward to a future anointed king or priest figure bringing salvation to God’s people. Both OT and NT authors believed that many texts had messianic significance. These passages include Gen. 3:15; 14:17-20; 49:8-12; Num. 24:17-19; Deut. 18:18-19; Psalms 2 and 110; and Dan. 9:24-26, where *mašīaḥ* is actual.¹⁰ The result is a question raised by Longman and others: Did the original authors understand these passages as messianic? If not, then what is the significance of this material’s use in the NT?

Boda notes that in the Prophets *mašīaḥ* is rarely associated with an anticipated future leader within the OT, except Dan. 9:24-26 and Is. 61:1. He further proposes that most Hebrew passages describe past and present leaders. However, by examining the Prophets, the employment of the words “Messiah” and “messianic” is the proper way to refer to an assortment of future leaders or the functions of a single leader.¹¹ There is tension in the last passages of the Prophets concerning the character and role of future leaders delivering the implication of the prophetic voice transitioning to a more emphatic eschatological priority. Where first-century Judaism’s presentation about a coming age figured in a particular agent, a clearly defined view of the *Messiah* was not especially a conventional description. The “days of Messiah” was the expression of where he appeared as opposed to the significance of his purpose as a person. “He was part of the ‘furniture’ rather than a decisive factor.”¹² In this

⁹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 552.

¹⁰ Stanley E. Porter, *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, IL: Eerdmans, 2007), 4-5.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 552.

¹² *Ibid.*, 553.

framing, “messianic” in the Jewish expectation of Messiah was not the key classification it was for Christians. Thus, it is evident in the Prophets that the new David will shepherd Israel with love and care, unlike those who preceded him. In Daniel, the connection provides that the son of man will shatter worldly kingdoms. It is also evident in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah that the new David will shepherd and rule God’s flock, a function of the stone in Daniel and the son of man. For this reason, one may think of the new David and the son of man as one and the same. However, Isaiah clarifies that the son of man will be given the kingdom, that the new David will rule, and that he is the Spirit-anointed ruler of God’s people (Is. 9:2-7; 11:1-9).

Isaiah plainly notes that the new exodus and new creation will only come through the Lord’s servant. The sins of Israel forgiven resulted in their return from exile, and the one who bore their sins is God’s suffering servant, the shepherd who was struck for the people’s sake, according to Zechariah. This new exodus and new creation become a reality through the new David, the son of man and the Lord’s servant. All have the same meaning. This reality is God’s promise to Abraham realized through the new David, the servant of the Lord and the son of man as the NT refers to Jesus as the Son of David, the messianic king, the servant of the Lord, and Son of man.

Jeremiah’s prophecy concerning messianic expectations provides a major theme for a new covenant in chapters 30-33. These combined passages explain God’s provision for the future restoration of his people. While Judah suffered great terror under the attack of the Babylonians (30:4-7, 12-15), Jeremiah offered the people new hope for a planned restoration by God. He reminds them of God’s covenantal past with them and encourages them that if they repented of their sins, God would build them up and plant them (31:1-14). A new covenant is offered by God that would be written on their hearts and never broken (31:31-40). Jeremiah reminded the people that God's promise to heal, transform, and fill the land with joy

is because of David's righteous *Branch* (23:3-6) to rule and restore worship through the Levites (33:1-26).

Zechariah's prophetic utterances occur in eight visions concerning God's people during the Persian period. These visions are framed within the first theme of Zechariah encouraging the people of Jerusalem that the sovereign God was in control of their future. Though Judah was symbolized as having patrolling horse riders, God knew what was happening within the land (1:7-11) and was zealous for their future but angry with the surrounding nations' ease (1:12-17). The second vision pronounces destruction to four horns by four craftsmen (1:18-21). The third involved a man measuring for the building of Jerusalem's walls with the intervention of an angel telling him that the people of God were too numerous for walls but, instead, that the fire of God's presence would protect the city (2:6-13). The high priest Joshua is on trial in Zechariah's fourth vision. God forgave his sins and gave him new clothing to fulfill his priestly roles (3:3-8). Two olive trees stand between a lampstand, one representing Zerubbabel encouraged by God's Spirit to build the temple (4:6). This fifth vision also exhorts Zerubbabel not to despise a diminutive temple building (4:1-14). The sixth vision symbolizes God's curses against sinful activity by representing a flying scroll. Babylon would, in turn, receive the wickedness of the land (5:5-11). God's sovereign control of the world's four corners is Zechariah's seventh vision of chariots (6:1-8). Still finally, the future hope of the *Branch*, the coming Davidic Messiah, who has a priestly function (6:9-14), is symbolic of the high priest Joshua's gold crown placed upon his head by the people.

Lastly in one's examination of Zechariah is a king riding on a donkey into Jerusalem whose purpose is to bring salvation and righteousness to God's people (9:9). He is related to the rejected good Shepherd (11:4-13) and the pierced Man (12:10-12). These prophecies are universal in dimension and not restricted to Israel only, but the resulting salvation brought

about by the new David extends beyond Israel and includes the Gentiles whose hope is in the servant of the Lord and the Davidic king.

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