

# **The Messianic Hope**

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## **The Messianic Hope**

Christians all over the world and through the centuries have affirmed the basic confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Indeed, the familiar title “Christ” is a Greek form of the term Messiah. However, though this confession is at the core of the Christian faith, Christians sometimes are unclear about what the messianic hope meant in the context of ancient Jewish life, how it developed from the writings of the prophets, how it was sharpened in the intertestamental period, and how the New Testament apostles interpreted the Old Testament promises as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. For the most part, we have been content to brush shoulders with a handful of messianic passages during Advent and Christmas.

This class will explore the messianic hope. Far more than compiling a list of Old Testament verses that are fulfilled in the New Testament, we shall try to apprehend the messianic consciousness as it gradually arose out of the context of looming historical disaster for Israel and Judah and a vibrant hope on the other side. The messianic hope was that the future would not end with this terrible judgment in history. In this way, we shall see how the Old Testament is not simply a prelude to the Christian message but serves as an integral part of that message. We shall see why the ancient fathers of the church clearly embraced the Old Testament as a Christian document. Finally, we shall see why the God of the Old Testament is also the God of the New Testament.

### **From Hiddenness to the Proclamation of Jesus**

One feature that arises several times in the New Testament is that the Christ was “hidden” by God until he was revealed. Peter, for instance, says that Christ was chosen before the creation but was revealed “in these last times” (1 Pe. 1:20). Paul speaks of the gospel of Christ as something “hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings” (Rom. 16:26). Paul can even say that the message of grace was “given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 1:9-10). Again and again, the whole complex of events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and the message of the Christians is described as “revealed” (e.g., Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:23; Eph. 3:2-6; 1 Pe. 1:10-12).

This language of hiddenness should not be taken to mean that until Christ appeared no one had any idea that such a one was coming. At the same time, it clearly suggests that there was a certain ambiguity about the coming one before he appeared. This ambiguity was sufficient to allow a number of historical figures in the decades both before and after Jesus to make messianic claims and to gain a hearing. Some of these are alluded to briefly in the New Testament (cf. Ac. 5:36-37; 21:38), and we know of others in historical writings of the period.<sup>1</sup> In subsequent history, there also was sufficient ambiguity to allow the majority of Jews to continue in Judaism without a compelling need to claim the appearance of a messiah. Even among those Jews who eagerly anticipated a messiah, there were competing notions. Some believed he would be born in Bethlehem (cf. Mt. 2:5), and some believed his origins would be unknown (Jn. 7:27).

Hence, the burden of proof that Jesus truly was the coming one fell squarely on his disciples. Jesus himself gave them a primary lesson in such Old Testament interpretation (Lk. 24:25-27, 32, 44-47). Furthermore, the miraculous events in the life of Jesus became a primary testimony to his Christhood (Jn. 20:30-31). Finally, the Holy Spirit also aided Jesus' followers in understanding his messiahship (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13-15). When Paul began his missionary trips among the gentiles, his pattern was first to attend the Jewish synagogue and to reason with them from the Hebrew Bible that Jesus was the Christ (Ac. 13:23-41; 14:1; 17:2-4, 10-12; 18:4-5; 19:8-10).

So, what was there in the Torah and the prophets of Israel that was so compelling to the disciples? How did they bridge the gap from the hiddenness of the messiah to the clear and unambiguous proclamation that what God had promised he had fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth?

### **The Earliest Hints**

It is fair to say that prior to the appearance of the writing prophets, the idea of a coming messianic figure was virtually unknown. To be sure, there were hints of this future, but they were occasional, brief and less than precise. Five passages in the Torah especially should be singled out as messianic. The earliest hint is the protevangelium in the curses after the fall. The "seed" or offspring of the woman would crush the snake's head, though the snake would snap at his heel (Gen. 3:15). In retrospect, Paul is surely right in assigning this passage to Christ's victory over Satan (Rom. 16:20). However, it is also fair to say that as originally given, the

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<sup>1</sup> In Flavius Josephus quite a number of Jewish revolutionaries adopted a messianic tone patterned after Judas Maccabeus, cf. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17-20 and *Wars of the Jews*, 2. These figures span a time from about 40 BC until the early 60s AD, and beyond that, to the first and second Jewish revolts in the late 60s and 130s AD carried a similar ideal.

promise is veiled and could just as easily have been interpreted that there would be ongoing conflict between humans and the serpent, each trying to kill the other. Since Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century), Christians have regularly understood this passage to refer to Christ and Mary, where the “seed” was understood individually (i.e., one person) rather than collectively (i.e., posterity) and “the seed of the woman” was understood to be a reference to the virgin birth. The ambiguity of the Hebrew term זרע, however, is that it can mean either an individual or posterity.

In God’s call to Abraham there is another hint about the future. In his covenant, God promised that in Abraham’s “seed” all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; cf. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Here, again, the word זרע is ambiguous. Does it refer to Abraham’s posterity (i.e., the people of Israel) or to some individual in Abraham’s posterity? St. Paul is quite clear that the term “seed” refers to “one person, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Doubtless he is correct. Yet, his assessment derives from his knowledge of Jesus and from the inspiration of the Spirit, not the grammar of the Hebrew text.

Later, when Jacob blessed his sons on his deathbed, Judah was singled out as the royal son (Gen. 49:10). His descendants would be kings, as symbolized by the scepter and ruler’s staff. Of course, many centuries would pass before Judah’s favorite son, David, would ascend to the throne to fulfill this kingly anticipation. Yet even after David began the royal line, his dynasty would only continue “until” one would come to whom the kingship rightly belonged. This coming one would rule the nations. Who would he be, and when would he appear? The prophecy does not say. Micah, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, singles out a coming one from Bethlehem in Judah who will rule over Israel (Mic. 5:2). A century and a half later, Ezekiel announced that the royal office of Zedekiah, the “wicked prince” of David’s family at the time of the Babylonian exile, had come to an end and would not be restored “until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs” (Eze. 21:25-27). So, the ambiguous language in Genesis is clarified in the historical circumstances surrounding the Assyrian threat to Judah and the fall of Jerusalem.

When the Israelites sojourned in the desert before entering the land of promise, a pagan prophet from northwest Mesopotamia was hired by the Moabite king Balak to curse them. In all, Balaam made four unsuccessful attempts at cursing, and instead, was compelled by God to bless the Israelites. In his final oracle, his blessing of the Israelites included a reference to a future “star out of Jacob” and “scepter out of Israel” (Num. 24:17). The astrological image, which probably was natural enough to a Mesopotamian diviner, is a metaphor for a king.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The Hebrew parallelism in the poetic stanza indicates as much, where the “star” is parallel to the “scepter.”

Though this king would not appear in the near future, when he came he would conquer Israel's neighbors (Num. 24:18-19). Who was he? David certainly fits the description, but many Christians, beginning with Justin Martyr in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, have believed the prophecy ultimately is about Christ.<sup>3</sup> Jewish interpreters, also, gave the passage a messianic nuance.<sup>4</sup>

After the Israelites had spent a whole generation in the desert and awaited entry into the land, Moses' final speeches to the congregation of Israel included the prediction of a prophet like himself (Deut. 18:18). Again, there is ambiguity. In an immediate sense, Moses' successor was Joshua ben Nun, but it is equally clear that in the various successors to Moses, Joshua included, none arose to equal Moses (cf. Deut. 34:10-12). So who would be the prophet like Moses? The Jews by the time of Jesus had concluded that it could be none other than the Messiah when he would appear (cf. Jn. 1:21, 45; 6:14; 7:40). Clearly, the earliest Christians agreed with this interpretation (Acts 3:20-23; 7:37).

Between Moses and the Israelite monarchy, virtually nothing in the biblical literature directly anticipates a messiah. However, the beginning of the monarchy saw an escalation of the royal concept based on the Deuteronomic laws, and this new institution in Israel set the stage for the beginning of a messianic ideal. If the ancient prophecies of Jacob over Judah and Balaam over Israel looked ahead to a royal figure, the Deuteronomic code also anticipated an era when Israel would accept a monarchy as well as a centralized, permanent shrine for worship. The two definitive passages are Deuteronomy 12 and 17. In the one appears the repeating description of "the place the LORD your God will choose" (12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26). This site was conceptualized as a permanent shrine where Yahweh would place his name, and all worship was to be conducted there. Such centralization would be quite different than the varied locations of patriarchal altars or the moveable sites for the Tent of Meeting.

Along with a centralized sacred place for worship would be a centralized government under a king. Not only the place for worship but the king himself would be someone "the LORD your God chooses" (17:15). Especially, the king was to be a God-fearing, Torah-conscious leader (17:18-20).

Samuel was a pivotal figure in this transition. Even before his adulthood, a prophetic prayer by his mother looked ahead to a coming king, a "messiah" anointed of God (1 Sam. 2:10b). When Samuel was chosen by circumstances to

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<sup>3</sup> *First Apology*, xxxii.

<sup>4</sup> Targum Onkelos reads: *When a mighty king of Jacob's house will reign, and the Messiah will be magnified...* Targum Jonathan, also, offers the same messianic approach as does the Talmud and the community at Qumran, cf. R. Allen, "Numbers," *EBC* (1990) II.911.

replace Eli's failed priesthood, the cryptic comment was made by an unnamed prophet that the true priest would minister "before my messiah always" (1 Sam. 2:35), a word suggestive of the future king.

## The Messianic King

During Samuel's declining years, the tribes took steps to initiate this ancient expectation of a king (1 Sam. 8). The process of installation included anointing (1 Sam. 10:1) a sacramental act by which a person was destined for a special office. This act effectively set apart Saul as "the anointed [the messiah] of the LORD". Afterward the term מָשִׁיחַ (= messiah, the anointed) became a regular metonymy for the king (e.g., 1 Sam. 12:3, 5; 16:6; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16).

When David succeeded Saul, he, too, was anointed in a symbolic act that set him apart for his office (1 Sam. 16:13). The title messiah continued as a figure of speech for David's office as it had his predecessor (e.g., 2 Sam. 19:21; 22:51; 23:1), and later, for Solomon as well (2 Chr. 6:42; cf. 1 Kg. 1:39). The so-called royal psalms frequently use the title messiah as a designation for the Davidic king, referring either to David or one of the sons in his dynasty (Psa. 2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 28:8; 84:9; 89:38, 51; 132:10, 17; Lam. 4:20).

Even more significant than the euphemistic title messiah is the special covenant God established with David. Through the prophet Nathan, Yahweh promised to David a perpetual dynasty that would last forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 1 Chr. 17:11-14). From among David's sons would come one who would build God's permanent shrine on Mt. Zion. The Deuteronomic ideal of one king and one central shrine would be established together. David himself had longed to build this temple (2 Sam. 7:1-3; 1 Chr. 17:1-2), but God restricted him because he was a man of war, deferring the project to Solomon, a man of peace (1 Chr. 22:6-10). Nevertheless, the twin institutions of Davidic kingship and the Zion temple were inextricably linked (Psa. 2:6-9; 78:65-72; 132:10-18). God's choice of David and Zion were welded together for all time. Thus, the Davidic king—the son in David's line—was the messiah, while Zion was the place of his throne.

The citizens of Judah found it difficult to look beyond this basic definition that their king was the messiah. Had not God promised the continuity of David's dynasty forever, secure in every part (2 Sam. 23:5)? Would he not provide victory always to his chosen king (2 Sam. 22:47-51)? Was not Zion secure forever (Psa. 46:1-7; 48:1-14; 125:1-2; 146:10)? No wonder when the northern clans seceded from the tribal union after Solomon's death, the southern tribe of Judah never lost faith in the dynasty of her favorite son or the temple that David's son had built. To be faithful to David and Zion was to be guaranteed eternal political security—or so

it seemed. It took the prophets and the horrors of Mesopotamian imperialism to shake this hope and make way for a messianic ideal pushed into the indeterminate future.

The division of the monarchy after Solomon's death was a theological watershed for the Israelites. The northern tribes flatly rejected the dynasty of David after Rehoboam's rash threat (1 Kg. 12:1-16//2 Chr. 10:1-16). Along with the dynasty of David, they implicitly rejected David's covenant and the temple built by his son—and along with it, the messianic ideal embodied in the Davidic covenant. Though the temple services in Jerusalem had been in place for nearly three decades, Jeroboam, the new king in the north made certain that the northern clans would not revert to David's dynasty in the south. He reestablished two of the old patriarchal worship centers in Bethel (which Jacob had named as the "house of God, the gate of heaven", cf. Gen. 28:16-19) and Dan (an old shrine in the far north established by a maverick Levite, cf. Jg. 18:27-31). Jeroboam persuaded his constituents to go here for their annual festivals (1 Kg. 12:26-30). He made changes in the priesthood and the liturgical year to reinforce the alienation from the Davidic temple (1 Kg. 12:31-33). Of course, such changes did not set well with the levitical clan, and some Levites defected to the south (2 Chr. 11:13-17). By and large, however, Jeroboam was successful in severing ties with the Davidic ideals.

This national cleavage had profound effects upon the messianic ideal. From the time of Jacob's dying blessing, the tribe of Judah had been singled out for royalty (Gen. 49:10), and this blessing had been substantially reinforced by the Davidic covenant. The northern nation was now alienated from Judah and the Davidic dynasty. Nevertheless, the connection with the south did not vanish entirely, and two striking incidents in the north pointed toward the validity of the Davidic ideal. In the first incident, an unnamed prophet condemned Jeroboam's altar at Bethel, announcing that a Davidic son of the future would burn the bones of the northern false priests upon this altar (1 Kg. 13:1-5). Later, Elijah staged a dramatic contest on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Ba'al so that it climaxed at the time of the evening sacrifice, offered far southward in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kg. 18:29). He built the altar of twelve stones, a potent symbol that the political division of the tribes could not destroy their theological unity (1 Kg. 18:31). Judah, for its part, kept alive the messianic ideal by faithfulness to David's family and the temple.

## **The 8<sup>th</sup> Century Prophets**

It is with the writing prophets that the messianic consciousness began to build significantly. Both nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, were under divine judgment for covenant violation. This judgment, according to the



Deuteronomic code, would come first in the form of economic hardship and later in the form of foreign invasions (Lev. 26:14-32; Deut. 28:15-63). Eventually, if covenant unfaithfulness persisted, the curse of dispersion would result in the loss of the land itself (Lev. 26:33-35; Deut. 28:64-68). Beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Amos and Hosea preached scathing messages of coming judgment to the northern tribes. The nation of Israel would be destroyed with only a few survivors (Am. 3:11-12; 5:2-3). The citizens would be exiled from their land (Am. 5:27; 6:7; 7:17). Nevertheless, this predicted doomsday would not be the end of history. After judgment would come restoration. The restoration would revive the Davidic ideal, even in the north. The fallen tent of David—a metaphor for the rejection of David’s family (cf. Isa. 38:12)—would be restored (Am. 9:11-12), and Israel once more would be established in the Holy Land in the midst of prosperity (Am. 9:13-15).

Hosea, another prophet in the north, preached substantially the same message. Though the citizens of the north would be torn from their land (Hos. 5:14-15; 9:3, 17; 10:5-7), after judgment there was still a future. Though this future included exile, a period without king or cult (Hos. 3:4), afterward the Israelites would seek Yahweh and his promises to the family of David (Hos. 3:5). Though the north had rejected David, God would bring the nation back full circle!

In the south, though Judah remained faithful to David’s family and the temple, the same covenant breaking patterns that were the bane of the north also proliferated. Micah was the first prophet in the south to predict that the temple of Solomon on Mt. Zion would be destroyed (Mic. 3:11-12). The citizens of Judah would be exiled to Babylon (Mic. 4:10). Still, this judgment was not Yahweh’s final word. Beyond judgment was the hope for a future king who would rule over the survivors (Mic. 2:12-13; 4:8). In fact, a new Zion, a center of worship for the nations of the world, would replace the temple that was to be destroyed (Mic. 4:1-4). A new ruler would come, born in Bethlehem, David’s city, and his reign would bring peace to the whole world (Mic. 5:2-5).

Isaiah, Micah’s contemporary, demonstrated that the connection between temple and king must not be reckoned merely in earthly categories, for the real king was Yahweh himself, who was enthroned in the temple (Isa. 6:1-5). In fact, the earthly kingdom would perish and the citizens of the land would be driven out, cut down like so many trees in the forest, leaving only stumps (Isa. 6:11-13). Near the end of Isaiah’s ministry, after Hezekiah foolishly displayed his national treasury to Merodach-Baladan of Babylon, the prophet announced that Babylon would take the citizens of Judah into exile (Isa. 39:1-7).

Once again, however, as with the other 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, the failure of the

kingdom of Judah would not be the conclusion of history. Beyond judgment, a new hope in the family of David would arise. Though the remnant of Judah would be like stumps, a branch would grow from Jesse's stump that would bring justice to the poor of the earth (Isa. 11:1-10). This Branch would become the means of blessing and restoration for the nation (Isa. 4:2-6). The people who had experienced the darkness of invasion would see the light of God's future in the rise of a king from David's line, a king who would reign forever (Isa. 9:1-7; 16:4b-5; 32:1; 33:17). The scattered remnant of God's people would be regathered (Isa. 11:12) and redeemed (Isa. 12:1-6). A remnant of aliens, also, would be joined to the Israelites in the common worship of Yahweh (Isa. 14:1-2; 19:19-25; 24:14-16; 25:6-9). Like Micah, Isaiah envisioned this future as the exaltation of Zion, the mountain Yahweh had chosen for his temple (Isa. 2:1-5; 33:20-24).<sup>5</sup>

Nor was the hope for the future confined only to the bare idea of an eternal kingship. Associated with this royal promise were a series of breath-taking corollary promises. Agricultural prosperity would be astounding (Am. 9:13-15; Hos. 2:21-22; Isa. 30:23-26). The divided nation would be reunited into a single people (Hos. 1:10-11; Mic. 2:12; 5:3; Isa. 14:1; 27:12-13). War would cease (Hos. 2:18; Isa. 2:4; 9:5; Mic. 4:3). The imagery of each citizen living in safety "under his own vine and under his own fig tree" depicts a healthy and prosperous life (Mic. 4:4). God would redeem the nation from death (Hos. 13:14; Isa. 26:19), providing justice and offering forgiveness, salvation and joy (Mic. 7:8-10, 18-20; Isa. 1:18, 25-27; 4:4; 11:4-5; 12:2-6; 30:19-22; 33:24; 35:1-10). Conditions of absolute peace, a restoration to the Garden of Eden, would be epitomized in the harmony of carnivores and their natural prey lying down together without aggression or fear (Isa. 11:6-9). All abusers would be purged from society (Isa. 29:17-21). The divine Spirit would be poured out on the earth like rain to usher in an era of righteousness and complete peace (Isa. 32:14-20). Hence, it is appropriate to speak of a messianic consciousness. The promise of a coming king and all the blessings attending his righteous reign form the messianic hope.

Thus, the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets developed the messianic ideal out of the context of the coming judgment for the two nations of Israel and Judah. Even though the northern kingdom rejected the family of David, and even though the Davidic dynasty in the south would not survive in the normal course of events, the sure promises of God to David would not fail (Psa. 2:6-9; 78:19-37; 132:11-18). Their fulfillment was only postponed until after a judgment within history. Beyond that judgment lay a future—a messianic future!

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<sup>5</sup> The nearly verbatim parallel in the Hebrew text between Isaiah 2:2-5 and Micah 4:1-5 almost certainly shows a literary dependency between these contemporary prophets.

Succeeding prophets followed the precedent set by the 8th century prophets from various periods of Israel's history. Just as Amos and Hosea had predicted, the northern nation was exiled by Assyria. Further south, the looming invasions of the Assyrians, and after them the Babylonians, preoccupied the minds of the citizens of Judah for the better part of two centuries. Judgment was coming, but after judgment, a remnant of survivors would be left to grasp the promises of a bright future.

## **The 7<sup>th</sup> Century Prophets**

As the history of the kingdom of Judah wound down, the prophetic voices announcing doomsday became more insistent. Zephaniah, like Amos and Isaiah before him, used the expression “the Day of Yahweh” to describe the coming disaster (Zep. 1:14). Nevertheless, after judgment Yahweh promised to regather and purify his scattered people (Zep. 3:9-10; 3:19-20), a remnant who would no longer break covenant as they once had (Zep. 3:13). Yahweh, their true King, would bring them salvation and joy (Zep. 3:15-17).

In the meantime, there remained the problem of the Davidic hope. What about the sure promises to David of a dynasty that would never fail? What about the claim that Yahweh had chosen Zion forever and eternally placed his name in the temple built by David's son? Jeremiah, the brooding preacher whose ministry lasted from Josiah until the collapse of Jerusalem, wrestled with this issue on and off during his whole ministry.

In the first place, there was a terrible precedent for the destruction of the temple—Shiloh, which God had destroyed during the priesthood of Eli (1 Sam. 4). What God had done to Shiloh he intended to do to the temple on Zion (Jer. 7:12-15; 26:1-6). Faithfulness to temple ritual without faithfulness to Yahweh himself and to his Torah was no guarantee of anything (Jer. 7:1-11)! Furthermore, a nominal loyalty to the dynasty of David as though that fact alone would preserve the nation was a deceptive hope. Many of the later kings in David's family were covenant-breakers and blasphemers. After Jehoiakim flippantly burned Jeremiah's scroll (Jer. 36:22-26), the prophet announced that Yahweh had rejected Jehoiakim and his family (Jer. 36:29-31). Repeatedly, Jeremiah warned against a royal theology that clung to the promises of David but ignored the demands of the Torah (Jer. 22:1-9). Jehoiachin, who succeeded Jehoiakim, would be like a discarded signet ring. None of these sons would sit on David's throne (Jer. 22:24-30). Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, speculated that perhaps God would perform a last minute miracle to save his kingship, but to such naive optimism Jeremiah offered a searing rebuttal (Jer. 21:1-7). As to the kings of David's line who depended upon their supposed divine guarantee, they would think again (Jer. 21:11-13)!

Still, the coming judgment against the house of David was not God's last word. A remnant would survive to be regathered and restored (Jer. 23:3-4). The righteous Branch of which Isaiah spoke reappears in the oracles of Jeremiah, a future king from David's line who would arise to fulfill the ancient promises (Jer. 23:5-8). A repeating theme in Jeremiah's restoration oracles is the return from exile (Jer. 30:3; 31:17; 33:7). The distress of the nation would come to an end, and the nation once more would serve a king from David's line (Jer. 30:8-9), a leader close to Yahweh (Jer. 30:21). The royal palace in Jerusalem and the temple on Mt. Zion would be restored (Jer. 30:18b; 31:6b, 12, 23, 38-40). All the tribes of Israel would be reunited (Jer. 31:1), and God would establish with them a new covenant of forgiveness (Jer. 31:31-34), a covenant guaranteed for all time (Jer. 31:35-37). Associated with this new covenant was the reestablishment of David's family (33:14-18). The ancient promises to David were guaranteed fulfillment by Yahweh's most solemn oath (Jer. 33:19-26).

Thus, the messianic hope embodied in the line of David remained valid. The prophets, especially Jeremiah, demonstrated that this hope must be interpreted in terms other than the politics of the ancient kingdom of Judah, however. Judah was a kingdom under judgment. The sons of David who ruled in Jerusalem prior the exile fell far short of what God required. The hope for a kingdom ruled over forever by David's son must be deferred to a future time after the coming judgment in history.

## **Other Prophetic Voices**

Other prophets continued to develop the vision of hope beyond the looming disaster of exile. Joel, like Amos, anticipated a return to incredible prosperity (Jl. 2:18-19, 21-27). The gift of the divine Spirit would be poured out upon all people (Jl. 2:28-29), and salvation would be given to anyone calling on the Lord's name (Jl. 2:32). God's interest in peoples beyond the boundaries of Israel was sharply profiled in the Book of Jonah (cf. 4:10-11). The inscrutable purposes of God in history, especially in view of the coming fall of Judah, prompted deep musings from the prophet Habakkuk, but he was charged to simply wait in righteousness and faith for God's plan to materialize, since it concerned the long range future (Hab. 2:2-4). When this future came, as Obadiah declared, "the kingdom would be the LORD's" (Oba. 21b).

In the uniqueness of apocalyptic vision, the seer Daniel predicted an entire sequence of powerful empires that would rise and fall before the final triumph of God's kingdom (Dan. 2:36-43; 7:2-12, 23-25). In the end, however, God would establish a kingdom that would never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44-45; 7:13-14, 26-27). This future reign would be administrated by "one like a son of man", a coming

messianic figure who would head up God's new order. Yet, paradoxically, the "Anointed One"—the coming messiah—would be cut off and the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed (Dan. 9:24-26). A time of terrible distress would fall upon the earth, climaxing with the resurrection of the dead and the salvation of God's holy people (Dan. 12:1-3).

Thus, the fall of Jerusalem, the end of David's dynasty and the destruction of the temple were only the beginning of God's mysterious purposes in history. After the destruction of all the institutions upon which Judah depended—kingship, temple and land—God would search out his scattered sheep as the Good Shepherd (Eze. 34:11-15). He would bind up the wounded and strengthen the weak, shepherding the flock with justice (Eze. 34:16, 22). The medium through which God would restore his people would be, as in the other prophets, the family of David (Eze. 34:23-31). God would give to his people a new heart and bestow upon them his Holy Spirit (Eze. 36:24-28). The ancient division of Israel from Judah would be healed, for they would become one nation under one king (Eze. 37:15-23). That king would be from the family of David, and he would rule over his people in peace forever (Eze. 37:24-28). The glory that once had departed Solomon's temple (Eze. 9:3; 10:3-4, 18-19) would return to a new temple (Eze. 43:1-7; 44:4). The city of Jerusalem, abandoned to destruction by the Babylonians, would be restored and renamed *Yahweh Shammah* (= the LORD is there).

### **The Servant of the Lord**

Beginning with Isaiah 40, a new context surrounds the remaining oracles of the book. Whereas Isaiah 1-39 has a context in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Isaiah 40-66 has a context near the end of the exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>6</sup> The institutions of Judah have already fallen. The Davidic dynasty has come to an end, the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed, and the temple of Solomon has been burned. Large portions of the populace have been deported to Babylon. Now, in Babylon, the voice of the prophet speaks God's message of comfort to the exiles (Isa. 40:1-2). Earlier prophets had promised that judgment was not God's final word—that after exile he would regather his people back to their land. Now, that promise was on the verge of fulfillment! God was preparing a highway through the desert back to the Holy Land (Isa. 40:3). Mt. Zion and Jerusalem, the places of destruction, would hear the glad tidings of restoration (Isa. 40:9-11).

The impetus for this restoration would be through a preliminary messianic

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<sup>6</sup> Because of this change in context, questions of authorship loom large. Were the oracles in chapters 40-66 produced by a prophet later than Isaiah, or were they produced by the great prophet himself in anticipation of what would come later? Scholars line up on both sides of this issue, but regardless, the new context in chapter 40 and later must underlie all sound interpretation.

figure, Cyrus of Persia. As the Sovereign King of all the nations, Yahweh had chosen Cyrus to be his “shepherd” by allowing the Jews to return to their land (Isa. 44:28—45:1). It may seem odd that this pagan king should be called “messiah,” but he obviously was not the one to fulfill the promises made to the family of David. He may have been *a* messiah, but he was not *the* messiah. In fact, Cyrus was himself an unwitting tool in the hands of God (Isa. 45:4-7). The return from exile was the first step toward a future that would climax with all the nations bowing and confessing, “In Yahweh alone is righteousness and strength” (Isa. 45:22-25).

In the midst of these oracles announcing the imminency of restoration, there appear several oracles regarding a figure called the Servant of the LORD. In one sense, this figure is a collective metaphor for the entire nation of Israel (Isa. 41:9-10). As Yahweh’s servant, chosen by God to carry his glory, Israel had been unsuccessful. All along, she had been blind and deaf to God’s greater purpose (Isa. 42:18-22). Even in the holocaust of exile, the nation had not understood nor taken to heart what had happened (Isa. 42:25). Repeatedly, she had turned away from the Lord and burdened him with her sins (Isa. 43:22-24). Nevertheless, it was God’s purpose to blot out the nation’s transgressions and redeem her (Isa. 43:1-7, 14-21, 25; 44:22-23) and to bless her with the gift of the Spirit (Isa. 44:1-5).

The most remarkable aspect of this future would come through a future leader—an individual—also called the Servant of the LORD. It is apparent that while on the one hand the servant metaphor describes the nation collectively, on the other it describes a leader who is distinguished from the nation but commissioned to turn the nation back to God (Isa. 49:5), and not only Israel, but to bring salvation to the nations of the whole earth (Isa. 49:6). Though collectively Israel had failed as Yahweh’s servant, the individual servant would never fail (Isa. 42:1-7). Though despised and abhorred, he would be honored by the nations (Isa. 49:7). Though collectively Israel had been rebellious and stubborn, the coming Servant would be attentive and obedient, even to the point of terrible suffering (Isa. 50:4-9). He would be mistreated and rejected, but in his passion he would vicariously bear the sins of the nation even unto death (Isa. 52:13—53:12). Though this coming Servant of the LORD is not titled as the messiah, his mission would bring about the rebirth of the nation (Isa. 54:1-8), a rebirth directly connected to the “unfailing kindnesses promised to David” (Isa. 55:3-5). A new Jerusalem and a new Zion would be rebuilt, and the glory of the Lord would replace the very sun (Isa. 60:10-11, 19-22)! In the end, a new heavens and new earth would become the habitation of God’s people forever (Isa. 65:17-25; 66:22). Such were the breath-taking promises associated with the mission of the Servant of the LORD.

Thus, several titles are accorded the future leader whom God would raise up.

Not only would he be the son of David, thus embracing the messianic language of “the anointed,” he would be called the “Son of Man” and the “Servant of the LORD.” These titles, along with the title from Deuteronomy of the “prophet like Moses”, helped shape the expectations for the future.

The Babylonian exile, which Jeremiah predicted would last some seventy years (Jer. 29:10), came to an end with the edict of Cyrus, the Persian. In his first year after conquering Babylon, Cyrus allowed displaced peoples in the empire to go back to their homelands and rebuild their sacred temples (Isa. 44:28; 2 Chr. 36:22-23; Ezr. 1:1-4).<sup>7</sup> This edict began the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises of restoration. The movement of Jews from Babylon back to Jerusalem began with the advance of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, the leaders of the original expedition (Ezr. 1:5-11).<sup>8</sup> The mental state of those returning must have been a heightened optimism, for as one of the psalms expresses it, “When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed! Our mouths were filled with laughter, and our tongues with songs of joy” (Psa. 126:1)! Jerusalem, of course, was still part of the Persian Empire, and the threats were not over. A pogrom aimed at all Jewish people in every Persian province was foiled by the courage of Esther in Susa. Her salvation of the Jewish people was no less a preservation of the messianic promise. Nevertheless, the center of the Jewish hope now had moved from eastern Mesopotamia back to the Holy Land.

Under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel, the people rebuilt the great altar on Mt. Zion (Ezr. 3:1-6) and laid the foundation stones for a new temple (Ezr. 3:8-11). Then followed a long interval of difficulties that halted the work on the temple for sixteen years from 536 BC until 520 BC (Ezr. 4:24; Hag. 1:1).<sup>9</sup> Had it not been for the ministry of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, it is doubtful that the energy and initiative to rebuild the temple could have revived after so daunting a series of setbacks (Ezr. 5:1-2; 6:14-15).

### **The Post-Exilic Vision**

Haggai’s preaching urged the people onward in the temple project. Not only did God promise to be with them in their work (Hag. 1:13; 2:4-5), he promised that the temple they were building would figure in his purposes for all the nations (2:6),

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<sup>7</sup> That this edict concerned not only the Jews but other displaced peoples and other temples is clear from the Cyrus Cylinder inscription, cf. J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958), pp. 206-208.

<sup>8</sup> It is not entirely clear that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two different leaders, though most scholars distinguish between them. For our purposes here, the question is academic.

<sup>9</sup> The chronology here can be calculated with considerable accuracy. Cyrus’ decree was issued in 539/538 BC, the great altar was built in 537 BC and the temple work begun the next year, 536 BC. Darius’ reign began in 522 BC, hence, his second regnal year would have been 520 BC, sixteen years after the temple project began.

especially the return of Yahweh's glory to the new edifice (Hag. 2:7). In fact, the glory of the second temple would be even greater than the glory of Solomon's temple (Hag. 2:9)! Even more, Zerubbabel was to symbolize the restoration of the fallen dynasty of David (Hag. 2:23). Jehoiachin, the Davidic signet ring that God had thrown into Babylon many years earlier (cf. Jer. 22:24-27), would be replaced by another descendant of David, Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, the grandson of Jehoiachin (cf. 1 Chr. 3:17-19).

The prophet Zechariah supported these same major themes, urging the people forward in their work. The rebuilding of the temple was only the beginning of the glorious future God had promised (Zec. 1:16-17). Jerusalem would be restored, and the glory of Yahweh would fill the new sanctuary (Zec. 2:3-5). Yahweh himself would live among his people again, and the nations of the world would be joined to the people of God as one nation (Zec. 2:10-13). The symbols of this future were Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor. Joshua and his fellow priests were to prepare for the coming of the messianic Branch (Zec. 3:8) predicted by Isaiah (Isa. 4:2-6; 11:1ff.) and Jeremiah (Jer. 23:5-6; 33:15-16). Zerubbabel, who had begun the temple project, would overcome all opposition through the power of the Holy Spirit and complete the work (Zec. 4:6-9). Together, these two leaders were anointed by the Lord to press forward (Zec. 4:1-5, 11-14). The roles of Joshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, ultimately would be united into a single messianic ideal, the priest-king, so that the coming Branch would be "a priest on his throne," both a priest and a king (Zec. 6:11-13). Zion and Jerusalem would be restored (Zec. 8:1-9), and the nations would stream into Jerusalem to worship Yahweh Tsabaoth (Zec. 8:20-23).

The future messianic blessing would center around the coming of a new king to Jerusalem who would ride into the city on a donkey, the symbol of peace (Zec. 9:9-10).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the coming "good shepherd" who would tend the flock of Israel's oppressed (Zec. 11:7) also would be betrayed by his own sheep and sent away for the price of a slave—a paltry thirty pieces of silver (Zec. 11:12-13). He would be pierced and mourned over by the people in Jerusalem and the family of David (Zec. 11:10-14). The shepherd, the one close to Yahweh, would be struck down, and the flock of Israel would be scattered (Zec. 13:7). Still, in spite of this trauma (or because of it), a fountain of cleansing would be opened to Jerusalem and the family of David for purification from sin and impurity (Zec. 13:1). In the end, survivors from all the nations of the world would come to worship in Jerusalem (Zec. 14:16). Everything in the whole city would be holy (Zec. 14:20-21).

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<sup>10</sup> Just as the war horse is the symbol of battle, the donkey is the symbol of peace.



The hopes for this glorious future did not materialize in the lifetimes of those who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. To be sure, the temple was built and its services restored. However, half a century later, the people were still waiting for the LORD to return to his temple. Malachi, the final prophetic voice in the Old Testament, predicted that before Yahweh returned to his temple, a messenger would precede him (Mal. 3:1), a prophet like Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6). Hence, the messianic promises were pushed yet again into the indeterminate future of God's inscrutable purposes. The Hebrew prophets' oracles end on this unfinished note.

From the closing of the last documents of the Hebrew Bible until the Jewish wars in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, the messianic consciousness continued to develop within the Jewish communities. Both in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, messianic ideals were advanced and developed. The hopes for a coming messiah burned brightest in times of persecution, especially during the Maccabean Period and the Roman Period. One should recognize, of course, that this coming figure was discussed under many titles and names, "messiah" being only one of them. Still, the ideal that someone was coming—that God was in control of history and would raise up his own champion—was a clear hope.

### **The Quenched Spirit**

With Malachi, the prophetic voice of inspiration ceased in about 450 BC. The general viewpoint of the Jewish community was that the Spirit had been quenched and would remain so until the advent of the messiah. In the Maccabean Period, after Judas Maccabeus had triumphed over the Syrian Greeks in c. 164 BC, the Jews cleansed their desecrated temple but debated about what to do with the defiled altar. They decided to tear it down and store the stones until a prophet should arise to give them spiritual direction, and in its place, they built a new altar to replace the old one (1 Maccabees 4:46-47). Of significance, of course, is the absence of any prophetic voice. Later in the same book, there is a clear reference to the breaking off of prophetic sequence in the summary statement, "There was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them" (1 Maccabees 9:27). Later still, there is the future anticipation of a "trustworthy prophet" who would eventually arise (1 Maccabees 14:41). Other references, also, point to the quenched Spirit. Psalm 74, if it addresses the post-exilic period, states, "We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be" (Psa. 74:9).<sup>11</sup> Flavius Josephus, a

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<sup>11</sup> The KJV and RV both render the word **מִקְוֵה** (= meetingplace) in 74:8 as "synagogues", which suggests a late date (though later English Versions render the word differently). Most scholars suggest the setting for the psalm to be either the destruction of the temple in 587 BC or the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC.

contemporary of Jesus, concedes that “there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time” (i.e., since the time of Artaxerxes in the Persian Period).<sup>12</sup> Another Jewish writer from about the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD says that “our fathers in former times and former generations had helpers, righteous prophets and holy men,” but that “now the prophets are sleeping.”<sup>13</sup> The rabbinical conclusion was that “since the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit has ceased in Israel.”<sup>14</sup>

Though the prophetic Spirit had been quenched, the expectation was vibrant that it would return when the Messiah appeared. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the hope burned brightly for a coming son of David who would rule over Israel (Psalms of Solomon 17:21), a leader called “the Lord Messiah” (Psalms of Solomon 17:32; 18:7) whom God would make “powerful in the Holy Spirit” (Psalms of Solomon 17:37).<sup>15</sup> A century or so earlier, this same expectation was voiced concerning the messianic “son of man” (1 Enoch 46:3), a leader endowed with the Spirit (1 Enoch 49:3; 62:2). The same idea is found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, where appears the vision of a messianic priest filled with the divine Spirit of understanding and the glory of the Most High God (Testament of Levi 18:2, 7). Similarly, the messianic leader called the “Star of Jacob” and the “Sun of righteousness,” obvious Old Testament allusions, would have poured out upon him the Spirit of the Holy Father (Testament of Judah 24:1-2). This leader would be the one called “the Shoot” or “Branch” (Testament of Judah 24:4).

### **The Maccabean Ideal**

The hopes for a triumphant Messiah were greatly sharpened in view of the efforts by the Seleucids to Hellenize the Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Judas Maccabeus and his brothers overturned the Seleucid oppression in the 160s BC, and the success of the Maccabees indelibly impressed upon the Jewish consciousness a political and military ideal that came to be connected with the vision of the messiah. Though there were various competing ideas about the messiah, one thing everyone seemed to agree on: the coming leader would be a political ruler and a national hero, much as was Judas Maccabeus.<sup>16</sup> Judas himself, of course, could not have fulfilled completely the messianic ideal, since he was from the clan of Levi rather than Judah (his father was a priest, 1 Maccabees 1:1-

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<sup>12</sup> *Against Apion*, 1.8.

<sup>13</sup> 2 *Baruch* 85:1-3.

<sup>14</sup> *T. Sota*, 13, 2, par. in Str.-B., I.127 as cited in *TDNT* (1968) VI.385.

<sup>15</sup> The Psalms of Solomon probably were written before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, cf. R. Wright, “Psalms of Solomon,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), II.640.

<sup>16</sup> O. Piper, *ISBE* (1986) III.333.

5). Also, Judas, though greatly successful in driving out the pagans, died in battle at the apex of his career (1 Maccabees 9:17-22). Nevertheless, the image of a Maccabean-like warrior was never far from the messianic ideal.

The descendants of Judas and his family attempted to establish a dynasty of priest-kings as though they were the rightful heirs of the families of David and Aaron. This Hasmonean dynasty<sup>17</sup> lasted about a century, but its tendency toward self-aggrandizement led to the serious disenfranchisement of several Jewish groups, not the least of which were the Pharisees. Especially objectionable was the Hasmonean appropriation of the title “king,” even though the Hasmoneans were not from the family of David.<sup>18</sup> Though the Hasmoneans succumbed to the Romans in 63 BC, the Maccabean ideal did not dim, but in fact, burned even more brightly. Jewish brigands arose, not simply as an expression of anarchy, but due to a fierce belief that God backed their national cause of justice. A whole series of revolutionary movements dot the period from about 40 BC until the Jewish revolts in the 60s and 130s AD. There seems little reason to doubt that these movements were broadly messianic in the sense that their constituents hoped the ancient prophecies about God’s intervention on behalf of his people soon would be fulfilled.<sup>19</sup>

### **Other Jewish Messianic Expressions**

Besides the hopes for the return of the quenched Spirit and the ideals of the Maccabean revolution, other Jewish literature also held forth the messianic hope. To be sure, there was not a consensus about exactly who or how or what the Messiah would be. Nevertheless, there was a latent hope, even when it was not openly expressed, that God would intervene to fulfill his eschatological promises. Nothing less than such a hope could ever have given rise to the first and second Jewish revolts against Rome, which were clearly messianic.<sup>20</sup>

Besides a latent hope, however, there also was a vividly expressed hope in the Jewish writings. In Qumran, for instance, the Old Testament promises of a Davidic son, the Branch, the builder of God’s house and the establisher of God’s kingdom are brought together in a litany of quotations anticipating the coming messiah.<sup>21</sup> Qumran commentators cite passages like Genesis 49:10 (the scepter of Judah),

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<sup>17</sup> The name Hasmonean is derived from the family name of Mattathias, Judas’ father, who belonged to the House of Hasmon.

<sup>18</sup> D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> N. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp.170-209 and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 481-486.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Jesus*, p. 481.

<sup>21</sup> 4Q174 (= 4QFlor) 1:10-13, 18f., cited by Wright, *The New Testament People*, pp. 310-311.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19 (the prophet like Moses), Numbers 24:15-17 (the star of Jacob), 2 Samuel 7:10-14 (the son of David) and Psalm 2:1-2 (the triumph of God's Messiah) as messianic.<sup>22</sup>

In the Apocrypha, 2 Esdras offers an important messianic vision that identifies the Messiah as the descendent of David (2 Esdras 12:32), yet also as the Son of God (2 Esdras 7:28; 13:32). This coming Messiah would save the remnant of God's people (2 Esdras 12:34). He would die and be resurrected (2 Esdras 7:28-29). Equally important is the synagogue recitation of the eighteen benedictions in which the intercession is found: *The Shoot of David do Thou cause to shoot forth speedily*.<sup>23</sup> Such expressions demonstrate that the mindset of the Jewish community after the Maccabean revolt and during the Roman oppression included this messianic quotient. To be sure, there were variant ideas about the messiah. Some literature suggests two messiahs, one from the family of David and the other from the family of Aaron (Jubilees 31:11-20; Damascus Document xii.22-23; xiv.19). Even among those who looked for a single figure, however, there were conflicting opinions, some even documented in the New Testament itself (Mt. 2:4-6; Jn. 7:25-27). Nevertheless, the messianic consciousness derived from the Hebrew prophets and developed by succeeding thinkers was a clear factor in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. It was the claim of the New Testament apostles, following the interpretations of Jesus himself, which all these threads converged in the life, death and resurrection of the man from Nazareth.

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<sup>22</sup> T. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), pp. 446-448.

<sup>23</sup> E. Jenni, *IDB* (1962) III.364.