

EXCERPT FROM *A NEW LOOK AT THE OLD TESTAMENT*

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Chapter 14

The Messiah in the Old Testament

One of the glorious discoveries every reader of the Old Testament makes are the Messianic prophecies. Jesus is foretold in the Hebrew scriptures. How joyful the disciples on the road to Emmaus must have been when “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day.”¹

Yet many people are disappointed that there are not more clear references to Messiah, and especially to the cross. They are there, to be sure. But it has happened over the centuries that people have overdone Messianic prophecy. Wanting there to be more, many have found Messianic prophecies where they do not exist.

It is an important principle that Bible texts mean what they were intended to communicate to their original audience. Finding secret or hidden meanings in the Bible is counter to God’s plan to reveal himself to people through the Bible.

Therefore, in this presentation of Messiah in the Old Testament, we will only look at solid Messianic prophecies. If some of your favorites (Psalm 22 or Isaiah 7:14, for example) are not listed or discussed here, it is because many of these are better interpreted in other ways.

What we want to know is this: what does the Bible say with authority about the Messiah?

Messiah As a Word

Most English Bibles rarely or never use the word Messiah. That is because Messiah is not the only translation possible for that word. Let’s consider the literal meaning of the word, Messiah.

Messiah is a coined word from the Hebrew *moshiakh*, which means anointed. Most people do not use the word anointed on a daily basis and are unaware of its meaning.

In the Ancient Near East, when a person became a king, prophet, or priest, there was often a ceremony of anointing. Anointing is a physical ceremony involving oil, often perfumed oil, being poured over the head of the person being inaugurated.

How much oil would be poured? Well, Psalm 133 makes a reference to the anointing ceremony of Aaron, the first high priest. The Psalm says, “It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes.”² This was no thimble-full of oil or a smear on the forehead. It was a shower of oil over the head.

In the ancient world, fragrant oil was used for personal hygiene. In an age with less bathing and no deodorant products, fragrant oil refreshed and cleansed. The person being inaugurated into high office was anointed perhaps as a way of making them pure.

In the Old Testament, the same word that means Messiah is often used in verb form for anointing. Also, any person ordained to high office of king, priest, or prophet may be spoken of as “an anointed” or “the anointed.” We could say of them that they were “a messiah.” Examples include Saul, David, and even the pagan king Cyrus.³

Yet an idea developed in Israel of a coming Anointed One who would surpass David and Aaron and all other anointed ones. This is what we think of when we speak of Messiah.

The Messiah Concept

By the time of Jesus, various groups in Israel were expecting various types of Messiahs. Some expected more than one Messiah. For example, some expected a great Prophet Messiah, Priest Messiah, and King Messiah.

It was the King Messiah concept that caught most people’s imagination. There were false Messiahs. Craig Evans lists more than a dozen false Messiahs just from the 1st and 2nd centuries.⁴

Why were the Jewish people of Jesus' day so bent on seeing the coming of Messiah? Who was this Messiah and why did they expect him?

The answer begins with what is perhaps the most important of all the Messianic Prophecies and certainly the foundation of the concept: 2 Samuel 7:12-16:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.

God spoke this promise to David. Specifically God promised David in these verses:

An unending line of heirs to sit on the throne of Israel.
That he would be a father to David's heirs, making them sons of God.
That the line of David would last forever.

What do you do when one of God's promises seems to fail? That is exactly what happened. David's line continued for about 400 years. There were good and bad kings in his line. But God did not let his line fail, until the Babylonians came, starting in 605 B.C.E. Then the last king of David's line was taken captive into Babylon. David's line was ended.

It might seem that God's promise had failed. But the believers waited. They assumed that God would restore David's line quickly. When the survivors of Judah returned from Babylon, they were led by

Zerubbabel, David's heir.⁵ Would he be the one to restore David's throne? Would he be the son of God for his generation?

No, Zerubbabel was only allowed to be governor. He did not take the throne. Judah had no king. Had God's promise failed?

That leads us to a second great Messianic Prophecy, a Psalm that reasserts God's promise and calls on God to fulfill his promise: Psalm 89. In verses 38-42, the Psalm complains:

But You have cast off and rejected, You have been full of wrath against Your anointed. You have spurned the covenant of Your servant; You have profaned his crown in the dust. You have broken down all his walls; You have brought his strongholds to ruin. All who pass along the way plunder him; He has become a reproach to his neighbors. You have exalted the right hand of his adversaries; You have made all his enemies rejoice.

As Psalm 89 declares, God is supposed to bring an heir to David's throne. And so Israel waited. Israel waited for more than 500 years.

And then we come to the time of Jesus. After waiting more than 500 years, what was Israel's situation in Jesus' time? They were under Roman rule. And the Romans, who were not bad rulers compared to many other empires, were hard on the Jewish people. And the people wanted out from under the thumb of Rome. And they spoke of a Messiah, an anointed one from David's line, who would restore Israel and defeat Rome.

And the people who believed in this Messiah who would set them free had plenty of scripture to back up their belief. Numerous prophecies about a Messiah-figure declared that he would defeat the armies of the nations and make peace in the world.

From the time that Zerubbabel did not become the Messiah, the people waited. Zechariah, the prophet from Zerubbabel's generation, drove the people even more to look for Messiah to come. In the days when the people hoped Zerubbabel would ascend, Zechariah said:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.⁶

Types of Messianic Prophecies

In this treatment of Messiah in the Old Testament, we are only concerned with prophecies whose literal meaning points to a Messianic leader or a Messianic Age. And within this group of prophecies, there are several types:

- Prophecies of a Messianic Age, focusing on the times and conditions more than the person.
- Indirect Messianic Prophecies, speaking of David's line or the seed of Abraham, but not getting specific about Messiah.
- Prophecies of King Messiah, focusing on the second coming of Jesus as King.
- Prophecies of the Suffering Messiah, focusing on the first coming of Jesus.

It is important to say that we are presenting here the New Testament view of the Messianic prophecies. In Judaism there are some differences since, other than in Messianic Judaism, Jesus is not regarded as the Messiah. Some Bible scholars will dispute Jesus being identified with some of these prophecies on other grounds. Yet for those who know that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, we can easily see how these prophecies point to him.

Listing the Messianic Prophecies

The following lists, except for the first category, are intended to be relatively complete. Many other authors would include more references, but the ones included here are literally about Messiah and do not involve hidden meanings or allegories.

The Messianic Age

See chapter 13 for more details on the Messianic Age. These prophecies refer more to the times and conditions of the days of Messiah than to the person of Messiah. The following list is very incomplete and intended to provide a few examples of numerous prophecies:

- Isaiah 2:2-4 (Micah 4:1-3).
- Jeremiah 23:5-8.
- Jeremiah 31:31-34.
- Ezekiel 36:24-28.
- Ezekiel 40-48.
- Daniel 2:44-45.
- Daniel 7:13-14.
- Joel 3:18-21.
- Amos 9:11-15.
- Micah 4:4-8.
- Zephaniah 3:12-20.
- Zechariah 14:1-4, 16-21.

Indirect Messianic Prophecies

- Genesis 22:18 (Abraham's seed).
- Genesis 49:10 (Judah's scepter).
- Numbers 24:17-19 (The Star of Jacob).
- 2 Samuel 7:12-18 (The Son of God).
- Psalm 2 (The Anointed Son).
- Psalm 89 (The Davidic King).
- Psalm 110 (The Priest like Melchizedek).
- Amos 9:11 (The Fallen Booth of David).
- Micah 2:12-13 (The King who Breaks).

Prophecies of King Messiah

- Hosea 3:5 (David, their King).
- Micah 5:1-4 (A Ruler from of Old).
- Isaiah 9:1-7 (Light of Galilee, Prince of Peace).

- Isaiah 11:1-16 (Root of Jesse, Righteous Judge).
- Isaiah 61:1-3 (Healer of the Broken-Hearted).
- Jeremiah 23:5-6 (Branch of David).
- Jeremiah 30:21 (The Leader in the Last Days).
- Jeremiah 33:14-26 (Branch of David).
- Ezekiel 21:25-27 (The One to whom it Belongs).
- Ezekiel 34:23-21 (The One Shepherd).
- Ezekiel 37:24-28 (David, my Servant).
- Daniel 7:13-14 (Son of Man).
- Zechariah 9:9-10 (The King on a Donkey).

Prophecies of a Suffering Messiah

- Isaiah 42:1-4 (The Gentle Servant).
- Isaiah 49:1-7 (The Servant's Despair).
- Isaiah 52:13—53:12 (The Suffering Servant).
- Daniel 9:25-26 (The Anointed One Cut Off).
- Zechariah 12:10 (The Pierced One).

The Two Strands of Messianic Prophecy

If I speak to a religious Jewish person about Jesus being Messiah, I often hear the objection, "Then why isn't there world peace?" This objection sounds strange to the ears of many of Jesus' followers who are so used to assuming that Messiah had to suffer and die.

But how clearly understood was the suffering of Messiah before the death of Jesus? To find the answer, simply look at the disciples. The disciples of Jesus were good Jews with a decent amount of biblical knowledge. They understood the words of the prophets as well as most people in their day.

When Jesus told Peter he would die, Peter said, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."⁷ If it was hard for Peter to understand, should we be surprised when God's Chosen People today do not understand? Can we not represent Jesus to Jewish people with more understanding and respect if we understand what the Old Testament really says about Messiah?

To a religious Jewish person, Messiah is the one who restores Israel and brings peace to the world. This is true. But the Old Testament says more. The Old Testament has two strands of Messianic prophecy: King Messiah and Suffering Messiah.

How can these two things be reconciled? How can the same person destroy the armies of nations and bring peace to the world on the one hand and yet be "like a lamb is led to the slaughter"⁸ on the other hand?

It is the New Testament, not the Old Testament, that provides the answer. Jesus came the first time to be a sacrifice for sin, as Isaiah 53 so clearly declares.⁹ But he will come back and fulfill all the prophecies of King Messiah. He will not be the lamb when he returns, but the Lion of Judah.

1. Luke 24:45-46.
2. Psalm 133:2.
3. 1 Samuel 12:3; 16:13, and Isaiah 45:1.
4. Evans, Craig A. *Non-Canonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992. pp.239-252.
5. 1 Chronicles 3:19; Ezra 2:2.
6. Zechariah 9:9.
7. Matthew 16:22.
8. Isaiah 53:7.
9. Many interpreters, Jewish and otherwise, deny that Isaiah 53 is about the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a worthy debate, but for those who believe the Bible to be the inspired revelation of God, it is not difficult to make a solid case for Isaiah 53 as describing Jesus. Other possible referents, such as Israel, Moses, or Isaiah, do not fit the wording nearly as well.