

‘I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it .. I will rescue them from where they have been scattered .. I shall be a true shepherd to them’ (ch.34)

‘I shall take the Israelites from the nations where they have gone. I shall make them into one nation .. David my servant will reign over them, one shepherd for all .. my servant David will be their prince forever’ (ch.37)’

For second Isaiah, Cyrus the Persian King is called the Messiah (ch.45) although Isaiah also makes a theological innovation in presenting as a saviour the Suffering Servant.



Post-Exilic Messianism

The prophets Haggai (ch.2) and Zechariah (ch.4) placed reliance on Zerubbabel, the Governor of the new province of Judah, as the Messiah as he was a descendant of David. Zechariah also prophesied a shared role between King and Priest.

The last six chapters of Zechariah are completely different to the first five and are, no doubt, by a later unknown author or authors (as ch.9-11 are mainly in verse, 12-14 in prose). These contain Messianic themes: a peaceful and humble King riding a donkey and the restoration of the Davidic Monarchy (ch.9). Of course, it is this vision of the Messianic King riding a donkey that Jesus would rekindle when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and which aroused the fervour of the crowds so much.

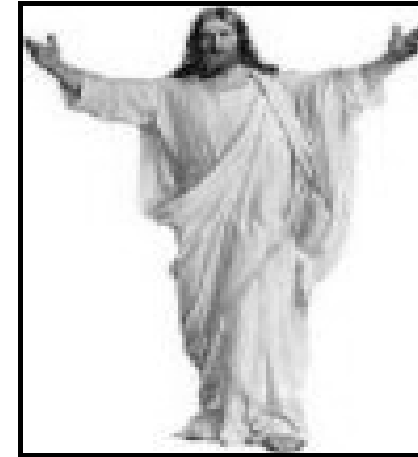
Although all these aspirations seemed to have failed (even the limited national independence gained by the Maccabees in the mid 2nd. century BC apparently was not understood in Messianic terms), hope for the Messiah did not die. It is maintained in the apocryphal books, and is seen in the Gospels and the hopes placed in Jesus. But these hopes were for an earthly empire. That is why Jesus was rejected after His Messianic entry into Jerusalem did not lead to the expected overthrow of the Romans and the re-establishment of a Davidic Jewish kingdom.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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What is the Messiah?

Examining the background to Messianism



Questions for Reflection

1. What was the Messiah needed for?
2. Is Messianism a major theme of the Old Testament?
3. Why didn't the Jews believe Jesus was the Messiah?

What is Meant by Messiah?

The word Messiah come from the Hebrew for 'anointed'. The Messiah means, therefore, 'the Anointed One'. To be anointed with oil was a sacred blessing, implying both a close relationship with God and an important calling. In the Old Testament, priests, kings and very occasionally prophets were anointed. In Greek the word for 'anointed one' is translated as Christ. The word Messiah, is usually understood in terms of a Jewish concept called Messianism, whereby the glories of the ancient kingdom of Israel will be relived through a victorious conquering King, a descendant of king David.



The Development of Messianism

Messianism proper really refers to the hope of a Saviour, an intermediary between God and the people of Israel, who would restore the earthly fortunes of the nation after the collapse of the monarchy in the 6th century BC.

The origins of this earthly type of Messianism goes back to the establishment of Kingship in Israel, although it is more accurate to state that it was initiated with the Covenant of eternal kingship promised to David by God, through the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel ch.7)

In some ways, it can be argued that the Covenants with Abraham and Moses are the real roots of Messianism because of their eternal promises to Israel. However, the hope of earthly prosperity eventually associated with a Kingdom meant that the success of the King became complementary with that of the people, and hope became inextricably linked with the King as God's earthly representative. This is no more seen than in the so-called Royal Psalms, 2, 72 and 110.

It should also be noted that those Messianic passages that appear to be pre-monarchic, like Jacob's blessing of Judah in Genesis ch.49, are in reality monarchic additions, made when the book of Genesis was being edited.

With the Fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721BC, Messianic hopes became explicit in the prophetic writings of the pre-exilic prophets First Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. It is important to recognise that, although the Kingdom of Judah survived the disaster that befell its northern counterpart, Judah was really a very minor backwater politically. The northern Kingdom of Israel, the 10 tribes, had been the real power and had constituted real influence and prosperity in the region. It was a yearning to return to this status that provided the impetus for Messianism.



First Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah

The book of Isaiah (ch.9 and 11) describes the Messiah in Davidic terms (from the stock of Jesse, David's father), and outlines the qualities he will possess and the effect of his reign:

'For a son has been born to us .. and these are the names he has been given: Wonder Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal father, Prince of Peace' (ch.9)

'On him will rest the spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of insight and wisdom, the spirit of counsel and power, of knowledge and fear of the Lord' (ch.11).

In hindsight, the 'Immanuel' passage of ch.7 is now seen as being Messianic, but in its context it related to a very real danger confronting the kingdom of Judah in c734 BC, during the reign of King Ahaz. Judah was being attacked by the northern kingdom of Israel and by the kingdom of Damascus, and the passage was a direct promise from Yahweh to Ahaz that deliverance would be granted within the timescale of the birth of a baby boy and his weaning period.

Jeremiah (ch. 23 and the doublet at 33) brings hope to the people who have been sent into exile by promising the return of a Davidic King and the triumph of Judah:

'The days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall raise an upright branch for David. He will reign as king and be wise .. in his days Judah will triumph and Israel live in safety'

Micah (ch.5) associates the Messiah with Bethlehem (of the clan) Ephrathah.

Messianism in the Exilic Period (587— 538BC)

Ezekiel is the great prophet of the exile. He gives hope to the people by speaking about a renewal of the Sinaitic Covenant (ch. 16 & 36):

'I shall conclude a covenant with you that will last forever' (ch.16)
'I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you .. and make you keep my laws.. you will be my people and I will be your God' (ch.36)

He also promises a continuation of the Davidic dynasty (ch.34 and 37). However, there is a significant departure from Kingly Messianism in that this descendent is described not as a King but as a shepherd and Prince:

