

CHRISTOLOGY AND INCARNATION:
FULFILLMENT AND RADICAL
REINTERPRETATION OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS
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In Judaism and in Christianity the term *messiah* refers to a "divinely appointed deliverer figure." But while the Hebrew word *meshiach* occurs some 39 times in the Old Testament, it is never used to designate this coming deliverer figure. But make no mistake: there clearly was a hope for a divinely appointed deliverer figure in the Old Testament period and in the last two centuries before the appearance of Jesus, despite the late appearance of the technical term *messiah*.¹

The theological basis for the messianic hope is the oracle of Yahweh to David, mediated through Nathan, in which God promised: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). Kingship was not the earliest form of governance in Israel, and there are many indications that it was opposed by many on political, economic, and theological grounds.² Nathan's oracle, however, offered theological support for David's kingship and indeed for his dynastic pretensions.

The prophets maintained a constant state of tension with their contemporaneous kings. Isaiah had no use for Ahaz, Jeremiah could not stand Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and Ezekiel seems to have found few redeemable social values in any of the Judean kings. And yet some of the prophets saw on the other side of their contemporary kings, yes, even on the other side of the demise of the whole Davidic line, a possibility for Yahweh to remain true to his promise to David in changed circumstances. God's kingdom would be exercised through a new king or a new line of kings.

My assignment is to review the passages in the prophets dealing with this hope, to note the differences between this hope and its New Testament fulfillment, and to ponder briefly the term "incarnation" from the perspective of Old Testament studies. All of this is written with the intention and the hope that what we say and do at this Symposium will enhance the life of the whole church.

I. THE MESSIAH IN THE PROPHETS

Messianic passages are conspicuously absent from Hosea,³ Joel, Amos,⁴ Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Malachi.⁵ In Second Isaiah, the promises made to the Davidic dynasty are "democratized" and reapplied to the people as a whole, without speaking of a coming, divinely-appointed deliverer figure.⁶ The messianic passages in the other prophets, however, amply demonstrate the range and power of this hope within the canon.⁷

A. Isaiah⁸

In Isaiah 9:1-7, the prophet describes the great deliverance that would come to three areas of North Israel that had been turned into Assyrian provinces in the eighth century: "the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." God's theophanic appearance (a great light, v. 2) would break the oppressor's rod (v. 4) and consign the military uniforms of the Assyrian invaders to flames of fire (v. 5). It is the birth of a child in the Davidic house, however, that gives this passage its specific shape. This birth is a sign of the validity of the promised deliverance, while the child himself will exercise his royal authority in a rule marked by peace without end. "Justice and righteousness"—we would say, a concern for social justice—will be the king's everlasting attributes. It is the name of this child, however, that rests in most of our memory banks, thanks to Handel's *Messiah*, and that name is most important for understanding the messianic hope of Israel.

The NRSV translates the name as follows:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

If this translation is correct, the coming ruler is given wondrous, almost God-like attributes—each of the words is capitalized in the NRSV. To call this Davidic child "Mighty God" is in clear tension with the rest of the Old Testament, that presupposes the human identity of the king and his children and seems intent on limiting any pretensions to deity. For this reason I favor the alternate translation of JPS:

The Mighty God is planning grace;
the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler.

This name, then, like almost all other biblical names, is a sentence that makes a confession about God: God is planning grace, the Father is planning to send a peaceable ruler. It is this divine initiative that is the really good news in this passage, as the last line of the pericope confirms: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this." The name of the new Davidic prince reminds everyone that the ultimate source of deliverance from the Assyrians is God. In fact, this passage assigns no role to the king in effecting this deliverance. Rather, by his name the messiah points people to God; his rule will be marked by a constant passion for justice.

A series of messianic passages in Isaiah 11 adds to the picture. In vv. 1-5 the prophet notes that the present Davidic line must come to an end (stump, roots), before a

new dynasty (shoot, branch) can begin. The king will be the son of Jesse and hence a second David. Most importantly, he will be gifted by the spirit. Charismatic endowment was claimed by both Saul and David, but all subsequent kings owed their status to the fact that their father had been king. No historical king after David is said to have had the spirit. This passage, therefore, foresees the Davidic prince as a return to the original contours of the royal house. His gifts of the spirit equip him for leadership in war (v. 2). The king will also be an exemplary judge, not moved by flattery, who will issue stern words of judgment against the arrogant⁹ and the wicked (v. 4). His personal "righteousness" and "faithfulness" will equip him for his judicial role. He will be a partisan for the poor and the meek of the earth (v. 4). Kingship is here envisioned living up to its best intents.

A subsequent paragraph predicts peace between wolf and lamb, cow and bear, nursing child and dangerous asp (11:6-9). These familiar lines suggest a return to the conditions of the garden of Eden and characterize the effects of the messiah's righteous reign. They are also a reminder that the messianic hope of Israel is part of a much wider eschatological tradition.¹⁰ so diverse is Israel's eschatological hope that many biblical books can discuss it in detail without ever mentioning the messiah (cf. Daniel).

B. Micah

The central part of Micah's messianic promise is wellknown:¹¹

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.¹²

Micah starts the new line of kings from Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, just as Isaiah 11 had returned to the stump of Jesse. David was the youngest member of his family, and Bethlehem was among the smallest clans. Yet neither David's youth or Bethlehem's size could thwart God's decision to make someone again be ruler in Israel. The continuity with the line of David will be preserved even if it is necessary to start the line of kings over from its original home town. Other elements in Micah's promise include the return of exiled members of the people (5:3), the king as the channel of food and sustenance for the people, and the expected security for the people (cf. Jer 23:5-6). The king will be a person of peace (cf. Isa 9 7).¹³

C. Jeremiah

The first messianic passage in Jeremiah appears in 23:5-6:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

I take these words as a contrast to the puppet King Zedekiah, the last ruler of the

Southern kingdom, who had been elevated to kingship by Nebuchadnezzar. The messiah promised through Jeremiah will be a real king, who will exercise wise leadership. "Legitimate branch"¹⁴ might be a better translation than the NRSV's "righteous Branch." The term "legitimate branch" contains an implicit criticism of Zedekiah's credentials. The promise that this king would execute justice and righteousness repeats a theme we found in Isaiah 9 and 11 and stands in sharp contrast to the injustices presided over by Zedekiah's predecessor Jehoiakim (Jer 22:13-17). Jeremiah foresees a united people (Judah and Israel) free from the invasions and exiles faced by the prophet's contemporaries. Most interesting to me is that the messiah again bears a special name: "The LORD is our righteousness," or, perhaps better: "The LORD is the source of our vindication." Zedekiah's name had originally been Mattaniah; it was changed by the king of Babylon who had put him on the throne. The messiah's name change is the result of divine promise. Like the name in Isaiah 9, it indicates that the messiah's efforts are not an end in themselves, but point to the real source of aid: God's inbreaking efforts.¹⁵

Within the book of Jeremiah this promise is given a later interpretation in 33:14-16¹⁶: "The days are surely coming ... when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (v. 14). With only minor changes from chapter 23, verse 15 repeats the promise to raise up a branch, who will practice social justice in the land. But verse 16 reflects its later chronological setting by narrowing the geographical scope from Jeremiah's united nation (Judah and Israel) to the much smaller expectations of the post-exilic author: Judah and Jerusalem. The name is not given to the messiah, but to the city: This is the name by which it (the city) will be called: "The LORD is the source of our vindication." As the site of the second temple, which brings benefactions to the people, Jerusalem is given a name which expresses its new importance. One might compare the renaming of the "city" in the last verse of Ezekiel: "Yahweh is there" (48:35), as well as the renaming of Jerusalem as Hephzibah (My delight is in her) in Isaiah 62:4.

D. Ezekiel

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah during the early days of the Babylonian exile. The final paragraph in chapter 17 promises that Yahweh will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar tree and plant it on the mountains of Israel, where it would sprout branches and bear fruit. The prophet expected a future monarch from the descendants of Jehoiachin, not from the discredited line of Zedekiah. When this sprig would mature and become a noble cedar, it would serve, appropriately, as a roost for all kinds of birds. Thanks to what Yahweh would do for Israel, all the trees of the forest—that is, all the nations—would recognize the deity's ability to raise and lower the status of countries or their rulers.¹⁷

In chapter 34 Yahweh promises to be the good shepherd in the place of the former faithless shepherd-kings, but he also promises to raise up an ideal earthly counter-part shepherd to rule with him (vv. 23-24). This "prince" would be the servant of Yahweh, and he would rule among (not over) the people. Twice it is said of this messiah that he would be "David." This does not seem to represent a hope for the resurrection or return of the first dynastic ruler. Rather, it expresses the view that the coming king, or series of kings, will form a counterpart or parallel to that great king of Israel's early history.

Ezekiel also cites another divine promise: "And David my servant will be prince forever" (37:25). The line of David had come to a dreary end with its final member, Zedekiah. Ezekiel believed that God would restore the dynasty and keep it forever, just he would keep forever the promise of land, of covenant, and of temple. But Ezekiel also

shows that kingship in a renewed Israel would be a limited institution. The messiah is designated by the title "prince" (*nasi*) instead of "king" (*melek*) cf. 34::23-24).

The monarch of the coming era is always called "prince" in chapters 40-48 of Ezekiel, a title inherited from ancient Israelite tradition, but suggesting here the limited status of the king after the exile. He will be "prince," not king. A discussion of the prince's property in Ezekiel 45:7-8 indicates that he will be given enough income to meet his needs, but the passage ends with admonitions for him not to expropriate land belonging to the tribes and to avoid all violence (45:9). Ezekiel apparently recognized that the nation Israel could not exist without a king, but he also recognized the ambivalent character of kingship itself. The prince's central function in the restored Israel would be that of chief worshiper, sitting in the east gate, on the days of sabbath and new moon. For Ezekiel the real power that would lead to change comes not from the messiah, but from the presence of God which hallows temple, people, and land.

E. Haggai

Haggai prophesied in 520 and attempted to rekindle interest in completing the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai believed that Yahweh's worldwide rule was about to begin. Yahweh himself would destroy the strength of kingdoms and overthrow the chariots and their riders. Then he would take Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, his servant, and make him like a signet ring on Yahweh's hand.

Zerubbabel would be an implement or sign of Yahweh's reign and not a king of an independent kingdom or a warrior king. He would be the opposite of Jehoiachim, the second last king before the exile, whom Yahweh had vowed to cast off even if he were a signet ring on the divine hand (Jer 22:23-25). As Yahweh's chosen one and his servant, Zerubbabel would be a passive earthly symbol of divine sovereignty and not an active messianic figure. The prophet proposed linkages with the past, but did not spell out future political developments.

F. Zechariah

In Zechariah 3:1-10, the prophet Zechariah confirmed the high priest Joshua's new authority, but he also indicated that there would be an ultimate reversal of the present order: "I am going to bring my servant the Branch" (3: 8).

In 4: 6b-10, someone added a supplement to the vision of the lampstand and the olive trees. This secondary passage promises Yahweh's spirit to Zerubbabel, who will be able to overcome all obstacles and finish the temple. While the original vision itself held that both human officials—Joshua and Zerubbabel—are fundamentally equal in importance (4:1-6a, 11-14), this supplement ascribes superior status to Zerubbabel.

In 6: 9-15 Yahweh commanded Zechariah to crown Joshua the high priest and to deliver an oracle that assured the community that a Davidide would one day be installed as king, and that the dual leadership of the community would work in perfect harmony. Thus Zechariah supported a government led by a priestly officer, but hoped for an eschatological role for a son of David.

II. MESSIANIC HOPE AND NEW TESTAMENT FULFILLMENT

To say anything about the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament is very risky, but we need to note continuities and contrasts.

The mere fact that *christos* became such a preeminent title in the New Testament alerts us to the importance of the survey we have been undertaking. The many New Testament attempts to link Jesus to David, even the term "son of David" itself, is further evidence of this connection. The Old Testament messiah's role as one whose name and activity point to God may serve as correction to those who imply that Christianity is a new religion without significant connection to the Old Testament. Whatever Jesus does as the Christ is finally also meant to remind us all that God's commitment to God's people is firm and sure, as it has been in the past.

I would like to reflect on three areas in which there is tension between the Old Testament prophetic materials and the New Testament fulfillments.

(1) At some level of the New Testament record, Jesus the Christ is confessed to be God. Thomas's "My Lord and my God" can serve as a case in point. However complex the factors were that led to that development, the deity of the messiah is totally lacking in Old Testament texts, at least the way I read them. Small wonder that this Christian doctrine leads to conflict and tension with Judaism. The deity of Christ goes beyond what was predicted for the Messiah in the Old Testament material. One might say that the fulfillment turns out to be greater than the promise.

(2) Equally remarkable is the fact that the messiah in the Old Testament does not suffer, let alone die. The only Jewish document I know of that refers to the death of the messiah is 4 Ezra 7, which announces that the Messiah and all humanity will die after a four hundred year reign on earth. Then the world will be judged, the dead raised, and recompense handed out to righteous and wicked (4 Ezra 7:27-35). This death of the messiah lacks all salvific significance. St. Paul presupposes this absence of death in the inherited tradition dealing with the messiah when he writes: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:22-24). Any Christian, and especially those of us in the Western church, know how central the death of Jesus is to our faith. That centrality would not be predictable from the side of the Old Testament.

(3) A third discontinuity lies in the presence or absence of real social, political, economic, or material change in the post New Testament world. Justice, peace, and prosperity, according to the promise, were to be hallmarks of the messianic age. If one broadens the data base and considers Old Testament eschatological texts with no explicit reference to the messiah, one finds an even richer array of promises that seem unfulfilled in the Common Era. Have the eyes of the blind been opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, have the lame been cured, and the desert transformed (Isa 35:5-7)?

Perhaps three answers can be given to this third discontinuity.

In the gospel accounts, social and material transformations were manifest in the miracles and words of Jesus. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he asked "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus replied, "Go

and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matt 11:2-5).

We have learned to account for this discontinuity between promise and Christian reality with the notion of "already and not yet" and with the distinction between the first and the second coming of Jesus. The miracles and even the resurrection of Jesus are viewed as but the first fruits of what is yet to come.

But a third type of reflection has ethical implications. If the church carries on the work of the messiah and if we, the members, are his representatives on earth, we need to remember that the church has often not brought healing and peace, but instead hatred, persecution, and silent acquiescence to evil. Hence we the members have acted as if we did not recognize in Jesus the messiah. If the deity and death of Jesus make him incredible to some, how much more offensive is the failure of the church to inaugurate his new age.

III. INCARNATION

The Old Testament offers little or no help in explaining *cur deus homo*, why God became a human being. At times we speak more broadly of an incarnational theology which fully accepts all creatures great and small. It would be easy to illustrate this positive attitude toward creation and the created order in many Old Testament passages. But I would like to explore with you one Old Testament passage that speaks of God's immanence and transcendence, even of God's self-contradiction in ways that might enhance our proclamation of the good news by highlighting the radicality of the incarnation itself.

I speak, of course, of Hosea 11:1-11. That passage appears in one of the Matthean formula quotations in a way that is jarring at first. When the holy family returns from the flight into Egypt, Matthew writes: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' " (Matt 2:15). This is not the literal meaning of Hosea 11:1, which is not even prophetic of the future, but recalls instead God's elective and adoptive call to Israel the child in the course of the Exodus. This call was followed by Baal and idol worship—which would lead to absurd correlations if one attempted to relate Hosea 11: 2 to the life of Jesus.

Matthew seems to be following an eschatological or typological approach. If all Scripture is written for the end time, and we live in the end time, then all Scripture is about us. The modern focus on determining the historical context in which a passage is to be read is not the only way to read a passage. Alternately, one could propose that Jesus is reliving the history of Israel in the gospel of Matthew, including Israel's slavery in Egypt.

Whichever approach he followed, Matthew was able to mine the text of the Old Testament to enhance his message because he believed that the same God who spoke in Hosea was speaking through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We share Matthew's belief that the God of Hosea and Matthew is identical, but we would illustrate that sameness by far different hermeneutical strategies.

Hosea describes a parent/child relationship gone bad. Despite tender and generous parental activity—picking them up, healing them, teaching them to walk, lifting infants to cheeks—Israel reacted like a highly rebellious teenager. Yahweh concludes that "My people are bent on turning away from me."

What should be the divine response? "Anger, wrath, and punishment," the doctrine of retribution would say. God struggles with that, agonizes with that. "How can I

give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" God's heart recoils; God's compassion—not his nose—grows warm. And then God decides not to execute anger; God decides to forgive.

Why? "I am God and no mortal." That is a very radical line. God does not have to follow the rules of the doctrine of retribution, the rules of logic, the rules of human parenting. Hosea said this was because God was God and not a human being. The New Testament takes such radicality a step further: God forgives and does not execute wrath precisely *because* God became a human being.

But Hosea cites a second reason for God's strange behavior: "He is the Holy One in your midst." The biblical term *holy* means something like transcendent, other worldly, Godly. But Hosea notes the deep paradox: God, the wholly other, is in your midst—therefore God decides not to execute his anger and not to destroy. The Holy-One-in-your-midst became flesh and dwelled among us, John affirmed. Is the miracle here God becoming human, or is it not as well the self-contradictory, paradoxical behavior in which God chooses to forgive, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding?

Christology and Incarnation are both terms from New Testament studies and from the history of Christian doctrine. What we say about the Christ, however, needs to be shaped by Israel's longing for the one who was to come. The radical fulfillment connected with Christology is understood best when we see how far the fulfillment exceeds the promise, especially in terms of the messiah's deity and his suffering.

Our language about incarnation may depend in part on Greek and Persian myths, Gnosticism, and other analogies from the history of religions. It also is informed by the whole biblical faith, which knows that God's righteousness leads him to extraordinary efforts and strategies to maintain God's relationship to us. Hosea said: "God contradicts Godself when he decides not to execute his anger. The Holy One chooses to dwell among us."

For someone steeped in Hosea, is the incarnation really a total surprise?

NOTES

1. For a brief survey of messianism between the testaments, see Ralph W. Klein, "Aspects of Intertestamental Messianism," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972) 507-17.
2. Frank Criesemann, *Der Widerstand gegen das Konigtum* WMANT 49 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978).
3. A (secondary?) passage in Hos 3:5 promises a return "to Yahweh their God and to David their king," thus predicting the reunification of Israel and the acknowledgement of the Davidic dynasty.
4. A (supplementary?) passage in Amos (9:11-15) promises that God will raise up the booth of David (the dynasty, the temple, the southern kingdom?) that is fallen.
5. Malachi speaks of an eschatological prophet who will convert the hearts of parents and children before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.
6. Isa 55:3. The Servant Songs, so crucial for understanding the death of Jesus in the New Testament are not messianic in the sense used in this paper. Rather, they outline the servant's stance of steadfast faith in the midst of suffering and rejection. The servant is either the prophet himself, or the people as a whole, or both. Second Isaiah does speak of Cyrus, the great liberator of the exiled Israelites, as "his [Yahweh's] messiah" (45:1), but Cyrus is not a descendant of David or the kind of deliverer figure discussed in the rest of this paper.
7. Many of these passages are judged to be secondary by Old Testament scholars and commentators. I believe that a contrary case can often be maintained, but these issues of dating are

only crucial if one is writing a history of the development of the messianic hope, which is not the subject of this paper.

8. It is not clear whether Immanuel (Isa 7:14) is the son of the wife of King Ahaz, the son of the wife of Isaiah, or the son of other, unnamed women. For this reason we are not including it among the messianic texts. But see Matt 2:23. Isa 32:1-8 can also be considered messianic. Just rule will be accompanied by the removal of handicapping conditions.

9. *arts* NRSV earth.

10. Isaiah 11: 10 hails the "root of Jesse" as a signal to the peoples. Like David and Solomon he will exercise a "worldwide" reign.

11. For the difficult problems in Micah 5: 2-6, see the commentators.

12. In Matt 2:6 Bethlehem is called "by no means least among the rulers of Judah."

13. Or This shall be salvation from Assyria" (Mays) or "And this shall be peace" (Smith). In these alternate understandings Micah refers respectively to the messiah as offering security from attack by Assyria or he refers to a period of peace after Assyria is conquered.

14. The term branch smh is later employed by Zechariah to describe the messiah (3:8; 6:12).

15. It is possible that this name is Zedekiah written backwards. Compare Zedekiah sdqyhw with the LORD is the source of our vindication (*yhwshdqmw*).

16. Jer 33:17-26 speaks of a dynastic succession of kings who will ascend to the throne, and of a corresponding line of Levitical priests to offer sacrifices.

17. Cf. Ralph W. Klein, *Ezekiel. The Prophet and His Message*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 117.