

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Last week we looked at how the concept of Messiah developed along two main lines of thinking from the Old Testament: the revelation that God was looking out for His people, the descendants of Abraham, and the later concept of a God-appointed deliverer, an anointed person in the line of King David, who would rescue Israel from its troubles.

Today we want to see how these ideas are further developed in the prophets, particularly in Isaiah. What strikes you right away is how rarely the term “anointed one” actually occurs. David uses it several times in the psalms, often referring to himself as God’s anointed king. But in Isaiah it only appears twice and after Isaiah the term is used only six more times ... and mostly not in what you would consider “messianic prophecy”. Let me show you what I mean.

In Isaiah 45 the LORD’s anointed is Cyrus, the king of Persia, who would defeat Babylon in the sixth century BC and liberate the Jews to return to their homeland. In verse 4, God speaks this word to Cyrus, long before he was born:

*For the sake of Jacob My servant, of Israel My chosen
I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not
acknowledge Me.*

The prophet makes it very clear in this chapter that God wants Cyrus to know Him, and that that is why He anoints him as Israel’s deliverer.

Another, rather obscure, use of the term *mashiach* is found in Ezekiel 28. On the surface, the text refers to the King of Tyre, but in the second prophecy against the king, it is clear that he is a spiritual being who has been around a very long time:

*You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty
You were in Eden, the garden of God . . . (28:12,13)*

It turns out that Lucifer had made his home in Tyre. According to v. 14, he had been “anointed” as a guardian cherub, set apart for a high and holy calling, but had fallen to pride which led him to rebellion against the Almighty.

Other uses of this word occur in Habakkuk 3:13 where it seems to refer to God’s people as a whole, and in Zechariah 4:14 where the anointing is given to two beings who are simply described as serving the Lord of all the earth.

That’s not much to go on. But there are a few other passages that give us much more specific insight into the nature of the coming Messiah. The big one, the one quoted by Jesus in Luke 4, is from Isaiah 61:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Yahweh is on me
Because Yahweh has anointed me to preach good news to the poor
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted
To proclaim freedom for the captives
And release from darkness for the prisoners*

*To proclaim the year of Yahweh's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,
To comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion
- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes
The oil of gladness instead of mourning
And a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair (Isaiah 61:1-3)*

Here's the calling that came to be the Jewish expectation for their Messiah: someone who would bring "shalom" to God's people. They had failed in their obligations to forgive debts, to release prisoners, to properly celebrate the year of Jubilee which had been required from the time of Moses. But now the "anointed one" would come, the Mashiach of God's people, and he would lead them into the fullness of God's calling. The year of Yahweh's favour is the year of Jubilee, the year when everyone could get a fresh start. It was only supposed to happen every fifty years, but it never happened. The Israelites didn't find it any easier to forgive debts and set slaves free than people do in modern times. But still, they did long to be led by someone who would fulfill God's laws in the ways described by Isaiah: bringing comfort to all who mourn and provision for all who grieve in Zion, to replace ashes with beauty, mourning with gladness and despair with praise. This became a part of the vision for the Messiah and it came from a passage that used the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, Isaiah 61.

What other passages and what other terms help us understand Messianic hope?

There are the psalms of David. We looked at a couple of them last week, but let me mention Psalm 22, because in a collection that includes several psalms that talk about God's everlasting love for His king, this one introduces the concept of a suffering ruler:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
So far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but You do not answer
By night, and am not silent. (22:1,2)*

Near the end of the psalm, David calls on the people to praise the LORD because He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the "afflicted one".

The idea of a suffering Messiah is one of the big themes in the later chapters of Isaiah. Last week I showed you one of the testimonies from the "I Met Messiah" website. As I listened to one after the other, I was amazed at how many had been religious Jews without knowing their Old Testament Scriptures. Only when they began to read the Bible in their quest to understand what Christianity was all about did they come across Isaiah 53:

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, He was punished for our iniquities
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray
Each of us has turned to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all
He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter
And as a sheep before her shearers is silent
So he did not open his mouth (53:4-7)*

For person after person, reading that passage for the first time, their reaction was, "That's Jesus. That's my Bible, the Jewish Bible, and it's talking about Jesus."

Some of the ancient Jewish scholars understood that their Messiah would have to suffer. Maybe 900-1000 years after Jesus' ministry, Eleazar ben Qulir wrote this prayer to be used on the Day of Atonement:

Our righteous Messiah has departed from us; we are horror-stricken, and there is none to justify us. Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions he carries, and is wounded for our transgressions. He bears on his shoulders our sins to find pardon for our iniquities. May we be healed by his stripes.

These rabbis understood that anything or anyone who bore the sins of others would suffer the fate that they deserved. So the lamb which was sacrificed as a sacrifice for sins was sacrificed and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world also had to be sacrificed, although many of the rabbis seemed to stop short of expecting that their Messiah would actually have to die.

In the passage in Daniel that we looked at briefly last week, we note again that the promised Messiah would come within a certain time frame, before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem which took place in 70 A.D., and that he would be killed. Daniel uses the term "anointed one" which is a translation of the Hebrew "mashiach" or Messiah. Let's look at Daniel 9:26 again:

*After the sixty-two sevens, the Anointed One
(mashiach) will be cut off and will have nothing. The
people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city
and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood.*

This is a strong indication that the Messiah would suffer and also strongly points to Jesus because of the time frame in which Daniel's prophecies had to be fulfilled.

The next Old Testament symbol for the coming Messiah is the word "branch". Here's the key text and watch how it ties together David's line with the Messianic ruler:

*"The days are coming", declares the LORD,
When I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely
And do what is right and just in the land
In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety
This is the name by which he will be called:
Yahweh Our Righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:5,6)*

Here are the key components again, but expressed in a different way: a righteous ruler, a descendant of David and the deliverer of God's people. By this point in history, about four hundred years after David was king in Israel, these were the key components of the Messianic hope of the Jews.

Earlier, Isaiah had also expressed a belief in a branch that would come out of David's line to be Messiah:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse
From his roots a Branch will bear fruit
The Spirit of Yahweh will rest on him
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Yahweh
And he will delight in the fear of the LORD
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes
or decide by what he hears with his ears
But with righteousness he will judge the needy
With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth . . .
The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat
The calf and the lion and the yearling together;
And a little child will lead them. (Isaiah 11:1-4,6)*

This is Messianic hope and expectation, an era of peace.

Like the Jeremiah passage, this one points to a "branch" or descendant from the line of King David and, again like Jeremiah, a key component of this Branch is that he will be marked by righteousness and justice. His wise and righteous rule, led by the Spirit of Yahweh resting on him, will bring about peace among the people of God.

Another one from Jeremiah, this time 33:15,16:

*In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from
David's line
He will do what is just and right in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety
This is the name by which it will be called: Yahweh Our Righteousness.*

Notice that all the elements of Messianic hope are being brought together in this reference to the Branch: a deliverer will come from the line of David who will save Judah and rule in righteousness, bringing peace and safety. This is clearly God's doing; He will represent God.

Zechariah also has a couple of references to the Branch as someone appointed by God to rule over Israel.

Other texts tie in the idea of a descendant of David with the coming ruler who acts like the Branch of these previous passages. For example, Isaiah 16:5 says:

*In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit upon it
One from the house of David, one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the
cause of righteousness*

The ideals of justice and righteousness are repeated in these verses, just as they were in Jeremiah 23 and 33 and in Isaiah 11.

The rescuing, or saving, aspect of the Messiah's coming is seen in Ezekiel's writings, particularly in chapter 34:

I will save My flock, and they will no longer be plundered ... I will place over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them. (vv. 22-24)

In chapter 37, Ezekiel repeats these promises and claims that David's kingdom will be an everlasting one and that God would make an everlasting covenant of peace with His people (37:24-26)

Hosea talks about a future day in which Israel will return to their God and to David their King, Amos writes about the restoration of "David's fallen tent" and Zechariah speaks of a time of cleansing that will be made available to the house of David and all who live in Jerusalem. These images of hope, of forgiveness, of restoration and of justice are all a part of the expectation for the Jewish Messiah. This is not an isolated prophecy, but one that seems to be part of the air they were breathing. It intersects the words of the prophets on many, many different occasions.

Which brings us to this wonderful passage that helps us every year to think about our preparation for Christmas, the season of advent. As I read Isaiah 9, think about the themes we've come across, think about how these words would have sounded in the ears of someone reading the prophets around the time of Jesus' birth:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan -- The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned . . . (9:1,2)

*Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
Will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire*

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given

And the government will be on his shoulders

*And he will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace*

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,

*Establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on
and forever.*

The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this

(9:5-7)

Listen to those names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Those are not the names given to a great leader or a powerful ruler. Those are the names of God, given to one who represents God perfectly, who reveals God's

rule, God's kingdom to the human race. This kind of prophecy helped create an exciting expectation for the Jewish people, a great hope. So when a Jew from the first or second century B.C. would read this passage from Micah 5, you can imagine how they would interpret it:

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah
Though you are small among the clans of Judah
Out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel
Whose origins are from of old, from ancient times ...
He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of Yahweh his God
And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the
earth, and he will be their peace. (Micah 5:2,4,5a)*

This was the great hope of the Jewish people.

Let's break it down into pieces to summarize this portrait:

1. The Messiah would continue and fully demonstrate God's loving concern for His people.
2. The Messiah would be a descendant of King David, and he would rule in righteousness and justice.
3. The Messiah would suffer on behalf of the people of God, in their place. (*He was pierced for our transgressions; He was punished for our iniquities*)
4. The Messiah would be anointed by God for his mission on earth, carrying a special presence of the Holy Spirit and fulfilling the prophecy of a *mashiach*, the "anointed one".
5. He would represent God's Kingdom perfectly, as the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father.
6. The Messiah would live and die before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.
7. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem
8. The Messiah would be a savior and a shepherd to his people, bringing them into places of safety and rest. The peace he brought Israel would reach the ends of the earth.

Who could it have been? If he did come, who was he?