

Messiah In the Promise Plan of God Part 1 by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Although it may not seem to make much of a difference whether we think of the Tanak's (old Testament/ OT) words about Messiah's person and work as being either scattered "predictions" found throughout the Old Testament or part of a continuing "promise-plan," there was a vast difference in the minds of the Biblical authors and the way they present Messiah. For example, a "prediction" is a word foretelling, or a prognosticating, the future. In such a usage, it focuses the reader's or listener's attention only on the two things: the word spoken before the event and the fulfilling event itself, which is proper and legitimate in itself. But when such a usage is attributed to the Scriptures, it fails to capture a third element, which was a key ingredient that captured the hearts and minds of the Old Testament writers: it was the historic means by which God continued to *maintain* his promissory word and to carry it all the way to fulfillment. This is what Willis J. Beecher described in his 1902 Princeton Seminary Stone Lectures called "the Promise." He described it this way:

"[Such a truncated analysis left out] the means employed for that purpose [i.e., the purpose of describing the coming of the Messiah]. The promise and the means and the result are all in mind at once If the promise involved a series of results, we might connect any one of the results with the foretelling clause as a fulfilled prediction But if we preeminently confined our thought to these items in the fulfilled promise, we should be led to an inadequate and very likely a false idea of the promise and its fulfillment. To understand the predictive element alright we must see it in light of the other elements. Every

fulfilled promise is a fulfilled prediction; but it is exceedingly Important to look at it as promise and not as a mere prediction.”

In light of this definition, what follows will be a brief outline of the messianic doctrine as set forth in the Bible’s own promise-plan and a brief word on its interpretation.

I. The Messianic Promise-Plan in the Torah

The messianic doctrine in the Torah may be surveyed under six headings: two in Genesis 1-11, two major ones in the Patriarchal period, and two that dominated the Mosaic period in the rest of the Pentateuch. All six were inter-connected and related seminally to the one grand promise-plan of God, which plan was the backbone of the narrative and theology of the Old Testament.

The first two promises declared that the coming Man of Promise would be from the “Seed,” or “Offspring,” of the woman in Genesis 3:15, while the second promise announced that no one less than God himself would come and dwell in the midst of the families of Shem in Genesis 9:27.

In the second set of promises in the Patriarchal Era, the plan called for Abraham’s “Seed” to be the means of blessing all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). But the plan added more specificity when it named one of Jacob’s sons, Judah, as the one who would be given the rule and authority over the nation Israel as well as over all the nations on earth (Gen 49:10).

Two other events stand out during the Mosaic Era of divine revelation. Surprisingly, one comes from a Gentile prophet (the exception that proves the rule that prophecies normally come through Jewish prophets) named Balaam in Numbers 24:17. Balaam raised the promise that the coming Man of Promise would be a victorious king who would crush his enemies and find great success. The second distinctive part of the promise-plan in this period has to be the promise made to Moses that a “prophet,” who would be like him, would come in that same plan of God (Deut 18:18).

Even from these earliest and most rudimentary forms, the Torah has anchored this promise-plan with the seminal (ie., seed) truths that this person who would come in the divine purpose would be known by the titles of "Seed," "Shiloh," "Scepter," "Star," "King," and "Prophet." However, care must be exercised not to take any one of these prophecies or titles in abstraction by itself, for each can only be appreciated in their own Biblical context as they contributed to the ongoing announcements and fulfillments of the promise theme. Intertwined in this one plan of God were provisions for a name, a blessing, a land, a gospel, a people, a divine dwelling in the midst of the people, and an affirmation that God himself would be a personal deity to those who called on him by faith. This last feature reminds us of the tri-partite formula of the promise-plan, repeated almost fifty times in both testaments: "I will be your God, you shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you."

While it is difficult to know where to place the book of Job chronologically, even though in genre form it belongs to the wisdom materials in the Tanak, there are very good reasons for placing Job historically and chronologically in the Patriarchal times.¹ Nevertheless, four times in this book a cry goes up to God for someone to act much as the Messiah would in his coming office and ministries.

First of all, in response to Bildad's first speech, Job longs for someone to "arbitrate," or in the older language to be a "daysman," between himself and God (Job 9:33). In a second appeal to heaven, Job longs for a "witness" in heaven who would act as his advocate on high to represent his case (Job 16:19-21). But in his third appeal to God, Job pulls out all the stops and declares that he knows his "redeemer" is the one who will raise him up "in the end" when Job expects to look on God with his own eyes and with his own flesh on the Living God (Job 19:23-27). In one more final time in this book, the young Elihu, who up to this point has remained silent in the presence of three older friends of

Job, called for an “interpreter” who would explain to Job what was going on in his life (Job 33:23-28). This “interpreter” cannot be fulfilled by any ordinary angel, or even by a prophet from the ranks of other mortals; he had to soar beyond the thousands of angels and exceed them in every way in order to redeem Job from the pit of despair and ransom him from all his troubles.

II. The Messianic Plan Prior to and During the Davidic Era

The days after Moses began well enough, for Joshua conquered the land in a mighty way, showing God himself was with Joshua as he was with Moses. But that enthusiasm quickly dissipated as a new syncretism engulfed the people and they began to adopt the gods and practices of the Canaanites. In the days of the Judges, Israel enters into a dark period of her history.

The light of revelation reappeared toward the close of this dark period as three major prophecies leading up to David’s reign over the nation set the stage for the new advances in the plan of God.

One came to the mother of the boy Samuel, Hannah, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. It represented the fourth stage in royal or kingly themes in messianism. The first came to Abraham when he had been promised that “kings will come from [him]” (Gen 17:6, 16), as God reaffirmed the same to Jacob, “Kings will come from your body” (Gen 35:11). In the second stage, the symbols of rule and authority (the “scepter” and “ruler’s staff”) were given to Judah (Gen 49:10), which royal authority would claim the “obedience of [all] nations.” The third stage depicted this coming king in the Messianic line crushing his enemies in the Balaam prophecies about a “star [coming] . . . out of Jacob” and a “scepter . . . out of Israel” (Num 24:17). Now in 1 Samuel 2:10 the fourth stage had been reached: Messiah would be the exalted King and Judge over all the earth.

There was more to messianism than its royal or kingly theme; a priestly messianism could be seen in germ form as far back as Exodus 19:6, where the whole nation was called to be “a

kingdom of priests.” But this aspect was further clarified by an unnamed prophet who was sent to the priest Eli in 1 Samuel 2:35-36 to say that God would raise up “a faithful priest who would do according to what was in [God’s] heart and mind.” But who was this “faithful priest?” The Hebrew word for “faithful,” ne’eman, is the same root used of David’s house in 2 Samuel 7:16, a “house and ... Kingdom [which] will endure forever” (as 1 Samuel 25:28 repeats as “a lasting dynasty”). The identity of the faithful priest mentioned here is to be understood as a collective expression, embracing all priests whom God raised up for altar duty and who collectively culminate in Messiah, the final one and only real “faithful priest.”

At the heart of the five promise-peaks in this era has to be 2 Samuel 7, where the prophet Nathan predicted about King David: (1) Messiah would come from his flesh and seed, (2) Messiah would be David’s climatic heir, (3) David’s son and the Messiah would be God’s own son, (4) Messiah would have a kingdom, a rule, and a reign that would never end, and (5) Messiah would surely come one day in the future.

To this key promise made to David, two Psalms echo this important and central point in the promise-plan of God: Psalm 89 and Psalm 132. The messianic part of Psalm 89 is found in verses 19-37. It repeats some twelve promises made by the prophet Nathan to David, despite the way the Psalm ends on the mournful note that David’s throne and kingdom were at that time in a dilapidated condition. But the taunts of the nations will be answered as God rises once again to vindicate his plan. In Psalm 132, three symbols describe Messiah: “a horn,” “a lamp” (already seen in 2 Sam 21:7; 1 Kgs 11:36), and “a crown.” With such high accolades, there is little doubt that the anointed one is not just David and his line of kings, but the Messiah himself.

III. The Messiah Celebrated in Eleven Psalms

J. Barton Payne declared that the single largest block of predictive material on the Messiah in the Old Testament was

to be found in the Psalms.² He counted some 101 verses directly predicting the Messiah in thirteen different Psalms. Since we have already treated two of the Psalms in the Davidic section (Pss 89, 132), we have time and space to only list the eleven additional Psalms here.

Two Psalms address Messiah as a conqueror and Enthroned Ruler, Psalm 2 and 110. Another Psalm described Messiah as a rejected Stone by Israel, Psalm 118. Two other Psalms, 69 and 109, saw Messiah as betrayed. But two of the most important of this group, Psalms 22 and 16, dealt with his dying and rising again in resurrected form. Add to this Psalms 40 and 45, where Messiah is addressed as a planner and a groom, while Psalms 68 and 72 declare Messiah to be the triumphant king.

–To be continued–

NOTES:

[1] For a list of reasons why Job should be placed in the Patriarchal era, see the study by E. Dhorme. A Commentary on the Book of Job. Tr. Harold Knight. Nashville, TN.: Nelson, 1984, pp. xx-xxviii.

² J. Barton Payne. Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy. New York: Harper and Row, 1973. P. 257.

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