

THE LORD'S ANOINTED

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*Interpretation of Old Testament
Messianic Texts*

Edited by

Philip E. Satterthwaite,
Richard S. Hess,
and Gordon J. Wenham

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The Lord's Anointed
Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts
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EDITORS' PREFACE

It has been a delight to be involved with the production of this collection of essays on messianic texts in the Old Testament. Like its predecessor, *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, this work began as one of the annual Tyndale Old Testament Study Groups, in this case the 1994 conference. A number of the papers given at that Study Group form the core of the present volume. Others were solicited to provide a more complete survey of the most important Old Testament texts. The editors are grateful to each of the contributors for the time and effort they devoted to the preparation and presentation of their work. This collection reflects the concerns of many scholars who represent a new generation of those committed to the work and ministry of interpreting the Old Testament.

The editors would also like to express appreciation to the Tyndale Fellowship for hosting the Old Testament Study Group as part of the 1994 Swanwick joint conference, and to Tyndale House for help in the production of the volume. We also thank Eileen Satterthwaite for compiling the indexes.

The essays in this volume build upon the work of previous scholars. Among these we would like particularly to mention Rev. F. Derek Kidner. His sensitivity to the Biblical text and appreciation of so many of the concerns that run through this volume are evident in his valuable studies on Genesis, Psalms and other Old Testament books. These appeared at a critical time, when Evangelical commentaries were too few and there was an urgent need for evidence of this commitment in a scholarship that engaged with the critical and theological concerns of the day. In appreciation for Derek Kidner's work, we dedicate this volume of essays to him.

Richard S. Hess
Philip E. Satterthwaite
Gordon J. Wenham

29th August, 1995.

CHAPTER 1

MESSIANIC INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN MODERN CONTEXT

J. Gordon McConville

Summary

Modern study has affected messianic interpretation of the Old Testament in a number of ways. Biblical criticism challenged the validity of many traditional 'messianic' texts. In doing so, however, it merely highlighted the exegetical and hermeneutical questions involved in articulating what might constitute messianism. The discussion implies a theological commitment. Twentieth-century Old Testament theology (von Rad, Eichrodt) put messianism back on the scholarly agenda. Contrary trends, however, stressing creation theology for example, are now prevalent. And Jewish-Christian ecumenical interpretation has raised old questions in a new way. A treatment of messianism as a historical phenomenon shows that messianic interpretation is a dialogue between text and experience. The challenge to Christian interpretation is to contend for its belief that the Old Testament gives a real basis to the New Testament's proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah.

I. Introduction

The present volume aims to reconsider the extent to which the Old Testament may be said to cherish a 'messianic' hope. Its topic, therefore, is one that is central to Christian theology and interpretation. No doubt for that reason it has been the subject of intense debate of different kinds. In the Church's earliest days it had to debate with the Synagogue whether Jesus was the expected Messiah. And in more recent times questions of a critical nature have been raised against the Christian belief that the Old Testament bears the promise of Christ.

Our study, therefore, scarcely needs apology. If the Old Testament is *the* problem of Christian theology, as has been said, the Messiah is at the heart of that problem; it was arguably the conviction that Old Testament promises were fulfilled in Christ that kept it within the Christian canon in spite of what seemed to some to be good arguments for dispensing with it. Christian scholarship is bound to return again and again to the questions of the relationship between the testaments, and especially of the validity of its claims about the Old Testament's messianic character. There is a strong case for a return to the topic at this particular time, because of developments in ways of reading the Old Testament, and because the topic as such has not attracted special study very recently. This has perhaps been because of a preoccupation with problems of methodology. The present set of essays, therefore, aims to begin to redress this deficiency, and to acknowledge that the topic of the Messiah should be of foremost importance for Christian scholarship on the Old Testament.

II. The Messiah in Modern Old Testament Study

Common to all modern treatments of the idea of the Messiah in the Old Testament is the recognition that it cannot be tied to the occurrence of the term מָשִׁיחַ ('anointed one'), which is not used in its later technical sense in the Old Testament. The question whether there is messianism in the Old Testament, therefore, has to seek other criteria than strictly terminological ones. This is true of both traditional Christian messianic and modern critical interpretations.

Modern Old Testament scholarship has been largely informed by the belief that traditional Christian messianic interpretations of Old Testament passages have been exegetically indefensible. The classic

work on the subject by S. Mowinckel rehearses in detail the traditional texts, carefully excluding many from consideration on the grounds that their original meanings had nothing to do with the hope of deliverance by an eschatological Messiah.¹ For example, the saying in Numbers 24:15-19, concerning a 'star' and 'sceptre' that would come out of Israel, was merely a poem 'in honour of Israel', referring in particular to the future supremacy of David and the tribe of Judah. It looked no further than that, and therefore could not be messianic.

Mowinckel may be said to be representative of modern criticism in the sense that it has insisted on the need to understand texts first of all in their own terms. Yet it is clear that this basic belief by no means settles the question whether the Old Testament contains messianic hope, or indeed precisely where and in what form it might be found. These questions remained open. Mowinckel himself criticized older works by Gressmann and Sellin, who had maintained that eschatology and the idea of the Messiah were ancient in Israel.² His own work was not concerned to deny these aspects of Old Testament thought in principle; on the contrary, he found a number of 'authentic' messianic texts, characterized by explicit eschatological hope.³

His work is devoted, rather, to developing a particular thesis concerning them. This, in brief, is that messianism and eschatology, which he thinks belong inextricably together, were not known in the pre-exilic period, and that the royal ideology of the Psalms focuses only on the political hopes associated with the contemporary or newly enthroned king. For him, the Davidic ideal in the Royal Psalms was cultic in nature, and the Psalms '... do not speak of a future, much less an eschatological, Messiah, but of the contemporary, earthly king of David's line who has just been enthroned'.⁴ Eschatology arises only after the exile when the former royal establishment has been destroyed. And messianic hope is expressed in texts found in the prophetic books, but post-exilic in origin.

Not all have accepted Mowinckel's reconstruction, in respect either of his view that messianism arose only after the exile,⁵ or his

¹S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (ET; Oxford: Blackwell, 1959) 12-13. The texts include Gn. 3:15; the Royal Psalms; other Psalms (such as Ps. 22); Nu. 24:15-19; Gn. 49:8-12.

²*Ibid.*, 14.

³*Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴*Ibid.*, 12. Cf. A. Bentzen, *King and Messiah* (ET; London: Lutterworth, 1955), who sees the king's enthronement as 'a repetition of a primeval act'; 17.

view of the nature of the pre-exilic royal ideology. A.R. Johnson, for example, in his study of sacral kingship, which has aspects in common with that of Mowinckel, lays some stress on its eschatological nature.⁶ A. Bentzen too questioned whether a definite distinction between 'cultic' and 'eschatological' could be maintained.⁷ G. von Rad, while granting that the extravagant epithets attached to the king articulated something about the existing world-order, in continuity with the Ancient Near East, admitted: 'We do not know whether those who did homage to them (the newly enthroned kings) were filled with real confidence, or whether they already had their doubts and were asking, "Art thou he who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"'⁸ C. Westermann, furthermore, found an important eschatological element in the very act of praise. The praise of Israel evokes a praise that is yet to be given. And this 'praise in expectation' has its context in 'the expectation of the Old Testament (which) is fulfilled in Jesus Christ'.⁹ And H.H. Rowley was another important advocate of an eschatological view of the Royal Psalms.¹⁰

The difference between Mowinckel and others on this issue illustrates the complexity of the attempt to interpret the Old Testament on the subject of the Messiah. The data may be read in different ways, depending on how one judges rather elusive and nuanced matters. The question whether the longing for an ideal king in Israel constitutes 'eschatology' or 'messianism' may not be open to demonstration, but may in the end be a matter of judgement. Mowinckel himself, agreeing that the roots of eschatology lie in the pre-exilic aspirations, is hardly convincing when he tries to show a transition from non-eschatological thought to eschatological.

The issue which we have just aired is merely one instance of what emerges as our first important point, namely that evaluations of

⁵J. Day thinks that Messianic expectation had its origin before the exile, though he favours a non-eschatological interpretation of the Psalms generally; *The Psalms* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 91, cf. 97.

⁶A.R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955) 131-134.

⁷Cf. Bentzen, who says that the difference between cultic and eschatological interpretations of the Enthronement Psalms is not very great: 'The Psalms experience...what Eschatology expects'; *King and Messiah*, 37.

⁸G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* Vol. I (ET; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962) 324; and see 318-324.

⁹C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (ET; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) 161-162.

¹⁰H.H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1967) 199-202.

messianism in the Old Testament are bound closely to the task of exegesis and interpretation. Recent study of the Deuteronomistic History also makes this clear. Since Martin Noth's thesis that this large block of Old Testament material aimed only to demonstrate to Judah why judgement had fallen upon it, critical discussion has focused on the question whether it did contain, *pace* Noth, any form of hope for the future. And von Rad, one of Noth's first critics, pointed to the importance of 2 Samuel 7 and related texts for interpreting the history, ascribing its presence there to a 'Messianic cycle of conceptions', which had forced its way into deuteronomistic thinking.¹¹ Decisions of this sort may be the result of a certain interplay between exegetical judgement and a theological instinct regarding the basic nature of the Old Testament.

The differences which we have noted are revealing. They show that, even within the framework of critical enquiry, there is no unanimity about what might constitute the basic data of messianism. There is no agreed corpus of 'messianic' texts, nor is there a single *type* of text to which the enquiry must be limited (despite Mowinckel's opinion to the contrary. If the Royal Psalms are allowed to have an eschatological aspect, the concept of what might be regarded as messianic is quite different from Mowinckel's belief that it can be found only in explicit promises of a future deliverance). There is therefore much scope for the interpreter, as s/he judges what might constitute messianism in the Old Testament. Decisions are inevitably informed by many factors, not least a basic understanding of the nature of the Old Testament: is it essentially 'expectant'? And how may its (ancient Israelite) texts be used for Christian theology?

III. Messianism and Modern Old Testament Theology

We have observed that critical enquiry is not by definition inimical to the idea of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Yet some basic methodological questions have been raised which have to do with the way in which Old Testament study itself is conceived. A few remarks will be in place, therefore, about trends in Old Testament study which might have a bearing on the interpretation of the Messiah.

The century's classics in Old Testament theology, the works of

¹¹M. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (ET; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); G. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (ET; London: SCM, 1953) 89.

von Rad and Eichrodt, were favourable to the idea of a relationship between the two testaments. Von Rad's category of salvation-history stressed the sense of forward movement and expectation in the Old Testament, and found its conclusion, in his view, in Jesus Christ, the last of God's great acts of salvation. Eichrodt's cross-sectional approach to Old Testament Theology, while it appeared less hospitable on the surface to 'fulfilment' ideas, found in its organizing idea of 'covenant' a mechanism for affirming them. These works were steps towards the Christianising of Old Testament Theology, following decades in which scholarship had explicitly or implicitly declared the Old Testament to be less or other than Christian.

Further developments in Old Testament theology have tended to turn attention away from 'fulfilment' models. In particular 'salvation-history' has widely been seen as an inadequate key to understanding the Old Testament, because it cannot easily embrace all the types of material contained there. Indeed there has been in some treatments a new emphasis on aspects of the Old Testament which focus, not on the story of salvation, but on the relationship between God and his people in the regularities of life, and indeed the relationship between God and the world as such. An example is C. Westermann's focus on the concept of 'blessing' as a significant and previously underestimated dimension of Old Testament theology.¹² This tends to highlight the pole of 'creation' as opposed to redemption.

These corrective trends do not in themselves negate the idea of the Old Testament as expectant. Westermann, indeed, traces the idea of blessing from Old Testament roots into the New Testament and shows that, where blessing had once been bestowed by Yahweh on Israel, it was now transferred to Christ: 'God's bestowal of blessing became connected with God's work in Christ.'¹³ The theme of blessing, therefore, though it is seen as a balance to an exaggerated emphasis on salvation, is nevertheless subject to historical development and even fulfilment in Christ. Westermann has elsewhere shown how Jesus' teaching was imbued with Wisdom thinking.¹⁴ Furthermore, John Goldingay, drawing attention to the separate themes of creation and redemption in the Old Testament, has shown how the two might be

¹²C. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (ET; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Von Rad himself tried to redress the balance in his work on the Old Testament in his separate work on the Wisdom literature; von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (ET; London: SCM, 1972).

¹³*Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁴Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus* (ET; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990).

theologically integrated.¹⁵ This rather recent tendency in Old Testament studies has echoes of the somewhat older tension perceived between cultic and eschatological religion, observed a little earlier.

There is, however, a slightly different strain in modern thought about Old Testament. This is the trend towards claiming the Old Testament for various kinds of what might be called 'interested' readings, that is, those which read the Old Testament through the spectacles of a particular interest group. These take various forms and are associated in greater or lesser degrees with traditional Christian belief. But in common is their commitment to an agenda which influences the processes of selection and interpretation. An interesting feature of some of these interpretations is their stress on the 'creation' end of the creation-redemption polarity. Some feminist interpretations are a case in point. Phyllis Trible, notably, has seen the creation declaration 'male and female he created them' (Gn. 1:27) as a key to reading not only the creation narratives but the whole Old Testament, from her declared perspective of a 'feminist critique of culture'.¹⁶ The effect of the pursuit of this particular agenda, therefore, is to divert attention from the Old Testament as expectant, a story of salvation. Trible's focus on Genesis 2:17, indeed, makes a significant contrast with the high point which traditional Christian interpretation identifies in the creation narratives, namely Genesis 3:15, the promise (as it is held) of a saviour of the world from sin.

One particularly interesting recourse to Old Testament creation theology—for our present purpose—occurs in what might be called the ecumenical reading of the Old Testament. This is exemplified by R. Rendtorff, who has stressed the importance of creation as a means of effecting *rapprochement* between Christian and Jewish interpretation. In a collection which brings together a number of more or less recent essays his dominant theme is the need, as he puts it, 'to free the Hebrew Bible from the captivity into which it was brought when it came to be labelled merely a preliminary step, now superseded and overcome, on the way to the Christian Bible.'¹⁷ The volume is thus, in part at least, a renunciation of the Christian preoccupation with the prophetic (=redemptive, salvation-history) strain in the Old Testament at the expense of its theology of creation.

¹⁵John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 200-239.

¹⁶Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (London: SCM, 1978) 12-23, cf. 7-8.

¹⁷R. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 218.

Rendtorff believes, furthermore, that even critical scholarship since Wellhausen has denigrated the Jewishness of the Old Testament. And his laudable concern for reconciliation between Christians and Jews has led him to declare that the Church has no exclusive claim on the Old Testament. The Old Testament is *in itself* a revelation of God.

Rendtorff's later position on the Old Testament is interesting for a number of reasons, not least for the recantation it involves from his earlier association with the Pannenberg group and its assertion of God's revelation 'in history' whose end is revealed proleptically in Christ.¹⁸ It makes a telling contrast with Mowinckel's classic, which by Rendtorff's criteria emerges as strongly orthodox in terms of Christian interpretation. But it is most interesting as a reemergence, in striking form, of the ancient dilemma of the Old Testament: to whom does it belong, Church or synagogue? Rendtorff often appears to hesitate between simply allowing that the two claims are irreconcilable (but equally valid) and implying that the Church's interpretation has actually got it wrong. (His strictures on the traditional Christian reading of Jeremiah's New Covenant again makes an interesting contrast with Mowinckel). His dilemma, perhaps, cannot be resolved, and illustrates the real problem of the Old Testament—its call to a commitment of one kind or another.

The preceding brief and necessarily selective survey has aimed to put the investigation of the Messiah in the Old Testament in the context of modern study. It has shown a number of things. First, the idea of the Messiah has been seriously affected by tendencies in scholarship, which (at least until relatively recently) have stressed the importance of 'original' meanings, and frequently found that Old Testament texts which had been traditionally considered messianic were not so, but bore upon contemporary situations. Secondly, however, Old Testament scholarship was seen to manifest quite divergent tendencies, with some strands remaining closer to the traditional position than others. Mowinckel, though he narrowed the basis of messianic theology in the Old Testament, still operated with a strong idea of messianic expectation in it. And other critical scholars found even stronger messianic tendencies than he. In contrast to these, however, some modern work departed radically from the idea of the Old Testament as expectant. This was true of the many works which attempted to reread the Old Testament in pursuit of various kinds of social analysis. Thirdly, some modern readings reopened in a new

¹⁸W. Pannenberg (ed.), *Revelation as History* (ET; London: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

form the old debate concerning the real 'ownership' of the Old Testament, the Church or the synagogue.

Our survey suggests the question whether or how far the Old Testament may convincingly be shown to be messianic. Is a messianic reading just one among others, having no claim to possess a special validity? Or is it the task of Christian scholarship to try to show that, in a modern context too, a messianic reading of the Old Testament is compelling? The question involves us necessarily in hermeneutical considerations, to which we shall turn shortly. As a prelude to that, however, we must first look more closely at what is meant by messianism.

IV. What is Messianism?

Messianism, on most accounts, is a phenomenon that arises only in the late Old Testament period, and that reaches its full development in the century or so either side of the birth of Christ; indeed it is in the context of a rather widespread Jewish messianic expectation that Jesus is hailed as the Christ. The term 'Messiah' itself arises, as is well known, from the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ ('anoint'), which is used widely in the Old Testament for the anointing of kings, prophets and others to their divinely given tasks. As such, therefore, it is originally a rather general term, not yet specialized into a name for the deliverer sent by God, who would become the focus of Jewish hope in the post-exilic period.¹⁹

As we have already seen, however, the topic is much broader than the simple issue of the changing connotations of a single word. To locate the full-blown movement only late in the period and literature which we are interested in does not in itself answer the important questions about the roots of ideas and the legitimacy of interpretations. If messianism is late it may nevertheless have sound credentials. One aspect of the enquiry, therefore, must be to consider whether there are continuities between the Jewish literature extant at the time of Christ and various parts of the Old Testament. With that in mind, we begin by considering briefly the historical context of messianism as it is usually understood in modern scholarship.

¹⁹It occurs in Dn. 9:25-26, apparently in its developed technical sense, but its meaning there is unclear; see the further comments in M. Selman's essay in this volume.

1. *Messianism in Judaism*

How widespread was messianic expectation in later Judaism? To those weaned on the New Testament, with its pictures of Jesus' triumphal progress towards Jerusalem amid the exultation of expectant crowds, it comes as a surprise to find that there is a good deal of contemporary Jewish literature which has little or no overt messianic expectation. A distinction is sometimes made between those Jewish books which exhibit such hope and those which do not, the latter including virtually all of the Old Testament Apocrypha. In books like Tobit and Judith the focus is on the business of living and surviving as a faithful Jew in a hostile pagan environment rather than on hopes of dramatic deliverance. And Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus is often thought to have features of what would later become Sadduceanism, with its emphasis on the Torah and its denial of a resurrection.²⁰

A range of other books, however, show signs of messianic expectation. These include some works found at Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls), the Psalms of Solomon, Josephus and certain apocalyptic works.²¹ The problem for interpreters is then to know how far messianic expectation might be regarded as typical of Judaism at the turn of the eras. How far do the extant books enable us to build up a profile of Judaism at large? Are some more representative than others? And could it be that some of those which express no overt hope betray signs of it in the subsoil of their thought?²²

Having reviewed the literature in question, along with some general historical circumstances, N.T. Wright concludes that messianism was rather more widespread than one might suppose on the basis of certain Jewish literature. The evidence is to some extent circumstantial. There were messianic movements in the period 66-70 CE, according to Josephus, followed again by bar-Kochba (132-135), whose claims apparently had Davidic overtones.²³ Herod has been thought to have aimed to imitate Solomon. And the New Testament itself, with its Davidic language about Jesus, forms part of the bigger picture.²⁴ In the portrayal of Judaism offered by Wright, Jewish

²⁰Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: OUP, 1977) 87.

²¹N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) 319.

²²So W. Horbury, who notes patriotic elements in general in the Apocrypha, and certain Davidic and temple themes in particular (Jdt. 15:9; 16:18-20; 1 Mac. 2:57); (seminar at Oxford, and forthcoming book). See also *idem.*, "The Messianic Associations of the "Son of Man"", *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985) 34-55.

²³Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 308-309.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 308-310.

consciousness is informed by a 'story' which involves God's ultimate redemption of the nation, and in which the messianic idea is readily accommodated and often actually surfaces.

If Judaism between the testaments is to a large degree messianic, this has a bearing on our question to what extent the Old Testament contains messianic hopes. For a messianic Judaism must have its roots somewhere, and it is natural to suppose that the place to look for them is the Old Testament. This favours the view, superficially at least, that messianic expectation was present in post-exilic Old Testament literature (the view of Mowinckel). The point is significant, because it is hotly debated to what extent there is evidence of such expectation at that time. There is a school of thought which considers that messianic expectation was at best marginal in the post-exilic period, the dominant viewpoint being the priestly, theocratic position represented (*ex hypothesi*) by Chronicles and the Priestly literature.²⁵ Yet here the corpus of literature on which a judgement must be based is small, the evidence is finely balanced, and the interpreter is called upon to look carefully not only at the lines but between them.²⁶

A further caveat, which we have already noted, is that messianic hope in the Old Testament does not in any case come fully formed. Messianism as a phenomenon takes various forms, and indeed our information about it is imperfect. Our attempt to say something about the Messiah in the Old Testament, therefore, does not begin with comprehensive and clearly defined data about what 'Messiah' connotes. Any attempt to reconstruct the lines of Old Testament messianic expectation will require sensitivity to a range of overtones.

2. The Old Testament and Jewish and Christian Messianism

Now that we have made some observations about messianism as a phenomenon, our next question is a hermeneutical one. The historical phenomenon is closely bound up with self-understandings that arise from readings of the Old Testament Scriptures. Messianism is essentially hermeneutical; it is about understanding God's purposes, as revealed, and as bearing upon history now, for 'us'. But how does the relationship between text and 'messianic' community work?

The promise-fulfilment model (implicit in Old Testament

²⁵O. Plöger, *Theocracy and Eschatology* (ET; Richmond: John Knox, 1968); P.D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

²⁶See further B. Kelly's essay on Chronicles in this volume.

prophecy and taken up in the New Testament) might lead us to expect that the dynamic is a simple one: the Old Testament makes certain promises, later communities read and understand them, and see their fulfilment in history. On this model we might suppose that the people of Jesus' day simply expected what the Bible had led them to expect. To an extent this is true. As we have seen, Jewish messianism had a marked Davidic colour, to take the most obvious point. However, the reality is not so simple as this might suggest. The interpretation of the Old Testament is not a one-way street, but a two-way flow, in which contemporary situations were compared with the Scriptures, and the Scriptures were then brought to bear, sometimes in (to us) unexpected ways, on the situations. The Old Testament, indeed, underwent a good deal of reinterpretation even as hopes of deliverance were being worked out. The Biblical interpreters at Qumran afford an obvious example of this, with their readings of the Scriptures in such a way as to see themselves as the eschatological community.²⁷

To make this observation is to do little more than draw attention to a commonplace of modern thinking about interpretation. People bring a certain pre-understanding to the reading of texts, which informs how they read them; the text in turn exercises an influence on the reader, whose 'pre-understanding' is thus slightly modified as s/he continues to read. And the process can continue in what is known as the 'hermeneutical circle'. Such an understanding of how texts are heard and appropriated sheds some light on what was happening at Qumran, as well as on what happens when we ourselves reflect on our own traditions. This does not mean that judgements may not be formed about the greater or lesser persuasiveness, or correctness, of particular views. The modern reader, indeed, may find Qumran exegesis strange and wholly unjustifiable. Yet it is important to understand that their world was one in which the appropriation of Scripture had urgent importance; Scripture was the backcloth to issues of life and death, and it was read and searched with the greatest urgency.

The relevance of these observations to our own interpretation of the Messiah in the Old Testament should be clear. Inasmuch as we come to the topic as a strand in *Biblical* theology—the Old Testament in relation to the New—we are bound to recognize that the New Testament writers belonged to the same world as the exegetes of

²⁷See the essay of P. Jenson in the present volume for the complex relationship between a text and the understanding of its fulfilment.

Qumran and other Jews. Christian appropriation of the promises of a Messiah do not avoid the basic dynamics of hermeneutics. The early Church was Jewish first of all, and the intellectual and religious assumptions of its first members were (at least in the beginning) the same as those of other Jews. In principle, therefore, the same factors come into play as with other messianic interpretations. The first Christians matched their inherited expectations to their new experience and self-understanding, and read the promises of the Old Testament as fulfilled in Jesus.

It bears repeating that these things are not said to suggest that various readings have merely relative importance. It does mean, though, that claims to represent the true interpretation of texts and traditions need to be contended for. That, of course, is precisely what the New Testament does, and indeed subsequent Christian interpretation too. Arguably any discussion of the Messiah, therefore, has a history in committed dialogue, and belongs within a discourse of persuasion. True interpretations, furthermore, are worth contending for.

3. The Messiah and New Testament Interpretation of the Old

It should be clear from the above that our understanding of the Messiah in the Old Testament belongs within the larger study of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The nature of that relationship is not easy to pin down and various models have been advanced to try to articulate it.²⁸ What is clear, however, is that the exercise is one of *theology*. That is, the New Testament is reading the Old Testament in an engaged way, because of its certainty that Jesus is the Messiah. Furthermore, it avails itself of contemporary techniques of interpretation in doing so, in a way which can be disconcerting to the modern Christian reader.

Specifically, texts that are interpreted of Jesus in the New Testament do not appear to be 'messianic' predictions when read in their original Old Testament contexts. Matthew's rendering of Hosea's 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Ho. 11:1) is a case in point. When Hosea wrote the line he had in mind God's calling of his 'son' Israel out of slavery in Egypt. When Matthew lines it up with the return of the child Jesus from his Egyptian refuge on the death of Herod (Mt. 2:15), he is scarcely claiming that that is what Hosea actually had in mind.

²⁸For an authoritative survey see D.L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (2nd ed; Leicester: Apollos, 1991).

Rather, he is asserting that there is a true connection, at a deep level, between the two events.

It might be thought that we are on safer ground with explicit predictions. However, predictions which have been taken messianically in the New Testament do not necessarily fit the mould of promised Davidic king in the Old. The famous Immanuel prophecy (Is. 7:14) is a case in point, since it is not at all clear that it referred to a royal child, and appears to have its fulfilment in the immediate context of Ahaz' reign. If this text originally had messianic overtones, it requires careful demonstration. Mowinckel attempted such a demonstration, appealing to the significance generally of royal births in the ancient Near East (though there he had to assume the 'young woman' in the prophetic sign was Ahaz' queen), and to alleged Canaanite mythological associations, which postulated a connection between the birth of a god to the 'virgin' Anath and royal births; these latter, in his view, were evidently understood by the Jewish translators of the LXX when they rendered עֲלִמָּה by παρθένος. This line of argument, however, has not found general acceptance.²⁹ If the saying is to be shown to have been messianic in intent, other ways must be found of doing so. The traditional argument that the noun עֲלִמָּה actually meant 'virgin' is another possible avenue, which has been recently explored again by J.A. Motyer.³⁰ This study raises two issues, however. First, it poses the question of the precise nature of Old Testament 'prediction'. Does the validity of the messianic interpretation of the sign given to Ahaz depend on a demonstration that the noun עֲלִמָּה actually meant 'virgin' to Isaiah and his hearers? Or does the messianic understanding of what Isaiah said arise in the course of hearing and reflecting on the passage? The second issue is exegetical: how does the prophecy concerning this child relate to the context of Isaiah 7-9 in general, and in particular the several children with significant names who feature there? Answers to these questions should be part of a full explanation of how the prophecy is messianic.

A number of essays in the present collection address issues of this sort. Johnston and Heim, for example, argue (in slightly different ways) that Psalms 16 and 72 respectively, though explicable entirely within an Old Testament context, have features which suggest or encourage messianic reinterpretation. And Jenson examines the way

²⁹Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 114-119. Contrast R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980) 86, who argues that the child is the prophet's own.

³⁰J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 84-86.

in which a traditional messianic text, Micah 5:2(1), has become capable of bearing messianic meaning, though it did not originally do so.

There are, of course, predictions that are more transparently messianic, in the sense that they hold out an express hope of a restored Davidic monarchy (Is. 9:6-7; 11:1; Je. 23:5-6 *etc.*).³¹ With these, Mowinckel thought that he was on the firmest ground. However, even here, a case has to be made for the transition from the mix of spiritual and political hopes to hopes which might be seen to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The political dimension in these prophecies should not be underestimated, for the predictions of a restored monarchy often go hand in hand with what look like nationalistic, or at least thoroughly 'Jewish', elements (especially the temple, the land; *e.g.*, Je. 33:19-22; Ezk. 34:23-24; 36:8-12). This awkward fact has led to unfortunate misappropriations of prophecy in our day, with unhappy consequences for Christian consciousness, and conscience, in relation to Palestine. A suitable appropriation of even these clearly messianic prophecies still has to pass through a rather subtle theological process.

In the face of data such as these the modern reader may well ask whether s/he has any hope of discovering 'real' messianism in the Old Testament. To put it pessimistically, are not such connections made between the Old Testament and the New Testament and Christian theology arbitrary, or at least beyond the wit of the modern mind to fathom? To put a different slant on it, in terms of a theology of Scripture, are such connections irreducibly the product of divine inspiration, and simply to be accepted by faith?

V. Conclusions

In the light of the foregoing a number of points may be made in general about a study of the topic of the Messiah in the Old Testament. First, there are fundamental issues of interpretation, which have to do with how one views Scripture. Messianism might be regarded simply as a phenomenon of Israelite religion. Alternatively it may be seen as a prominent motif in the Old Testament because the Scriptures, under divine inspiration, witness to the coming of Christ. This basic tenet leaves open a number of specific exegetical and hermeneutical options. It does not necessitate, for example, fanciful christological readings. It leaves open the question how precisely future events may be said to

³¹See the essay of Dan Schibler, below.

have been foreseen or predicted. On the other hand it may well be a line from sacral kingship, for example, to messianic hope, and if so the interpreter must try to understand the world of religious ideas in which the Old Testament is located. This implies a further question of interpretation, namely the extent of the Old Testament's openness to foreign ideas.

Secondly, Christian messianic interpretation requires an understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. We have seen that that relationship is not simply, certainly not entirely, a matter of specific promises finding fulfilment. The history of salvation which begins to be told in the Old Testament and which comes to its completion in Christ is discerned in ways that go deeper than that. When the New Testament writers found fulfilments of Old Testament events and sayings in Christ, they were seeing correspondences between them that had to do with the way in which God relates fundamentally to the world. Some have spoken of 'typology' to articulate connections of this sort.³² Christ brings to completion the reality of salvation as it has been desired and partly experienced for ages past. Conversely, messianic expectation may express such intuitions and desires in a wide variety of ways, without necessarily seeing beforehand the precise shape in which fulfilment would eventually come.

For this reason, incidentally, foreshadowings of Christ may be discerned in a variety of ways, and not just in express predictions. One possible category is personalities of the Old Testament. Is Joshua a messianic figure, for example, or Solomon, or Elisha (see Provan)? The danger of fanciful christological interpretation may seem to lie close here, and claims of this sort need justification. Yet subject to the criteria just mentioned it may be right to see messianism in them. This is one illustration of the range of ways in which the Old Testament might be said to be messianic.

Thirdly, there is the central issue of the interpretation of specific texts. How does one 'decide' a text? Here the scenery has changed considerably since Mowinckel's days, because the literary- and historical-critical means which were available to him are now widely considered to be too narrow a basis on which to decide meaning. Canonical criticism and the newer approach to literary

³²See D.L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (2nd ed; Leicester: Apollos, 1991) 179-299, for a careful treatment of the nature of typology and its relation to fulfilment. And see again Jenson, below.

criticism have brought new contextual possibilities into interpretation. Central questions in the discussion of the topic of the Messiah (and any other topic) are in principle reopened by this. P. Satterthwaite's study of the Books of Samuel is an attempt to do this for the interpretation of David in those books.

Other factors are also present when an interpreter decides on an interpretation of a text. An interpreter's general view of the topic will inevitably have an influence on his or her reading of a particular text. If I think, for example, that messianism is essentially a post-exilic phenomenon I am likely to date texts that seem to me to be messianic in that period; and conversely, texts which I think are pre-exilic I am unlikely to see as messianic. Some such relationship between general theory and the evaluation of the details is inevitable. It may be formed in part by factors which are not immediately exegetical or theological. For example, one might judge on the basis of ordinary probability that messianism is likely to have arisen only after the end of the kingdom. (Others, of course, may judge otherwise). For this sort of reason, however, interpreters have to be particularly careful to ensure that the theory remains open to testing.

Finally, the above discussion shows that there is ample warrant for the ongoing study of the topic of the Messiah from within the Old Testament. Such a study can hardly be *exclusively* an Old Testament study, since the agenda has been set from outside it. Yet we have seen, I think, that the interpretation of this essentially Old Testament-New Testament issue is by no means entirely formed by the New. An understanding of the Old Testament's contribution to the theme involves a genuine two-way process (between Old and New). The validity of a Christian understanding of the Old Testament must depend in the last analysis on cogency of the argument that the Old Testament *is* messianic. In this sense the present volume is a contribution to an old argument. Yet the argument needs always to be remade, since its backcloth in Old Testament studies constantly changes. The attempt to do this involves a number of specific interpretative issues, some of which are addressed in the pages that follow. The essays are not necessarily univocal in their understanding of the hermeneutics of messianism. In that sense there are elements of internal dialogue here. That too, however, is offered as a constructive contribution to the theme.

CHAPTER 2

MESSIANIC IDEOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

T. Desmond Alexander

Summary

Recent studies have tended to reject the long-standing view that Genesis 3:15 and 49:8-12 are important passages concerning the Old Testament portrayal of the Messiah. Taking Genesis as a unified literary work, there are, however, substantial grounds for believing that messianic ideology permeates not only these verses but also the entire work. Central to this is the recognition that the writer of Genesis focuses on a unique line of 'seed' from which will arise a king of the tribe of Judah through whom all nations will be blessed. This future king will be responsible for the restoration of 'Edenic' conditions upon earth and the overthrow of the powers of evil. Genesis 3:15 and 49:8-12 are vital components of this overall picture.

I. Introduction

For the majority of contemporary biblical scholars the book of Genesis has little or nothing to say about the Messiah or associated concepts. This is reflected both in studies devoted specifically to the topic of the Messiah¹ and commentaries on Genesis itself.² Two main factors may account for this situation. First, neither the noun מָשִׁיחַ ('Messiah', 'anointed one') nor the verb מָשַׁח ('to anoint') is used in Genesis to denote a royal figure.³ Also, the few passages which have in the past been viewed as messianic (*i.e.*, 3:15; 49:8-12)⁴ are now generally considered to be non-messianic in nature. Second, the expectation of a unique future king or Messiah is commonly assumed to be a late development in Israelite thinking, possibly arising as a result of the demise of the Davidic monarchy at the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. The book of Genesis, however, focuses on the very earliest period of Israelite history, centuries before any monarch ever ruled the nation. There is little reason, therefore, to expect that Genesis would deal with a concept which only arose many years later.

Yet, in spite of these considerations, this study aims to show that messianic ideology permeates the book of Genesis. It will be argued that any assessment of what the Old Testament has to teach about the coming of a future king or Messiah must include a careful consideration of the Genesis narrative; to ignore its contents is to overlook an important contribution to messianic thought in the Old Testament.

¹*E.g.*, J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel from its Beginnings to the Completion of the Mishnah* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956); S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956); H. Ringgren, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Studies in Biblical Theology; London: SCM, 1956); A. Bentzen, *King and Messiah* (2nd ed; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970); J. Becker, *Messianic Expectation in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980); M. de Jonge, 'Messiah', *ABD* 4:777-88. The most notable exception to this trend is G. van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

²For example, in Westermann's detailed and extensive three-volume commentary on Genesis discussion of the Messiah or messianic age is restricted to three passages: 3:15; 9:20 and 48:8-12. Commenting on 9:20 Westermann (*Genesis 1-11*, [London: SPCK, 1984] 487) observes briefly that 'the vine and its fruit became the sign of the blessed life in the messianic era.' As regards 3:15 and 48:8-12, we shall consider in more detail below Westermann's arguments for rejecting a messianic reading of these passages.

³There is only one occurrence of the root מָשַׁח in Genesis; the verb is used in Gn. 31:13 with reference to the pillar which Jacob anointed at Bethel.

⁴Unless otherwise indicated all biblical references are from the book of Genesis.

While we will attempt to show that the book of Genesis displays features which are clearly associated with messianic concepts found elsewhere in the Old Testament, no attempt will be made here to account for the origin and nature of this relationship. To do so would require a complex traditio-historical investigation with much depending upon the proposed dating of the relevant material. Given especially the present lack of consensus regarding the extent and dating of the sources used in the composition of Genesis, any attempt to reconstruct the history of messianic traditions found both in Genesis and elsewhere would be highly speculative.

Although the noun מָשִׁיחַ ('Messiah') and associated verbal forms are not used in Genesis of royal persons, the present text develops a number of motifs which are prominent in other messianic texts. Foremost among these is the expectation of a divinely appointed king who will play a vital role in mediating God's blessing throughout the earth. Significantly, in Genesis this future king is linked to a royal dynasty descended from the tribe of Judah. Furthermore, the activity of this king is associated with the restoration of the harmonious state which initially existed between God, humanity and nature in the Garden of Eden. In spite of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden, the book of Genesis envisages a time when the consequences of humanity's rebellion against God will be reversed through the mediation of a future monarch. Such ideas clearly find remarkable parallels elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁵

To appreciate the presence of these ideas in Genesis it is necessary to consider the book of Genesis in its received form. Regardless of how we view the process by which Genesis was composed, the present text, as the end product of this process, reflects the outlook of the final author/editor.⁶ It is with regard to this final phase that we are concerned to demonstrate the presence of messianic ideology in the book of Genesis.

⁵The royal Psalms, for example, envisage a king who by the power of God (2:6, 8; 18:46-50; 21:1-13; 110:1-2) overcomes ungodly opponents (2:1-3; 45:3-5; 89:22-23; 110:1) in order to establish his authority over the entire earth (2:8-12; 18:43-45; 45:17; 72:8-11; 89:25; 110:5-6) for all time (21:4; 45:6; 72:5) thereby bringing peace (72:7), prosperity (72:16) and justice to the poor and oppressed (72:2-4, 12-14; cf. 45:4, 6-7; 72:7; 101:1-8). Similarly, it is striking that descriptions of the messianic age in Am. 9:13; Is. 4:2; 11:6-9; 32:1-8, 15, 20; 55:13; Ps. 72:7, 16 are reminiscent of the prosperity and peace which existed prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

⁶Hereafter this author/editor is referred to as the 'writer' of Genesis.

II. Major Literary Features in Genesis

As Genesis now stands there are two distinctive literary features which highlight its central message.⁷ The first of these is the תולדות headings. These headings introduce either narrative sections dealing with the principal characters in Genesis (2:4; 6:9; 11:27; 25:19; 37:2; introducing respectively Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph), or genealogical lists (5:1; 10:1; 11:10; 25:12; 36:1,9). Significantly, the genealogies fall into two types: linear (5:1-32; 11:10-26) and segmented (10:1-32; 25:12-18; 36:1-8,9-43).⁸ Of these the linear genealogies in chs. 5 and 11 are especially important; in conjunction with the תולדות headings they emphasise the existence of a unique family line in Genesis.

The second literary feature is the use of the Hebrew term זרע ('seed') as a *Leitwort* or keyword. The significance of this term is indicated by its unusually high frequency in Genesis; of 231 occurrences in the whole of the Hebrew Bible,⁹ it comes 59 times in Genesis. Two aspects of the term זרע should be noted.

(a) זרע may denote either a single seed (*e.g.*, Ishmael is Abraham's seed [21:13]) or many seed (*e.g.*, the seed of Jacob will be as numerous as 'the dust of the earth' [28:14]). Due consideration must be given to both these possibilities when interpreting passages containing the term.

(b) The term זרע implies a close resemblance between progenitor and progeny. This link is underlined initially in 1:11-12 where attention is drawn to the fact that plants and trees produce seeds 'according to their various kinds'. These observations will be developed further below.

Significantly, the way in which the term זרע is used in Genesis complements the תולדות headings and linear genealogies. Taken

⁷Much of the discussion which comes in this and the following section summarizes fuller treatments by the present author in 'From Adam to Judah: the significance of the family tree in Genesis', *EQ* 61 (1989) 5-19; 'Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis', *TynB* 44 (1993) 255-70; *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 6-18.

⁸On the distinction between linear and segmented genealogies see R.R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (Yale Near Eastern Researches 7; New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) 9. Interestingly, he observes (p. 132) that in the 'politico-jural sphere' Near Eastern genealogies 'are used to legitimate royal and professional officeholders.'

⁹Or 232 if we include the Aramaic word זרע in Dn. 2:43.

together these features focus attention on a unique lineage which begins with Adam and concludes with the sons of Israel. This family line forms the backbone of the book.

III. The Family Line in Genesis

When this family line is examined closely various aspects of it are noteworthy. First, the central lineage in Genesis is traced through male descendants and successive members are always clearly indicated. Beginning with Adam, the line then moves from Seth to Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (5:1-32). It next proceeds from Shem to Terah and his three sons, Abraham, Nahor and Haran (11:10-26). After this it focuses on Abraham, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Finally, Genesis concluded by noting that Jacob had twelve sons. Throughout care is taken to establish accurately the precise line of succession, especially when, contrary to expectation, it is not traced through the first-born son.

Second, the writer of Genesis emphasizes that the existence and continuity of this unique line of descendants is dependent upon God. This is especially apparent in two ways. On the one hand, when the wives of certain members of this lineage are barren, it is God who enables them to have children.¹⁰ Even when there are no apparent barriers to the birth of children, God's role in giving new life is often acknowledged (*e.g.*, 4:2; 29:33; 30:6). On the other hand, although it is normally anticipated that the line of descent will be traced through the first-born son, occasionally God intervenes and specifies that the lineage will be continued through another male child. Thus, Seth the third-born is favoured over Cain the first-born (4:1-25); Isaac, Abraham's second-born son, enjoys priority over Ishmael, the first-born son (16:1-16; 17:18-21; 21:9-20); Esau, the first-born of Isaac, takes a secondary position to his younger twin brother Jacob (25:23). These features indicate that the lineage traced in Genesis is no ordinary line; it is one appointed by God. Moreover, its members enjoy an exceptionally close relationship with God. This is especially apparent in the cases of Noah and Abraham, with whom God makes eternal covenants. However, other members of the family lineage also experience in large measure God's favour and blessing (*e.g.*, Enoch, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph).

¹⁰This is so in the cases of Sarah (21:1; *cf.* 17:16; 18:10-14), Rebekah (25:21) and Rachel (30:22-24; *cf.* 29:31; 30:1-2).