

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

The messianic hope was shaped in the context of exile, restoration, and the unfulfilled expectations and trials of the Intertestamental Period. To be sure, there had been ancient hints about a Coming One (cf. Ge. 3:15; 12:3; 49:10; Nu. 24:17; Dt. 18:18), but between Moses and David there was virtually nothing contributing to this idea. However, following the Davidic Covenant and the failure of David's sons and Israel to be faithful, the promise among the prophets of a coming anointed king from David's line who would establish the nation in freedom and faithfulness captured the imagination of the beleaguered Jews, and the idea of a Messiah *par excellence* was born (Is. 9:1-7; 11:1-10; 16:4b-5; 32:1; 33:17; Amo. 9:11-12; Ho. 3:4-5; Mic. 5:2-5; Je. 23:5-8; 30:8-9; 33:14-26; Eze. 34:23-31; 37:24-28; Ps. 2:6-9; 89:19-37; 132:11-18).

DEFINING SYMBOLS OF SELF-IDENTITY

*The defining symbols for Judah's self-identity—**kingship, temple, covenant** and **land**—remained remarkably stable in spite of the exile and its aftermath. It is due almost entirely to the prophetic hope that these defining symbols had such longevity between the return from Babylon and the two Jewish revolts early in the Common Era. All of these symbols were threatened by pagan occupation, but all of them were sustained, in spite of foreign occupation, because of God's promises for the future, especially his messianic promises, that were inextricably linked to these symbols.*

The yoke of heathenism that extended from the Persian through the Greek to the Roman Periods gave rise to a vibrant Jewish nationalism that continued through the 1st and 2nd Jewish revolts in the 60s and 130s AD. Much of the literature produced by the Apocalyptists was rife with the imagery of liberation as was considerable literature produced by the Qumran community. By the time of Jesus, the Greco-Roman occupation had become a perpetual threat to the cultural identity and faith of the Jews. There was, of course, incredible pressure to assimilate, and some, notably the Herodians in the gospels, seemed content to do so. Against this pressure, however, a number of patriotic uprisings—usually billed by the Romans as the foment of brigands—demonstrated that revolution remained barely beneath the surface. It erupted in AD

66 as a full-scale revolt. Roman reprisals were severe, and they included the destruction of Jerusalem and the 2nd Temple by Vespasian and Titus. Yet another revolt under Simon ben Kosiba in AD 132-135 would be put down by the Roman Emperor Hadrian. The fact that Rabbi Akiba dubbed ben Kosiba as "Bar-Kochba" (= Son of the Star, cf. Nu. 24:17) clearly showed that the revolt was perceived to be the advance of the new age, the one heralded by the ancient prophets.

It would remain for Jesus and the writers of the New Testament to offer an alternative pathway toward ending the exile, a pathway that was markedly spiritual, not political, and certainly not militaristic. Still, it should be clearly understood that for the earliest followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jews, the common consent was that the exile was not over. The ideals of covenant, land, kingship, and temple—all of which figured so prominently in the prophets' visions of restoration—were taken up by those who heard Jesus preach, "The kingdom of God is at hand."

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These same disciples would compose much of the New Testament, albeit in ways that were counter-cultural to the Jewish mainstream.

The Servant of the LORD

Several important titles describe the Coming One. Among them, some of the most important were the “prophet like Moses” (Dt. 18:18; 34:19), the “Branch from David’s line” (Is. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15), the “Son of Man” (Dan. 7:13), and the “Messiah” (Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:26). However, a new title crops up in the latter chapters of Isaiah, the title “Servant of Yahweh.” Beginning with Isaiah 40, a new context surrounds the remaining oracles of the book. Jerusalem was now in ruins (Is. 40:1-2; 44:26-28; 49:14-23; 64:10). Solomon’s temple had been desecrated and burned (Is. 63:18; 64:11). Large portions of the populace had been deported to Babylon. In the midst of oracles announcing restoration, there appear several visions regarding a figure called the Servant of the LORD. In one sense, this figure is a collective metaphor for the entire nation of Israel (Is. 41:9-10). As Yahweh’s servant, chosen by God to display his glory among the nations, Israel had terribly failed. The nation had been blind and deaf to God’s greater purpose (Is. 42:18-22). Even in the holocaust of exile, the nation had not understood nor taken to heart what had happened (Is. 42:25). Repeatedly, the nation had turned away from the LORD and burdened him with their sins (Is. 43:22-24). Nevertheless, it was God’s purpose to blot out the nation’s transgressions, redeem it (Is. 43:1-7, 14-21, 25; 44:22-23), and bless it with the gift of the Spirit (Is. 44:1-5).

The most remarkable aspect of this promise would come through a Coming One—an individual—also called the Servant of the LORD. It is apparent that while on the one hand the servant metaphor describes the nation collectively, on the other it describes a leader who is distinguished

from the nation but commissioned to turn the nation back to God (Is. 49:5), and not only Israel, but to bring salvation to the nations of the whole earth (Is. 49:6). Though collectively Israel had failed as Yahweh’s servant, this coming individual servant would never fail (Is. 42:1-7). Though despised and abhorred, he would be honored by the nations (Is. 49:7). Though collectively Israel had been rebellious and stubborn, the coming Servant would be attentive and

The Songs of the Servant

Beginning in Isaiah 42:1, the reader encounters the first of what has come to be called the four Servant Songs, poetic declarations about Yahweh’s special purpose for his servant.

Mission 42:1-4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Justice to the nations</i> ▪ <i>Endowed with the Spirit</i> ▪ <i>Gracious to the weak</i> ▪ <i>Determined to succeed</i> 	Call 49:1-6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Chosen before birth</i> ▪ <i>Hidden in God’s purpose</i> ▪ <i>Destined for glory</i> ▪ <i>A light for the nations</i> 	Submission 50:4-9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Completely faithful</i> ▪ <i>Willing to suffer</i> ▪ <i>Determined to endure</i> ▪ <i>Vindicated at last by Yahweh</i> 	Humiliation 52:13–53:12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Despised and rejected</i> ▪ <i>Suffers innocently & vicariously</i> ▪ <i>Bears the sin of many</i> ▪ <i>Victorious!</i>
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obedient, even to the point of terrible suffering (Is. 50:4-9). He would be mistreated and rejected, but in his passion he would vicariously bear the sins of the nation even to death (Is. 52:13–53:12). His mission would bring about the rebirth of the nation (Is. 54:1-8), a rebirth directly connected to the “unfailing kindnesses promised to David” (Is. 55:3-5). A new Jerusalem and a

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new Zion would be rebuilt, and the glory of the LORD would replace the very sun (Is. 60:10-11, 19-22)! In the end, a new heavens and new earth would become the habitation of God's people forever (Is. 65:17-25; 66:22). These were the breath-taking promises associated with the mission of the LORD's Servant.

Thus, several titles are accorded the Coming One whom God would raise up. Not only would he be the son of David, thus embracing the messianic language of "the anointed," he would be called the "Son of Man" and the "Servant of the LORD." These titles, along with the title from Deuteronomy, "prophet like Moses," helped shape the Jewish expectations for the future.

The Post-Exilic Vision

Near the end of the Old Testament, Haggai's preaching had spurred the people to reengage in the temple project. God promised that the 2nd Temple they were building would figure in his divine purposes for all the nations (Hg. 2:6), especially the return of Yahweh's glory to the new edifice (Hg. 2:7). Indeed, the glory of the 2nd Temple would be even greater than the glory of Solomon's temple (Hg. 2:9)!

The prophet Zechariah supported these same major themes, urging the people forward in their work. The rebuilding of the temple was only the beginning of the glorious future God had promised (Zec. 1:16-17). Jerusalem would be restored, and the glory of Yahweh would fill the new sanctuary (Zec. 2:3-5). Yahweh himself would live among his people again, and the nations of the world would be joined to the people of God as one nation (Zec. 2:10-13).

This future messianic blessing would center around the coming of a new King to Jerusalem who would ride into the city on a donkey, the symbol of peace (Zec. 9:9-10).¹ Nevertheless, the coming "good shepherd" who would tend the sheep of Israel's oppressed (Zec. 11:7) would also be betrayed by his own flock and dismissed for the price of a slave—a paltry thirty pieces of silver (Zec. 11:12-13). He would be pierced and mourned by the people in Jerusalem and the family of David (Zec. 11:10-14). The Good Shepherd, the one close to Yahweh, would be struck down, and the flock of Israel would be scattered (Zec. 13:7). Still, in spite of this coming trauma (or because of it), a fountain of cleansing would be opened to Jerusalem and the family of David for purification from sin and impurity (Zec. 13:1). In the end, survivors from the nations would come to worship in Jerusalem (Zec. 14:16). Everything in the whole city would be holy (Zec. 14:20-21).

Malachi, the final prophetic voice in the Old Testament, predicted that before Yahweh returned to his temple, a messenger would precede him (Mal. 3:1), a prophet like Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6). Hence, the messianic promises were pushed into the indeterminate future. The Hebrew prophets' oracles end on this unfinished note.

The general viewpoint of the Jewish community was that the Spirit had been quenched and would remain so until the advent of the Messiah. In the Intertestamental Period, after Judas Maccabeus had triumphed over the Syrian Greeks in 164 BC, the Jews cleansed their desecrated temple but debated about what to do with the defiled altar. They decided to tear it down and store the stones until a prophet should arise to give them spiritual direction. In its place, they built a new altar to replace the old one (1 Maccabees 4:46-47). Of significance, of course, is the

¹ Just as the war horse is the symbol of battle, the domestic donkey is the symbol of peace.

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absence of any prophetic voice. Later in the same book, there is a clear reference to the breaking off of prophetic sequence in the summary statement, “There was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them” (1 Maccabees 9:27). Later, there is the future anticipation of a “trustworthy prophet” who would eventually arise (1 Maccabees 14:41). Other references, also, point to the quenched Spirit. Psalm 74, if it addresses the post-exilic period, states, “We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be” (Psa. 74:8-9).² Flavius Josephus, a contemporary of Paul, conceded that “there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time” (i.e., since the time of Artaxerxes in the Persian Period).³ Another Jewish writer from about the end of the 1st century AD says that “our fathers in former times and former generations had helpers, righteous prophets and holy men,” but that “now the prophets are sleeping.”⁴ The rabbinical conclusion was that “since the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit has ceased in Israel.”⁵

Though the prophetic Spirit had been quenched, the expectation was vibrant that it would return when the Messiah was to appear. In the 1st century AD, the hope burned brightly for a coming son of David who would rule over Israel (Psalms of Solomon 17:21), a leader called “the Lord Messiah” (Psalms of Solomon 17:32; 18:7) whom God would make “powerful in the Holy Spirit” (Psalms of Solomon 17:37).⁶ A century or so earlier, this same expectation was voiced concerning the messianic “son of man” (1 Enoch 46:3), a leader endowed with the Spirit (1 Enoch 49:3; 62:2). The same idea is found in the 2nd century BC, where appears the vision of a messianic priest filled with the divine Spirit of understanding and the glory of the Most High God (Testament of Levi 18:2, 7). Similarly, the messianic leader called the “Star of Jacob” and the “Sun of righteousness,” obvious Old Testament allusions, would have poured out upon him the Spirit of the Holy Father (Testament of Judah 24:1-2). This leader would be the one called “the Shoot” or “Branch” (Testament of Judah 24:4), recalling the metaphor of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah (Is. 11:1; Je. 23:5; Zec. 3:8).

The Maccabean Ideal

Though there were competing ideas about the messiah among the Jews emerging from the Intertestamental Period, one expectation seemed common: the coming leader would be a national hero, much as had been Judas Maccabeus. Judas himself, of course, could never have fulfilled the messianic ideal, since he was from the clan of Levi rather than Judah (his father was a priest, 1 Maccabees 1:1-5). Also, Judas, though greatly successful in driving out the pagan Greeks, died in battle at the apex of his career (1 Maccabees 9:17-22). Nevertheless, the expectation of a Maccabean-like warrior was never far from the messianic ideal.

Into this world and this set of expectations, Jesus of Nazareth was born.

² The KJV and RV both render the word מועד (= meetingplace) in 74:8 as “synagogues,” which suggests a late date (though later English Versions render the word differently). Most scholars suggest the setting for the psalm to be either the destruction of the temple in 587 BC or the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC.

³ *Against Apion*, 1.8.

⁴ 2 *Baruch* 85:1-3.

⁵ *T. Sota*, 13, 2, par. in Str.-B., I.127 as cited in *TDNT* (1968) VI.385.

⁶ The Psalms of Solomon probably were written before the end of the 1st century AD.