

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS MESSIANIC PROPHECY

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Shortly before his ascension our Lord spent several days with the Apostles explaining the significance of his own earthly career, now closing, and their own future mission to the world. On this occasion he explained both his career, i.e., Gospel history, and their great mission to the world as fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy. His words are basic to an understanding of Jesus' own hermeneutics as regards Old Testament messianic prophecy and must therefore be quoted at this point.

Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe *all that the prophets have spoken*: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at *Moses and all the prophets*, he expounded unto them *in all the scriptures* the things concerning himself . . . And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you that *all things must be fulfilled*, which are written in the *law of Moses*, and in *the prophets*, and in the *Psalms*, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand *the scriptures*, and he said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations beginning at Jerusalem (*italics mine*, Luke 24:24 - 27; 44 - 47).

Now, among the many discussions of Old Testament messianic prophecy there are precious few that take into consideration all the words of Jesus in this definitive text. Terms used (see underlining) make clear that Jesus held all 39 books of "prophetic" Old Testament Scripture to be predictive. Jesus seems to say not merely that there are messianic prophecies in all of the books (astonishing in itself) but that all the Scriptures of the Old Testament are, as such, predictive of Christ. Further, not only is the career of Christ predicted in the Old Testament but the spread of the Christian gospel as well.

Older generations of writers were more readily able to see this comprehensive predictive character of the Old Testament. Their perceptive powers had not been dulled by the current frantic interest in relating everything in the Old Testament to its background. No one had yet "discovered" an annual enthronement festival or annual ritual humiliation of the Babylonian monarchs! Their interest was mainly in the "foreground" of the Old Testament, i.e., the New Testament. So a Saint Augustine could write: *In vetere testamento novum latet et in novo vetus patet* ("In the Old Testament the New lies hidden and in the New the Old lies open") and a Patrick Fairbairn could quote his words on the title page of his monumental two-volume work of 1854, *The Typology of Scripture*.

Yet it is not at once evident just how it can be that all of the Old Testament is predictive of Jesus' career in the narratives of Gospel history and of the spread of the Christian gospel. In fact, the Gospel writers frequently cite portions of the Old Testament as messianic in ways that seem quite strange to us. Matthew especially seems to do this. Two famous examples are Matthew 2:15 ("Out of Egypt have I called my son") and 2:18 ("in Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping, and a great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted, because they are not"). The first is quoted from Hosea 11:1 which has clear contextual reference to the exodus of the nation Israel from Egypt rather than the journey of Joseph and Mary with Jesus. The second refers to events of

long ago in connection with the captivities of Judah and Israel (*vide* Jer. 31:15). How is it that certain prophecies seem to mean one thing in Old Testament setting and something else in New Testament citation?

It will be helpful to observe at once that if the whole Old Testament is predictive of Messiah, his career, work and their outgrowth, it is not all predictive in the same way or with the same degree of reference. A historical report in II Samuel, a genealogical register in I Chronicles, a Psalm of ascents, a liturgical outline in Leviticus for a priest's "morning office" or a bit of advice to young men in Proverbs seem quite far apart in intent and meaning, and none seem to be predictive. Other portions, however, seem like predictions at first glance and are generally considered to be such. An example is Micah 5:2, the famous prediction of the Savior's birthplace. There are many more. How may all of this come under the umbrella of messianic prophecy? There is a way. That way is to recognize varieties of prophecies and modes of prediction.

The writer has not come by the ideas to be set forth herein without help both from the older evangelical authors and suggestions from certain not-so-evangelical recent writers as well as contemporary evangelicals. Franz Delitzsch¹ is still prince of commentators in this area and the writer owes him much. Of the older authors special recognition must be made of Fairbairn², Barnes³, Alexander⁴, Hengstenberg⁵, and (a bit later) W. J. Beecher⁶. Their basic theology is his own. Recent writers of the same spirit to whom a debt is owed are especially O. T. Allis⁷, and E. J. Young.⁸ Papers read to the Evangelical Theological Society in recent years have also had a part in forming his opinions. A numerous group of men interested in Old Testament theology and what goes for messianic prophecy, but writing from a somewhat different point of view, to whom the writer owes a debt are chiefly C. R. North⁹, and H. H. Rowley¹⁰, whose writings are in our own language. There is also the work of Zimmerli and Jeremias¹¹, of Mowinckel¹² and Ringgren¹³ and their fellow Scandinavians—Engnell, Peterson and Bentzen whom Mowinckel's *He That Cometh* now in English, has made known to us. Edward J. Young's several papers to the Evangelical Theological Society¹⁴ on Scandinavian studies in messianic prophecy should not be omitted.

The materials shall be arranged in descending order of directness of reference to Messiah—most specific predictive class comes first, least specific last.

I. Direct Messianic Prophecy is the highest level. It is prophecy which looks exclusively beyond the contemporary or immediate and imparts information of a factual propositional sort about the coming Messiah. While the ancient historical background may furnish the language and the historical-cultural framework it cannot supply the ideas. The prophecy is not even intended to be fully understood by the prophet himself or his contemporaries. "The spirit of Christ" which was in him "testified" in and through the prophet "beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow" (I Pet. 1:11). While not without some understanding of their own words, in certain areas they searched their own writings (I Pet. 1:10) to find out what God meant¹⁵ only to learn that "not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things" regarding Gospel history (I Pet. 1:12).

Most reverent interpreters place Isaiah 53 in this class. This seems to be the passage Peter has in mind when he makes the above remarks. The present writer would be inclined to add Psalms 2 and 110.

This sort of prophecy receives sharp treatment from two quarters. The semi-believing scholar doubts if there is such prophecy, refusing to let the New Testament have an Old Testament theology of its own binding upon the mind of the Christian

scholar. C. R. North, with reference to this interpretation of Isaiah 53 writes:

The fundamental objection to the traditional Messianic interpretation is that it is wedded to a too mechanical doctrine of inspiration. This seems to put it out of court as unworthy of serious consideration. The prophet is a mere amanuensis, and what he writes has no relevance to the circumstances of his own time. Moreover, if this implies that he 'sees' in advance One who was not to come for another five or six centuries, it raises the difficult philosophical problem whether there can be an actual prevision of history.¹⁶

From a far distant quarter there come never-ending efforts by ultra-literalists to squeeze every New Testament quotation of an Old Testament prophecy into this class. This has led sometimes to treatment of the Old Testament as a kind of esoteric grap-bag in which are hidden prophecies of Messiah. This is not all wrong, of course. But, if research is not carried beyond this level it leads to most unwholesome wresting of the Scriptures.

It is doubtful if general agreement can be achieved on a list of passages of this class. Certainly there are not predictions of this sort "in all the scriptures" of the Old Testament. Yet apparently this is the only class certain expositors knew about. Thus far our purpose has been only to specify and to acknowledge that such prophecy does exist in the Old Testament.

II. Typical Messianic Prophecy is a second kind. It is not truly on a lower level of predictive reference, but is herein treated as a second class because of its different form. By Typical Messianic Prophecy of Scripture is meant description of events, institutions and persons such as certain prophets, priests and kings (especially) of the Davidic dynasty, designed by God to be distinctly prophetic of Messiah. These descriptions will be wholly true of the Old Testament item. This is the foundation of their typology. The fact that typology is frequently mis-handled by ill-informed advocates does not do away with typology as a fact of Scripture.

A type, if it is of the class here considered, is quite as predictive as any directly messianic prophecy. It is, to borrow an illustration from the construction business, like a blueprint of the future while the specification sheets are like direct messianic prophecies.

Five different Greek words are used in the New Testament for this relationship: *skia* (shadow, Heb. 10:1; Col. 2:16, 17); *parabole* (figure, Heb. 9:9); *typos* (figure, Rom. 9:14); *antitypon* (pattern, Heb. 9:24); *upodeigma* (pattern, Heb. 9:23). On this basis, for example, the whole book of Leviticus with large sections of Exodus and Numbers, reporting the sacrificial paraphernalia, personnel and ritual become predictive of our Lord's career and help us understand why his death was "that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

An air-tight rigid orthodoxy with mechanical views of inspiration denies this sometimes. Theologians of the Protestant scholastic period sometimes denied that *ina plerote* ("that it might be fulfilled") ever refers to such. Theodore of Mopsuestia was condemned for holding to it by the fifth ecumenical council.¹⁷ The older theologians "of the Protestant Scholastic age" had not yet attained to the organic view of history granted to our age, and were therefore also without the true counterpoise to their rigid theory of inspiration.¹⁷

III. A third level of prediction is noted by Delitzsch in the Psalms. In the earlier editions of his commentary this was called Hyperbolic Typico-Messianic Prophecy. It is described as prophecy wherein the prophet "describing experiences of his inner and outer life which were already typical in themselves, is raised above

his own individuality and time, and uses regarding himself hyperbolic expressions, which were not to become full historical truth until they became so in Christ.”¹⁷

Delitzsch furnishes no list of illustrative passages. The writer suggests Psalm 22 as an example. David was a typical person and no doubt felt as if God had forsaken him—and that all his bones were out of joint (vs. 1, 14). Yet neither was literally true of him. It is only poetically, hyperbolically, that they were true. Incidentally a number of soundly evangelical scholars have given this sort of interpretation to the virgin prophecy of Isaiah 7.

Even Mowinckel comes close to acknowledging something like this in his treatment of Isaiah 7 and 9.

It seems to the writer inevitable that given typology in the Old Testament and the tendency of Semetic speech to that lyrical excess which we call hyperbole this kind of prophecy becomes inevitable. Furthermore, the man who reads the Hebrew Bible with lexicon and without imagination will never come to acknowledge it.

IV. A fourth type of messianic prophecy goes by two names in the literature of the subject. The new school of which Mowinckel may be named as leading representative, would call these Royal Messianic Prophecy,¹⁸ or something of the sort. These men have been impressed by an annual enthronement festival prevalent in certain ancient oriental monarchies. From the literature of ancient Israel's neighbors also it has been discovered that various grand promises regarding the king's future and exaggerated affirmations about his person—even assigning divine qualities to him—were recited in public rituals at this occasion. Further, even though not one jot has been found in the Old Testament affirming the existence of such an observance in Israel it is confidently assumed by a segment of recent scholarship (e.g., Helmer Ringren¹⁹ and Mowinckel²⁰) that such an annual festival was held in association with the feast of tabernacles. Jewish expectation is supposed to have been shaped by this liturgy—out of which grew messianic prophecy. Insofar as the coming Messiah had kingly qualities and fulfilled the hopes for the dynasty of David expressed in these passages they are Messianic. It is frequently supposed that these hopes for a literal reign have been transmitted into a spiritual reign.

Many of the same passages (Psalms 45 and 72 are important examples) have been treated by conservatives as members of a class of Messianic predictions called, following Delitzsch again, Indirectly Eschatologico-Messianic Prophecy. Delitzsch, in his remarks on Psalms 45 and 72, states the interpretation with great skill and beauty:

These are Psalms in which in keeping with the circumstances of the time at which they were composed, Messianic hopes were centered upon a contemporary king, without, however, having been fulfilled in him; so that in the mouth of the Church, which was still waiting for their final fulfillment, they have become eschatological hymns, and we are perfectly justified in interpreting them *as such*, as well as in their bearing upon their own time.²¹

His insight is a true one. In our own language there is “Jesus Shall Reign,” a poetic paraphrase of Psalm 72, sung across the breadth of Christendom—though not everywhere with Delitzsch's premillennial hope of literal fulfillment. [Some of the most lovely, near lyrical theological prose in English (though translated from German) is his elaboration of this idea in the introduction to Delitzsch's comments on Psalm 72. In later editions it appears in the first volume, Introduction to the Psalms.]

V. There is another class of messianic passages which may be called Divine *Parousia* Prophecies. These are the numerous group which connect the coming salvation with the coming of God Himself to deal directly with the world. These texts flash like lightning across the pages of the Prophets and the Psalms: “For, behold the LORD cometh forth out of his place, and will come down” (Mic. 1:3); “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1); “Our God shall come” (Psa. 50:3). Psalms 93 and 94 as well as other examples may be cited.

These are all messianic in the Christian rather than Jewish sense. Christian interpretation had to wait for history; history had to wait for the “mystery of godliness, God was manifest in the flesh.” Here the New Testament must furnish the theological instrument whereby Old Testament theology is constructed. The Old Testament is sealed until it becomes a Christian Book!

At this point the article might be ended if the older writers were to be consulted. But there are still vast areas of Old Testament in which Jesus found prophecy of Himself. We therefore press on.

VI. Scriptures *Messianic by Extension* constitute a large area. The designation, the present writer's own invention, is not self-explanatory. Part of the basis for this category is Jesus' statement that he came “to fulfill” the “Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17, 18). Now holding in mind that “the law and the prophets” is a designation for the whole Old Testament it must be acknowledged that in some sense Jesus fulfilled all of it. He did this in a number of ways: by carrying out the details of specific predictions and types, by keeping its righteousness, by paying its penalties, etc. Thus the perfect righteousness of a man who “has not walked . . . nor stood . . . nor sat” in any degree with evil (Psa. 1:1) attained first expression in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Viewed in this light Psalms 1 and Psalms 5 describing the man who abides in God's holy hill who “walketh up-rightly, and worketh righteousness and speaketh truth in his heart” etc., are justly called messianic, though in a reduced and different sense from Psalms 16 and 22.

Thus by calling for man's perfection the Old Testament calls for the coming of the Son of Man from heaven who first in all of human history produced such perfection. This is what is meant by saying large sections of the Old Testament are “messianic by extension.” It is wrong for the Christian expositor to treat these Old Testament portrayals of ethical rectitude (the Psalms) or of practical wisdom (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) without pointing out that their very difficulty of attainment points to their fulfillment in Christ—for Himself and for us.

VII. Finally, there may be discerned messianic prophecy which is *Messianic by way of Preparation*.

A caution must be issued. The current crop of neo-orthodox writers seems to wish to reduce all messianic prediction to this. Such a procedure is unwarranted and certainly would not provide a basis whereupon Peter could have proved by Scripture, to the satisfaction of 3000 Jews, that Jesus is the Christ. He drew much more direct connection with Christ from Psalms 16 and 110 (Acts 2:25-28, 34, 35). But we must not let perversion of a truth remove it from consideration.

Galatians 4:4 lays a basis for seeking such a class of material: “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his son” etc.

Mowinckel and company will tell us that Near Eastern customs regarding kingship brought about exalted expectations in Israel for their kings; that these

expectations were transferred to the Davidic dynasty; that in a time of eclipse of the dynasty a prophet of the exile or later dreamed of a perfect Servant of the Lord who would fulfill God's promises to Abraham and to David; that from Daniel and from Eastern gentile religious sources came hopes of a heavenly Son of Man. They hold that Jesus became, in his own and his followers' eyes, the focus and fulfillment of those manifold expectations.

These interpreters are not entirely wrong, for this, with their liberal higher criticism and theory of religious origins removed, is not unlike traditional Christian interpretation of Galatians 4:4.

But there is more than this to the Old Testament as preparation for Christ. When the Saviour of the world was born he had a pure mother; his earthly father understood and observed both righteousness and discretion; there was clean food on the family table and a clean bed. Their community understood the necessity of a latrine. All this was because God had called a man named Abram from beyond the River, where with his forefathers he had served idols, and taught him to worship God Most High. Later He made him into a nation, grown large in Egypt, instructed in the wilderness where the nation learned law and discipline. The rest of Old Testament canonical history traces the growth of this nation, especially of a righteous remnant within it. This remnant of spiritual elite nestled and cherished the infant messiah when he came. It was a remnant saturated with and nourished by the Holy Scriptures--as the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis* of Luke's Gospel with great delicacy tell us. It is this readying of a society and home on earth through the revelatory history reported in the Old Testament that constitutes the reports therein "Messianic by Preparation" and fully worthy of being cited in the New Testament as prophecy of Christ. It justifies in part the frequent formula, "that the Scripture might be fulfilled" or "according to the Scriptures."

The Old Testament is from first to last a Christian document designed by God as prophecy and preparation for the coming of the One known to Christians from the Old Testament as Messiah, Son of Man, Servant of the LORD, Son of David; known from their New Testament as Son of God and Saviour. Different levels of messianic reference are to be found therein. All the Old Testament, on the most basic level, is messianic by preparation for His coming. Its prescription and descriptions of human perfection are messianic by extension to Him. The prayers and wishes for the day of God's *parousia* as well as the predictions of it are prophecies of the God-man who came to Bethlehem. Prayers for and prophecies of an ideal Davidic king a kingdom are indirect messianic prophecy. Hyperbolic typico-messianic and typico-messianic prophecy are two varieties of "picture" or "blueprint" prediction of Christ. Finally, there is direct messianic prophecy.

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DOCUMENTATION

1. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3 vols., *Commentary on Isaiah*, 2 vols.
2. *The Typology of Scripture*, 2 vols.
3. *Notes on Isaiah*, 2 vols.
4. *Isaiah Translated and Explained*, 2 vols., *The Psalms Translated and Explained*, 3 vols.
5. *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols.
6. *The Prophets and the Promise*.
7. *The Unity of Isaiah*.
8. *My Servants the Prophets*.
9. *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*.
10. *The Servant of the Lord*.
11. *The Servant of God*.
12. *He That Cometh*.
13. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*.
14. "Professor Nyberg on Isaiah 53," *Papers of the Seventh Annual Meeting of E. T. S. "Kiss the Son," Papers on the Ninth Annual Meeting*.
15. Even Mowinckel somewhere states that God meant more by the prophets' words than the prophets did.
16. *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 207.
17. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on Psalms*, vol. 1, p. 93.
18. Helmer Ringgren, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, chap. 2. Sigmund Mowinckel, *He the Cometh*, Chap. 4.
19. *Op. Cit.*, p.p. 7 - 10.
20. *Op. Cit.*, p.p. 36, 64, 80 f., 91, 96, 105, 111, 121, 130, 139 f., 151, 153, 163, 172 f., 261, 266, 270, 289, 298, 339, 452, 457, 462 - 468.
21. *Op. Cit.*, p. 94.