

Messianism and Zionism

Hope in the Davidic Covenant extends beyond the Deuteronomistic history. We will see in some prophetic texts that David's kingdom remains the model for visions of an ideal Israel. Their oracles of hope envision a new Israel with all twelve tribes reunited under one king. The Israelites would refer to this future king as the messiah. Hope in the return of the monarchy is called *messianism*.

Other visions rest their hope in the rebuilt Temple; the Twelve Tribes will be united in their worship of Yahweh in and around the Temple in Jerusalem. This hope picks up on the second element promised in God's Covenant with David: God's eternal presence in the temple. Because the temple was built on Mount Zion, such hope is called *Zionism*.

New Testament texts pick up much more on the theme of messianism than they do on that of Zionism. This could be, in part, because the second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans before most of the New Testament texts were written, and so salvation through Jesus was interpreted by early Christians as a replacement of (and improvement on) the ritual system of the Temple. Jesus' Death was the final sacrifice, after which animal sacrifices were no longer needed. Jesus was the high priest serving God in Heaven in the Book of Hebrews. To replace the Temple would be to return to a system that the followers of Jesus believed God had replaced.

The Gospel writers, however, do describe Jesus as the "messiah" or "anointed one." Because of this title for Jesus, many Christians mistakenly think that *messiah* means that he is divine. This is not accurate. The Gospel writers are connecting Jesus to the promises made to David. The accounts of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke explicitly link him to the Davidic line. His birth in Bethlehem in Luke's Gospel makes the connection especially clear. What were the Gospel writers trying to express by calling Jesus the "messiah," that is, the one who fulfills the promises made to the earthly king, David?

This is a very complex question, and we can only touch on a couple of main points. There is a noticeable irony here; Jesus is a poor man who is executed by the Roman government for claiming that he is "king of the Jews." It would seem, then, that his life proved he was most assuredly not the messiah. The Gospel writers play with the expectations of the messiah, however, in their portrait of Jesus. He is not a political powerhouse, but a man who identifies with the poor and disenfranchised. He is not born into the lap of luxury, but rather his first cradle is a feeding trough for farm animals. He does not have a big army, many wives, or a royal court. He has poor disciples with whom he travels about, preaching of the true kingdom: the kingdom of God. In this sense Jesus returns to the heart of the message of Samuel, that it is God who is king, God who has the true power and right to rule.

It is only when we take seriously the Old Testament background of the language of the messiah that we can begin to appreciate how later Christian writers are using these earlier images. As you read the Bible, notice who else is called a messiah. What did a messiah look like for ancient Israelites?

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