

IS THE MESSIAH GOD? A LOOK AT THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Todd Bolen

Many Jews and cultists charge that the deity of the Messiah was invented after the first century AD by theologians who misread the Bible. In fact, the deity of the Messiah was a glorious truth already anticipated in the Old Testament.

Before considering the development of messianic revelation, we must affirm the progressive nature of God's revelation. Just as a parent doesn't begin teaching his first-grade child physics and calculus, so the Lord chose to build truth upon truth as he inspired Scripture. Earlier revelation (Torah) contains more seminal truths and later revelation (Prophets) contains greater detail that amplifies and develops previous revelation. The concept of the Trinity is not fully developed in the Old Testament, and this is not surprising given the polytheistic world in which Israel lived. Lesson #1 for Israel was that there is one God. This truth would never be controverted, but through time God laid the foundation for revealing that there are three persons in one God.

The first inkling that there is more than one person in the Godhead comes in the second verse of the Bible: "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen 1:2). This helps us to understand God's words when he created man: "Let us make man in our image" (Gen 1:26). The only referent to "us" in the context is the preceding mention of the "Spirit." So already in Genesis 1, God has revealed a plurality of persons in the Godhead.

The initial messianic hope is provided by God in Genesis 3:15: the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head and in turn the serpent will crush the man's heel. This starts a wonderful series of prophecies attesting to the Messiah's humanity and suffering. While these aspects are not the focus of this study, the point must be made that the OT strongly teaches that the Messiah is human, a descendant of Eve, who will suffer in order to bring redemption to the earth.

This redemption will come through the seed of Abraham, through whom all families on earth will be blessed (Gen 12:1-3). Of the twelve tribes, the king will come from Judah, and from Judah the house of David will produce the long-awaited Messiah (Gen 49:8-12; 2 Sam 7:8-16). Yahweh declared that he would raise up David's seed and establish his kingdom forever. This eternal ruler will be God's son (2 Sam 7:12-16; cf. Ps 2:7). In context, the concept of "son of God" need only signify God's close relationship with the Davidic heir. But the psalmists and the prophets make it clear that this heir is more than a man.

They do this by speaking of the Messiah in language that seems utterly impossible for a human to fulfill. The prayer for the king in Psalm 72 anticipates a ruler endowed with divine justice who will "crush the oppressor," making his enemies "lick the dust." This king will "rule from sea to sea," "all kings will bow down to him," and "he will endure as long as the sun." He is the one through whom all nations will be blessed and who will establish God's glory throughout the

whole earth. Is this describing the reign of a mere human king? Certainly one can be justified for thinking that God intends more than this, especially when the history of Israel's kings reveals that all fall miserably short. What hope is there that another merely human descendant of David born in the exile will be able to accomplish what all of his predecessors could not?

Psalm 110 continues this trajectory, looking forward to David's "lord" who would rule over the earth on God's behalf (Ps 110:1-2). Verse 3 is difficult, but the early Greek translators of the Septuagint (200 BC) understood this to refer to the king who was begotten from the womb of the dawn, signifying the divine status of the king. Verse 5 appears to be speaking of God ("the Lord") defeating his enemies, until you get to verse 7 and realize that in fact the subject is the earthly king. This too suggests that the king is both human and divine.

In Psalm 45, the writer pens an ode to the king on his wedding day, describing the king's strength, righteousness, and victory. In verse 6, he says to this king, "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever." Lest anyone think that he shifted his address to Yahweh, the speaker in the next verse declares to the king that "therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions." Here we have a striking reference to the human king as God, and he has a God. That this verse speaks of a divine Messiah is confirmed in Hebrews 1:8-9.

The case for a divine Messiah is not built on any single verse or passage, but rather on a number that create a beautiful and consistent portrait of a man who is also God. Isaiah's witness is particularly powerful, and thus it formed the basis for much of the explanation of the character of the Messiah in the New Testament. In Isaiah 6, the revelation of Yahweh as "holy, holy, holy" is followed by Israel's only hope in a "holy seed." The seed recalls the longed-for snake-crushing king (Gen 3:15), but that he is "holy" when Isaiah and his people are utterly unclean is surely suggestive. In chapter 7, a virgin conceives a child who is to be named "God with us." This child is one and the same as the "holy seed," as both are described as the hope that arises during Israel's exile (6:11-13; 7:14-25). This child is the owner of the land of Israel (8:8), which confirms that he is the king. But he is more than that, for this child is a "great light" who brings honor to Galilee, defeats all enemies, ends all wars, and brings abundant blessing to the nation (9:1-5). He reigns on David's throne in perfect righteousness forever, and he is called "Mighty God" (9:6-7). This same name "Mighty God" is used in the next chapter in an indisputable reference to Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel (10:20-21). Indeed, Isaiah wants us to see the holy seed, the child Immanuel, as Yahweh himself. But there is more. This king has the Spirit of Yahweh upon him (11:2). Unlike every other king, he is perfectly righteous and his rule transforms the world so that it is like the Garden of Eden, flooded with the knowledge of Yahweh in every part (11:3-9). It is clear from the Book of Isaiah that neither Ahaz nor even Hezekiah can measure up to this glorious standard. We have every right to expect that this king is the Lord himself. The response of the Israelites in chapter 12 confirms this, for they praise Yahweh for his salvation, one which has just been accomplished by the Messiah.

Chapter 40 announces the coming of the Lord. The voice of one calling initiates the preparation of the Lord's way to Zion (40:3-5). There can be no mistaking that the good news is the arrival of God himself: "Say to the town of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See the Sovereign LORD comes with power" (40:9-10). But who is it who comes to Zion to rule the nation and tenderly shepherd his people? The following chapters reveal that it is none other than the Servant of the Lord. Indeed John the Baptist understood his own ministry in precisely this way. John was the messenger preparing the way for the Lord Jesus, the Servant foretold in Isaiah (Matt 3).

The Servant's description begins in chapter 42 where the Lord puts his Spirit upon him. His mission again is too much for any human king we have seen thus far: he must establish justice on the earth and himself be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles. He opens blind eyes and frees the prisoners. Even the great King David could not do this.

Then the Lord affirms that he is Yahweh and he will not give his glory (*kavod*) or praise to another (42:8). Only Yahweh deserves such glory and praise! How is it then that this same Servant receives glory (*kavod*) in the eyes of Yahweh in 49:5? Yahweh declares that he is Israel's Savior and Redeemer (49:26) and yet it is the Servant who is Yahweh's salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6). The humanity of this individual is never in question, and chapter 50 describes the suffering he will endure in order to accomplish God's work (50:6). But this servant declares that he has not been rebellious and no charge against him will stand up (50:5, 8-9). Then in parallel lines, the Servant is given equal status with Yahweh: "Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant?" (50:10). Isaiah paints his portrait of the Messiah not with a single verse or passage but with a cumulative case that is beautiful and compelling.

Isaiah 52 returns to the theme of chapter 40: Yahweh is coming! He comes to comfort, redeem, and establish his salvation to the ends of the earth (52:7-10). The rejoicing is great: "When Yahweh returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes" (52:8). But who do we see in the following verses? The Servant! "Behold, my servant will act wisely." Is the Servant God himself? The next phrase answers that question decisively: "He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted" (52:13). Throughout Isaiah this language of exaltation is reserved for Yahweh alone. It is the Lord who is "high and exalted" in Isaiah's throne room vision (6:1). It is Yahweh who is "high and exalted" in 57:15. The ascription of the same status to the servant confirms what we already know: the Servant is God himself.

The revelation of this identity is the only way to understand the Servant's work in chapter 53. It is because he is God-with-us that he can be declared guiltless (53:9). It is because he is the Prince of Peace that he can bear the punishment of all people in order to create peace between God and them (53:5). It is only the Mighty God who can die and rise to life again (53:8-10). It is the high and exalted Servant who suffers for others, purifies the nations, and bears the iniquities of us all (52:14-15; 53:6). And yet who is Israel's Redeemer? It is "the Holy One of Israel . . . the God of all the earth" (54:5). This same Redeemer came to Zion when he saw that "there was no

one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him” (59:16, 20). The Servant is Yahweh’s own arm who accomplished that salvation.

But does not this King-Servant appear again in chapter 63, described as striding from Bozrah in judgment? Clearly this must be Yahweh, for he executes the day of God’s vengeance as described in 61:2. Yet this is the role of the Messiah as delineated in chapters 9 and 11. The one who “strikes the earth with the rod of his mouth” is surely the same as the one who treads the winepress alone (11:4; 63:3; cf. Rev 19:15). The hope of the child born to us who will shatter the rod of their oppressor is fulfilled in the divine figure who tramples the nations in his anger (9:4; 63:6; cf. Ps 2:8-9; 110:5-6).

Twice in Isaiah we see striking references to the three persons of the Trinity. In 48:16, the Servant declares, “And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me with his Spirit.” Speaking to the Servant, Yahweh says, “My Spirit, who is on you” (59:21). The Book of Isaiah presents a glorious portrait of one God who is three persons.

Micah presents a similar portrait of the Messiah, describing him as the one who shepherds Yahweh’s flock and establishes peace to the ends of the earth (5:4). Of his origins, this ruler is said to come from Bethlehem and yet to have origins from ancient times (5:2). This speaks of a pre-existent One who is yet born as a child. This parallels Isaiah’s virgin-born “God-with-us” and the child-king who is “Mighty God.”

Jeremiah continues the theme of the righteous Branch, a sprout of David’s line raised up by Yahweh. This righteous king establishes justice and security throughout Israel (Jer 23:5-6; 33:15-16). And this king is given a name: Yahweh Our Righteousness.

The visions that Daniel sees are in perfect harmony with previous revelation. The four kingdoms of men are destroyed by the coming of God’s kingdom (Dan 2, 7). This kingdom of God is ruled by “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (Dan 7:13). One who rides the clouds is God, yet he is also man, and he stands before God. He is given authority, glory, and sovereign power to rule over God’s eternal kingdom. This king is called “the Most High” (7:27).

Zechariah pulls together a number of strands of messianic prophecy. He equates the Servant with the Branch and connects his coming with the removal of the nation’s sin and the establishment of peace (3:8-10). This man is both king and priest and he builds Yahweh’s temple where he rules (6:12-13). He comes to Jerusalem riding on a donkey where he establishes peace throughout his worldwide kingdom (9:9-10). Yet it is Yahweh who claims to defeat Jerusalem’s enemies (12:9). And it is Yahweh who pours out on Jerusalem a spirit of grace. But, he says, “they will look on me, the one they have pierced” (12:10). Such interchange between Yahweh and the pierced Messiah is not surprising given what we already know. This continues in chapter 14 where Yahweh goes out to fight against the nations, his feet stand on the Mount of Olives, and he becomes king over the whole earth (14:3-9). Jesus is the Lord who descends to the Mount of Olives, delivers his repentant people, and establishes his throne on earth (Matt 24:30-51; 25:31-

34; Acts 1:11). Zechariah tells us that this king who reigns in Jerusalem is “Yahweh Almighty” (Zech 14:16).

Malachi puts the finishing touches on the Old Testament portrait of the divine Messiah. Like Isaiah, he speaks of a messenger who comes to prepare the way for the Lord (3:1; 4:5). The Lord will come to judge the wicked, just as Isaiah had declared the Messiah would do (Micah 3:2-3; Isaiah 11:4). John the Baptist was the messenger, and he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus who will “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12).

The Old Testament portrait of the Messiah is rich and glorious. The prophets declare in unison that he is the seed of the woman, the descendant of David, and the rightful king of Israel. He defeats God’s enemies, establishes justice, and upholds the needy. He suffers and is pierced, not for his own sin but for those of his people. He dies, but he lives again. He is son of man, but he rides the clouds. He is virgin-born, but he is God-with-us. He is born in Bethlehem and raised in Galilee, but his origins are from ancient times and he is called “Mighty God.” This robust portrayal of the Messiah applies to the one God calls his son in 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7. It is then no wonder that Jesus’s earliest followers recognized that the “son of God” was both human and divine. He is God’s appointed ruler over the earth, because he is God come in the flesh (Ps 89:26-27; Col 1:15; Heb 1:2; Rev 1:5). He is the one before whom every knee will bow, because he is the very nature of God (Isa 45:23; Phil 2:6-11). He is worthy to receive glory because he is equal with the Father (Rev 5:12-13; Isa 42:8). To know Jesus is to know the Father, because Jesus is God (John 14:7-12).