

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND IN THE SECOND TEMPLE ERA LITERATURE

**The hope for the future in Jewish faith**

This hope centred around a core belief that God would one day vindicate the Jewish people and establish a new order in which God’s ways would prevail (Isaiah 11; Psalm 85, 89; Ezekiel:40-48; Zechariah9-14). Any messianic belief must be understood in the context of this firm belief. Thus when one refers to Jewish messianic belief, reference is really being made to a large complex of ideas which could be labelled the messianic age.

**Jewish messianic expectation**

Much of this expectation is rooted in the rule of King David. David’s rule was the zenith of the Israelite empire. The Davidic covenant or the promise of God to David, ‘Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever’, (2 Samuel : 7.16) became the basic messianic text.

**Jewish belief begins to focus on a specific person or earthly ruler (the messiah or anointed one)**. This ruler would be a descendant of David and would usher in an era of bliss for Israel. Many of the prophecies of Isaiah look forward to just such a ruler (Isaiah 7:14; 9:1-7; 11:1-12). This hope for a new David is also found in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel written around the six century BC (see time chart in Session 2). Later it is found in the Second Temple era writing, Psalm of Solomon 17.1-38, written about 100 years before Jesus’ birth.

**The Second Temple Writings**

The Second Temple refers to the Temple that was rebuilt after the Exile and then later by Herod the Great. Thus, the Second Temple writings are Jewish religious literature written mostly after the last book of the Hebrew scriptures, Malachi, and before the New Testament, during the years c400 BC to c100 AD. Some are older, dating possibly back to the time of the exile. These religious writings are not included in the Hebrew scriptures because they generally were judged to be questionable in some way. Some of these writings are called the *Apocrypha* – a number of them were not included in the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, a Greek translation made in about third and second century BC. Others are labelled the Old Testament *Pseudepigrapha* because the authors of the writings are unknown. Another collection of Jewish writings from this period are the *Dead Sea Scrolls* which are mostly associated with the Jewish religious community that lived at Qumran. Although these writings are not in the biblical ‘canon’, the value of all these writings as a record of Jewish religious thinking and experience is unquestionable.]

**After the Israelite return from the Babylonian exile**

A religious tradition grew up which longed for the temple and its priestly ministry to be restored to the glory known before the exile. This religious tradition reinterpreted many of the messianic texts to have reference to a priestly messiah (see the Testament of Levi 18.1-14 written in the second century BC). Sometimes they spoke of two messiahs to come, a royal and a priestly (Zechariah 4:14; 6:12-13). This belief is also found in the Qumran community in the first century BC which spoke of ‘the Messiah of Aaron and Israel’ as found in the Dead Sea Scroll document, 1QS 9.11.During the political turmoil and occupation of Israel during the first and second century BC, a general messianic expectation emerged which hoped for a prophet-like figure who would bring salvation (‘salvation’ was defined according to the belief of the religious community you belonged to). This tradition began to interpret many other OT texts as referring to a future messiah, texts like the promise of a prophet to replace Moses (Deut. 18 15 -19), the royal Psalms 2 and 110, the Servant of Isaiah found in Isa. 42, 49, 50 and 53, and the Son of Man referred to in Daniel 7:13 and 1 Enoch 37-71.

**The Jewish hope for future vindication**

This hope rested on the hope for a new age of God’s rule over all the nations. One specific hope linked to this new age was for a righteous leader who would act as an agent of God to help bring in this new age by delivering the Jewish people. The exact nature of this expectation depended on the religious tradition to which one belonged and on which OT texts one used to describe the messiah or anointed one of God.

**A kingly Messiah:**

In Jewish faith, at the heart of the hope for the future, there has always been a firm belief that one day God would vindicate the Jewish people and establish a new order in which God’s ways would prevail. You can find this belief expressed in some of the Psalms - 85 & 89, and some of the writings of the prophets. Isaiah 11; Ezekiel 40 – 48; Zechariah 9 - 14

This belief is not just about a person called the Messiah, but about a new kind of future - the Messianic Age. Many ideas about the messianic age have their roots in the reign of King David (which was the high point of the Israelite empire). The basic messianic text was God’s promise to King David, the ‘Davidic Covenant’ : *‘Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.’* (2 Samuel 7 : 16)

So Jewish belief began to focus on a particular person or earthly ruler – the messiah or anointed one. This ruler would be a descendant of David and would usher in an era of bliss for Israel. Many of the prophecies of Isaiah look forward to such a ruler: Isaiah 7 : 14; 9 : 1-7; 11 : 1-2

This hope for a new David is also found in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel written around the sixth century BC.

It is also found later in the ‘Psalm of Solomon’ written about 100 years before the birth of Jesus:

Psalm of Solomon 17:1-38 (extracts)

Thou, Lord, didst choose David as king over Israel

And thou didst swear to him concerning his posterity forever …

Behold, O Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David,

For the time which thou didst foresee, O God, that he may reign over Israel

 thy servant …

May he destroy the lawless nations by the word of his mouth …

And he shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in

 righteousness …

And he shall have the peoples of the Gentiles to serve him under his yoke;

And he shall glorify the Lord at the centre of all the earth,

And he shall purify Jerusalem, making it holy as of old.

**A priestly Messiah:**

After the Israelites returned from the Exile in Babylon, a religious tradition grew up which longed for the temple and its priestly ministry to be restored to the glory known before the Exile.

Many of the messianic texts were reinterpreted to refer to a priestly messiah. This extract is from the ‘Testament of Levi’ written in the 2nd century BC :

*Testament of Levi 18 : 1-14 found in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (excerpts)*

And after judgment has come upon them from the Lord, the priesthood will

fail.

Then will the Lord raise up a new priest,

To whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed;

And he will execute true judgment on earth for many days.

And his star will arise in heaven, as a king ...

He will shine forth like the sun on the earth,

And dispel all darkness from under heaven;

And there will be peace in all the earth ...

In his priesthood will all sin come to an end ...

And he will open the gates of Paradise,

And destroy the power of the sword that threatened Adam.

And he will give the saints the right to eat from the tree of life ...

Sometimes the prophets spoke of two messiahs to come, one royal and one priestly: Zechariah 4 : 14 and 6 : 12-13. This belief was also found in the Qumran community in the 1st century BC. The Dead Sea Scroll document 1 QS 9. 11 speaks of ‘the Messiah of Aaron and Israel.

**Who will He be?**

During the first and second century BC, a time of political turmoil and occupation of Israel there was a general messianic expectation which hoped for a prophet-like figure who would bring salvation. (‘Salvation’ was defined in different ways by different religious communities.)

This tradition began to see many other Old Testament texts as references to the messiah : a prophet promised to replace Moses (Deuteronomy 18 : 15-19, the royal figure in Psalms 2 and 110, the Servant in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 53, the Son of Man in Daniel 7 : 13 and 1 Enoch 37-71.

And there I saw one who had a head of days, and his head was white like wool; and with him there was another, whose face had the appearance of a man, and his face was full of grace, like one of the holy angels. And I asked one of the holy angels who went with me, and showed me all the secrets about that Son of Man, who he was and whence he was, and why he went with the Head of Days. And he answered me and said to me, ‘This is the Son of Man who has righteousness, and with whom righteousness dwells; he will reveal all the treasures of that which is secret, for the Lord of Spirits has chosen him, and through uprightness his lot has surpassed all before the Lord of Spirits for ever. And this Son of Man whom you have seen will rouse the kings and the powerful from their resting-places, and the strong from their thrones, and will loose the reins of the strong, and will break the teeth of the sinners. And he will cast down the kings from their thrones and from their kingdoms for they do not exalt him, and do not praise him, and do not humbly acknowledge when their kingdom was given to them ...’

As these quotations show the Jewish hope for future vindication rested on the hope for a new age when God would rule over all the nations. Linked to this hope was the hope of a righteous leader who would act as God’s agent to help bring in the new age by delivering the Jewish people. But the exact nature of this expectation varied, depending on the religious tradition you belonged to, and which Scripture texts you relied on to describe the messiah or anointed one of God.