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THE DAVIDIC MESSIAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT TRACING A THEOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY

DANIEL D. MARTIN*

Aurel Vlaicu University

ABSTRACT. The present article revisits the issue of messianism, particularly as it finds its expression in the Davidic kingship tradition, that is, the belief concerning a Davidic Messiah. Since Old Testament messianic hope is inseparably associatied with the dynasty of David a study that traces the various perspectives concerning the Davidic Messiah chronologically and canonically can bring a contribution to this important Old Testament theme, too often neglected. Thus, the study shows that the belief in the coming of a Davidic Messiah is a prominent eschatological theme in the Old Testament. Its roots can be traced back to the historical covenant made by Yahweh with David, which receives hyperbolic and symbolical dimensions in the royal Psalms, and a full-fledged eschatological orientation in prophetic writings. The monarchic prophets: Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Hosea draw on the covenant promises to David to ground their message regarding the coming of a 'new David', who would destroy the wicked, protect the poor and oppressed, and institute an eternal era of peace, justice, and righteousness. In the context of the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel foresee that God will bring forth a righteous 'shoot' of Davidic line to reunite the nation and shepherd God's people. In the post-exilic period, Zechariah underscores the promise that David's son will build a house for Yahweh, moving from the initial historical focus on Zerubbabel and his role, to the eschatological expectation of the one and only messianic figure that will bring the final restoration.

KEYWORDS: messianic expectation, Davidic covenant, royal psalms, Davidic kingship, eschatological hope

Introduction

Ever since Gerhard von Rad and Walther Eichrodt, two of the most important twentieth-century Bible interpreters, have tackled 'messianism', the concept has had a place on the scholarly agenda. Surprisingly though, it seems that the attention given to the topic has been too small when compared with the emphasis 'messianic hope' receives on the pages of the Scripture. For instance, other 'theologies' of the Old Testament published during the same period have dealt only briefly with the messianic ideas that permeate Old Testament texts. In the present article we will revisit the issue of

* DANIEL D. MARTIN (MTh 2001, Evandeoski Teološki Fakultet, Osijek, Croatia) is a PhD student at Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania. Email: danmirmartin@gmail.com.

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messianism, particularly as it finds its expression in the Davidic kingship tradition, that is, the belief concerning a Davidic Messiah. And this, because a particularly significant feature of the Old Testament messianic hope lies in its inseparable association with the dynasty of David (cf. Becker 1980: 18-30). Our aim in the paper is to trace the various perspectives concerning the Davidic Messiah chronologically and canonically.

Davidic Messianic Hope in the Pentateuch

There are two closely related passages in the Pentateuch that seem to allude to the rise of the Davidic dynasty and were interpreted messianically in Judaism and early Christianity (Alexander 1998: 191-212). The first is Jacob's blessing of Judah (Genesis 49: 8-12), which indicates a future leadership role in Israel. Arguably a late addition to an earlier text (Wenham 1998: 459-462; Good 1963: 427-432; Carmichael 1969: 435-444), the setting of the passage clearly links the tribe of Judah to kingship (Westermann 1986: 215-218) as it bestows prophetically upon Judah the signs of royal authority (Genesis 49:8-10). The passage depicts Judah metaphorically as a lion—a symbol of strength and prowess and connects this image to signs of royal authority—the sceptre and the staff (cf. also Psalms 45: 7; Isaiah 14: 5; Ezekiel 19: 11, 14; Amos 1: 5, 8). Since King David was from the tribe of Judah, the passage has been connected by interpreters to the authority bestowed upon the Davidic dynasty and upon its ultimate descendent, the Davidic Messiah (e.g. Gunkel 1997: 456). Although the original significance of the phrase 'until Shiloh comes' (v. 10) has been debated (e.g. Lockshin 1989: 362; Plaut 1981: 309; von Rad 1972: 425-426; cf. Mowinkel 1956: 13), it is quite clear that the grammar suggests the continuity (Brown et al 1979: 1010) of the rule depicted, thus including the leadership role the Davidic line was to assume later on. Thus, on a first plane, we can interpret the saying of Genesis 49: 10-12 in the light of the united monarchy under David and Solomon. However, there is a higher plane at work in the passage, for we should not exclude the possibility that these verses are looking beyond the united monarchy to the glorious messianic age ultimately fulfilled by Jesus (cf. Revelation 5: 5).

The second instance of messianic allusion in the Pentateuch is found in the third and fourth oracles of Balaam (Numbers 24: 3-9, 15-24). There seems to be a linguistic link to the blessing of Judah discussed above, for the same 'lion' metaphor is used (v. 9), and that again in connection with a sceptre, which here rises out of Israel (v. 17). Balaam declares that what he 'sees' is neither 'now' nor 'near' (24: 17), indicating that the words are prophetic (cf. Alter 1981: 105), an image that is not of the present, but of the future. Moreover, what Balaam sees concerning a 'star coming out of Jacob' and a 'sceptre arising out of Israel' should be interpreted as a reference to a particular individual—the Annointed One. The nearest antecedent to the 'star' is

the pronoun 'him' in the immediately preceding lines, which indicates that a person is in view here (Gray 1903: 369). Thus, the role of the 'star' can be defined as conquest and dominion.

To conclude, both instances discussed above refer to an individual deliverer and in both the context illustrates that this is something to occur 'in the days to come' (Genesis 49:1; Numbers 24:14). No doubt, such language has encouraged the messianic eschatological interpretation of both passages in later Judaism and early Christianity.

Davidic Messianic Hope in Monarchic Israel

It is argued that the concept of a Davidic Messiah has its origin in the legitimization formulas of the Davidic dynasty (Laato 1997). One of the first statements where the promise of a future ruler is connected to the historical dynasty of David is the oracle of Nathan in 2 Samuel 7:5-16 (cf. 1 Chronicles 17: 4-14) and its poetic counterpart in Psalms 89:4-5, 20-30 (cf. Psalms 132: 1-18; 2 Samuel 23: 1-7). The promise to David outlined in 2 Samuel 7: 8-16 can hardly be overstated in terms of its importance for shaping later conceptions of messianic hope in Israel (Bergen 1996: 337). Brueggemann (1990: 253) notes that it 'occupies the dramatic and theological center of the entire Samuel corpus and has been one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith'. Furthermore, Gordon (1986: 236) says that 'we shall not be exaggerating the importance of the Nathan oracle, if we see it as the matrix of biblical messianism'. Indeed, the text in 2 Samuel, its parallel in 1 Chronicles 17 (cf. North 1963: 369-381; Williamson 1979: 115-154; Murray 1993: 71-92), its poetic counterparts in Psalms 89: 4-5, 20-30 (Mullen 1983: 207-218; Mosca 1986: 27-37; Veijola 1988: 413-417) and Psalms 132:1-18 (Laato 1992: 49-67; Laato 1995: 643-653; Laato 1999: 24-33), as well as the last words of David in 2 Samuel 23: 1-7 (Richardson 1971: 257-265) portray a fuller picture of the Davidic messianic expectation. Thus, we can firstly note that the expectation of a future ruler from the house of David and the promise of continuity for David's seed (2 Samuel 7: 12; Psalms 89: 5, 30, 37). Secondly, there is the concept of sonship or the promise of a unique father-son relationship (Craig 1993: 159-176) present in 2 Samuel 7: 14 and Psalms 89:27-28, also associated with the promise of Yahweh's perpetual loyalty (Weinfeld 1970: 185) and mercy (cf. 2 Samuel 7: 15; Psalms 89: 5, 25, 29), despite his chastisement for the sins of David's descendants (Waltke 1988: 131). Thirdly, the passages also speak of an eternal King Messiah or the promise of an eternal throne for David (2 Samuel 7: 13, 16; Psalms 89: 5, 30, 37). Fourthly, the concept of an ideal Davidic Messiah or the promise of peace and security for Israel in the Land. This, in turn, implies a kingdom and the abolition of foreign domination. In Psalms 89: 22-26, David is assured power and triumph over his enemies (vv. 22-24). Yahweh will exalt his horn (make

him strong) and will set his (left) hand on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers (vv. 25-26), images which are clearly beyond any one person's reach. Thus, the promise is political—that Yahweh will extend Israel's borders to their rightful place.

The Davidic Messiah and His Universal Kingship in the Royal Psalms

Several of the Old Testament psalms have linked David and the Davidic dynasty to the messianic hope. Below we will discuss Psalms 2: 7-9; Psalms 45; Psalms 72; and Psalms 110: 1-2; 5-7.

The history of interpretation of Psalm 2 shows evidence that this passage has been consistently regarded as a 'royal psalm' with messianic overtones (Wood 1976; cf. Mettinger 1976: 261, n. 22; Craigie 1983: 62). The king portrayed in vv. 7-9 recounts the 'decree' of Yahweh that assures his supremacy over the nations and affirms his distinct dependence on God. The 'decree' most likely represents the covenant promise of 2 Samuel 7:5-16. Interestingly though, the passage speaks of divine sonship for the Davidic heir the psalm speaks of is metaphorically begotten by Yahweh. He is adopted into a special relationship as son to represent Yahweh before the people and the people before Yahweh. A new element is also added: the worldwide dominion the king will have. This idea is probably drawn from the Hebrew belief in the universal kingship of Yahweh, with which the Davidic ruler is associated by covenant. As McKenzie explains, 'the hope of the eternal dynasty now demands that the kingship ultimately become coextensive with the kingship of Yahweh Himself, from whom the Davidic ruler has received his commission to rule' (1957: 33).

Psalm 45 is a royal wedding song, which describes the awesome strength and beauty of the king and introduces the concept of justice as a fundamental attribute of the messianic ruler. Pslam 72 continues in a similar fashion. It presents an ideal, hyperbolic image of the Davidic Messiah, in a highly political language (cf. Măcelaru 2022: 118-137). The psalm records a prayer for the Davidic descendant (Solomon) that his rule is characterized by justice and righteousness toward the poor, so that he would enjoy perpetuity and universality of reign. The role of the king is to provide justice in the land (vv. 1-4, 12-14) and to secure God's blessing for his people (vv. 6-7, 16). He has universal dominion (vv. 8, 9-11) as nations other than Israel serve him (Broyles 1997: 23-40).

Finally, in Psalm 110 we have the image of a victorious divine Davidic King Messiah. This psalm has been closely associated with Psalm 2 and consistently interpreted in messianic eschatological terms (Hay 1973: 19-33). Both psalms imply a royal enthronement or appointment in Zion, and both include Yahweh's words to the king (see Durham 1984: 425-434). The king in Psalm 110 is again promised victory over his enemies through the

intervention of Yahweh (vv. 1-2; 5-7). Also, the obscure 'from the womb of the dawn' (v. 3) is most likely an allusion of divine sonship (cf. Mowinkel 1956: 62, 67, 75). The divine oracle with which the psalm starts (vv. 1-2) introduces the idea of a unique and privileged position for the Davidic king at Yahweh's right hand, while v. 4 introduces a completely new element—the priestly role of the kingly character portrayed, later interpreted as a reference to Jesus (cf. Callan 1982). Though not of Levitical lineage, the Davidic king is given oversight over the temple cult and serves as a priest in his own right (Brown 1998: 93-95).

The Righteous Davidic Messianic King in the Pre-Exilic Prophets

As the deterioration of the Israelite monarchy advanced the prophets begun announcing that God would raise a Davidic king whose role would be to restore and renew the nation. Two passages in the book of Isaiah, related thematically to 2 Samuel 7 and the Royal Psalms are worthy of note here: Isaiah 9:1-7 and Isaiah 11:1-16. Both passages express hope in an ideal king who is yet to come, a ruler who will reign over God's people with justice and righteousness (von Rad 1966: 230; O'Doherty 1957: 19; Kaiser 1983: 125-130). These passages are two of the most discussed prophetic texts among the passages commonly regarded as 'messianic' (Wegner 1992; cf. Motyer 1993: 13, n. 1).

Isaiah 9:1-7 foresees a period of hope succeeding the distress and failure of the Assyrian attack. We see here the hope of liberation from enemies (vv. 1-5) which will correspond with the coming of an ideal Davidic king, whose reign will inaugurate an eternal era of peace, justice, and righteousness (vv. 6-7; cf. 2 Samuel 7:13, 16). Whatever is the exact significance of the 'throne-names' given to the child (v. 6)—Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—they clearly exceed all the titles elsewhere ascribed to the Davidic king (Goldingay 1999: 239-244). In fact, this is a move that includes both isaianic passages in view here. As Talmon (1992: 481) observes, we move from the historical reality of Isaiah 7:14-16 to the ideation of Isaiah 9:5-6 and the idealization of Isaiah 11:1-10. Isaiah 11 in particular, with its depiction of a return to the conditions of paradise (vv. 6-9), has clear eschatological implications. Yet the effects of the messianic rule are also to be felt in the present (cf. Măcelaru 2016: 131-146). The author describes the king as a righteous judge who shows mercy and possesses extraordinary powers of wisdom and discernment by virtue of his Spirit-endowment, and the spectacular way he destroys the wicked 'with the rod of his mouth' and 'the breath of his lips'. The Davidic 'shoot' here takes on prophetic as well as royal traits. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon him, a Spirit bestowing wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, and knowledge and fear of the Lord. The

result are true and righteous judgments and ultimately the instauration of *shalom* for all of creation (Isaiah 11:6-9).

The Davidic expectations of Micah 5:1-5 have close connections to the isaianic images discussed above. Micah too forecasts the emergence of a ruler in Israel, but adds that his origin is from Bethlehem, the birthplace of David (cf. 1 Samuel 17:12). Since the Davidic kings sitting on the throne of Judah during Micah's time were associated with Jerusalem, the introduction of Bethlehem in the oracle may play as a rejection of the historical Davidic line in favour of a new 'David', cast along the lines of Isaiah's 'shoot from the root of Jesse'. Whether this critique is what the prophet had in mind or not, the messianic ruler in Micah is one who is both 'great to the ends of the earth' and 'a man of peace', feeding his flock in the strength of Yahweh (vv. 4-5).

The prophecies of Hosea and Amos also contain Davidic expectations, although in both cases (Hosea 3:4-5 and Amos 9:11) these may be later insertion into the text. In Hosea 3:5 it is announced that after God's judgment, manifested as the Assyrian exile, will end, Israel, led by David, will once again seek Yahweh. Some have seen here a Judean influence, a hope for both cultic and political restoration (Emmerson 1984: 101-113). Still, the language used can be regarded as an example of messianic hope and more exactly a messianic prediction about a new David (Kaiser 1995: 144).

An eschatological setting may be in view in the last chapter of Amos, where Yahweh states that though the nation will be devastated in judgment (9:8), following her punishment and dispersion among the nations, a renewal will take place. Although a thorough interpretation of the passage would require a much longer discussion (Paul 1991: 288-295), here it suffices to say that Amos concentrates on what God will make of it in a day that is yet to come. This will be accomplished through the agency of the Davidic Messiah. Thus, Amos appeals to an ancient promise made to David to launch his teaching about the coming new Messiah.

The Righteous Davidic Messiah of the Exile

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel assert in powerful terms that God will raise up a Davidic 'shoot' or a 'new David' to reign over a restored and united monarchy. In Jeremiah's prophecy the Davidic covenant is surpassed by the promise of a 'new covenant' for Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31). This appears to be an expansion rather than an abrogation of earlier covenants, for God remains faithful to his promises to David and his seed. Also in Jeremiah 23:5-6 the prophet announces a ruler, descendant of David whose attributes are entirely messianic. The image resembles the language of Isaiah 11 and adds the attribute 'righteous'. In later traditions this image became a standard Davidic messianic concept (cf. Jeremiah 33:15; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; 4QFlor; 4QPBless). In the context, 'righteous' probably means both, 'legitimate' and

'pious' (Holladay 1986: 617-618). The shoot's reign is characterized especially by 'judgment' and 'righteousness' and its end-result is salvation for the nation.

In Ezekiel 34:23-24 and 37:24-25 there are two explicit references to the coming of a 'new David'. The context of chapters 34-37 is one of renewal and restoration. In this context, the messianic Davidic figure introduced is identified as 'king', 'shepherd' and 'servant', whose role is to be feed the people and rule over them forever. Under this rule Israel will finally obey God's commandments (37:25). The term 'Prince' used by Ezekiel in this context is the specific title the prophet uses in order to emphasize the Davidic King's role as vice-regent, subordinate to Yahweh, who is the true King of Israel (Eichrodt 1970: 476-477). However, differently than the regent's image in the Deuteronomistic history (e.g. 1 Samuel 8) the Davidic prince of Ezekiel does not appear to be a conquering warrior, but a shepherd of peace, raised after Yahweh accomplished his judgment, who brings in the new age. Thus, hopes for the renewal of the Davidic reign under a 'new David' played a significant role in the restoration theologies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The Davidic Messiah in the Post-Exilic Period

The return of the exiles under the decree of Cyrus and the following designation of the Davidide Zerubbabel, grandson of Jehoiachin, as governor of Judah, raised hopes that God was about to fulfil his covenant promises to David. Zechariah views Zerubbabel as the Davidic heir appointed by Yahweh to rebuild the temple. Thus, Zerubbabel is assigned a prominent role in the prophecy. Interestingly though, an eschatological 'priestly figure', appears beside the royal one (Zechariah 3:1-10). The expectation for a messianic royal personage comes in view in the second half of the prophecy (Zechariah 9-14) and is generally regarded as a later addition to the prophecy, associated with the book of Malachi. The point made here, however, is not changed by the redactional discussion, for both texts are post-exilic. The image is first of a king who is ruling with justice and righteousness. Secondly, he is also a victorious king, through the grace and power of Yahweh alone. Thirdly, he is an ideal king, who proclaims peace and is given the universal dominion expected in Psalm 72. Again, his is not a warrior role but in line with the images seen earlier, he is the bringer of an era of justice, peace and prosperity (Baldwin 1972: 132-134).

Conclusion

The belief in the coming of a Davidic Messiah is a prominent eschatological theme in the Old Testament. Its roots can be traced back to the historical covenant made by Yahweh with David, which receives hyperbolic and symbolical dimensions in the royal Psalms, and a full-fledged eschatological

orientation in prophetic writings. The monarchic prophets: Isaiah, Micah Amos, and Hosea draw on the covenant promises to David to ground their message regarding the coming of a 'new David', who would destroy the wicked, protect the poor and oppressed, and institute an eternal era of peace, justice and righteousness. In the context of the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel foresee that God will bring forth a righteous 'shoot' of Davidic line to reunite the nation and shepherd God's people. In the post-exilic period, Zechariah underscores the promise that David's son will build a house for Yahweh, moving from the initial historical focus on Zerubbabel and his role, to the eschatological expectation of the one and only messianic figure that will bring the final restoration.

These images have impacted the writings of late Judaism and Early Christianity and although a discussion beyond the confines of the Old Testament canon was not in view here, it is important to point out that the theme of a Davidic Messiah, the eschatological Davidic descendant, who is to be Israel's ideal king, is found throughout the entire biblical corpus, from the very first occurrences in the Pentateuch to the last of the Old Testament prophets, and to the New Testament writings as well. However, a full examination of its New Testament expressions is a discussion which requires that a subsequent study will be realised in the future.

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