



The Significance of the David Tradition for the Emergence of Messianic Beliefs in the Old Testament

ERNST-JOACHIM WASCHKE

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” In Matt 11:3 John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus this question.¹ Jesus does not respond as he does to a similar query before the council, where he says, “I am!” (Mark 14:62 and parallels). Instead, in Jesus’ affirmative response here, the hearer recognizes several quotations from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “[T]he blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:5; cf. Isa 26:19; 29:18–19; 35:5; 61:1). The Baptist’s inquiry makes clear that the New Testament seeks to ground its messianic claims for Jesus in the promises of the Old Testament. At the same time, however, in their Old Testament context none of the quotations alluded to here emerge out of the hope related to David or one of his successors. For its messianic interpretation of Jesus, the New Testament, as this example

¹The title of one of the classic studies of the Messiah in the Old Testament is derived from this verse: Sigmund Mowinkel, *He That Cometh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956).

Although New Testament messianic expectations reflect significant developments during the intertestamental period, it is important to examine the source of these hopes in the David tradition of the Old Testament itself. The redaction of both the prophetic books and the Psalter are marked by this tradition.

shows, reaches far beyond those Old Testament texts that speak directly of the expectations for David and his dynasty. Nevertheless, the Old Testament's David tradition builds one of the foundations for New Testament christology. One indication of this is the adoption of the title Messiah, in its Greek form *christos* (e.g., Mark 8:29 par);² another is the tracing of Jesus' genealogy to David (Matt 1:1, 6; cf. Luke 3:31), as well as the application of the messianic titles "Son of David" (Matt 9:27; 15:22; 21:9, etc.) and "Son of God" (Matt 8:29; 26:63; Mark 1:1; 5:7, etc.).

To be sure, the New Testament's christology did not develop from Old Testament beliefs in a linear fashion. Rather, in the course of history, these beliefs were substantially changed by eschatological and apocalyptic expectations, as exemplified by the incorporation of the "son of man" tradition (Dan 7:13; *1 Enoch* 46:1; *4 Ezra* 13:3) as a foundation of New Testament christology. Still, for the sake of an overall biblical understanding, it is important to be clear about the Old Testament bases for the emergence of messianism. Otherwise, we will be in danger of failing to make sufficient distinction between the historical results of Old Testament exegesis itself and the history of the influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Old Testament traditions in the context of New Testament theology. The New Testament's christological interpretation of Old Testament texts can be neither legitimated nor theologially called into question on the basis of historical-critical exegesis. This interpretation is the result of the history of influence that must be taken seriously and accepted according to the hermeneutical premises of the biblical period.

We begin the following considerations with a sketch of the origins of messianic beliefs in the Old Testament and attempt, on that basis, to present in more detail their development in the prophets and the psalms.

THE TITLE "MESSIAH" AND THE ANOINTING OF THE KING

As a rule, the title "messiah" (anointed) in the Old Testament designates the king (e.g., 1 Sam 16:6; 24:6; 2 Sam 22:51 par Ps 18:50; 2 Sam 23:1; Ps 2:2).³ Only once is it used for the ancestors of Israel (Ps 105:15 par 1 Chr 16:22). The term stems from the investiture of the king in an anointing ritual, which, according to Old Testament tradition, was performed either by a representative of the people (2 Sam 2:4; 5:3; 2 Kings 23:30) or by a prophet commissioned by YHWH (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13; 2 Kings 9:6). By contrast, the anointing of the high priest is recorded only after the collapse of the monarchy in the postexilic period (Lev 4:3, 5, 16; 6:22). His investiture by means of an anointing ritual and his ornate accouterments (cf. Exod 28:39) show him to be the successor of the king, whereby, as highest representative of the congregation, he now assumes the original role of the king in the cult. The more the hopes for a restoration of the Davidic monarchy receded, the more political significance was given the office of high priest.

One can assume that all the Jerusalem kings were anointed at their enthronement.

²The Hebrew or Aramaic title is found in the New Testament only in John 1:41 and 4:25.

³English, rather than Hebrew, verse numbers are used throughout this essay for Old Testament texts.

ment (cf. 1 Kings 1:39; 2 Kings 11:12). The title “messiah,” however, was never part of the official royal form of address. From the beginning, that title has theological connotations. It is always used in connection with YHWH, the God of Israel. In narrative texts one frequently finds the designation “the LORD’s anointed,”⁴ while in poetic texts the relation to God is supplied in most cases by a suffix (i.e., “your,” “his,” or “my anointed”).⁵ It is this usage against the background of the Jerusalem royal theology that gives the title its significance. The texts make the point that God is protector and helper of his anointed (Ps 18:50 par; 20:6). The king is guarantor that God can be called upon for favor (turning his “face” toward the king and Israel) and help (Ps 84:9; 132:10). This principle is clear already in the succession narrative of David (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5), where the title is attested above all for Saul (1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23). David rejects the counsel to kill Saul with the words, “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam 24:6). When David calls Saul “the LORD’s anointed,” that means that even the king who has sinned (1 Sam 15:6, 10–11; 22:16–17) and whom God has rejected (1 Sam 16:1; cf. 28:16–19) is responsible only to God and is subject to no human authority. Neither the future king nor any one else dare break this taboo.

“The divine sphere of authority is the king’s political arena. Justice and righteousness are the pillars of his throne, just as these support the throne of God.”

This claim is based in the peculiar place of the anointed, described in the Old Testament in a manner clearly related to notions of sacral kingship in the ancient Near Eastern environment. This background in royal theology is preserved most clearly in the royal psalms.⁶ Here we find the title “messiah” in the language of prayer—in lament, petition, and thanksgiving. All of the essential statements of royal theology here are connected—if often loosely—with the title “messiah.” He is the son of God, begotten of God (Pss 2:7; 110:3); God is his father (Ps 89:27). He sits at God’s right hand (Ps 110:1) as God’s highest earthly representative. The divine sphere of authority is the king’s political arena. The whole world belongs to the king (Pss 2:8; 72:8; 89:26). The peoples and nations of the world are his divine inheritance. Justice and righteousness are the pillars of his throne, just as these support the throne of God. Therefore, people ask for and expect through his reign victory (Ps 20:10) and the peace that brings renewed order to the structures of society. To be sure, ancient Near Eastern notions of royalty are not taken over by the Old Testament unchanged; but these and similar ideas build the foundation without

⁴1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam 1:14, 16; 19:21.

⁵Ps 2:2; 18:50 par 2 Sam 22:51; 20:6; 28:8; 84:9; 89:38, 51; 105:15; 132:10, 17; cf. Isa 45:1; Hab 3:13; 1 Chr 16:22; 2 Chr 6:42.

⁶Pss 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 110; 132; 145.

which people cannot imagine an ordered world and the future of a social and political community.

Two texts that belong to the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem monarchy can serve as examples: While Lam 4:20 simply affirms, over against this background, that “the LORD’s anointed” has been taken captive by the enemy, although people had hoped that “under his shadow” (that is, under his protection) they could “live among the nations,” Ps 89:38–39 raises this as a complaint against God himself:

But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.

The royal theology texts are not in themselves proof for an emerging messianism in the Old Testament. They could be interpreted as a historical review of David’s kingship. The messianic orientation is more clearly recognizable by the fact that the royal texts and songs are not randomly preserved but have consciously been built into the structure of the Psalter and the prophetic books.

THE DAVID TRADITION IN PROPHECY

Scattered throughout the prophetic books we find texts that have as their theme the renewal of the monarchy. Mic 5:2–5 promises a ruler for Israel from Bethlehem, the geographical origin of the family of David. His rule, “in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God” (v. 4), will bring the nation security and peace. The message of Isa 9:2–7 is similar. Here the people, crushed by war and oppression, are promised the birth of a royal child. His rule will secure peace “for the throne of David and his kingdom.” This is reflected in the names given to the child at his enthronement: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6). The same idea informs the promise of Jer 23:5–6: God will raise up for David “a righteous branch,” whose name will be called, “The LORD is our righteousness.”

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Characteristic of these expectations is the establishment of internal peace and justice along with the provision of protection and security over against external threats. In these expectations the reestablishment of a condition of order and wholeness is linked, by name, to a ruler from the Davidic dynasty. The promise of Isa 11:1–5 (6–8) also belongs with these texts. The future ruler is characterized here by “wisdom and understanding,” by “counsel and might,” by “knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” By naming Jesse as the father of David, this promise, like the one in Mic 5:2, reaches back beyond the house of David to the original seed of the dy-

nasty. At the same time, it extends the picture: The promised salvation does not remain limited to the Davidic kingdom. It encompasses the whole creation in a universal peaceable kingdom, expressed in the pictures of the wolf and the lamb and in the peaceful coexistence of animals and human beings (Isa 11:6–8).

By contrast, we also find texts in which the expectations for the reestablishment of the kingdom or of just rule are formulated in much more general terms. At the end of the book of Amos God promises to “raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11–12). The following passage then describes the coming age with pictures of fertility and fullness in the land, now made secure (Amos 9:13–15). The picture of the “fallen booth” can be applied both to the house of David and to the kingdom as a whole. This text, however, has no special interest in describing a future ruler. The announcement of a just rule in Isa 32:1–5 demonstrates reticence of a different kind. The text promises a king who will rule with justice and whose political deputies will serve righteousness (v. 1). This will bring an end to blindness and deafness and an increase in good judgment and insight (vv. 3–4). Social order will be reestablished in which the fool is no longer called “noble” and the villain no longer “honorable” (v. 5). But unlike Isa 9 and 11, this text no longer speaks of a Davidic king. In the face of the description of corrupt rule in chapters 28–31, we hear simply of a new king and new officials who will rule justly and free society of all ills.

Two things are important in order to understand these prophecies: (1) All of them stand at the end of smaller or larger groups of texts⁷ and seem deliberately to have been placed by a redactor in their present positions. (2) It is hardly accidental that the texts are found primarily in prophetic books like Isa 1–39, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah, which are understood to reflect the historical situation of the time of the Davidic monarchy. In that perspective they are inherently subject to multiple interpretations. They can be seen as *vaticinia ex eventu* (prophecy after the event), referring to a particular historical Davidic ruler (perhaps Hezekiah or Josiah; cf. 2 Kings 18:5–7; 23:25)—as frequently done with the promise of “Immanuel” in Isa 7:14 (among other texts). However, since the texts themselves avoid any direct reference to a concrete ruler, the promises remain open, and therein lies the power of their ongoing influence.

Such openness is displayed also in the last great promise of the prophetic tradition in Zech 9:9–10. Jerusalem/Zion is called upon to receive its king with rejoicing (v. 9a). Even though the name David is lacking, the reference to Jerusalem points obviously to a Davidide. In any case, the text refers to a king of the eschatological age, as seen by the expectations linked to his coming. The instruments of war will be cut off: chariots, horses, and battle-bows (v. 10a); only then will the king command peace to the nations, and his dominion will extend to the whole earth (v. 10b). The Greek text of the Septuagint differs from the Hebrew original

⁷Isa 9:1–6 relates to chs. 6–8 (the so-called *Denkschrift* or memoir); Isa 11:1–8 to chs. 2–10; Isa 32 stands at the end of the so-called Assyrian cycle (chs. 28–32); Jer 23:5–6 at the end of the collection about the royal house of Judah (21:11–23:8).

primarily at one point: According to the Hebrew text, God himself demilitarizes Ephraim and Jerusalem. Correspondingly, the Hebrew terms that characterize the king imply a passive behavior, fully responsible to God. The king's entry "on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" is then understood as a sign of his weakness or humility. According to the Greek text, however, the king himself destroys the weapons of war. Terms that in the Hebrew text express the king's passive behavior and subservience are made active in the Greek text. Here, the king requires no help but becomes himself the savior. He is neither lowly nor weak, though his appearance is gentle and peaceful. Correspondingly, his entrance mounted on a young beast is not a sign of his humility but rather of his royal dignity. The different interpretations of Zech 9:9–10 show that the hopes of the late Old Testament period fluctuated between seeing the king purely as a symbolic figure of the age to come and seeing him as one who should bring in this age with power.

THE DAVID TRADITION IN THE PSALMS

There can be no question about the significance of David in relation to the canonical development and history of influence of the Psalter. His significance is not limited to his traditional function as singer, poet, and pray-er of particular psalms; equal weight must be given in this consideration to the royal psalms.⁸ In this respect, Pss 2, 72, and 89 have a macrostructural function for Books I-III of the Psalter. Books I and II are framed by the two psalms that have as their theme the investiture of the king at Zion and his dominion over the world.

Psalms 2 opens the first book (Pss 2–41)⁹ with the astonishing question, "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" (v. 1). The agitating rulers are told by God himself: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (v. 6). This king is no less than God's son, begotten by God (v. 7), to whom will be given, on demand, dominion over the earth (vv. 8–9).

Psalms 72 stands at the end of Book II of the Psalter (Pss 42–72) and contains petitions for the king or his son (v. 1). The psalm prays that he might rule the people of God with righteousness and treat society's poor with equal justice, so that they will be protected from violence and oppression (vv. 2–4, 12–14). The king's rule is expected to bring universal peace, encompassing both society and nature. Whereas Ps 2 warns the kings and rulers of the world to submit themselves to God and his anointed in humility and fear (vv. 10–12), in Ps 72 they are subjugated. They bow down before the king and serve him (vv. 9–11) so that under his reign "all nations [may] be blessed in him" (v. 17b; cf. Gen 12:1–3).

Psalms 89 (already mentioned) closes the third book of the Psalter (Pss 73–89); it recalls the divine promise to David and laments the loss of the kingdom. This produces a redactional parenthesis around Books I-III that understands this part of the Psalter from the perspective of the Davidic monarchy. The royal texts in

⁸See above, note 6.

⁹Psalms 1, without a superscript, should be understood as an introduction to the entire Psalter.

the book of Isaiah correspond to this in the way that Isa 9 announces the birth and enthronement of the royal child while Isa 11 and 32 promise the just rule of the king in the coming age in images and concepts similar to those of Ps 72. In the prophetic tradition, the connection to the Davidic monarchy is limited largely to the royal texts; by contrast, the composition of the Psalter allows us to speak of a fundamental orientation toward David. To begin with, a large number of psalms of quite different genres are annotated with the superscript, “A Psalm of David.” Most such psalms are found in the first and second books of the Psalter.¹⁰ The superscript does not point to David as author but means, rather, that the psalm in

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question is meant to be read and understood “in relation to” David. At the next level, we find the superscripts of some psalms expanded with a biographical notice from the David tradition, which function to link the David psalms with the David narratives in the books of Samuel. The dates in the superscripts in the prophetic books as well as the historical appendices in Isa 36–39 and Jer 52 serve a similar purpose. They mean to provide a connection between the prophetic proclamation and the corresponding narratives in the books of Kings. Whereas the historical connections in the prophetic books serve to anchor their message “historically,” the Psalter’s biographical connection to David invites meditation on the Davidic history in prayer. Israel should consider the highs and lows of his life and remember his persecutions and failures, but also the divine guidance he received along the way. In both cases (prophets and psalms), these connections actualize and come to terms with history under changed political and social conditions. By means of the later framing of the first two books of the Psalter with royal psalms (Pss 2 and 72), the Psalter that had been oriented toward his life story was now expanded to include his royal dominion. David himself is the king installed by God on Zion and is, at the same time, the pray-er who in Ps 72 invokes righteous rule for his successor. This understanding is suggested by the psalm’s superscript (“Of Solomon”) and by the notice that closes the second book (“The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” Ps 72:20). With this remark the Psalter now leaves behind the perspective of the “historical” David.

Then, at the end of Book III stands Ps 89, which laments the fall of the kingdom and petitions God to renew the grace once given to David. The answer to this prayer comes in Books IV and V (Pss 90–106; 107–150). In light of Ps 89’s lament, the pray-er must now learn that human power and earthly deeds are transitory, whereas God has established his own kingdom before the beginning of time forever and ever (compare the very next psalm, Ps 90). In this light, the move from Book III to Book IV marks a change from the Davidic monarchy to the kingly rule of

¹⁰The 73 occurrences are distributed as follows: 37 times in Pss 2–41; 18 times in Pss 42–72; once in Pss 73–89; twice in Pss 90–106; 15 times in Pss 107–150.

God. This can be seen by (among other things) the fact that the first three books consist largely of psalms of lament and petition, whereas the last two are defined by hymns and other psalms with hymnic structure.

Overall, the hopes connected to David in the Psalter have the same purpose as the royal texts in the prophetic books. The primary difference is that with the prophets these hopes are addressed to Israel as divine promises, whereby in the Psalter Israel reflects and meditates upon the promises in prayer.

In summation, Israel's Davidic hopes begin, in both the prophetic tradition and in the Psalter, with statements that have their origin in the royal theology of Jerusalem and that attempt to formulate the expectations for the future in "historical" connection to the reign of David. At this level, both the royal texts and the royal psalms have a restorative force. In the subsequent redaction of both prophets and Psalter, however, we note the tendency to free these expectations from their tie to the institution of the monarchy in order to allow new interpretations and reinterpretations of the promise to David. In this way, the expectation of an "eschatological David" under the kingly rule of God gains in importance, as does the transfer of the Davidic promise to the people of Israel (cf. Isa 55:3). The progression that moves from the hope for a restoration of the monarchy to Israel's investiture as a royal people and then on to the universal and sole rule of God seems, therefore, to be a deliberate redactional choice. It remains questionable, however, whether we can extrapolate from this corresponding historical developments in the Davidic expectations of the postexilic period. All three tendencies are already discernible in texts of exilic or early-postexilic times. In this light, the different expectations seem rather to be connected to particular groups and circles within early Judaism, each brought to bear as the changing external and internal political situation permits. What remains essential for the history of influence of these texts, however, is that the promise of a new king is inscribed in perpetuity in the prophetic books and that, in the David-oriented Psalter, Israel possessed a spiritual compendium that allowed it at any time to remember its history and to be reassured of its hopes in prayer.¹¹ ⊕

ERNST-JOACHIM WASCHKE is professor of Old Testament in the theological faculty of Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. He is the author of a major work on Israel's "anointed," Der Gesalbte: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie (Walter de Gruyter, 2001). This article was translated for publication by Frederick J. Gaiser.

¹¹On the entire question of this essay, see Ursula Struppe, ed., *Studien zum Messiasbild im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989); Ingo Baldermann et al., eds., *Der Messias* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993); Antti Laato, *Josiah and David Redivivus: The Historical Josiah and the Messianic Expectations of Exilic and Postexilic Times* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1992); Martin Kleer, *Der liebliche Sänger der Psalmen Israels: Untersuchungen zu David als Dichter und Beter der Psalmen* (Bodenheim: Philo, 1996); Ernst-Joachim Waschke, *Der Gesalbte: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001)—see this volume for further references; E.-J. Waschke, "David redivivus: Die Hoffnungen auf einen neuen David in der Spätzeit des Alten Testaments," in *König David—biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt*, ed. Walter Dietrich and Hubert Herkommer (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003) 179–209.