

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF MESSIANIC TEXTS

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It is a personal privilege to dedicate this essay to the memory of my friend Gerhard F. Hasel, with whom I had the pleasure, on a number of occasions, to discuss and weigh solutions to the issues related to our common interest in Biblical Theology.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed some rather remarkable shifts in the methods used for interpreting the older portion of the Bible. One of the most amazing shifts was the way that the messianic texts of the OT were treated as part of the theological study of the OT and the degree of continuity demonstrated with the theology of the NT. To judge from many of the results of the last century, it was almost as if the OT had suddenly become an embarrassment to modernity, if not to the church as well.

More recently, Gerhard von Rad put his finger on this issue, which previously had seldom been recognized for the problem it really was. Said von Rad as he reflected on the situation in Germany:

But when National Socialism came, with its repellent and gross 'no' to the Old Testament, . . . the situation became critical, for this challenge found Old Testament scholarship almost completely unprepared. With an almost religious earnestness, it had trained people to the ethic of an incorruptible historical discernment; but it had not trained them to acknowledge the Old Testament publicly, indeed in the political sector, in a crucial situation—what theologians call *in statu confessionis*.¹

The problem was especially acute as the nineteenth century drew to a close, for OT scholarship had for the most part failed to treat that

¹Gerhard von Rad, "Gerhard von Rad uber Gerhard von Rad," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie: G. Von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 660, as quoted by Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 76.

testament theologically. But worse still, this situation continued into the 1920s and 1930s. The study of this part of the canon was declared to be only a historical science, with theology receiving scant, if any, notice.

It is most significant, as well, that in 1882, Julius Wellhausen (whose leading voice would dominate OT scholarship for most of the next century) applied to be moved out of the theological faculty into the faculty of philosophy. As he explained it:

I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me. It was only gradually that I came to realize that a professor of theology also has the practical function of preparing students for service in the Protestant church, and that this practical function was one I could not fulfill. Indeed, in spite of all restraint on my part, I was rather making my students incapable of carrying out their ministry.²

Wellhausen's honesty was refreshing, but nevertheless indicative of a problem that has continued to remain with us for most of this century. In this regard, little has changed, as a recent study published in 1995 by the American Association of Theological Schools has demonstrated.³ The concern of that study was this: How can the relationship between theological studies in a seminary and the work carried out in university religious studies departments be stated in such a way as not to denigrate or to undermine the scholarship of the seminary? At the heart of this dilemma seems to be the embarrassment over the presence of theology in the academic curriculum of a university, even though many universities on the European continent were established first with faculties of theology and biblical studies. Accordingly, while much has changed in some regards, little has changed in the critical area of the avoidance of any use of theology in OT scholarship.

One area of theological studies that had early experienced a reevaluation of its meaning was the area of messianic interpretation. A study of this revolutionary change, by scholars and many in the Church, merits the investigation by OT biblical theologians.

²As quoted by Rendtorff, 77, from A. Jepsen, "Wellhausen in Greifswald: Ein Beitrag zur Biographie Julius Wellhausens," Appendix 5, in *Festschrift zur 500-Jahr-Frier der Universitat Greifswald* (1956) 2:47-56 (= A. Jepsen, *Der Herr ist Gott* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978), 254-270).

³See the lead article by Don Browning, "The Nature and Criteria of Theological Scholarship," *Theological Education* 32 (Autumn, 1995): 1-12. Seven responses were included in this issue including my own, "The Nature and Criteria of Theological Scholarship: An Evangelical Critique and Plan," *Theological Education* 32 (1995): 57-70.

Modernity and Messianic Interpretation

Nowhere has this tension been more acute than in the way modern study has left its mark on the messianic interpretation of the OT. Up to the modern era, it had been customary to regard Christology in the biblical text as a topic central to the whole of Christian theology and interpretation. But that favored-doctrine status began to change already several centuries ago.

The issue of how to interpret the messianic passages, then, did not arise for the first time as a problem in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it had a history that went all the way back to at least the eighteenth century. One of the best documented starting points for this change is probably the work of Anthony Collins, who published a volume in 1724, entitled *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons for the Christian Religion*, and its sequel in 1727, *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered*.⁴ Collins argued in both of these works that the use of the natural or literal meaning of certain OT messianic texts, previously used as proof-texts for messianism in the OT, could not support the messianic interpretation placed on them by the NT. In his view, the only valid and true meaning of these texts was the original (i.e., the literal) sense, which for scholarly purposes was declared not to be the same sense attributed to them by the NT writers. To those who were attempting to defend a messianic reference in these OT texts by talking about a "spiritual" or "complete" fulfillment as referring to Jesus Christ, Collins concluded that these could be no more than mere illustrations; but in no case did they constitute a specific "proof" that Jesus had been anticipated in the OT.

Thus began the long debate which has continued to this very hour. And this debate is in no small measure linked to the paranoia about involving academicians in the theology of the OT as part of the scientific, scholarly, and academic exercise of genuine research into that testament. Strangely enough, at almost the same time as this debate was given its logical and exegetical formulation by Collins, George F. Handel's oratorio, "The Messiah," was first performed in 1742, less than twenty years after Collins published his work. That oratorio continues to be a favorite of many peoples to this day, even though many of the

⁴See Ronald Clements, "Messianic Prophecy or Messianic History?" *Horizons of Biblical Theology* 1 (1979): 87 and J. O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Works*, International Archives of the History of Ideas 35 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 135 ff for Collins' works on biblical prophecy. Also, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 13-14, 18-23.

very texts that are in dispute in this central topic in biblical theology form the libretto for that soul-stirring music.

There is no need to rehearse here the history of interpretation of messianism in the OT, for Ronald E. Clements has succinctly done that in his 1979 article.⁵ However, it would be helpful to note the various attempts made to meet the challenge raised by Collins.

Dual Meaning

The first rebuttal to the critique that Collins offered came from Thomas Sherlock's *The Use and Intent of Prophecy* (London, 1732). Sherlock began, as many would continue to do even to this present day, by conceding the case that Collins had made about the literal or natural meaning of these texts. However, there was another, later, but fuller meaning, to which the messianic interpretation could be attached. This tactic would prove to be popular over the next centuries for many who would maintain the traditional messianic meaning of these texts. But it would come at the price of forfeiting most of the predictive value and any genuine anticipations of the Messiah in the OT context as the so-called fuller meaning tended to crowd out the original or natural meaning of the text.

Single Meaning

Toward the end of the eighteenth century just as the dual meaning began to be considered as the way to interpret OT texts about the Messiah, J. G. Herder (1744-1803) and J. G. Eichhorn (1752-1827) proposed a new approach to the study of prophecy.

Prophecy, they contended, could only have one meaning—the meaning that the OT *text* was understood to possess in the prophet's own time and milieu. Eichhorn, in particular, was most confident that this claim had eradicated the whole idea of messianic proof-texts as well as predictive prophecy itself. He boasted in 1793, "the last three decades have erased the Messiah from the OT."⁶ Rather than depending on "foretelling" (*Weissagung*), Eichhorn suggested that "discernment" (*Abndung*) replace it as a category of thought to be applied to prophecy. The effect of this suggestion was to turn the interpreter's attention away from the text of the OT and to direct it instead to the prophet himself. Messianism was all but dead at the end of the eighteenth century.

⁵Clements, 87-104; see also Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 13-23.

⁶The work of Herder and Eichhorn on prophecy is recorded in E. Sehmsdorf, *Die Propheten-auslegung bei J. G. Eichhorn* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeft, 1971), 153-154 as cited by Clements, 89.

New Testament Meaning

Another attempt to counter the massive assault on messianic teaching in the OT was made by the Lutheran conservative, E. W. Von Hengstenberg, whose three and later four volumes of *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions* were published between 1829 and 1835, with a second edition appearing between 1854 to 1858. Hengstenberg allowed the NT to be the final arbiter of what the OT text said whenever he encountered difficult passages, such as prophecies of Christ.

Developmental Meaning

Another conservative writer, Franz Delitzsch, broke with Hengstenberg's NT principle, for it, like the dual meaning, had failed to win any confidence in the scholarly community. While holding to many of the traditional arguments from prophecy, Delitzsch insisted that every interpretation must meet two criteria: (1) The prophecy had to be placed in the times and the setting of the original prophet, and (2) every prophecy had only one meaning, without resorting to a typological or spiritual meaning in order to rescue a text for a messianic interpretation. In order to get back to the traditional meaning of these OT texts, Delitzsch proposed the idea of development. Thus, the OT says *less* than its fulfillment in Jesus required, but it allowed for the original OT text to say *more* when it was filled out by later doctrine and Christian experience.⁷

Goal Meaning

While the two conservatives, Hengstenberg and Delitzsch, were working out their solutions to rehabilitate messianic interpretation of the OT, A. F. Kirkpatrick argued that Christ was not the goal of prophecy in the sense that he fulfilled specific, or even detailed, prophecies from the OT about his coming. Instead, Christ was the goal of prophecy in an ethical and moral sense.⁸ But again, prophetic hope was now so large that any particular prophetic utterances were vague, archaic, incidental, and practically useless.

⁷Franz Delitzsch, *Messianic Prophecies in Historical Succession* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891).

⁸A. F. Kirkpatrick, "Christ the Goal of History," in his book entitled, *The Doctrine of the Prophets* (New York: Macmillan, 1897).

Relecture Meaning

More recently there has been an attempt to connect OT prophecy with its New Testament "fulfillments" by a process known as relecture, i.e., the process of reading earlier prophecies in new ways so that they are filled with new meanings. In many ways, this is merely a return to the dual meaning position. Only here the contention is that since the OT is not the work of single authors, but the result of a long process of interpretation and reinterpretation, there is no final way to understand all the possible meanings of a text. The subjectivity of this approach is usually acknowledged, thus it offered no validating potentiality in anything that could be seen as objective.⁹

Theological Meaning

Christ as the end of Israel's history, even if it is only a theological and not a historical judgment, is yet another way to treat OT messianic prophecies. The hidden messianic theme had to play its part in the NT representation of the OT. Thus, the history of Israel would find its consummation and final stage in its growth in the appearance of the Christian church.¹⁰ The price paid here, of course, is the transformation of Israel into the church, which becomes the last stage in the development of the concept of the nation "Israel." But this runs counter to the clear hopes expressed repeatedly by the OT prophets that God would conclude in space and time what he promised to do long ago to Abraham and David: to restore Israel to her land.¹¹

And there the case rests. So what will it be? Did the OT contain specific and particular prophecies about the person and work of a coming Messiah? Or was there just a general, but unexpressed, expectation of the coming of some future Messiah, the details of which would rest totally on the shaping and interpretations given by NT adherents after the appearance of one claiming to be the Messiah? The questions were passed on to the twentieth century with little or no resolution from the previous centuries.

⁹Clements pointed to J. Vereylen, *Du prophète Isaïe à l'apocalyptique: Isaïe I-XXXV miroir d'un demimillénaire d'expérience religieuse en Israël*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1977-1978), 2:655ff; and B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 55 ff.

¹⁰This view is espoused by H.G.A. Ewald, *The History of Israel*, 4th ed., 8 vols. (London: Longmans, 1883-1886), 6:7, 9.

¹¹For a fuller representation of this critique, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "An Assessment of 'Replacement Theology,'" *Mishkan* 21 (1994): 9-20.

No doubt the classic work on this subject of the Messiah in the OT at the middle of this century was that of Sigmund Mowinckel.¹² Mowinckel examined a number of biblical texts that had traditionally been judged to be messianic, excluding many of them on the grounds that their original meanings, as he saw them, had nothing to do with a coming personal Messiah. Thus, texts like Gen 3:15, about a male descendant of Eve; Num 24:15-19, concerning a "star" and a "scepter" out of Israel; and royal Psalms, along with Psalms like the much quoted Psalm 22, were all referred either to the future supremacy of David or to the tribe of Judah. Mowinckel's conclusion was that the inextricably interwoven messianism and eschatology that Christianity so highly regards were unknown in the pre-exilic period. Only after the exile did a messianic hope arise in the post-exilic prophetic books. The Davidic ideal celebrated in the royal psalms was cultic in nature and not a prediction of a future Messiah, but only of a contemporary, earthly king in the line of David!

While there were minor dissensions from this general picture drawn by Mowinckel, it was by now exceedingly clear that: (1) there was no agreed-upon corpus of messianic texts from the OT; (2) there was no agreed-upon criteria as to what would constitute the basic data of messianism; and (3) there was no one literary form or type of text to which the study of messianism could be applied. The search for the Messiah in the OT was either at an end or had to be reintroduced on grounds that had not yet been tested in the debate of the past two hundred and fifty years.

Messianism and the New Search for Jesus

It would appear that there is a connection between the failure of the previous generations to establish any agreed corpus of texts, basic data, or even a paradigmatic type of OT text for the Messiah and the current frustrations of the new search for the historical Jesus in the New Testament text. The Easter 1996 issues of *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* all carried as their cover stories reports on the new search for Jesus.¹³ After over two hundred years of scholarly

¹²Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959).

¹³Jeffrey L. Sheler with Mike Tharp and Jill Jordan Seider, "In Search of Jesus," *U.S. News and World Report*, 8 April, 1996, 46-50, 52-53; Kenneth L. Woodward, "Rethinking the Resurrection," *Newsweek*, 8 April, 1996, 40-46; David van Biema, "The Gospel Truth?" *Time*, 8 April, 1996, 52-59. Also Robert J. Hutchinson, "The Jesus Seminar Unmasked," *Christianity Today*, 29 April, 1996, 28-30, in a report on his interview with Luke Timothy Johnson and his book *The Real Jesus: The Mistaken Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), in which he critiqued the claims made by Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, and Burton Mack.

research, the signs are that the "Quest" for the Messiah announced in the OT and the various "Quests" for the "historical" Jesus have reached a dead end, given the grounds and the terms of current research.

The "Quest for the historical Jesus" has gone through at least three phases since the 1778 publication of Hermann Reimarus' *Fragments*¹⁴: the "Old Quest," 1778-1906, which concluded that the historical figure of Jesus was not supernatural; the "No Quest," 1906-1953, which asserted that Jesus' historical figure was lost to history—only the Christ of faith matters; and the "New Quest," 1953 to the present, that combines the search for the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.¹⁵ The central contributions in the debate were those by Albert Schweitzer,¹⁶ Rudolf Bultmann,¹⁷ Ernst Kasemann,¹⁸ and James M. Robinson.¹⁹

A fairly unnoticed turning point in all these "Quests" was a statement made by Julius Wellhausen at the turn of this century. In his *Introduction to the Gospels*, he wrote, "*Jesus war kein Christ sondern Jude*," ("Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew").²⁰ Whatever else this statement meant, it was no longer possible to avoid the Jewishness of Jesus. It was this declaration by Wellhausen that opened up the study of Jesus for Reform Jewish scholars.

While liberal Christianity continues to become more skeptical about its ability to ever find the Jesus of history or the Jesus of faith, Jewish

¹⁴English translation by C. H. Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

¹⁵See Craig A. Evans, "Jesus of Nazareth: Who Do Scholars Say That He is?" *Cruce* 23, no.4 (1987): 15-19.

¹⁶Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte des Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen, 1906), trans. James M. Robinson, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London:, 1910).

¹⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesu* (Berlin, 1926); trans. *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

¹⁸The translation of Ernst Käsemann's paper, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," was published in Käsemann's book, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), 15-47.

¹⁹James M. Robinson's famous review of the whole movement was called *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1959). A Jewish criticism of the "New Quest" is given by Jewish scholar B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).

²⁰Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), 113, as cited by Walter Riggans, "Jewish Views of Jesus Through the Ages," *Mishkan* 17-18 (1992): 2.

scholars have come forth with their own new phase of the "Quest" for the historical Jesus.²¹

Many in this new phase are convinced, *vis à vis* their liberal counterparts in Christianity, that the real Jesus can be discovered, the three Gospels do have historical value, and that Jesus should be rooted in the Judaism of his day. This is not to claim that all of these Jewish claims are not without their own problems, for there is a tendency in much of this research to sharply distinguish Jesus from Paul and the rest of the apostles. The point of driving a wedge between the Jesus of history and Paul is to celebrate Jesus' Jewishness while making Christianity largely the creation of the apostle Paul. This, of course, will not bear the scrutiny of textual or historical research.

However, both Jewish and much of Christian scholarship has continued to join together in the prevailing estimate that the OT has a marked absence of any evidence for an expected figure in the future whose coming will coincide with the inauguration of an era of salvation. For example, such an esteemed Jewish scholar as S. Talmon concluded:

But notwithstanding the palpable absence of Messiah-futurism in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is yet much truth in Martin Buber's assertion that messianism must be deemed 'die zutiefst originelle Idee des Judentums,' deeply rooted in the ancient Israelites' conceptual universe, and that it is the only source out of which the various postbiblical formulations of messianism could have sprung. No equal to the messianic idea—its essence and its diversity—can be found outside the framework of the Judeo-Christian culture and belief systems.²²

At the moment, then, there is almost a scholarly consensus that has now threatened to spread even into evangelical scholarship. As Joachim Becker has expressed it, "It is on the threshold of the New Testament that we first encounter a real messianism."²³ Becker can make the case even more stringent:

²¹This assessment of the situation is argued by N. T. Wright, "Constraints and the Jesus of History," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986): 189-210. As examples of this Jewish search, Wright cites B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*; (1973); M. J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Mellen, 1984); E. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); and John K. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980).

²²S. Talmon, "The Concepts of Mashiah and Messianism in Early Judaism," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 83.

²³Joachim Becker, *Messianic Expectations in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 87.

In fact, there was no such thing as messianic expectation until the last two centuries B.C. Does this eliminate the traditional picture of messianic expectation? Such a conclusion would contradict one of the most central concerns of the New Testament, which insists with unprecedented frequency, intensity, and unanimity that Christ was proclaimed in advance in the Old Testament.²⁴

But how could this be? How could the New Testament be so sure that what was happening in their day was a direct fulfillment of what the OT had promised when most scholarship is certain of the opposite point of view? Most modern study on the question of the Messiah in the OT has agreed on three widely accepted principles: (1) When the original meanings of those passages that are traditionally considered to be messianic are discovered, the meanings bear only on contemporary situations and not on any future Messiah; (2) The real "ownership" of the OT is to be located in the synagogue and not the church; and (3) The NT used an exegetical method that was common in late Judaism, a *peshet* or *midrashic* interpretation, which made concrete applications of the OT text *without regard for the original statement or its concurrent historical consciousness*.

A Proposal for Cutting the Gordian Knot

Neither of the current alternatives appeals to this writer or to the current generation, i.e., to ride roughshod over the historical context of the OT, pointing only to the time of the future, thereby producing a messianological maximum, or being so critically bound to each individual context that it produces a messianological minimum. There must be another way through this impasse than concluding that the two contrasting approaches are irreconcilable.

But how can this Gordian knot be cut? Is the solution to adopt some ancient or modern form of a dual meaning? If two hundred years has demonstrated anything, it has shown that appeals to some form of a dual sense or meaning to the OT, such as a NT additive of a messianic sense to OT texts, or some secondary development behind, under, or around the text that carries a spiritual or typological meaning, have all proved in the end to be self-defeating, leading ultimately to parochial, subjective, privatized, and preferential points of view about the Messiah that cannot be validated by the OT text itself. The advantage of the commonality of language, in each of these proposals, is forfeited in favor of an in-house key that can be supplied only by those who participated in the esoteric mysteries of the conservative group or its cultic analogue, such as the Essenes of Qumran. Moreover, all alleged apologetic

²⁴*Ibid.*, 93.

advantages that might have accrued to those trying to make the case for NT Christology would be scrapped by the interjection of a two-track hermeneutical system for interpreting messianic passages.

The place to begin is by affirming two criteria that nontraditionalists used to assume: (1) The meaning of any OT references to the Messiah must reflect the author's own times and historical circumstances, and (2) that meaning must be reflected in the grammar and syntax of the OT text. To deny these two working hypotheses will only introduce pandemonium in the whole interpretive process and ultimately make any and all communication impossible.

But does that not leave us exactly where we started? Wasn't that the point that Anthony Collins had made in 1724 and 1727? No! While Collins, and all who have adopted some form of his method since his day, claimed that they were following the grammatico-historical meaning of the text, they were often more faithful to their own presuppositions than they were to the text itself. Prior philosophical and critical commitments tended to crowd out the authorial intentionality in these works that often made much of the author's times and circumstances.

What, then, was missing from those who claimed they espoused the historical or literal meaning of the text? Primarily, they failed to see the parts in terms of "the whole." And what was missing from those who claimed they espoused the theological meaning of the texts? Usually it was that they failed to see the whole in terms of its "constituent parts" from the OT text.

What, then, were these "wholes" and "parts" that were understated or completely left out of the alternative views?

To properly understand the Bible, as any other book, is to gain some idea of the beginning, the middle, and the end. There is plan, purpose, and progress to the OT, where the end folds back on the beginning. This claim, of course, has been vigorously denied. It is said that the Bible had too many disparate writers and editors to have had anything like a unified message or plan. But that is a philosophical point of view wherein the wish is parent to the demonstration of the matter from the text. One need only to contrast the Bible with other sacred scriptures such as the Koran, and the difference is immediately apparent. James Orr stated this matter exactly when he argued:

The Koran, for instance, is a miscellany of disjointed pieces, out of which it is impossible to extract any order, progress, or arrangement. The 114 Suras or chapters of which it is composed are arranged chiefly according to length—the longer in general preceding the shorter. It is not otherwise with the Zoroastrian and Buddhist

Scriptures. These are equally destitute of beginning, middle or end. They are, for the most part, collections of heterogeneous materials, loosely placed together. How different everyone must acknowledge it to be with the Bible! From Genesis to Revelation we feel that this book is in a real sense a unity. It is not a collection of fragments, but has, as we say, an organic character. It has one connected story to tell from beginning to end; we see something growing before our eyes: there is plan, purpose, progress; the end folds back on the beginning, and, when the whole is finished, we feel that here again, as in primal creation, God has finished all his works, and behold, they are very good.²⁵

For too long now the topic of the unity of the Bible has been neglected. But that God had a fixed program can be seen early on in Genesis 12:3b, "In your seed [Abraham], all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This became one of the most succinct statements of that plan of God.

But the unity that Scripture exhibited was not a static, flat-Bible type of unity. It demonstrated growth, development, and an epigenesis. It is precisely this type of organic and holistic understanding that is so often missed by those who presume to take the historical conditioning of the words of Scripture seriously. The atomization of the individual words, nakedly left to their immediate contexts, tended to rob many of those words of the seminal ideas that the original authors deliberately imbedded and implanted in those same words. Much of the same freight was contained in those reutilized words, meanings they had for both the previous author and now the new author who specifically chose to use the same word again. Here is where a great deal of the doctrine of the Messiah is lost, by those who fail to see the epigenetical meaning of quotations, allusions, or words that tended to take on technical status, borrowed from earlier writers in the Scriptures.

It is not enough to speak of the moment of the predicted word and the moment of the fulfillment. What about the interval that passed between those two moments? It was more than just a necessary nuisance. But herein rests our main contention about the messianic doctrine. God was not only predicting what would happen in the future; he was mightily working out his promise-plan out in the everyday course of events as the very *means* by which he would bring about the final fulfillment. This was no wasted *filler*; it was part of the fulfillment in the process of history: the *means* by which the predicted *word* and the fulfilled *event* were bound together. Thus, those who saw

²⁵James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 31-32.

only the historic meaning in the times and circumstances of the days of the original writer(s) and readers were seeing truly, but only partially. They apparently had no idea that that already was the fulfillment in progress, unfolding before their eyes. In other words, the *word* about the past and the *word* about the future both shared the same *working in history*, a *working now* as well as a *working then*.

Some, of course, will object to our finding any provision in the text for prediction or foretelling. That debate, however, is a philosophical one—one that David Hume introduced and which has been answered elsewhere many times before. This cannot deter us here, for the claims of the text and a view of a communicating God will see to those objections that are not philosophical presuppositions that need to be cared for at that level of discourse.

Those who miss the parts of the messianic doctrine because they have assumed at some deeper level there is a holism that supersedes the parts will need to pay closer attention to two details. First there is the matter of the single or literal meaning of the text. These terms, though often abused, mean no more than this: The words of the text of Scripture must mean what they ordinarily meant when they were given their *usus loquendi*, i.e., their spoken sense in similar contexts of that day. To try to attach some *hidden* or *spiritual* meaning that is not really traceable to the grammar or syntax is to import meanings, a procedure we must avoid, called eisegesis.

But having said that, let us also understand that the *usus loquendi* can just as easily come with an association and a history of usage. Let a word or a phrase be used in a memorable or important occasion and that word will for the next number of years continue to carry that nuance as part of its single and literal meaning. In our own day, words like "Watergate," "gay," or names like "Martin Luther King" have an organic wholeness in their single meaning that forever will affect all subsequent usage.

This same phenomenon can be seen in what scholars have dubbed words that carry a "Corporate Solidarity." The exegete needs only to encounter words such as "seed," "branch," "firstborn," and "servant of the LORD," to notice that within the single meaning of these words is the presence of *the One* who represents the whole group as well as *the many* who are equally a part of that which was intended by the author. Usually such concepts are included in what are called "collective singulars." Thus, in English we say "one deer" or "ten deer"; we do not say ten deers. The noun remains the same. The closest parallel we have in modern society exists in legal suits. If I, after much exasperation and many attempts for remedial action, sue General Motors Company to get

relief for a new car that turns out to be a "lemon," the suit reads "Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., versus GMC." For the purposes of law, there is a legal fiction in which GMC is regarded as one individual, even though GMC represents management, boards, employees, and stockholders. In a similar way, the single meaning of some biblical terms that have taken on a technical status because of their embodiment of the One and the Many, are too insulated and isolated if they are treated as if it meant *only* the *One* or as if it meant only the *many*.

Conclusion

In the past, the great apologetic works pointed to scores of separate predictions in the OT with their NT fulfillments. But what was lacking was a biblical theology of the Bible's own case for the unity and cumulative force of all these promises. The depictions of the coming Messiah should not be a random association of heterogeneous prognostications, arbitrarily introduced in the OT or haphazardly chosen to suit the purposes of the NT writers. Instead, they comprised one continuous plan of God, each being linked to an ongoing stream of announcements that continued to expand and grow as they moved forward in the progress of revelation. This is the case we have attempted to restore in our recent monograph in the Studies in Old Testament Theology series, entitled *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, published by Zondervan in September 1995. Our contention in that volume is that there are at least sixty-five direct, straightforward prophecies of the Messiah that were meant to be apprehended (note: not comprehended) by the audiences to whom they were first addressed. These sixty-five prophecies were spread out fairly evenly throughout the OT in each of its sections.²⁶ And the way readers could apprehend them was not by tearing them apart from their linkage to the immediate history in the day in which they were written, but to see them in their wholeness, corporate solidarity, and unity in the divine plan that God had in the entire corpus of revelation.

If the case for supernaturalism is accepted, as it is here, then the claim that God announced beforehand what he intended to do in the future is not an insuperable objection. We argued in an earlier work that "prediction is so natural and so much a part of the divine activity that it can almost be ascribed as an attribute of God himself."²⁷ That was the exact challenge that God himself made to the dead idols of the

²⁶For a graphic exemplification of this point, see Appendices 1 and 2, in *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 237-242.

²⁷Walter C. Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 17-18.

nations through the prophet Isaiah: If your idols truly are deities, then say something about the future and how events will turn out (Isa 41: 22-23; 45: 21b-c; 46: 9b-10). In fact, so important is the predictive gift to the Bible that approximately 27 percent of its message was given over to this function.²⁸

But no less significant is the fact that the OT does not even hint at the fact that its predictions must be understood in a *peshet* or *midrashic* method of interpretation. A straightforward understanding of the text in the context of the unity of the Bible will lead one straight to Jesus of Nazareth as the One who fulfilled and is now fulfilling the plan of God for the past, present and future. Because the rubric of the “center of Scripture” cannot be separated from the topic of the “unity of Scripture,”²⁹ our argument is that the center of Scripture, like the center of history itself, is personal in that it focuses on God’s son, the Messiah.

²⁸J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 631-682.

²⁹This is the thesis of H. Freiherr Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968), 335, as cited by Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 188. See Maier’s note 12 on the same page for three other writers who came to the same conclusion.