

## Theologies of the Messiah: Class Two

### The Return & Persian Period

## THE RETURN & THE PERSIAN PERIOD

### BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW [OPEN WITH ISAIAH 56:3-8]<sup>1</sup>

Last week, we remembered that from around 1050-930 BC, Israel had been a United Kingdom with all the tribes under one king. They were especially strong under David and his son Solomon. However, there was a rebellion when Solomon's son was king (around 930 BC), which split the kingdom into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. In 587 BC, the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar II conquered the southern kingdom and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. They sent the people into exile in Babylon.



1. "The Fall of Babylon; Cyrus the Great Defeating the Chaldean Army" by John Martin, British, 1831.

Cyrus the Great, a Persian king, conquered Babylon and claimed all the territories of its empire in 538 BC. Cyrus granted religious freedom to all nations in the empire and even contributed money and resources to rebuild the Temple and restore its services. Isaiah tells us, "Thus says the Lord to the anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him... For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me" (Isaiah 45:1, 4). In Isaiah, Cyrus is called the anointed, chosen by God to bring Israel home.

The Bible says that 50,000 Judeans were led back home by Zerubbabel. There was also a second major group that returned in 456 BC with Ezra (a scribe and priest) and Nehemiah (a governor) as their leaders. As they worked to rebuild, they had many enemies who would attack them and who petitioned Cyrus to shut down their efforts.<sup>2</sup> They were attacked so often that those who carried building materials to work sites did so with their load in one hand and their sword drawn in another. Even the builders had to build with weapons strapped to their belts!<sup>3</sup>

In 525 BC, the Persians also conquered Egypt.<sup>4</sup> This meant that the two major empires that generally threatened Israel (Mesopotamia & Egypt) were not the major threats that they had been for as long as Israel had existed. Despite some skirmishes with their immediate neighbors, this was a period in which Jews could renew their religious practices, focus on

spiritual and moral growth, and finalize scriptures (the end form of the first five books of the Bible as well as 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Samuel).<sup>5</sup>

## TWO MESSIAHS IN ZECHARIAH

We remember that one of the big features of messianic expectation from the Exile period was that the exiles would get to return home to Israel. Since that had happened, there were passages where Cyrus was called a messiah (Isaiah 45), but there were also other passages exploring multiple messiahs. Zerubbabel (technically a governor) worked together with the new High Priest Joshua to rebuild the Temple in 520 BC, when Darius I was king of Persia.<sup>6</sup> Hopes were high that this was the start of the messianic age of peace – that a king in David’s line would work together with the leader of faith to transform the people in holiness.<sup>7</sup>

### Zechariah 4:6-14 (Describing a Vision)

<sup>6</sup>The angel said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>7</sup>What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and he shall bring out the top stone amid shouts of ‘Grace, grace to it!’”

<sup>8</sup>Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, <sup>9</sup>“The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. <sup>10</sup>For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel.

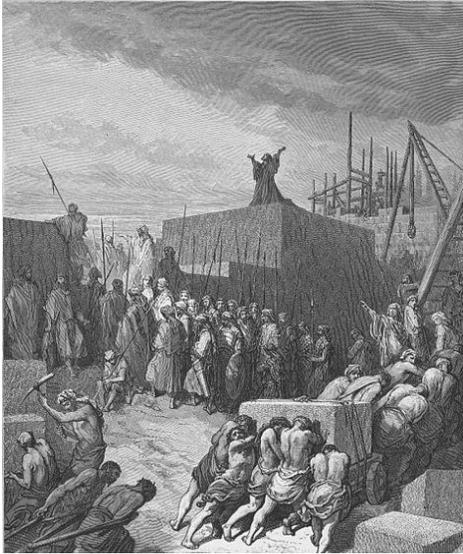
“These seven [lamps] are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth.” <sup>11</sup> Then I said to him, “What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?” <sup>12</sup> And a second time I said to him, “What are these two branches of the olive trees, which pour out the oil through the two golden pipes?” <sup>13</sup> He said to me, “Do you not know what these are?” I said, “No, my lord.” <sup>14</sup> Then he said, “These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.”



2. "The Menorah of Zechariah" from the Bible of Cervera, Spanish, between 1299 and 1300.

### Zechariah 3:6-14

<sup>6</sup>Then the angel of the LORD assured Joshua, saying <sup>7</sup>“Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. <sup>8</sup>Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. <sup>9</sup>For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. <sup>10</sup>On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree.”



3. "The Rebuilding of the Temple is Begun" by Gustav Doré, French, 1866.

### Zechariah 6:11-13

<sup>11</sup>Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak; <sup>12</sup>say to him: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. <sup>13</sup>It is he that shall build the temple of the LORD; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit upon his throne and rule. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.

1. What stands out to you in these passages?
2. Think about the people living in this time period (Return & Persian Period) and how they would connect with these passages. Where do you see fear? Where do you see hope?
3. What do you think of the idea of the idea of two messiahs as working in tandem?
4. The vision in Zechariah 3 can be dated on February 15, 519.<sup>8</sup> We remember that “branch” is used for messiah in Isaiah 11:1 (“a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots”) as well as Jeremiah 23:5-6 (“the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”). What does it mean to you to call the messiah “the Branch”?

## MESSIAH AS HIGH PRIEST IN THE PSALMS

Unfortunately, the record of Zerubbabel suddenly stops and we do not know what happened to him. The line of High Priests did continue from Joshua, though. We don't know exactly what happened, but following this, the prophecies written no longer mentioned specific people. They looked further forward to a Messiah descended from the line of David.<sup>9</sup>

### Psalm 110:1-5a

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD says to my lord,  
 "Sit at my right hand  
 until I make your enemies your  
 footstool."  
<sup>2</sup> The LORD sends out from Zion  
 your mighty scepter.  
 Rule in the midst of your foes.  
<sup>3</sup> Your people will offer themselves  
 willingly  
 on the day you lead your forces  
 on the holy mountains.  
 From the womb of the morning,  
 like dew, your youth will come to you.



<sup>4</sup> "Melchizedek, King of Peace" mosaic at the Church of the Beatitudes in Tabgha, Israel.

- <sup>4</sup> The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,  
 "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."<sup>10</sup>  
<sup>5</sup> The Lord is at your right hand.

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. Where do you see fear? Where do you see hope?
3. This psalm talks about victory for God's Priest-King and introduces the idea on the anointed being a "priest forever." What does it mean to you to think of the messiah as a priest forever?
4. Many years later, but before the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 AD,<sup>11</sup> we find this scripture, "since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find

grace to help in time of need” (Hebrew 4:14-16). In light of this scripture, what does the messiah as High Priest do?

### ELIJAH & THE MESSIAH



5. "Elijah" by John August Swanson, American, 2008.

The prophet Elijah was a 9<sup>th</sup> century prophet during the Divided Kingdom period. He was one of the greatest prophets Israel had ever known: fighting against idolatry, challenging wicked rulers, resurrecting the dead, calling fire to rain from the sky, performing miracles with food, and more. Malachi prophesied after the dedication of the Second Temple in 516 BC. In the book of Malachi, it is prophesied that Elijah will return before the Messiah comes. In this period, Elijah becomes a messenger who brings about peace in families, restores the tribes in Israel, and elevates humanity so that God will not be angry with us.<sup>12</sup> Even today in Passover meals, there is a chair for Elijah. Since Passover celebrates redemption, freedom from slavery and from Egypt, Elijah is included as a way to look forward to ultimate redemption when the Messiah comes.

#### Malachi 3:1-2 & 4:5-6

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

<sup>5</sup> Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

#### Luke 1:14-17

<sup>14</sup> [Angel to Zechariah foretelling the birth of John the Baptist] “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. ...Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

1. What stands out to you in these passages?
2. Where do you see fear? Where do you see hope?

3. Unlike Zechariah, Malachi doesn't talk about two messiahs. He talks about someone who prepares the way for the messiah. Do we need someone new to prepare the way for the Lord? Do we need a new prophecy or is it our responsibility to look to the prophecies and scriptures that we have been given? If Elijah came again, what would that look like? What would he say in our day?

## MANY DIFFERENT IDEAS

There are a lot of themes and ideas about the messiah that have come forward in different scripture passages. Rather than show a uniform picture, we see that each passage glimpse a different aspect of who the messiah might be and what the messiah might look like. Check out this chart:<sup>13</sup>

	Psalms	Micah	Isaiah	Ezekiel	2. Isa.	Haggai	Zech.
Davidic descent	+	+	+	+	-	+	+
King, prince	+	+	+	+	+	-	-
Ruler of the world	+	+	?	-	+	-	-
Defeat of enemies	+	+	+	-	+	?	-
Priest	+	-	-	-	-	-	+
Restoration of Israel	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
Cultic reforms	-	-	-	+	+	+	+
Age of peace	-	+	+	+	+	-	-
Servant	-	-	-	+	-	+	+
Anointment	+	-	-	-	+	-	-

The books of the Bible are listed in roughly chronological order at the top (notice that this includes prophecies going back to the United Kingdom and including the Divided Kingdom, Exile, and Return).

From Jona Lendering: "the authors of these texts describe some kind of ideal ruler. Except for Second Isaiah, they expect him to come from the house of David; except for the authors of the Psalms, they all connect this special ruler with the restoration of Israel... Some prophets speak of an age of peace, others don't... An interesting difference is also that the prophets who lived after Josiah were interested in the pure cult in the Temple, something that earlier authors had ignored... Almost none of these authors calls the savior 'Messiah' ... It was not necessary to use the word: after all, a king was always anointed."<sup>14</sup>

1. Take a moment to look at the chart and notice what things changed as you look from left to right (i.e. as time moves forward). What do you think about these changes?
2. Of all the characteristics listed in the left hand column, which do you think are most important descriptions of the messiah?

## WHAT DOES THE MESSIAH DO?

In this time period:<sup>15</sup>

- Gather all Jews home to Israel
- Be a king in the line of David
- Be the Great High Priest
- Restore the Temple, Purify its Rituals
- Know and Teach the Law and Commandments to the People
- Fight wars for God in a kingdom that is the equal of others around it
- Show other nations that God is God so that even Gentiles worship

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<sup>1</sup> Historians divide the book of Isaiah into 2 or 3 sections even though the book is presented as a whole in scripture. Proto-Isaiah, or First Isaiah, is chapters 1-39 and was written before the exile. Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah, is chapters 40-55 and was written while the people were in exile, possibly by students or disciples of Isaiah. Trito-Isaiah, or Third Isaiah, is chapters 56-66 and was written after the people returned. Thus, the reading from Isaiah 56 reflects ideas and concerns of the Return Period. See "Book of Isaiah," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Isaiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah) (accessed 12/9/19).

<sup>2</sup> "History of Israel," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Israel#Babylonian,\\_Persian,\\_and\\_Hellenistic\\_periods\\_\(586%E2%80%99337\\_BCE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Israel#Babylonian,_Persian,_and_Hellenistic_periods_(586%E2%80%99337_BCE)) (accessed 12/9/19).

<sup>3</sup> See Nehemiah 4.

<sup>4</sup> "History of Persian Egypt," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Persian\\_Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Persian_Egypt) (accessed 12/9/19)

<sup>5</sup> "History of Israel," Wikipedia.

<sup>6</sup> "Zerubbabel," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zerubbabel> (accessed 12/9/19)

<sup>7</sup> "Second Temple Judaism." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\\_Temple\\_Judaism#Messianism\\_and\\_the\\_end\\_times](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple_Judaism#Messianism_and_the_end_times) (accessed 12/9/19).

<sup>8</sup> "Lendering, Jona, "Messiah, Roots 5: Zerubbabel." Livius.org. <https://www.livius.org/articles/religion/messiah/messiah-roots-5-zerubbabel/> (accessed 12/9/19).

<sup>9</sup> "Second Temple Judaism." Wikipedia.

<sup>10</sup> Melchizedek is called the king of Salem in Genesis 14. He brings bread and wine to Abraham (at that point Abram) and blesses him. Melchizedek is called "priest of the most high God." King of Salem could also be translated "king of peace." Priesthood in ancient Israel was derived from the line of Aaron and his sons. The "order of Melchizedek" would perhaps be a separate priesthood from his descendants that is nowhere else mentioned in the Old Testament except for in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. It also appears in Hebrews 6 & 7.

<sup>11</sup> Lendering, Jona. "Messiah #3: Priest or High-Priest." Livius.org. <https://www.livius.org/articles/religion/messiah/messiah-4-priest/> (accessed 12/9/19).

<sup>12</sup> "Elijah," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah> (accessed 12/9/19). "Malachi," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malachi> (accessed 12/9/19)

<sup>13</sup> Lendering, "Roots 5."

<sup>14</sup> Lendering, "Roots 5."

<sup>15</sup> "Messiah," Wikipedia. See also "Judaism's Views of Jesus." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judaism%27s\\_view\\_of\\_Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judaism%27s_view_of_Jesus) (Accessed 12/3/2019).