

THE MESSIAH AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

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I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE QUESTION

In a recent book review for *JETS*, Walt Kaiser has made a strong plea for the importance of the question of the Messiah and the Hebrew Bible. The question, says Kaiser, “could be a defining moment for evangelical scholarship and ultimately for the Church’s view of the way we regard Scripture.”¹ According to Kaiser, the question ultimately comes down to whether the NT interpretation of an OT text is, in fact, the meaning intended by the OT author. Kaiser states, “. . . if it is not in the OT text, who cares how ingenious later writers are in their ability to reload the OT text with truths that it never claimed or revealed in the first place? The issue is more than hermeneutics,” says Kaiser. The issue is that of “the authority and content of revelation itself!”²

Another evangelical OT scholar, Gordon McConville, has also stressed the importance of the Messiah in the OT. McConville says, “If the Old Testament is *the* problem of Christian theology . . . , [then] the Messiah is at the heart of that problem.”³ McConville goes on to say that “the validity of a Christian understanding of the Old Testament must depend in the last analysis on [the] cogency of the argument that the Old Testament is messianic.”⁴

These are strong statements. And they come from two respected Biblical scholars. I believe they accurately reflect the current state of mind of evangelical scholarship. If liberalism once defined itself as a quest for the *historical* Jesus, evangelicalism may well be in the process of defining itself as a quest for the *Biblical* Jesus. I believe this question lies at the heart of much of the current evangelical discussion about Biblical theology. I am sure there are more pressing issues facing us today, but I cannot think of a more important topic for us to reflect on at this occasion.

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¹ *JETS* 42/1 (1999) 99–102.

² *Ibid.* 101.

³ *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 2.

⁴ *Ibid.* 17.

1. *Evangelical views of the Messiah and the Hebrew Bible.* Evangelical views of messianic prophecy can be traced to the work of two early nineteenth century OT scholars, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–1869) and Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877). The views of these two men still set the agenda for much of evangelical Biblical scholarship. In many respects, their views were similar. Both were influenced greatly by the Berlin revivals in the early nineteenth century. For both, the last word on the meaning of messianic prophecy in the OT was that of Jesus and the NT. Both believed fulfilled prophecy offered essential support for the truth of the gospel. Both also believed that in giving us messianic prophecy, God had intervened in a real way in human history. He had made known his will and purpose. Messianic prophecy was thus not a product of a human yearning for a better life, but the result of a “supernatural” revelation.

In spite of these basic similarities, each man offered a fundamentally different set of answers to essential questions.

a. *Hengstenberg.* Hengstenberg’s understanding of messianic prophecy was shaped by two primary concerns: (1) his own experience of conversion, which was sudden and undeniable; and (2) his desire to use his religious experience as a basis for the defense of the Bible. For Hengstenberg, God’s work in the world was accomplished by means of specific divine interventions. These were miraculous events within the arena of ordinary history. The incarnation was a prime example. It marked a new beginning for God’s relationship with the world. In the incarnation, the Word had become part of the world. Israel’s history was a record of the many and diverse instances of that intervention. Although Israel’s history was a part of ordinary human history, it was also, like his own conversion, punctuated with miraculous exceptions.

That a prophet could foresee the exact name of the future Persian king Cyrus (e.g. Isa 45:1) was an exception to ordinary history, but such an exception was to be expected given the divine origin of the prophetic word. When God stepped into the flow of human history, his actions were direct and clear to anyone who witnessed them. They were, in fact, so self-evident that they could be used as proof of the truth of the gospel.

As Hengstenberg saw it, God’s acts in history had an immediate but short-range effect on the rest of history. As miracles, they did not become part of the rest of history. They were historical, but not part of history. They were, in fact, exceptions to history and as such were clear signs of God’s activity. God’s acts in history were like our stepping into the current of a river. Our feet may make a splash, but there are no ripples made in the river. The ripples are lost in the flow of the river. Hengstenberg’s own conversion was a divine splash whose ripples were quickly dissolved by the flow of time. There was nothing left for the historian to fix upon and to draw conclusions from. It was a “super”-natural (miraculous) event lost within the course of ordinary history.

For Hengstenberg, the divine revelation of messianic prophecy consisted of similar kinds of miraculous events. In this way, his entire understanding

of messianic prophecy came to be shaped by his own conversion experience. As Hengstenberg understood it, the prophets of old were given sudden, miraculous, panoramic visions of the whole of the messianic future. Those visions were like flashes of supernatural light and insight. Often they came so suddenly and faded so quickly the prophet could record only a small portion of the vision. One is reminded of flashbulbs from the 1950s which left one momentarily stunned and unable to see anything but a large blue dot that faded slowly from one's eyes. The prophet hurriedly recorded the vision as it faded from his sight.

Hengstenberg believed the prophetic visions came so quickly that in some cases, new visions would appear to the prophet in the midst of other visions. The prophet would have to stop recording one vision to pick up his description of another. What the prophet was ultimately able to record were only bits and pieces of the visions he had seen. Hence, for Hengstenberg, to discover Christ in the OT meant finding all the bits and pieces of the one grand vision and piecing them back together. It was as if the prophetic books were large scrapbooks containing scattered fragments of once-whole Rembrandts and Michelangelos. A single verse in the Bible might contain fragmented pieces of several visions. Only the trained eye could spot a piece of both a Rembrandt and a Michelangelo in the same verse. Only one who knew the whole vision could piece the fragments together.

In finding and piecing together such splintered visions, the NT was indispensable. It was like the picture on the cover of a jigsaw puzzle. For Hengstenberg, little or nothing was left to the prophet. He merely recorded the visionary fragments from which the student of prophecy must piece together the whole.

Given these assumptions about the nature of prophecy (which were novel and unusual in Hengstenberg's day), it is not hard to understand the approach he took to the Messiah in the OT. Following Hengstenberg through the Hebrew Bible is like following a trained geologist through the Black Hills. We watch him pick up a stone here and a rock there and tell us they were once part of a great prehistoric mountain range. Hengstenberg can point to a fragment here and a text there and reconstruct for us the great messianic mountain range that once inhabited the prophet's mind. Without knowing the whole scope of messianic prophecy as Hengstenberg, we have to follow him and take his word about the messianic parts of a verse.

Though few evangelicals today openly adopt Hengstenberg's approach, his legacy continues to influence the contemporary discussion. That legacy, as I understand it, consists of three commonly held assumptions:

—*Assumption 1:* The meaning of any one messianic prophecy is not immediately transparent. There is a need for some kind of translation of what is *said* in the OT into what is *seen* in the NT. For Hengstenberg it meant a "spiritual" interpretation—a looking to the NT for clues to the OT's meaning. Another word for this is *typology*. In any event, for Hengstenberg, the NT held the key to the meaning of the OT.

—*Assumption 2:* The messianic meaning of the OT consists of the predictive nature of its prophecy. To be messianic, the OT must accurately *predict*

the historical events in the life of Jesus. We thus judge the messianic intent of the OT by indexing it to the picture of Jesus in the Gospels. Once again, the NT holds the key to the meaning of the OT.

—*Assumption 3*: The value of the messianic prophecies in the OT is largely apologetic. To the extent that an OT passage proves to be messianic and thus predictive of the life of Jesus, it shows that Christianity, or the gospel, is true. This is the argument from prophecy. In actual fact, this legacy goes back to the apologists in the early church. It is to Hengstenberg, however, that the credit must go for reviving this concern. In saying this is one of the legacies of Hengstenberg, I am not saying it remains, at present, a productive use of messianic prophecy. Hengstenberg did not convince many even of his own evangelical colleagues.⁵

b. *von Hofmann*. Whereas Hengstenberg had focused his attention on piecing together the messianic prophecies in the text of Scripture, von Hofmann looked beyond the text to the historical events they recorded. According to von Hofmann, it was not the text of Scripture that was messianic. It was history itself that was messianic. It was not Israel's historical writings that were messianic but the history that Israel itself experienced. That history was a "living picture" of the coming Messiah. It was a *vaticinium reale*,⁶ a "material prophecy" consisting of the actual events. Von Hofmann believed the events of Israel's history were an "inspired" messianic picture—just as he believed the Bible was an "inspired text." To be sure, the Hebrew Bible functions as our primary means of "seeing" the picture in history, but the *messianic* picture itself and the means of "seeing" that picture were found by looking beyond the Scriptures to Israel's history *as history*. The full messianic picture can only be seen as one observes Israel's history unfold itself into the first century and the life of Christ. The history becomes clearer, the picture more focused, as it moves closer to the coming Redeemer. Because it was truly God at work in this history, Israel's history was unlike any other. It was a "holy history." God himself had caused it. God was not merely working *in* history, history *was God at work*. Von Hofmann believed that just as God can be seen by a botanist in every leaf of a tree, so God can be seen by the historian in every moment of Israel's history. For von Hofmann, in fact, there was not a moment in all of world history in which something divine does not dwell.⁷ History is God working out his will in the world. In Israel's history, God was, as it were, submerging himself into history, making it increasingly more sacred and increasingly more messianic. Ultimately, Israel's sacred history culminated in God's final act of stepping into history, that is, the incarnation.

⁵ His popularity among evangelicals in English translation was probably primarily due to his strong stand on Reformed orthodoxy and his sustained attack on Biblical criticism.

⁶ Franz Delitzsch, *Die biblisch-prophetische Theologie* (Leipzig: Gebauersche Buchhandlung, 1845) 175.

⁷ J. Chr. K. von Hofmann, *Weissagung und Erfüllung im alten und im neuen Testamente*, Vol. 1 (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Buchhandlung, 1841) 7.

For von Hofmann, God did not momentarily step in and out of history, as Hengstenberg had envisioned. In Israel's history, God was increasingly immersing himself in the world. The incarnation of Christ was thus not a unique and new beginning, but a final stage in a long process of God's becoming a part of the world. The boundaries of world history had already been permanently breached by a real divine presence with Israel. God, in effect, had carved out a "sacred history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) in the midst of his work in the world (*Weltgeschichte*).

With such a view of the Bible and history it is not hard to see how everything in the Hebrew Bible could ultimately be about the Messiah. It does not initially have to look messianic for it to be an early stage of a developing prophecy. To quote von Hofmann: "It is a long way between the death of an animal whose skin covered [man's] nakedness, and the death of the Son of God whose righteousness covers [man's] sin. Yet these are like the beginning and the end of the same journey."⁸

It is thus also not hard to see how, in von Hofmann's approach, everything in the Bible could be understood in strictly historical terms. Only the one who understands history as moving towards Christ can understand the messianic element in the Hebrew Bible. The meaning of Israel's history is messianic only when one sees God's messianic intentions behind the actual events of that history. The task of understanding the OT as messianic lies in recognizing the divine patterns in these early events and pointing to how they replay themselves throughout the remainder of Israel's history. History's meaning thus becomes typological and finds its ultimate meaning only with the coming of the anti-type. The mere historical similarity between the exodus and our Lord's sojourn to Egypt in Matthew 2 constitutes for von Hofmann a "material prophecy" of the coming Messiah. Once again, in such an approach, the NT holds the key to the meaning of the OT.

In such a context, the meaning of Biblical words and terms, such as "the anointed one" or "the king," spoken at a certain moment in Israel's history, transcended the meaning of those words when understood solely within the context of the rest of history. Behind *all* events in Israel's "holy history" lay the mind of God and his will. Every word spoken within Israel's history had thus a horizontal (historical) range of meaning as well as a vertical (messianic) one. Within Israel's salvation history, not only were Biblical words fraught with divine intentionality, but so were the historical events that constituted that history. God was the author of both. His will and intention lay behind both. While David might have referred to *himself* as "the anointed one" in Psalm 18, the real event that lay behind Psalm 18 carried with it the potential of being understood by the historian as part of a prophetic history. Proof of this comes when the historian views Psalm 18 from the perspective of its NT fulfillment.

To appreciate the legacy of von Hofmann one must know something of how evangelicals viewed "history" before his time. Before von Hofmann there

⁸ Idem, *Interpreting the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959) 137.

was a fundamental distinction between how evangelicals viewed Biblical history and how it was viewed by Biblical critics. Biblical history, as critical scholarship had come to view it, was an understanding of the history of Israel within the context of what we might call “ancient analogies.” By that I mean that Israel’s history was not viewed on its own terms but as part of the history of other ancient peoples. The Bible played an increasingly minor role in reconstructing its own history.

For evangelicals before von Hofmann, Biblical history meant simply that history which could be read off the pages of the Bible. Before von Hofmann, evangelical Biblical scholars had a largely *realistic* historical understanding of the Bible. What they read in the Bible was what they understood to have happened. If the Bible said the Nile turned to blood, they took that to mean the Nile River turned to “*real* blood.” Von Hofmann marks the turning point of evangelical Biblical scholarship away from such a realistic view of history. Even C. F. Keil, the most conservative evangelical OT scholar of his day, was willing to concede that “the changing of the water into blood is to be interpreted . . . not as a chemical change into real blood, but as a change in the colour, which caused it to assume the appearance of blood.”⁹ It is important to note that von Hofmann did not alter the newly developing critical attitude towards Israel’s history. He accepted it as such, though he practiced it conservatively and was even willing to render it the status of divine revelation. Nevertheless, with von Hofmann, the holy history that progressively revealed the coming Messiah was no longer merely the history we read in the Bible. Revelatory prophetic history (*Heilsgeschichte*) must be reconstructed and augmented from our knowledge of the ancient world.

A second, and important, legacy of von Hofmann is that OT messianic prophecy could no longer be viewed apologetically. Having assigned the meaning of the OT to a history that finds its meaning in the events of the NT, one could no longer speak of fulfillment in terms of verification or validation. It was the fulfillment that validated the earlier history, not the other way around. Von Hofmann was thus quick to jettison the notion that OT messianic prophecy could be used in any way to defend the truth of Christianity. With von Hofmann it was *history* that validated Christianity, not the *miracle* of fulfilled prophecy.

Von Hofmann’s legacy among modern evangelical approaches to the OT is felt at many levels. Nowhere is it more tangible than in the study of messianic prophecy. My purpose is not to critique modern evangelical approaches for their dependence on von Hofmann. I have tried to do this elsewhere.¹⁰ My purpose now, as I stated earlier, is to seek an alternative to the approaches of both von Hofmann and Hengstenberg.

Before moving on to that part of the paper, let me briefly summarize what, I think, these two evangelical views have in common. Though quite

⁹ C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 478.

¹⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 36–85.

different in detail, both Hengstenberg and von Hofmann share important evangelical assumptions about the Messiah in the OT. Here I have listed three:

—*Assumption 1*: Both men (Hengstenberg and von Hofmann) understood messianic prophecy as a genuine (supernatural) “vision” of the future. Prophecy was a “history of the future.”

—*Assumption 2*: Both men saw the NT as the primary guide for understanding OT messianic prophecy. Without a NT picture of Jesus, we could not truly understand the OT. The NT serves as a kind of searchlight cast back over the OT. Without that light from the NT, the OT messianic vision is at best hazy and uncertain.

—*Assumption 3*: For both Hengstenberg and von Hofmann, the messianic vision of the OT is not presented in a straightforward, holistic manner. The messianic picture is scattered in bits and pieces throughout the OT.

As we have stated above, Hengstenberg explained this as a function of the rapidity of the visions. The visions came so quickly, the prophets simply could not record them fast enough. The prophetic books were like large scrapbooks containing scattered fragments of once-whole Rembrandts and Michelangelos. To be sure, the prophets saw the whole picture, but they recorded only a small portion of what they had seen. A single verse in the Bible might contain fragmented pieces of several visions. Only the trained eye could spot a piece of both a Rembrandt and a Michelangelo in the same verse. Only one who knew the whole vision (from the NT) could piece the fragments together.

I want to make it clear that I believe there is much truth in these three assumptions. Nevertheless, I still believe there is room for more work in each of these areas. As a summary of what lies ahead in this paper, I would like to add my own response to each of these three points.

—*Response 1*: Prophecy is not just a “history of the future.” It is also a “history for the future.” It is not merely a description of the destination of Israel’s history, it is also a road map that explains how it was to get there.

—*Response 2*: The NT is not so much a *guide* to understanding the OT as it is the *goal* of understanding the OT. Unless we understand the OT picture of the Messiah, we will not understand the NT picture of Jesus. The OT, not the NT, is the messianic searchlight.

—*Response 3*: For Hengstenberg (and von Hofmann) viewing the messianic vision in the OT was like looking into a huge mirror that had been shattered into a thousand pieces. Hengstenberg believed that to see the Messiah in the OT, we must look at the NT picture of Jesus as it is reflected through the pieces of this shattered mirror. What remains of the OT messianic picture is now only small bits and pieces scattered throughout the OT.

Now, I think most of us would agree with Hengstenberg on this point—at least in part. That is certainly the impression one gets from reading the OT prophets. I would like to suggest, however, that these bits and pieces (of the messianic vision) are not *randomly* scattered, as Hengstenberg believed. There is a recognizable pattern. They follow an order. A good number of them, for example, fall along what we might call the “compositional seams”

of the OT books, the transitional comments the Biblical authors use to tie their texts together.

Some of these bits and pieces of prophetic visions also fall along the “seams” of the OT as a whole, what is called the Tanak.¹¹ What I am suggesting is that the shape of the Hebrew Bible as a whole is a meaningful context for viewing the scattered bits and pieces of prophetic visions. Rather than a shattered mirror, I think a better image of the OT is a stained-glass window. To be sure, it is made of fragmented pieces of glass, but like a stained-glass window, each piece belongs with the others and plays a crucial part in the picture of the whole.

If these initial observations are valid, I believe they suggest new possibilities for viewing the Messiah in the OT. If there is an order and pattern to the distribution of messianic texts, then the time has come for us to take a closer look at that order. We should ask: what is the meaning that lies behind the order?

Let me briefly outline what taking such an approach might entail. There are many ways to look at the messianic stained-glass window in the Hebrew Bible. The approach I have in mind begins by looking at the Hebrew Bible in the shape we find it just at the threshold of the coming of Christ. It looks at the OT’s last word about itself, at how the OT was understood by those who gave it its final shape. Here I have in mind the Tanak: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. To be sure, there were and are other shapes to the Hebrew Bible, but judging from texts such as Luke 24:44, the Tanak is the form of the OT with which Jesus and the NT authors were most familiar.

Viewed from this perspective, the OT has all the appearance of being a single work with a single purpose. It is connected by literary seams linking Deuteronomy 34 and Joshua 1 and similar seams linking Malachi 3 and Psalm 1. These passages fall together in the order of books in the Tanak. There are also clear links within these individual parts and a distinct compositional strategy that goes from the first word in the Hebrew Bible (בְּרֵאשִׁית) to the last (וַיְצַל). If we follow along the lines of these compositional seams, I believe, we will find it to be motivated primarily by a hope in the soon coming of the promised messiah. It is that perspective on the OT that, I believe, gives us the best view of what the OT authors believed about the Messiah. It is also that perspective that shows most clearly the literary and theological dependency of the NT on the OT.

II. A PROPOSAL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE MESSIAH AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to describe what I think is a possible approach to understanding the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible. I can only describe it in outline. I am not going to try to argue a case for it.¹² I am

¹¹ The Tanak is the name given to the Hebrew Bible within Judaism. It is an abbreviation of the three parts of Scripture: the “Torah,” the “Nebi’im,” and the “Ketubim.” The Hebrew Bible has a different shape than our English OT. The individual books are the same, but the order is different.

¹² I have attempted this in the following articles: “Biblical Theology and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible,” Papers from the Wheaton College Theology Conference (Downers Grove: Inter-

not going to try to convince you of it. My goal is simply to explain to you what I think is a plausible approach for understanding Jesus in light of the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. I will attempt to describe this approach with the help of three basic propositions: (1) the nature of OT messianic prophecy consists of both prediction and identification; (2) the OT messianic vision is a fragmented vision that becomes increasingly more cohesive as one moves towards the final stages of the formation of the Hebrew Bible; and (3) the Hebrew Bible is both text and commentary.

1. *Proposition #1: Prophecy as prediction and identification.* The central element of the approach I have in mind lies in an attempt to clarify the question of predictive messianic prophecy. There is, of course, prophetic prediction in the OT. Prediction is a major apologetic theme, for example, in passages such as Isaiah 41. There are also other important features to the notion of prophetic fulfillment. To highlight those features, I would suggest that alongside terms such as “fulfillment” we also use the terms “identification” and “exposition.” The OT does not only *predict* the coming of a Messiah. It also *describes* and *identifies* that Messiah.

Here is an important difference from Hengstenberg and von Hofmann’s idea of prophecy as a “history of the future.” As we said above, messianic visions in the OT are not only visions *of* the future, they are also visions *for* the future. They *explain* the future as well as *reveal* it. The amazing thing about OT prophecy is not only that the prophets fore-saw what would happen. That, as Hengstenberg rightly held, was miraculous. But equally amazing was that, when it came, the future the prophets foresaw (and here I have in mind the NT) actually followed the plan the prophets had laid out for it. When the future came at a specific time and place, there were people waiting for it. There were those, like Simeon and Anna, who understood it in terms of the OT prophetic vision. In other words, the prophets’s vision was such that it preserved and carried with it a people who both understood the prophets and were there waiting for the fulfillment of their vision. By falling in line with that vision, the NT writers show that they accepted the OT not only as pre-interpreted, but they also were in fundamental agreement with its interpretation. That interpretation, we can see, began long before the time of its fulfillment. Already within the OT itself we can discover clear signs of an ongoing process of inter-Biblical, or (I would prefer to say) inter-textual interpretation.

In the Pentateuch, for example, the Messiah is a prophetic priest-king like Moses, who will reign over God’s kingdom, bring salvation to Israel and the nations, and fulfill God’s covenants. As I understand it, this messianic

Varsity, forthcoming); *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* 197–252; *The Pentateuch As Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 1–79; *The NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 38–42; “Creation, Genesis 1–11, and the Canon,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10 (2000) 89–106; “A Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch?” *The Way of Wisdom* (ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund) Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 15–35; “Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15,” *WTJ* (forthcoming).

vision is part of the compositional strategy of the whole of the Pentateuch. In the Prophets and Writings, we find a full and detailed *exposition* of the Pentateuch's messianism. It is in that exposition that the OT messianic hope is extended and deepened to the very point at which we find it in the NT. Thus, the last word in the Hebrew Bible is as messianic as any passage in the NT. I have in mind, of course, texts such as the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel 7. That vision, and the book of Daniel as a whole, is equal to any messianic Christology in the NT.

Here it is important to be clear about one thing. What I am describing is often viewed in terms of a process of "re-interpretation." Earlier, nonmessianic, sections of the OT are re-interpreted by later authors and subsequently understood as messianic. That is very far from what I have in mind. What I have in mind is that when the OT reads and interprets itself, as is happening in Daniel 7, it does so by drawing on the real, historical intent of the other OT authors. There is no need to speak of a re-interpretation of texts. I think, for example, it is possible to show that the Pentateuch is already thoroughly messianic and that the rest of the OT understands this and expands on it by way of textual commentary and exposition.

There is a direct link, in other words, between the beginning of the OT and the end of the OT, as well as the end of the OT and the beginning of the NT. From a literary perspective, there is no intertestamental gap between the Testaments. The last word in the Hebrew Bible can also be understood as the first word in the NT. It is a verb without a subject (לֵצֵק, 2 Chr 36:23, "let him go up"). Its subject could very well be taken from the first chapter of Matthew in the NT. It is a call for the coming of that one "whose God is with him," and who is to build the Temple in Jerusalem. In Chronicles (and the post-exilic prophets) this one is the messianic (priestly) son of David. Matthew's Gospel, which follows immediately after this last word, begins like Chronicles, with a genealogy identifying Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), the son of David, who is Emanuel, "God with us."

So what I am suggesting is that the Hebrew Bible, when viewed in its final historical context (on the eve of the Christian era), is already messianic in a NT sense. When the NT says that the OT is fulfilled in Jesus, it means that we can identify Jesus as the Messiah because he fits the picture of the Messiah in the OT. The *proof* that the Gospel is true (and I believe there is a proof here) lies not only in an accurate *prediction*, but also in an accurate *identification* of Jesus with the one promised by the Law and the Prophets. To say it another way, it is only when we have identified Jesus as the OT Messiah that we can speak of verification of OT prophecy by prediction. Thus the messianic thrust of the NT is not merely an argument that the OT is true prophecy. It also includes the argument that Jesus is the true Messiah.

Let me return for a moment to the metaphor of the NT as a "messianic searchlight." Here, I believe, a shift in focus is necessary. As I would see it, it is not the NT, but the OT, that is the "messianic searchlight."¹³ It is only

¹³ Cf. 2 Pet 1:19—the "prophetic word" is "a lamp shining in a dark place."

when the OT casts its light onto the pages of the NT that we see the meaning of the life of Jesus.¹⁴ In such an approach, the OT (without the NT) is *not* understood as “inadequate and incomplete,” as Eichrodt once described it.¹⁵ The messianism of the OT is fully developed and is the context from which we must *identify* Jesus as the promised Messiah.

2. *Proposition #2: The OT messianic vision moving toward greater cohesiveness.* The OT messianic vision is a fragmented vision that becomes increasingly more cohesive as one moves towards the final stages of the formation of the Hebrew Bible. The second point I want to make is taken from Hengstenberg’s notion of a shattered vision. No one who has read the prophets will want to disagree with Hengstenberg that the messianic vision of these books lies before us in bits and pieces. As Calvin once said, “Those who have carefully . . . perused the Prophets will agree with me in thinking that their discourses have not always been arranged in a regular order.”¹⁶

Hengstenberg proposed to piece this fractured vision together by looking at the picture that emerges from the NT. I propose reading the fragmented prophetic visions, not in light of the NT, but in light of the picture that emerges from within the OT itself. There is, I believe, a coherent picture behind the composition of the prophetic books and the Pentateuch. The pieces fit into that picture. I also believe it can be shown that if we follow the order of the Hebrew Bible—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Tanak)—the messianic picture becomes increasingly more transparent. That is because later Biblical texts focus on and provide interpretation for earlier Biblical texts. By “later” I do not mean chronologically late. I mean, rather, the stage at which the Biblical author is at work making a book. As far as we can tell, most Biblical authors, such as the authors of Kings and Chronicles, worked with existing written texts. They organized and presented those texts so that their narratives gave meaning and sense to the events they recorded. The question of *how* they did this leads to my next proposition—the Hebrew Bible as text and commentary.

3. *Proposition #3: The Hebrew Bible as both text and commentary.* The Hebrew Bible is both text and commentary. If we ask what possible intertextual relationship lies between the compositional shape of the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings, I would suggest it is akin to that of text and commentary. The Prophets and the Writings are not intent on giving us a *new* vision for the future. Their aim is to help us understand the messianic vision that has already been laid down in the Pentateuch and repeated in their own writings. God told the prophet Habakkuk, for example, to “write the vision” and also “to explain it” (Hab 2:3). Like Habakkuk, the

¹⁴ As is said in the Gospel of John, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. . . .” (John 20:30–31). The signs Jesus performed are like road signs that reflect in the headlights of the OT.

¹⁵ Walter Eichrodt, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 26.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1979) xxxii.

prophets wrote their vision along with its explanation. As Heschel put it, the interpretation of prophecy is already “an exegesis of an exegesis.”¹⁷ Our task is not to explain the prophetic vision, but to explain the prophets’ own explanation of their vision. The aim of the authors of the Prophets and the Writings was to provide a full and detailed textual commentary on the messianic vision that begins in the Pentateuch and is carried along through the rest of the Bible.

Like a stained glass window, the Prophets and the Writings give us the important bits and pieces of the prophets’ vision. I have in mind something like the way Isaiah 63 draws a glimmer of light from the poem in Gen 3:15 and passes it on to Daniel 7 through the prism of Genesis 49. From there on it passes through the NT on its way to the vision of the “rider on the white horse” in Revelation 19. Isaiah takes as his starting point the picture of the king who, in Genesis 49, “washes his clothes in the blood of grapes.” He then builds that picture into one of a mighty warrior treading in the wine presses of divine wrath. In doing so, Isaiah consciously links Genesis 49 to the first messianic poem in the Pentateuch, Gen 3:15. Isaiah has thus linked two strategically important *poems* in the Pentateuch (Genesis 3 and Genesis 49). In doing so, he shows that he is reading the Pentateuch along its compositional seams. As in a stained-glass window, the light he draws from the Pentateuch is given color and texture as it passes through the remainder of the OT. But also like a stained-glass window, these points of light converge into the larger picture.

Here, let me reiterate the point I made earlier. The line of thought reflected in Isaiah and Daniel and the book of Revelation is, I believe, the same as the historical intention of the Pentateuch itself.

When Psalm 72 says of the Davidic king, “All the nations will be blessed in him,”¹⁸ it draws directly from the eschatology of the Pentateuch in Gen 12:3. When the same psalm says of the king’s enemies, “they shall lick the dust” (Ps 72:9b), it holds its vision up to a piece of light coming from Genesis 3.¹⁹

In the same way, when speaking of the eschatological future, Hosea says, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” In doing so, Hosea draws directly from the poetic vision of Balaam in the Pentateuch (Numbers 24). Also, by focusing on the poetic texts, Hosea shows he is reading the Pentateuch along its compositional seams.²⁰ In the Numbers passage, Israel’s messianic future (in Numbers 24) is viewed in terms of their glorious past, that is, the exodus (in Numbers 23).²¹ The compositional strategy *within the Pentateuch itself* has thus linked the exodus with the messianic future. Hosea draws his own messianic hope from just those passages. Both Hosea and the Pentateuch see the fulfillment of their visions in terms of the same

¹⁷ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) xiv.

¹⁸ וְיִחַדְּרֵכִי בּוֹ כָּל-אֲדָמָה, Ps 72:17.

¹⁹ Just as in Isa 65:25b, “the serpent’s food will be dust.”

²⁰ Sailhamer, “Creation, Genesis 1–11, and the Canon” 89–106; idem, “A Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch?” 15–35.

²¹ Idem, “Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15.”

eschatological future, that is, “the last days” (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים, Hos 3:5; Num 24:14). Hosea’s messianic vision is thus cast as a commentary on the Pentateuch’s own messianic eschatology. Matthew’s application of the Hosea passage to Jesus suggests he has properly read both the Pentateuch and its commentary in Hosea.

Here we can take another example from the Emanuel prophecy in Isa 7:14. It is an all too common practice to look *beyond* the book of Isaiah and *beyond* the words of Isaiah 7 to the historically reconstructed social location of those words. When we do that, it becomes very difficult to see the kind of prophecy of a virgin birth that Matthew saw. But, if we look at the passage within the compositional unity of the *book* of Isaiah, quite another view emerges. According to verse 15, for example, when Emanuel is born, “he shall eat curds and honey until he knows to reject the evil and choose the good.” As the author of the *book* of Isaiah saw it, verse 15 is as much a part of the sign given to Ahaz as verse 14. The sign is not only that a virgin is pregnant with a son, but also that when the son is born, he (and thus Israel as a whole) will be eating “curds and honey.” According to the description of the destruction of Judah in the following verses (Isa 7:17–25), they will be eating “curds and honey,” because the land will have been ruined first by the Assyrians (v. 17), then by the Babylonians (chap. 39), and finally by others after that (chaps. 40–66). Within the whole of the *book* of Isaiah, the birth of the young Emanuel is located long *after* the ruin of the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

The nineteenth-century critic Bernhard Duhm was so struck by the implications of verse 15 that he could only image it was a late “messianic gloss”²² to verses 14 and 16. Though I believe Duhm rightly understood the sense of verse 15, his notion that it was a late gloss is rendered unlikely by the presence of the verse in the Qumran Isaiah manuscript. No one here would dispute that the ultimate focus of the *book* of Isaiah is far beyond the exile, that is, long after the time of Isaiah and Ahaz. According to verse 15, the sign is for that distant future. Isaiah, of course, had a message for Ahaz, but that message was about something that was to happen in the “last days.” Among other things, the rest of the book of Isaiah is intended as an exegesis of the prophet’s tersely recorded vision in 7:14 and 15. Here we must not only understand the vision, but also the prophet’s exegesis of that vision as it plays out in the remainder of the book.

4. *Summary.* I hope by now I have made clear enough a general idea of one possible approach to the Messiah and the Hebrew Bible. There are many questions raised by this approach. One important question has to do with the notion of the “final shape” of the Bible. This is largely uncharted waters for most of us evangelicals. It is, of course, an idea that has been around in OT studies since the time of Wellhausen and earlier. Let me be

²² Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia übersetzt und erklärt* (HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892) 54.

clear that I am not suggesting we abandon the long-established evangelical concern for the meaning of the “original authors.” Far from it.

What I am suggesting is that by not paying close attention to the whole of the Hebrew Bible as we now have it, we are neglecting some very important “original authors.” Who was it, for example, who wrote of the death of Moses and tells us that a prophet like Moses never arose again in Israel? He was an inspired Biblical author of the same stature and importance as any other. His contribution to the meaning of the Pentateuch cannot be overestimated. His brief comments at the close of the book tell us in no uncertain terms that the prophet that Moses spoke of in Deuteronomy 18 was not any of the later prophets of Israel. There was still a prophet yet to come. In other words, the author who gave us the “final” ending of the Pentateuch understands the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18 exactly as they were understood by the NT authors. That “prophet like Moses” was the expected Messiah—and he had not yet come. I am suggesting we pay just as close attention to that Biblical author, and his colleagues, as we do to the better-known OT authors. Is an inspired author any less important because we do not know his name?

5. *A test case: Is the Pentateuch Messianic?* So, is the Pentateuch Messianic? If so, how? In what follows, I want to lay out the main lines of argument which, I believe, support the view that the Pentateuch was written primarily as a presentation of a future messianic hope centered in the tribe of Judah and grounded both in creation and covenant.²³

a. *The Pentateuch is a single book with a single purpose.* First, it is important to show that the whole of the Pentateuch (from Genesis to Deuteronomy) was intended to be read as a single book with a distinct purpose, focus, and message. That is to say, the Pentateuch had an author, and its author had a purpose in writing this great literary work. The Pentateuch is about something. What this means is that the whole of the Pentateuch has a definite shape and structure. It is not haphazardly thrown together. It is not merely a diary of events. It is not a hodgepodge of early documents. To me this has been the most beguiling feature of the Documentary Hypothesis—its complete disregard of and disdain for the text as we now have it. The Pentateuch is surely going somewhere, and its author has taken great pains to guide us along that route. There is a single “literary strategy” that runs through the whole of the Pentateuch.

²³ Let me quickly add that I am not raising the question of whether the Pentateuch “points to” Jesus and the NT. To say the Pentateuch is about the Messiah is not yet to say it is about Jesus. Those are two separate and equally important questions. We must first ask whether the Pentateuch is about the Messiah and then ask whether Jesus is the Messiah. The Pentateuch (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible) tells us there will be a Messiah. The NT tells us that Jesus is the Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Bible. It does so by identifying Jesus as the one about whom the Hebrew Bible speaks. This means that, in my opinion, there is an important apologetic value to the identity of Jesus as the OT Messiah. By identifying Jesus as the OT Messiah, the NT makes the claim that Jesus is the true Messiah.

There are several lines of argument which, I believe, show us that the Pentateuch is a unity and has a single, intentional structure.

(1) The Pentateuch recounts a single story that begins with the creation of the world and the preparation of the land and ends with the postponement of the possession of that land. A central theme of the Pentateuch is the land.

(2) The large blocks of narrative (primeval history, patriarchs, exodus, wilderness, conquest) are linked by a single theme—that is, faith. Someone, namely its author, has linked all the events in Israel's early history to the theme of faith.²⁴

(3) The arrangement of major, homogeneous poetic texts in Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 32 suggests the Pentateuch's narratives are linked by the single messianic theme that recurs in these poems. In this regard the Pentateuch is like a Hollywood musical. As in a musical, the story is both interrupted and developed by the songs (poems). Also like a musical, the songs (poems) are not randomly thrown into the story. The songs (poems) carry the central theme of the story. They are the primary means for developing what the narratives are about. A careful attention to the songs (poems) enables us see what the Pentateuch is about.²⁵

(4) A fourth element in the shaping of the Pentateuch is the way the various collections of laws have been purposefully arranged within the narratives. What Wellhausen and others maintained were remnants of earlier law codes, I believe, can be shown to follow a carefully laid out textual strategy. At its center lies the account of the Golden Calf. That story shows that something has gone fundamentally wrong. It is only at the end of the book, in Deuteronomy 30, that we come to the author's answer—that is, the circumcised heart and the promise of a new covenant.²⁶ The message of the Pentateuch lies not in its textual *strata* but in its textual *strategy*.

b. *The message of the Pentateuch.* Having established that the Pentateuch has a shape and a central message, I want to develop briefly what I believe that central message to be. My point is to show how the central message is linked to the actual textual strategies of its composition. It is not enough to point to broad themes and ideas. There is no end to that. What must be shown is *how those broad themes and ideas are specifically tied to the compositional shape of the Pentateuch.*

Here I want to list what I take to be the central components of the compositional themes of the Pentateuch. I want briefly also to discuss how those themes are tied to the compositional strategy of the Pentateuch.

(1) *Component #1: The prophetic critique of Israel's faith.* As we mentioned earlier, the single story of the Pentateuch takes us from God's creation and preparation of the land to Israel's failure in the wilderness and

²⁴ Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *WTJ* 53 (1991) 241–261; Hans-Christoph Schmitt, "Redaktion des Pentateuch im Geiste der Prophetie," *VT* 32 (1982) 170–189.

²⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* 35–37.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 46–59.

postponed possession of the land. Neither Moses (Num 20:12) nor the people (Num 14:11) have the faith that would bring them into the land. The overall strategy reflected in the Pentateuch, in other words, is anything but optimistic about Israel's immediate future. They have at best a rocky future. In one of the final compositional seams linking the poems to the Pentateuch (Deut 31:29), Moses on his death bed tells Israel, "I know that after I die you will completely corrupt and turn from the way I have commanded you." One can already hear in these words the distant voice of the prophets.²⁷ Exile is on the way. The future is at risk. There is at this time little room for hope among God's people.

Nevertheless, as in the prophetic books, there is also a message of hope to be found in the Pentateuch. Like the prophets, it is a message centered on a coming king. It is that king that is the center of focus of the poems in the Pentateuch. Each major (and minor) poem in the Pentateuch centers on his coming. He is the king that will arise from the house of Judah. He will rule over the nations, and he will restore God's good land to all of humanity. The Pentateuch leaves little doubt about when this king will come. He will come *בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים* ("in the last days").

The prophetic critique of Israel's lack of faith leads to the second element of the message of the Pentateuch.

(2) *Component #2: The centrality of faith as the way that is pleasing to God.* The unified "faith theme" in the Pentateuch stresses the role of faith and obedience from the heart that lies at the center of the prophetic notion of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36). According to the logic of the Pentateuch's own narrative, Israel failed to obey their covenant with God at Sinai (Exodus 32). Nevertheless, a future blessing still awaits them. That blessing is tied to Israel's faith, not their obedience to the law. How else can you explain Gen 26:5 which tells us, very clearly I believe, that Abraham's *faith* amounted to (not resulted in, but amounted to) his keeping God's statutes, commandments, and laws? Abraham could not have "kept the Sinai Law," which had not been given till the time of Moses. Abraham lived a life of faith and that *was* his "keeping the law." This emphasis on the role of faith, so clearly NT in its outlook, is not found randomly throughout the Pentateuch. It lies along the compositional seams that tie together the whole of the book.

(3) *Component #3: The promise of a coming eschatological king.* As we have suggested above, the central theme of each of the major poems in the Pentateuch is the promise of a coming "king." As an introduction to each of those poems we find the phrase "in the last days." This is terminology that is paralleled closely in the messianic eschatology of the prophets. It can

²⁷ This, to me, is the major weakness of the approach of double or multiple fulfillment. The Torah itself does not see the immediate events in the life of Israel as a positive fulfillment (cf. Deut 31:29).

hardly be accidental that each of these poems which stress the coming of the king is set in the context of “the last days.”

In the Masoretic Text, this king is said to conquer and rule over the kingdom of Agag (Num 24:7). That has led to the identification of this king (in the Masoretic Text) with David, who conquered Agag.²⁸ Rashi, for example, says of this king, זֶה דָּוִד (“this is David”). But that is only in the Masoretic Text. In all other ancient texts and versions,²⁹ this king is said to conquer and rule over the kingdom of Gog. This can only be the Gog of Ezekiel 38, the only other Scriptural reference to this Gog.³⁰ Ezekiel himself acknowledges he knows of Gog from earlier Scripture (Ezek 38:17).³¹ According to Num 24:24, this king will come after the defeat of Assyria, Babylon, and the rise of the Kittim. This can hardly be David. There is, thus, in the textual history of the Pentateuch a running debate over the identity of this king. The Masoretic Text sees the historical David as the focus of these prophecies. The earlier and more widely represented texts (including Ezekiel’s own copy of the Pentateuch) identify the king with an eschatological Redeemer who will defeat Gog.

c. *The Pentateuch and the prophets.* The first thing to strike one when looking at these features of the composition of the Pentateuch is how similar its themes are to the central themes of Israel’s later prophetic literature. By that I mean its messianic focus on a future new covenant in which God will give a new heart to those who trust in his word. At the center of that focus is the coming king who will defeat Israel’s enemies and establish a perfect kingdom.

To be sure, the Pentateuch is about the Mosaic covenant and the Law given at Sinai. But what it tells us about that Law is much the same as what Paul says in Galatians 3. The Law did not produce a living faith in Israel’s heart. There was nothing inherently wrong with the Law, nevertheless, Israel failed to keep it. God thus gave Israel a hope for the future and laws to hold them until that future should come. The Pentateuch is therefore a commentary on the laws of Sinai Covenant. It, like the prophetic books, looks for something better. That “something better” is a “new covenant” that includes both Jews and Gentiles and has as its center piece a royal, that is, a messianic Redeemer.

d. *The Messiah in the details.* The ultimate task is, of course, to show the messianic intent in all the many details of the narratives and poetry of the Pentateuch—even in the arrangement and composition of the laws themselves. Here one has to ask, What is the relationship of the details in the Pentateuch to the overall themes we have briefly outlined? This, I believe, is just why the prophets (and psalmists) have given us their inspired

²⁸ Cf. 1 Sam 15:8; 2 Sam 1:1.

²⁹ Cf. BHS: Sam Pent, LXX, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion.

³⁰ The Gog in 1 Chr 5:4 is one of the sons of Reuben.

³¹ “Thus said the Lord Jehovah, ‘Are you the one about whom I spoke in former days?’”

“commentaries” on the Pentateuch. Their commentaries are in many ways similar to the stained-glass window we mentioned earlier. By means of fragmentary bits and pieces of their vision, they capture the light cast by the Pentateuch and focus it not only on the needs of their own day, but also on their hope for the future.

III. CONCLUSION

Let me try to summarize my main argument.

First, as evangelicals, our approach to the question of the Messiah in the OT has generally been to read the NT back into the Old. I am suggesting we can also move in the other direction. The OT sheds a lot of light on the events of the NT. Our primary objective should be to read the NT in light of the Old, rather than the OT in light of the New.

Second, as evangelicals, we have spent a good deal of our time looking at the earliest stages of the Biblical history for the answer to the meaning of the OT. We have paid a good deal of attention to how Eve may have understood Gen 3:15. As important as that is, I am suggesting we also ask how Moses and the inspired Biblical authors understood Gen 3:15. There is little to go on to discover how Eve might have understood God’s first promise. There is, however, much to go on if we read Gen 3:15 from the perspective of Moses and onto the final shape of the Pentateuch, that is, the last eight verses in Deuteronomy that take us far beyond the death of Moses.

Third, the more closely we examine the final shape of the Hebrew Bible (Tanak), the clearer it becomes that its shape and structure are not accidental. There are clear signs of intelligent life behind its formation. If that is so, we should be asking what is the theological message behind this shape. My answer to that question is that it is strongly messianic. I do not mean by that that the earlier forms of the Bible are not also messianic. What I mean is that in the later stages of the formation of the Hebrew Bible its authors were primarily concerned with making more explicit the messianic hope that was already explicit in the earliest texts. This is what I would call “text and commentary.” In other words, the later stages in the formation of the Hebrew Bible treat the earlier stages much like the NT treats the OT. They build on and develop the messianic vision that is already present in the earlier texts.

I heard someone recently describe the lens of an old lighthouse along the New England coastline. It was a lighthouse used long before the discovery of electricity. Its light source was a single candle. The lens of its light consisted of literally thousands of triangular surfaces. Each surface focused and refracted a small portion of the original candlelight. The result was a beam of light that was cast 20 miles out to sea. The original light was just a small candle. As it passed through the lens it became a bright beacon of light. This is not unlike the Hebrew Bible. As the original messianic candlelight passes through, first the Pentateuch, and then the rest of the Tanak, it becomes a bright light that shines on the NT. Unfortunately, we have

become accustomed to holding only the candle (Gen 3:15) up to the NT—instead of reading the NT in the light cast by the lens of the whole of the Tanak.

Several years ago, I taught a course which I entitled “The Use of the OT in the OT.” It was a course on how later Biblical authors (like Ezra and Nehemiah, or the prophets) understood the Pentateuch. Every time I offered the course, the registrar would change the title in the class schedule to “The Use of the OT in the NT.” This happened every time I taught the course. You could see that the registrar always assumed I had made a typo. The phrase “Use of the OT in the OT” was meaningless to him. Nowadays, however, it is not meaningless. This question is being asked by many today. It is the question I have been trying to clarify in this article. How do the OT writers understand the early messianism of OT books like the Pentateuch?

IV. A FINAL COMMENT

In the end, I believe Walt Kaiser is right. The question of the Messiah and the Hebrew Bible “could be a defining moment for evangelical scholarship and ultimately for the Church’s view of the way we regard Scripture.” Dr. Kaiser, I believe, is also right in insisting that the question is ultimately whether the NT interpretation of an OT text is in fact the meaning intended by the OT author.

I also believe Gordon McConville is right: “The validity of a Christian understanding of the Old Testament must depend in the last analysis on [the] cogency of the argument that the Old Testament *is* messianic.” Whether or not you are convinced of the cogency of the argument I have outlined, I hope I have at least given you a sense of what possibilities lie open to us today.

Let me conclude with a bold, but sincere, claim: What I have tried to suggest is that it can be argued that the books of the OT are messianic in the full NT sense of the word. The OT is the *light* that points the way to the NT. The NT is not only to cast its light back on the Old, but more importantly, the light of the OT is to be cast on the New. The books of the OT were written as the embodiment of a real, messianic hope—a hope in a future miraculous work of God in sending a promised Redeemer. This was not an afterthought in the Hebrew Bible. This was not the work of final redactors.

I believe the messianic thrust of the OT was the *whole* reason the books of the Hebrew Bible were written. In other words, the Hebrew Bible was not written as the national literature of Israel. It probably also was not written to the nation of Israel as such. It was rather written, in my opinion, as the expression of the deep-seated messianic hope of a small group of faithful prophets and their followers.