

# Interpreting Messianic Passages

Wayne VanHorn

**W**HEN INTERPRETING PROPHETIC LITERATURE, several principles should be followed. First, allow the Bible to determine personal theology. Do not approach the text with preconceived notions. Second, seek to understand the historical context in which the prophecy was given. A fascinating and often overlooked aspect of the Bible is that it reveals God's concern for his people throughout history. Modern applications of Scripture must be related to its meaning as first revealed. Third, view the whole before examining the part. Get the "big picture" before focusing on smaller passages. Fourth, do grammatical (word usage and sentence structure) and literary (narrative flow) analysis. Fifth, examine the way New Testament writers used Old Testament passages. Do not make an Old Testament passage messianic if the New Testament writers, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, did not do so. Finally, apply the message to your life.<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew term *mashach* [mah-SHACK], from which the word *messiah* is derived, means to spread over and thus to anoint. To be anointed of God means to have God's power operating in one's life. The term is used in the Old Testament to refer to kings, prophets, and priests. David was anointed of God. Nathan the prophet declared that God would set descendants of David upon the throne of Israel forever (2 Sam. 7:8-17). Thus, from the time of David (ca. 1000 B.C.), the prophetic tradition of a "son of David" existed. With the failure

of the monarchy and the demise of prophets and priests, a belief developed that a future person would embody perfectly the qualities of a king, a priest, and a prophet. This anointed one, or messiah, would usher in an age of bounty and peace.<sup>2</sup>

The first-century church rightfully viewed Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. To convince the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6) that Jesus was the Messiah, the first disciples referred to their Scriptures, the Old Testament, for verification of this claim. One of the richest books in terms of messianic passages is the Book of Isaiah. The purpose of this article is to show the historical context of Isaiah 7:10-12 and 9:2-7, and to show how Matthew appropriated these passages with reference to Christ.

The concept of messiah is bound to the history of Israel. Many passages in the book of Isaiah, now viewed in a messianic light, had their origin in the circumstances of Israel's past. Notable among these passages are Isaiah 7:14; 9:2-7; 11:1-7; 52:13—53:12; and 61:1-2. The primary objective of the early church was to show how Christ fulfilled the promise of these passages. Yet, the historical circumstances were known and understood by the early church. What was common knowledge to first-century readers must become acquired knowledge for twentieth-century readers.

Isaiah ministered in Judah, the Southern Kingdom, during the years 742-700 B.C. These years were filled

**Below:** An Assyrian frieze picturing the capture of Astartu—perhaps biblical Ashtaroah. The town sits on a hill and is surrounded by a double wall flanked with turreted towers. To the right, Assyrian soldiers lead away the sheep and the inhabitants, who carry their possessions in bags over their shoulders.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/5/14)

with political intrigue. The faith of God's people was tested severely. Isaiah's message to Judah was that the Lord was trustworthy and that the people should rely on Him.

The focal passages for this study, Isaiah 7:10-12 and 9:2-7 were uttered originally during the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict. This conflict was precipitated by the intent of Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel to force Ahaz of Judah into a coalition against Assyria led by Tiglath-pileser III. When Ahaz refused to join the coalition, Rezin and Pekah surrounded Jerusalem. They planned to kill Ahaz and to set a puppet king, referred to as the son of Tabeel (Isa. 7:6), on the throne of Judah. God dispatched Isaiah the prophet to Ahaz to assure the king that the coalition's plan would fail and to encourage him to trust the Lord.

Isaiah 7:10-12 must be interpreted in the light of the historical situation described above. The Lord sought a demonstration of faith on Ahaz's part. In verses 10-11, God offered to supply a faith-building sign for Ahaz. The sign would be a demonstration of God's presence and power. For a king whose heart was shaking like the trees of the forest in the wind (Isa. 7:2), an assurance of God's presence would seem appropriate. The Lord put no restrictions on what Ahaz could ask. In fact, the phrases "as deep as Sheol" or as "high as heaven" represent the farthest extents of the created realm. Ahaz could ask God for anything.

However, Ahaz's response revealed a lack of faith. Rather than trust the Lord for deliverance, Ahaz trusted what his eyes could see and what his mind could reason. To him the only real option was to appeal to Tiglath-pileser III, the powerful king of Assyria. The writer of 2 Kings (16:7-8) recounted the details of this appeal. Ahaz submitted to Tiglath-pileser, referring to himself as servant and son of the Assyrian king. Moreover,

**Lesson reference:**

L&W: Isaiah 7:10-12; 9:2-7

Ahaz took silver and gold out of the Lord's house to send a tribute to his new master. When the Lord told Ahaz to seek a sign (Isa. 7:10-11), Ahaz refused on religious grounds (7:12). He did not want to put the Lord to the test.

The term *test* means "to try something or someone out." In affect, Ahaz was saying, "I do not want to try the Lord." The shallowness of his piety is evident. He did not have to depend on faith, because he depended on his alliance with the great king of Assyria. In other words, he put his faith in Tiglath-pileser instead of in the Lord.

Isaiah's response was justified. He asked the house of David (Ahaz), "Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?" (7:13, NIV). In this historical context the great Immanuel (God with us) prophecy was uttered (v. 14). Verses 15 and 16 ground the prophecy in the historical events described in 7:1-12. The prophet was declaring that God would make his presence known whether the people believed or not.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is also set in the historical context of the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict.<sup>3</sup> Zebulun and Naphtali, the two regions mentioned in 9:1, were to the north and to the west of the Sea of Galilee. Conquering armies from the northern region would first reach the border of these two tribes. During the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict, Tiglath-pileser exerted control over these areas. Isaiah described how these regions, symbols of torment and despair, would come to see the great light of hope. The oppressor's bonds would be broken as in the day of Midian (Judg. 7). The result would be rejoicing as in the day of harvest. The invading army would be put in a state of disarray (9:5).

This freedom from oppression would be followed by the establishment of a new government. The birth of the child in Isaiah 9:6 would mark the beginning of a new era. The significance of the birth here was comparable to the births of Moses and Samuel. Each child

became a great deliverer of God's people. Isaiah ascribed five titles to this deliverer: Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, and Prince of Peace (many scholars see four titles combining Wonderful Counselor into one title).

The prophecy concerning the nature of the government to be established by this new ruler is extraordinary. His rule will grow increasingly and the resultant peace will have no end. He will sit on the throne of David in keeping with the prophecy of Nathan (2 Sam. 7). His reign will be characterized by the establishment of justice and righteousness, the two qualities Jerusalem had lost (Isa. 1:21) but which were necessary for her redemption (Isa. 1:27).

Matthew began his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, referring to Him as the Son of David and the Son of Abraham. Both titles have covenant significance. Matthew presented Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. After the genealogy, Matthew began to describe the events related to the coming Christ child. Matthew interpreted these events in the light of Isaiah 7:14 (Matt. 1:22-23). A common emphasis of interpreters is upon the virgin birth of Christ. This doctrinal stance is confirmed by the statement in Matthew 1:18, "she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." The stance is confirmed additionally by the use of the Greek term *parthenos* [PAR-then-os], meaning "virgin."

However, another important emphasis has been obscured in the process of emphasizing the virgin birth. Matthew 1:22-23 must be viewed in the context of Matthew 1:21, "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins." The emphasis here clearly is upon the saving presence of God just as in the passage in Isaiah. Two key differences present themselves. First, Isaiah may not have known the ultimate messianic import of his prophecy; Matthew clearly did. Second, Isaiah was predicting a deliverance from political

bondage; Matthew was telling of deliverance from spiritual bondage. Perhaps Matthew was led to the prophecy of Isaiah because it emphasized so strongly that God was present with his people even when the political circumstances seemed to discourage faith in the Lord. After all, the circumstances of the early church under Roman domination were similar to the conditions prevailing in the days of Isaiah during the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict. God's presence with his people is also a theme found elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew, most notably in the "Great Commission." In Matthew 28:20, Matthew wrote of Jesus, "and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

Matthew used Isaiah's reference to the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali in Isaiah 9:1-2 to show why Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum (Matt. 4:13-17). Capernaum, which became the base of operation for Jesus' Galilean ministry, was located on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee in the region of Naphtali. Matthew interpreted Christ's presence in the region as the "great light" predicted by Isaiah. Isaiah stressed military victory; Matthew depicted spiritual victory.

Isaiah's prophecies had one meaning, but multiple applications. The word of God effectively spoke to the audience of Isaiah's day as well as to the audience of Matthew's day 800 years later.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, God's word can encourage faith in the Lord in our day. ○

<sup>1</sup>For additional help on interpreting the Old Testament see Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Ellis Rivkin, "Messiah, Jewish," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 588.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 279-318.

<sup>4</sup>For additional information of the function of the book of Isaiah within the Christian canon see John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1986), 52-54.

Wayne VanHorn is professor of Old Testament, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana.