

Promise¹ and Fulfillment

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Promise and fulfillment are characteristic activities of the God of the Bible and are richly in evidence in both testaments of the Christian biblical canon. Promise and fulfillment are ways of talking about God's faithfulness and reliability, demonstrated in words and saving actions in the past, and hoped for and trusted in for the present and the future.

Christians see fulfillment of God's promises in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the existence and preservation of the Christian church. Promise and fulfillment are ideas about God held in common by Christians and Jews, but they have also often been a source of division and offense when Christian claims for fulfillment give the impression that God's faithfulness and presence are not experienced among Jews and in Judaism.

This essay will explore the theme of promise and fulfillment within the Old Testament² and how the theme of promise and fulfillment plays out in the relationship of the two testaments. It will do so in order to clarify the limits and the legitimacy of the New Testament claims. Such a clarification is important for Jewish-Christian understanding. I want to thank my Jewish colleague and friend Professor Isaac Kalimi for discussing this essay with me and suggesting a number of ways for its improvement.

Promise and Fulfillment in Genesis

¹ In some respects, a better title might be "Prophecy and Fulfillment."

² The term "Old Testament" goes back to Melito of Sardis in the second century CE. Jews call these books "Tanakh," an acronym formed by the first letters of the Hebrew words for the three divisions in their canon: Torah (Pentateuch), Prophets, and Writings. For Jews the Tanakh is itself the Bible, while in Christianity the same books are one of two testaments.

Two promises dominate in the stories of Israel's ancestors, Sarah and Abraham: land and descendants. The LORD's first word to Abram is: Go from your country and your kindred and your ancestral home to the **land** that I will show you. I will make of you a great **nation** (Gen 12:1-2).³ Before Abraham and Sarah can become parents of a great nation they have to start with one child of their own, but this first promise is delayed for a long time and even doubted by them. Abraham and Sarah considered adopting their servant Eliezer in an attempt to help God out in fulfilling this promise (Gen 15:1-3), and Abraham actually engendered a child by the Egyptian maid Hagar in a dubious attempt to bring about the promise's fulfillment (Gen 16:1-16). But Abram believed the promise when God promised him as many children as the stars (Gen 15:5-6).⁴ Sarah finally conceived and bore Isaac when both she and Abram were very old, beyond reproductive age. Through this birth the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised (Gen 21:1-2).

The promise of land is also delayed; in fact, its fulfillment lies on the other side of four centuries of servitude in Egypt (Gen 15:13-16).⁵ The only land that the ancestors themselves owned was a burial plot, the Cave of Machpelah, where Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, and Leah and Jacob are buried.⁶ Each time an ancestor is buried in the Cave of Machpelah is a kind of mini fulfillment of the land promise and at the same time a reaffirmation of the land promise itself. Only after the conquest under Joshua and the distribution of the land (Joshua 1-21), can the narrator proclaim: "Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors...Not one of all the good

³ See also Gen 13:15-17; 15:5, 7, 18-21; 17:2-8; 22:17-18; 24:60; 26:2-4; 28:3-4, 13-15.

⁴ As a result the LORD considered Abram righteous. The text can also be construed to mean that Abram considered the LORD's renewed promise as evidence of divine righteousness.

⁵ According to Exod 12:40-41 the Israelites lived in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years.

⁶ Gen 23:19; 25:9; 49:31; 50:13.

promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (Josh 21:43, 45).

The Promise of a Line of Prophets...and a Future Prophet

The book of Deuteronomy hails Moses as a prophet and accompanies that affirmation with a distinctive understanding of his prophetic role. At Horeb, Deuteronomy’s name for Sinai, Israel found the divine voice that spoke the Ten Commandments unbearably frightening and begged Moses in the future to listen to the LORD himself and then hand on, or mediate, that word of God to the people (Deut 5:23-31; cf. Exod 20:18-19). The prophet, therefore, in Deuteronomy’s view is a person who hears the word of God and announces it to the people. This understanding of prophecy is put in the form of a promise in Deut 18:15, 18: “The LORD your God will raise up for you (again and again)⁷ a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall listen to such a prophet...I shall put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.” The Deuteronomic theologians in the seventh century no doubt thought that prophets like Moses could be seen in people such as Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. These and other similar prophets were fulfillments of the promise made to Moses.

But a later writer⁸ recognized a disjuncture: however good Elijah, Isaiah, and the rest had been, they were not quite up to the standards of Moses. He recorded his misgivings in Deut 34:10-11: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. Moses was unequalled for all the signs and

⁷ These additional words express the force of the Hebrew imperfect verb form.

⁸ The New Testament writers accepted traditional designations of authorship (Moses, Isaiah, etc.) and read the Bible synchronically. My training in historical criticism means that I usually read the Bible diachronically, recognizing various layers in the texts, often stemming from different writers.

wonders that he did in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants.” This verse recognizes that the line of prophets was at best a partial fulfillment of the prophet like Moses, and therefore this verse gives the promise of Deuteronomy 18 a new, far more eschatological significance. If the LORD had promised to raise a prophet like Moses, and yet had not yet fully done so, the ultimate fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18 still lay in the future.

Post-biblical Judaism expected such an eschatological prophet.⁹ When Judas the Maccabee restored the temple after its desecration by Antiochus, the people tore down the polluted altar and stored the stones in a convenient place until “a prophet” should come and tell them what to do with them (1 Macc 4:46). When Simon the Maccabee was installed as high priest, they decided that his term should last forever, or at least until “a trustworthy prophet” should arise (1 Macc 14:41). The people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls expected two messiahs and an eschatological prophet. “They shall govern themselves using the original precepts by which the men of the *Yahad* (community) began to be instructed, doing so until there come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel” (Rule of the Community 9:10-11).

Early Christians capitalized on this promise of an eschatological prophet and saw in Jesus a fulfillment of the prophet like Moses. When Jesus fed five thousand, the people said, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14).¹⁰ Feeding of the five thousand resembled Moses’ feeding Israel with manna in the wilderness. In a sermon in the book of Acts Peter proclaimed that God had raised Jesus

⁹ Within the canon itself Malachi promises the return of the prophet Elijah before the day of the LORD (Mal 4:5).

¹⁰ See also John 7:40, 52; Acts 7:37.

from the dead and added: “Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise¹¹ up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you...’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:22, 26). Early Christians tried to live out another prophetic word from the book of Deuteronomy when they held all things in common (Acts 4:32). After all, had not Moses said that there should be no poor among you (Deut 15:4)?¹²

Prophecies that “failed”

What if God promises something and it does not happen? Deuteronomy proposes this as one criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophets. “You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken” (Deut 18:21-22).¹³ Many of the prophets whose words of judgment are now contained in the biblical canon were proved true by the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of 722/721 and 587/586 BCE. Even in the best circumstances, however, this is not the most useful criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophecy since a person may need to decide what to do in the very near

¹¹ Note the play on words between “raising” someone as prophet and raising Jesus from the dead.

¹² In Deut 15:11, the text grants that there will always indeed be needy people, and therefore urges readers to open their hands in generosity toward the poor. This may be another occasion where a secondary hand adds a corrective addition.

¹³ Jeremiah invoked this principle against the false prophet Hananiah, who prophesied that within two years the temple vessels captured by Nebuchadnezzar would be returned and Jeconiah would be restored to the throne. Jeremiah appealed to the tradition of his predecessors who customarily announced judgment and said that a prophet who announced good times would only be proven true when this happened. Jeremiah did not wait for this eventuality, however, and returned a few days later and renounced Hananiah as a person whom the LORD had not sent. Jeremiah said that Hananiah was under a divine death sentence and he did indeed die within a year, proving the word of Jeremiah true (Jer 28:1-17).

future and cannot wait to find out whether history will vindicate or falsify the word of the prophet.

When God or a prophet makes a promise, however, it is always a risky business since trying to tell how history will turn out is like aiming at a moving target. In 587 BCE the prophet Ezekiel announced that Nebuchadnezzar would bring judgment on the island city of Tyre (Ezek 26:7-21). Some sixteen years later Ezekiel revised that prophecy. Despite a lengthy, thirteen-year siege, Nebuchadnezzar had little to show for his attack on Tyre. Now Ezekiel announced that God would instead give Nebuchadnezzar a victory over Egypt since Nebuchadnezzar had “worked” for God in bringing judgment against Judah and Jerusalem (Ezek 29:17-20). Walther Zimmerli described this as the faithfulness and freedom of the LORD: faithful to his word of reward to Nebuchadnezzar, but free to adapt it to the changed circumstances of history after Tyre’s stubborn defense.

At other times prophecies may have a partial fulfillment that leaves an expectation that God will someday carry out the still outstanding details of his promise. The promise of a new Exodus from Babylon in Second Isaiah may be a case in point. Second Isaiah opens with a divine address to the heavenly council, telling them to give comfort to Jerusalem that had already received twice as much punishment as it had coming (Isa 40:1-2). A second voice from the divine council gives orders to other angelic beings to build a superhighway from Babylon to Jerusalem, with leveling of mountains, filling in valleys, and taking out the “S” curves. God would make an appearance during that new Exodus as a witness to all the nations (Isa 40:3-5). A related passage in Isaiah 35 announces a concomitant renewal of handicapped human beings and almost a new

creation: the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the tongue of the speechless will sing, and water will break out in the desert.

In the years following the Persian takeover of Babylon some Jews did return from Babylon, with Cyrus' permission and encouragement, and they even rebuilt the temple, but the numbers were relatively small,¹⁴ the new temple was disappointing to many who had known Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:12-13), and the community was faced with inner divisions (see Isaiah 56-66). There surely was no "interstate" from Babylon to Jerusalem, no revitalized desert, and no wholesale healing of people with handicaps within Israel.

The people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls saw a fulfillment of this prophecy of Second Isaiah in the establishment of their community. In the Rule of the Community we read: "They shall separate themselves from the session of perverse men to go to the wilderness, there to prepare the way of truth, as it is written [Isa 40:3]: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (1 QS 8:13-14). Their refuge by the shore of the Dead Sea was seen as a way of preparing a way in the wilderness.

Matthew, too, used similar exegesis in an attempt to understand the ministry of John the Baptist: "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the ways of the Lord, make his paths straight"' (Matt 3:3).¹⁵ Preparing the way is now interpreted as moral regeneration and not as building a highway through the desert. When John was later thrown in prison, he

¹⁴ The post-exilic territory called Yehud was about as big geographically as the city of Chicago, with a total population possibly of less than twenty thousand.

¹⁵ The New Testament citations of this passage misconstrue the Hebrew poetry. Second Isaiah did not speak of a voice crying in the wilderness, but rather a voice cried out with a message in poetic parallelism: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD//make straight in the desert the superhighway of our God.

sent some of his disciples to Jesus and asked: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:3-4). Jesus’ answer to John is “Yes, I am the one who is to come,” but it is couched in words that see in his miracles of healing and in his identification with the poor a fulfillment of the promises in Isaiah 35 and 40.¹⁶ Thus both some Jews and early Christians identified additional fulfillments of Isaiah’s words in the things they had experienced, beyond those experienced in the immediate decades after the ministry of Second Isaiah.

In considering Old Testament promises, one must also consider the possibility that some promises from the beginning were meant metaphorically, and not literally. Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple in 40:1-44:3 seems to assign symbolic meanings to the various measurements of the temple and the sacred area of the land, with the sealed East gate indicating that the LORD would never again leave the temple. Similarly his description of the new boundaries of the land and the tribal portions in 47:13-48:29 stresses a separation from the territory of Transjordan that was always more vulnerable to apostasy. This metaphorical description of the land assigned equality of size and power to each of the twelve tribes, with some advantage to those tribes descended from the wives instead of the concubines of Jacob, and with the whole land centered on the temple and the regions of the priests and Levites. The stream that comes from the temple and renews the Judean wilderness and brings a multitude of the fish to the Dead Sea in 47:1-12 is designed to show that when the LORD is present with his people there is nothing

¹⁶ See also Isa 26:19 (raising of the dead); 29:18 (the deaf hear); 42:7, 18 (blind and deaf see and hear); 61:1 (good news to the oppressed and brokenhearted).

impervious to change. Such promises are open to multiple fulfillments. In the gospel of John, the body of Jesus is identified with the temple (2:19-21), and the stream of water flowing from his side at the crucifixion (19:34) could be seen as analogous to the stream of water Ezekiel saw.

The Promised Messiah

Many Christians who undertake critical biblical studies are surprised at the relative infrequency of the messianic hope in the Old Testament¹⁷ and how the initial significance of these passages in their Old Testament contexts is quite different from their interpretation in the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology. Study of the messianic motif in the Old Testament discloses a transition from an expectation of a new or better king of the Davidic line in the very near future, to the development of a more eschatological expectation of a messianic figure, and finally to further transformation of this hope in subsequent Jewish and Christian theologies.

At the base of all messianic expectations in the Old Testament is the oracle of Nathan in 2 Samuel 7. There the LORD turned aside on principle David's offer to build a house (temple) for the LORD, stating that he had been content to move about in a tent or tabernacle, only to authorize David's son (Solomon) to build the temple. The LORD also promised to make David's house and kingdom sure and to establish his throne forever. In its final form the oracle of Nathan gives a ringing endorsement to the Davidic dynastic

¹⁷ If by messianic hope we mean the expectation of a new or eschatological king who is a descendant of David, there is no messianic promise in the Pentateuch. The same could be said for a number of other Old Testament books. Second Isaiah democratizes the promise made to David by reapplying it to all members of the community (Isa 55:3). There were expectations of other eschatological figures in the Old Testament that are often merged with the messianic hope in Christian thinking. We have already discussed the expectation of a prophet like Moses in Deuteronomy, and the coming Son of Humanity is mentioned in Daniel 7. The servant figure in Second Isaiah (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 2 and 5) played a prominent role in early Christian attempts to understand the significance of the death of Jesus, but the servant is *not* a messianic figure in the biblical text itself.

house. Even if individuals in that line would commit iniquity and require punishment, the LORD promised not to take his steadfast love from this dynasty as he had taken it away from Saul.

The theological and political power of this oracle played a major role in the preservation of the Davidic dynasty over a four-century period. But the surety of this promise also played a role in the dynasty's weakest moments, and especially when it ceased to rule, for prophets concluded that this promise was still valid and would lead either to a replacement king or eventually to a figure who might be called an eschatological messiah. While the noun מָשִׁיחַ “messiah” (anointed one) is used some thirty-nine times in the Hebrew text, it is never used as a technical term in the Old Testament “messianic” passages as a designation for the future king.

Space permits us to look at only a few of the Old Testament passages dealing with the messiah.¹⁸ Passages dealing with a future king in First Isaiah are of uncertain meaning, or of uncertain date—or both. In Isaiah 7 the prophet Isaiah attempted to get King Ahaz to trust in the LORD for deliverance from the invading Syrian and Ephraimite forces, but, as we learn from the narrative history of Ahaz, the king eventually ignored this advice and sent a bribe to Tiglath-pileser III, the king of Assyria, to persuade him to attack Damascus and force the withdrawal of Syria and Ephraim from their attack on Jerusalem (2 Kings 16). Isaiah offered to give Ahaz a sign, apparently to indicate God's readiness to intervene on his behalf, but Ahaz declined and said that he did not want to put God to the test. Isaiah interpreted this as a hypocritical excuse and decided to give

¹⁸ For recent studies of this issue see Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll, eds. *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), and John Day, ed. *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 270. (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999).

Ahaz a sign anyway: “That young woman (over there) is pregnant and will bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isa 7:14). It is generally agreed today that the mother-to-be in question was not a virgin, but which woman Isaiah had in mind is unclear and casts some doubt on whether this should be considered a messianic passage at all. While there are many proposals about this woman’s identity, the two most common suggestions are that she was the wife of Isaiah or the wife of Ahaz. If the woman is Ms. Isaiah, Immanuel would be the third child she would bear with a role in Isaiah’s ministry—see Shear-jashub (the remnant will return) in Isa 7:3 and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (the spoil speeds, the prey hastens) in Isa 8:3. Perhaps a majority of scholars believe that the woman is indeed the wife of Ahaz so that the child to be born would be of the royal line. In neither interpretation, however, is the child hailed as a future king with specific responsibilities, and the sign offered by Isaiah may be nothing other than the child’s name, Immanuel, meaning, “God is with us.” This name itself could be good news or bad. It would be good news if God’s presence would mean deliverance from the invading forces, or bad news if God were coming in judgment. The positive connotation appears in Isa 7:16 and 8:10 and the negative connotation in Isa 7:17 and 8:8.

A second passage in Isaiah seems to refer to a new son born in the royal household whose birth indicates the continued effectiveness and validity of the promise to David (Isa 9:2-7). The passage speaks of this king’s authority and just rule, but the most significant thing about him is his name, traditionally translated as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). The name itself is unusual for at least three reasons: Israelite kings normally do not have a series of four names, Hebrew names are usually sentences and not attributes, and it would be very

unusual in the Old Testament to infer that the king had godly status. I prefer to translate the name, therefore, as two sentences: “The mighty God is planning a wonder; the everlasting Father is planning a captain of peace.”¹⁹ That is, this name, like that of Immanuel, points to God’s support of the king, just as the last line of this pericope affirms: “The zeal of the LORD of hosts will see to it that this will happen.” Strangely, this verse is not cited in the New Testament as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus.²⁰

A third messianic passage in Isaiah is Isa 11:1-9 (cf. also a series of supplements to this promise in vv. 10-16). This passage seems to presuppose the end of the Davidic dynasty or at least it predicts that end. It speaks of the stump of Jesse, meaning that the dynastic tree associated with David has been cut down. From that stump of Jesse will sprout a branch or shoot, that is, a new David will arise. This new king will be endowed with the divine spirit, as were the first two kings, Saul and David (Isa 11:2). All subsequent kings ascended the throne not by virtue of their being endowed with the divine spirit, but because they were descended from David. The new king promised in Isaiah 11 will be a righteous judge, an advocate for the poor and weak (Isa 11:3-5), and his reign will usher in an era of non-violence, symbolized by wolves living with lambs, leopards with young goats, and the like (Isa 11:6-9).

Two passages from Jeremiah will round out this brief survey of the messianic hope of the Old Testament. I think Jer 23:5-6 is from the prophet himself, although there are many dissenters from this dating. Jeremiah speaks of the LORD’s promise to raise up a “righteous branch,” perhaps better translated as “legitimate heir.” If the latter

¹⁹ Cf. the similar Jewish Publication Society translation: “The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler.”

²⁰ Isaiah 9:1-2 is cited as fulfilled in Matt 4:15-16, where Matthew sees the Galilean ministry as a fulfillment of the word of Isaiah.

translation is correct, this promised new king would be an apt replacement for Zedekiah, a puppet king installed by Nebuchadnezzar after his attack on Jerusalem in 597 BCE.²¹ The new king's reign, as in Isaiah 11, would be marked by justice and righteousness. Again, the king receives a new name: "The LORD is our righteousness," or, perhaps better, "The LORD is the source of our vindication." Either translation shows, as in the three Isaiah passages, that divine aid is the basis for the king's real strength. The Hebrew for this name $\text{w}nqdc \text{ h}w\text{hy}$ would seem to be a pun on Zedekiah $\text{w}hyqdc$, with the two elements in Zedekiah's name in reverse order. It seems likely to me that Jeremiah is talking about a replacement for Zedekiah in the near future and not yet about an eschatological figure.

A second messianic passage, in Jer 33:14-16, is secondary since vv. 14-26 are not included in the Septuagint, the second century BCE translation of the Bible into Greek. Its secondary character is confirmed by literary critical judgments, namely, that the territory envisioned in this promise is much smaller—Judah and Jerusalem instead of Judah and Israel—and because the name is applied not to the new king himself, but to the city of Jerusalem.²² The longer pericope in vv. 14-26 presupposes that alongside the unbroken Davidic line will be an unbroken line of Levitical priests, and that God will have an unbreakable covenant with each line. This passage is especially interesting because it shows the further development in some circles of Jeremiah's idea of a

²¹ Ezekiel shared this doubt about the legitimacy of Zedekiah since he dates his oracles not to the reign of Zedekiah, but to the reign of his predecessor Jehoiachin.

²² New names for Jerusalem are also cited in the last verse in Ezekiel (The name of the city from that time on shall be, the LORD is there) and in Third Isaiah, 62:4, where Zion/Jerusalem is renamed Hephzibah (my delight is in her).

replacement for king Zedekiah with the notion of a an unbroken line of Davidides and an unbroken line of Levitical priests.²³ The promise continues—and changes.

Before turning to the New Testament, we need to note that some passages dealing with reigning Israelite kings came to be read in late Old Testament times with messianic significance. I am thinking especially of the royal psalms (Psalms 2, 45, 72, 89, and 110). These psalms originally dealt with issues such as coronation, the righteous rule of kings, the marriage of the king, or the theological consequences of the king's defeat. Once Israel no longer had a king, it seems likely that many believers read these Psalms messianically, that is, as referring to a future king rather than a contemporaneous king.

Jesus as Christ/Messiah in the New Testament

One of the central affirmations of the New Testament is that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope. The Greek word "Christ" is a translation of the Hebrew word "messiah." Before we look at specific passages, however, I would like to rephrase what I said in the first sentence of this paragraph. One of the central affirmations of the New Testament is that Jesus is the fulfillment, and radical reinterpretation of, Israel's messianic hope. I note four changes that are significant departures from the messianic hope that began in the Old Testament and had developed further in Early Judaism:²⁴

1. The New Testament makes the death of Jesus one of his most significant features.

That death, of course, has multiple interpretations in the New Testament, but all of the

²³ Other messianic passages can be found in Ezekiel, Haggai, and perhaps Zechariah. A restoration of the Davidic line is also included in Am 9:11-15. In this short paper, we make no pretense of referring to every possible messianic promise. In intertestamental times the notion of the messiah was very prominent. See Psalms of Solomon 17, 2 Esdras 11-12, Testament of Judah 24, and Testament of Dan 5:10-13. The latter two texts *in their present form* are Christian, but were originally Jewish texts.

²⁴ It is usually noted in the Dead Sea Scrolls that two messiahs, one of Aaron and one of David/Israel, were expected by those who wrote the scrolls. For the messianic expectations at Qumran, see James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 265-273.

New Testament writers find deep meaning in his death (and resurrection). There is not a single Jewish text, in or out of the Old Testament canon, however, that talks about the saving significance of the death of the messiah. In fact, the only mention of the death of the messiah occurs in 2 Esd 7:29-30, where at the end of the age, we are told that all will die, including the messiah, and then the end will come. St. Paul was well aware of this departure from Jewish thought when he wrote: “We proclaim Christ [messiah] crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). Christians therefore should not be surprised if Jews have a different expectation of the character or even fate of the messiah.

2. While there are varying Christologies in the New Testament, some higher than others, Jesus is widely identified as Lord, a figure to be worshiped, and he is identified, in one sense or another, as Son of God. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not fully developed in the New Testament, there are clearly movements in that direction, specifically with regard to the role of Jesus as Son. Again the Old Testament totally lacks references to the divinity of the messiah, and where it has been detected by some, as in Isa 9:6, I believe this is based on a faulty translation of the passage (see the discussion above).

3. The New Testament does see the new (messianic) age breaking in with Jesus. His miracles are the signs of that age, and his resurrection is seen by Paul as the first fruits of the new age (1 Cor 15:20). And yet the New Testament also speaks of Jesus’ second coming and affirms that the new age is “already and not yet.” This distinction between already and not yet, between a new messianic age that is partially but not wholly present,

is again a radical departure from the view of the Old Testament itself and early Judaism. This adjustment of the promise to fit the realities of history is not different in kind from adjustments we saw in the prophecies of Ezekiel and Second Isaiah as history changed.

4. The New Testament conflates a number of expected figures from the Old Testament in its depictions of Jesus. Jesus is messiah/Christ, but he is also the prophet, servant, Son of Humanity, the incarnate *logos*, and even Melchizedek.

This took place to fulfill...

Christians from the beginning have seen in Jesus the “Yea and Amen” to all of God’s promises (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). Also from the beginning they had to account for a number of features about Jesus that must at first have been very surprising, even offensive to many of them. Clearly, Jesus’ closest disciples had trouble at first dealing with his death and interpreting the reality and significance of his resurrection. As decades wore on, the separation from mainstream Judaism and the separate existence of the church were theological issues in need of interpretation and justification. But it is clear that the early Christians saw the gospel of Jesus as continuing the redeeming work of the God of the Old Testament. They searched the Scriptures they had (=the Old Testament), as Jesus had urged them (Luke 24:27, 32), with the expectation that these Scriptures would confirm the message of Jesus and help them to understand who he was and who they now were. Their search was undertaken as first century people, using exegetical methods at home in the world of Judaism. Their search was also undertaken in contentious, even polemical times as the conflict with Judaism increased. Their speaking of fulfillment was usually an attempt to affirm continuity with the Old Testament past and with full acceptance of its authority. The last thing they thought they were doing was starting a

new religion. We need to keep this in mind as we discuss fulfillment in the New Testament, realizing that modern Christians might draw lines of continuity with the Old Testament in different ways and with more current methods of interpretation. This is not to say that the exegetical methods of the New Testament writers were wrong, but only that their methods were part of antiquity and need to be understood both sympathetically and critically by readers of the New Testament today. But it also means that Christians should not be surprised that Jews see the promises of their Bible, the Tanakh, fulfilled in different ways, or still waiting to be fulfilled.

Some New Testament Fulfillments

We have noted that early Christians sought to understand the significance of the life and ministry of Jesus by interpreting the Scriptures of their time (what we would call the Old Testament). Thus they often started with a tenet of their faith and moved backwards, attempting to find a promise in the Old Testament of what they had experienced and to interpret what they had experienced as fulfillment of that promise. Christians came to believe, for example, that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and that the child conceived in her was through the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20). They sought to explain this miracle by referring to the Scriptures. Matthew concludes: All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (Matt 1:23). The biblical allusion is to Isa 7:14.

This type of interpretation resembles in many ways that used in the seventeen or eighteen Pesharim (biblical commentaries) among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Peshar on Hab 2:2 reads: When it says, “so that with ease someone can read it,” this refers to the

Teacher of Righteousness to whom God made known all the mysterious revelations of his servants the prophets. Thus Habakkuk, who lived in the late seventh century is understood as prophesying about the Teacher of Righteousness, who was a leader in the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls in the second century BCE. The interpreters who wrote these commentaries assumed that prophetic proclamation dealt with the end times and that they themselves were living in the end times. Hence prophetic proclamation dealt directly with them and their situation. Matthew was apparently schooled in this type of exegesis. A passage written by Isaiah in the heart of the controversies of the eighth century BCE was assumed to have significance about the end times, that is, the era of Jesus. It helped in this case that Matthew was reading the Scriptures in their Greek translation, where the word translated “young woman” by the NRSV was rendered by *parthenos*, the standard Greek word for “virgin.” Matthew would also have been pleased that the child’s name from Isa 7:14, Emmanuel (God is with us) fit so well with his understanding of the significance of the birth of Jesus. The virgin birth of Jesus therefore was seen in continuity with the message of Isaiah and hailed as “fulfillment.” Thanks to the comparison with the Pesharim of the Dead Sea Scrolls we can now understand better how and why Matthew wrote this way. But just as the Peshar on Habakkuk cited above does not determine the meaning of Habakkuk in the seventh century BCE, so Matthew’s understanding of Isa 7:14 does not determine what the prophet was trying to say in his eighth century BCE context.

When king Herod’s mad policies threatened the infant Jesus, Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt and to stay there until the death of

Herod. Matthew observes: This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Matt 2:15).

Matthew refers here to Hos 11:1, but modern readers of Hosea soon learn that Matthew’s understanding of this verse was not that of the eighth century prophet. In Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called my son”²⁵ referred to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, which was taken as evidence for God’s election of Israel as his child and his support of Israel right from the beginning. The next verse in Hosea confirms this understanding because the prophet claims that despite this early benefaction Israel had proven to be disobedient and had pursued Baals and idols throughout its history. The original context in Hosea, therefore, takes the Exodus as a starting point for a history of disobedience, surely the last thing that Matthew would want to say about Jesus! Modern readers of the Bible assume that context and original setting determine a text’s meaning; that is not an assumption shared by Matthew or by the persons who wrote the Pesharim at Qumran. For Matthew the successful flight of the infant Jesus was evidence for the faithfulness of God to his promises, which led him to read Hos 11:1 in an eschatological context. In Matthew in general the life of Jesus often recapitulates the history of Israel. The Sermon on the Mount presents analogies to the revelations Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai.

Christians today can share Matthew’s conviction that the rescue of Jesus provides evidence of the faithfulness of God, and Christians today can affirm that the faith of the Old Testament has continuities with the faith of Christians. If we were today trying to demonstrate this faithfulness or these continuities by allusions to the Old Testament, we would express them with exegetical methods appropriate to our time. A historical critical

²⁵ Cf. already Exod 4:22, 23, for the LORD designating Israel as “my son.”

understanding of Hosea 11 offers a possible resource for Christian theologians. As that chapter proceeds, the disobedience of Israel leads to divine exasperation. Despite lavish divine parental care, Israel seems locked in behavior designed to lead to judgment. But God in Hosea 11 wrestles with conflicted feelings. Disappointment in Israel's behavior comes into conflict with divine parental loyalty: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel...I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal..." (Hos 11:8-9). The doctrine of retribution insists that sin must be followed by punishment, but the God of Hosea 11 states that he is not bound by the rules of retribution. The happy contradiction between God's anger and God's love, in which the latter wins out—so central to the Christian understanding of the faith—is also a central conviction of the prophet Hosea. A modern Matthew could hail this as promise and fulfillment or at least as a significant theological continuity.

Promise and Fulfillment as the Bond Between the Testaments

The earliest Christians had only what is now called the Old Testament as their Scriptures. Later the New Testament books came to have similar canonical authority for the church. Lines of continuity with the God and the faith of the Old Testament could be expressed in a number of ways, including promise and fulfillment. Promise-and-fulfillment is a time-tested and widely-held understanding of the relationship between the testaments. Luke's picture of Jesus with the disciples on the way to Emmaus is a typical example of this approach: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

Some Christians, even in modern times, have denied that continuity. The prominent New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann thought the Old Testament was a shattering failure and wrote: “How far, then, does Old Testament Jewish history represent prophecy fulfilled in the history of the New Testament community? It is fulfilled in its inner contradiction, its miscarriage....[F]aith requires the backward glance into Old Testament history as a history of failure, *and so of promise*,²⁶ in order to know that the situation of the justified man arises only on the basis of this miscarriage.”²⁷ In the same context Bultmann also referred to “the false way of salvation which we find in the law.” Despite his many illuminating comments on the New Testament, Bultmann had a blind spot in his understanding of the Old Testament and did not adequately recognize the strong lines of continuity in the theological affirmations of both testaments.

Promise-and-fulfillment is a welcome way to express that continuity. But this assertion too is capable of misunderstandings. We have seen that prophecies in the Old Testament can have multiple fulfillments. Second Isaiah’s word about the end of the exile had an immediate, partial fulfillment in the Jews who returned to Jerusalem in the early Persian period. But there were still aspects of that prophecy that cried out for more ultimate fulfillment, as seen for example in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the New Testament’s interpretation of John the Baptist. Christians need to recognize that Jewish sisters and brothers see evidence for the faithfulness of God, and therefore for fulfillment of his ancient promises, in the oral revelation recorded in the Talmud, in the land of

²⁶ Italics added.

²⁷ Rudolph Bultmann, “Prophecy and Fulfillment” in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 73-75. Antonius H. J. Gunneweg stated that the definition of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is the most difficult historical and theological question faced by Christians. See Isaac Kalimi, “Die Bibel und die klassisch-jüdische Bibelauslegung. Eine interpretations- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002), 594.

Israel, and in the ongoing presence of God in the lives of Jews and Judaism. What Christians and Jews hail as fulfillments refer back to the promises of the same God.

The New Testament is not only fulfillment. It also contains promises and prophecies that still cry out for fulfillment. From the beginning Christians have prayed, “Maranatha,” our Lord come (1 Cor 16:22), looking forward to additional fulfillments of God’s promises in the return of Jesus in triumph. Paul’s wonderful statement in Gal 3:28 is still in many ways more promise than fulfillment: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” And what might be the fulfillment of this prophecy of Paul, “And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). The second petition of the Lord’s prayer reads “Thy kingdom come!” putting future expectation or fulfillment at the heart of the New Testament message.

Contemporary Judaism recognizes that many of God’s promises were fulfilled in the life of ancient Israel and in the subsequent history of Judaism. Some of the promises that Christians have seen fulfilled in the life of Jesus, such as the dawning of the messianic age, are seen by them as continuing *and as yet unfulfilled* eschatological expectations.

Promise and fulfillment are indeed important talking points between Jews and Christians. We need to learn to wait together for God’s future.