

**10. THE HOPE FOR THE MESSIAH  
AND THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF HISTORY**

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1. Think about some of the most ominous aspects of the contemporary world situation
  - 1.1. Increasing political and religious polarisation
  - 1.2. Resurgence of authoritarianisms
  - 1.3. Climate crisis
  - 1.4. Geopolitical redistribution of power
2. This is history in the making and it raises the question of how events unfold and whether their outcome can be anticipated or directed in any way.
3. Another way of asking the same question is wondering whether *hope* is legitimate in relation to history – and if we say yes, *in what* or *whom* can we put our hope:
  - 3.1. *Humanity?* Things can go badly for a while but human goodness or resourcefulness always triumphs in the end.
  - 3.2. *Western values?* Democracy, equality, freedom can have setback but their progression is unstoppable.
  - 3.3. *Nation?* Our country stands for the good, for democracy and freedom and as long as it remains the most powerful in the world there is hope.
  - 3.4. More generally, with regards to the future of humanity, the contemporary narrative (especially since the industrial revolution) tends to put hope in *technology* especially for the improvement of health and human condition, the replacement of fossil fuels as sources of energy, the conquest of space.
4. There is a sense in which this attitude is a form of *messianism*: the belief in something which is going to bring a decisive resolution to present crises, to structural problems, or negative aspects of the human condition. This often implies
  - 4.1. Utopian aspiration
  - 4.2. Promise of Liberation
  - 4.3. End of History
  - 4.4. A charismatic leader
5. For example *communism* is a form of *messianism*:
  - 5.1. It envisions a classless society without private property, where wealth and resources are shared evenly among all members of society. It presents a vision of a future society that grants equality for all. (*Utopian aspiration*)

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- 5.2. It promises the emancipation of workers and the establishment of a fair and just society. (*Promise of liberation*)
- 5.3. It speaks of a revolutionary moment that will fundamentally transform society and bring about a new, final, definitive social order. (*End of history*)
- 5.4. It has given rise to messianic figures like Marx, Lenin, Mao who provided the ideological framework and guidance for the realization of the communist vision. (Charismatic leadership)
6. These examples imply a certain understanding of history which we now take for granted – namely the ideas the
  - 6.1. history goes somewhere
  - 6.2. that however bad the situation might look in the present, in the end all will be well
  - 6.3. and often (not always) that the pursuit of a future better end justifies every sacrifice which might be necessary in the present.
7. This ‘linear’ understanding of history – that is the idea the history goes somewhere, has a meaning, a direction, an end- is a trait which Western mentality inherited from the Bible – and especially from what we call messianism.
8. We are accustomed to refer to both Jesus and Christ as names, when the latter in fact is a title: “Jesus, the *anointed one*” – and Christians are so called because an essential aspect of what it means to become a Christian is to be ‘anointed’ as well.
  - 8.1. The Greek term *christos* is the translation of the Hebrew term *māšīaḥ*, which means “the anointed one”.
  - 8.2. Thus *Messiah* and *Christ* have the same meaning.
9. In the Old Testament, the anointing was employed for the investiture of kings, prophets, and priests.
10. There are several passages in the Old Testament that describe the anointing of **kings**. Here are a few notable examples:
  - 1 Samuel 10:1 "Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his [David's] head and kissed him and said, 'Has not the LORD anointed you to be prince over his people Israel?'"
  - 1 Samuel 16:13 "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward."
  - 1 Kings 1:39 "And Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, 'Long live King Solomon!'"
11. Then there is the anointing of **priests**:
  - 11.1. In Exodus 29:7, the Lord instructs Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests. The passage states,  
"You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him."  
Leviticus 8:12 "Then Moses poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him to consecrate him."

12. Anointing of **prophets**:

12.1. In 1 Kings 19:16, the prophet Elijah is instructed by God to anoint Elisha as his successor at the same time as the anointing of the king:

"Also, you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place."

12.2. While the anointing of kings was a formal act which emphasized that their political authority came from God, the anointing of prophets highlighted their spiritual calling and divine empowerment to convey God's word.

13. So there is a sense in which kings, priests, and prophets were 'messiahs', and yet this term increasingly came to signify something or rather someone else – a mysterious character who would hold the three roles simultaneously.

14. The whole history of the people of Israel is a testimony to the failure and the unfaithfulness of kings to be faithful to the covenant with God. The various military setbacks were usually explained as the consequences of this unfaithfulness. Even the model kings David and Solomon in the end fell short of their vocation. The most dramatic of these setbacks was the deportation to Babylon for some sixty years in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE in which there were no 'messiahs', that is no kings nor priests or at least nor priestly activity.

15. We find therefore a situation in which rule, salvation, liberation, mediation with God cannot be expected from the institutional 'anointed ones', the institutional 'messiahs' – and this explains the beginning of what is called "**messianic hope**", that is the expectation that God

15.1. will raise a unique king, associated with the Davidic dynasty

15.2. who will be faithful to God and establish true justice

15.3. and restore the vocation of Israel to be the vector of God's blessing to the nations of the world.

16. Even though the distinctive trait of this future 'messiah' is the association to David and hence the royal character, it also has the traits of a priest and of a prophet.

17. The Messiah expected will be a *king*

Psalm 2:6-7: "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain. I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father.'"

Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 11:1-5: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots, a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness, he will judge the needy, with justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth."

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Jeremiah 23:5-6: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior."

Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

18. The Messiah expected will be a *priest*:

Psalm 110:4: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'"

Zechariah 6:12-13: "Tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.'"

Malachi 3:1: "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

19. The Messiah expected will be a *prophet*:

Deuteronomy 18:15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him."

Isaiah 61:1-3: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

20. However, especially at the period of the Exile to Babylon, the identity and mission of this 'messiah' start assuming traits which point towards an unexpected way of exercising the royal, prophetic, and priestly roles:

20.1. In the book of Isaiah, there are several passages that refer to a mysterious figure known as the "Servant of the Lord" or "Servant of Yahweh."

20.2. The identity of the "Servant of the Lord" is not explicitly mentioned in the book of Isaiah. Instead, the text presents a collection of servant songs or passages (Isaiah 42:1-4, Isaiah 49:1-6, Isaiah 50:4-9, and Isaiah 52:13-53:12) that describe this Servant and his mission. Some of the characteristics of the Servant mentioned in these passages include:

- i. Divine Election: The Servant is chosen and called by God for a specific purpose (Isaiah 42:1, Isaiah 49:1).

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- ii. Faithful and Gentle: The Servant is characterized by a gentle and non-violent nature, yet determined in his mission (Isaiah 42:2-3, Isaiah 50:4).
  - iii. Suffering: The Servant experiences suffering, rejection, and humiliation on behalf of others (Isaiah 50:6, Isaiah 53:3-4, Isaiah 53:7-9).
  - iv. Atoning role: In Isaiah 53:4-6, the Servant is depicted as bearing the sins of others, making atonement for their transgressions.
  - v. Exalted and Glorious Outcome: Despite the suffering, the Servant is ultimately exalted and glorified by God (Isaiah 52:13, Isaiah 53:10-12).
21. The figure of the “messiah” becomes the unifying thread of the whole Hebrew Bible. Eventually, the whole history of the people of Israel starting from the garden of Eden and through the patriarchs is interpreted as a long preparation for the coming of this descendant of David. Thus
- 21.1. No sooner has the fall happened that God cryptically promises that a descendant of Eve will redress the consequence of the first couple’s transgression: God says to the woman  
“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:14–15).
  - 21.2. The various genealogies of the book of Genesis are meant to connect Adam and Eve to Abraham, and then Abraham to the tribe of Juda to which David belonged (and David was the ancestor of Jesus).
22. At the time of Jesus, there was a culmination of this Messianic expectation among the Jewish people, particularly due to the political and religious circumstances of the period (Roman occupation). The concept of the Messiah had evolved over centuries, and many Jews were eagerly awaiting the arrival of a promised deliverer who would fulfil various roles:
- 22.1. *Political Deliverance*: Many Jews hoped for a Messiah who would liberate them from Roman oppression and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory, similar to the days of King David. This expectation was fuelled by a longing for political independence and the desire to regain control of their homeland.
  - 22.2. *Davidic Descent*: The belief in a Davidic Messiah remained strong, with the expectation that the coming Messiah would be a descendant of King David, as prophesied in the Old Testament (e.g., Isaiah 11:1-5, Jeremiah 23:5-6). This lineage was thought to be significant in fulfilling the Messianic role.
  - 22.3. *Religious Renewal*: The Messianic expectation also included a hope for spiritual renewal and a return to genuine worship of God. Many believed that the Messiah would purify and reform religious practices, restoring true worship and adherence to the Law of Moses.
  - 22.4. *Miraculous Signs*: Some Jews anticipated that the Messiah's coming would be accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders, validating his divine authority and identity.

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23. The identification of Jesus with the Messiah is the prism through which the Gospels present the identity and mission of Jesus.
24. Jesus as *king*
- 24.1. Genealogy: The Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide genealogies tracing Jesus' lineage back to King David, highlighting His royal descent as the rightful heir to David's throne (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38).
  - 24.2. Titles: Jesus is referred to using Messianic titles such as "Son of David" (Matthew 9:27; Matthew 12:23; Matthew 15:22), which points to His kingly lineage from the house of David.
  - 24.3. Triumphal Entry: During Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the crowds hailed Him as the King, waving palm branches and spreading their cloaks before Him, echoing the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19).
  - 24.4. Parables and Teachings: Jesus often used parables to illustrate the nature of the Kingdom of God, depicting Himself as the King and revealing the principles and values of His Kingdom (e.g., the Parable of the Tenants - Matthew 21:33-44).
  - 24.5. Crucifixion: The sign posted above Jesus' head on the cross read, "This is the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-22). Though intended as mockery, it ironically acknowledged His Messianic role as King.
25. Jesus as *prophet*
- 25.1. Many passages refer to Jesus as a prophet. Some examples:
    - Matthew 21:11: "The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'"
    - Matthew 13:57: "And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.'"
    - Luke 7:16: "They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.'"
  - 25.2. But more importantly, he is portrayed with the traits of the great prophets of the Old Testament:
    - i. Moses: Jesus is often seen as a new and greater Moses. Both Moses and Jesus were born under threat (Moses with Pharaoh's decree to kill Hebrew male infants, and Jesus with King Herod's attempt to kill Him). Like Moses he gives the new Law of the Beatitudes on the mountain (Matthew 5-7).
    - ii. Elijah or Jeremiah: In Matthew 16:14, when Jesus asked His disciples who the people said He was, some said, "John the Baptist; others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." This association draws upon the expectation that Elijah would return before the Messiah's coming (Malachi 4:5).
26. Jesus as *priest*: the priestly character of Jesus' messianic identity is less explicitly

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stated in the Gospels and comes to the fore especially in the Letter to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 4:14-15: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

Hebrews 7:24-25: "But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

Hebrews 9:11-12: "But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."

26.1. However, also in the Gospels there are suggestions, especially in Luke's version of the Ascension in which Jesus blesses his disciples before being taken up into heaven:

Luke 24:50-51 "And he led them out as far as Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven."

27. Just as in the Old Testament, however, there is something like a spiritualization of the messianic expectation – especially through what has been called

27.1. The 'messianic secret' and

27.2. The announcement that the Messiah will fulfil the prophecies of the Servant of Yahweh of the book of Isaiah, that is suffer and die.

28. The messianic secret refers to a recurring theme found particularly in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus instructs those who witness his miracles or recognize him as the Messiah to keep it a secret.

28.1. The prevailing understanding of the Messiah during that time was often associated with political deliverance and a powerful earthly kingdom. Jesus wanted to avoid potential misinterpretations and misconceptions about his role as the Messiah.

28.2. He sought to redefine the concept of messiahship, emphasizing his spiritual mission and the establishment of God's Kingdom in people's hearts.

29. Jesus intention of redefining the perception of the messiah is made clear in the fact that when he finally allows Peter to confess Jesus' messianic identity, he starts announcing that he will fulfil this role not through political triumph but through suffering and death, according to the prophecies of Isaiah:

Mark 8.29-31 "Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?". Peter answered, "You are the Christ." And Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him. Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again."

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- 30. Moreover, because Jesus is God, the way in which he fulfils these roles has a plenitude which no human being can ever achieve:
  - 30.1. He does not just reign as a king authorised by God, but he is the *kingdom of God*
  - 30.2. He does not just speak or act as a prophet in the name of God, but *he is the Word of God*.
  - 30.3. He does not just fulfil the priestly function of mediating between human beings and God, but *he unites humanity and divinity in his person* once and for all.

### Conclusion

- 31. The key aspect of the messianic hope in the Bible is that
  - 31.1. History does have a direction, it goes somewhere
  - 31.2. The resolution of history (its end) though does not belong to human initiative but to God alone
  - 31.3. The kingdom is called “of God” to signify that God intervenes decisively to change history once for all.
- 32. Thus the theme of ‘messianic hope’ is crucial not only to understand the identity of Christ, but also the Christian notion of history.