



## First Isaiah

### Isaiah 9 and 11: Messianic Prophecy

The question of messianic prophecy comes up again in chapters 9 and 11. Isaiah 9:6, “unto us a child is born” is made famous by Handel’s messiah and inevitably associated with Christmas in Christian imagination. Originally, however, it was most probably not about the birth of a child, but rather a celebration of a new king’s ascent to the throne. Compare Psalm 2, where the king is told: you are my son; today I have begotten you. The king was acknowledged as the son of God when he assumed the kingship. This does not mean that he did not have a human father or was not begotten in the usual way. It is rather an affirmation of his close relationship with God. (See also Psalm 110:3, which also speaks of God begetting the king in the Greek translation).

Isaiah 9 begins by declaring that the people who have walked in darkness have seen a new light. This is probably a reference to the relief felt by the people of the northern kingdom of Israel when the Assyrians withdrew, either in 732 or shortly thereafter, or later, after Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, had been destroyed. The later date is somewhat more likely. The date at which Hezekiah became king is disputed. It was either 725 or 715 BCE. If Hezekiah was the “Immanuel” born at the time of the Syro-Ephremite war, then 715 would be the more plausible date for his accession, but even this is problematic, as 2 Kings 18:2 says he was 25 years old when he began to reign. We cannot be sure that Hezekiah was the person called Immanuel in Isaiah 7, but he is very probably the king whose accession is celebrated in Isaiah 9. We now know from archeology that Jerusalem was greatly expanded after the fall of Samaria, presumably by an influx of refugees from the north. This would explain the statement in Isaiah 9:3, “you have multiplied the nation.” The advent of a new king is always a time of hope.

In Isa 9:6, the new king is hailed with several remarkable titles: “wonderful counsellor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The king is also called a “god” (*Elohim*) in Ps 45:7. This does not mean that he was equal to the Most High, but it certainly means that he is more than an ordinary human being. It is very probable that the idea that the king was in some sense a god was inherited from the Egyptians, who had ruled Jerusalem in the second millennium, although the Jewish claim was not as strong as the one traditionally made for the Pharaoh.

Here again we are not dealing with a messiah in the technical sense, since the Davidic line did not have to be restored. Nonetheless, the passage is more directly relevant to messianic

expectation than is the case in Isaiah 7, since it affirms that the new king would establish the Davidic kingdom “from this time forth and for evermore” (9:7). This was the royal ideology of Judah, which held that the Davidic line would rule forever. It becomes properly messianic when it is projected into the future.

A more properly messianic oracle is found in Isaiah 11: “a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse.” Reference to the stump of Jesse implies that the “tree” has been cut down. There is no agreement among scholars, however, as to the historical setting. It is possible that the oracle was spoken by Isaiah after Judah was ravaged by Sennacherib, but the Davidic line was not cut off on that occasion. More probably, the oracle may have been spoken when Josiah came to the throne as an eight year old boy after the murder of his father in 640 (2 Kings 22:1). This would explain the statement in Isa 11:6: “a little child shall lead them.” A third possibility is that the oracle dates from the postexilic period when the line of David was finally cut off by the Babylonians. The oracle ends with a reference to the “holy mountain,” Mt. Zion. The mountain also features in Isa 2:1-5 (repeated in Mic 4:1-5), which speaks of a time when the nations would flock to Mt. Zion, and Torah would go forth from there. Josiah was the king who enshrined the Torah of Moses as the Law of Judah (2 Kings 22-23).

Isaiah 11 predicts a utopian transformation of the world where even the wild animals would live in harmony. The king would be guided by the spirit of the Lord. No such utopian reign has yet come to pass. In the centuries around the turn of the era, this was one of the main texts taken by Jews to predict the coming of a messianic king who would restore the line of David. The messianic kingdom was primarily conceived in political terms. It would bring about the independence of Judah, but it would lead to a transformation of the whole world.

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