

The suffering Servant
A Series on Messianic Prophecies: Part 4

What constitutes a Messianic prophecy? At times it can be difficult to understand how an Old Testament passage, read within its context, is a Messianic prophecy; the New Testament reader only knows that it is, because the New Testament writers refer to that Old Testament passage as applying to Jesus. The disciples apparently had the same problem, and it was not until the resurrection of Jesus Christ when they were fully informed how the Old Testament spoke of Him, which they passed on when they penned the gospels.

Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them. When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, "**Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?**" (Luke 24:27-32)

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:44-49)

When Jesus starts His ministry with the cleansing of the Temple, His ardent actions demonstrated to the disciples how "the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it was written, "**Zeal for Your house will consume me.**" (John 2:14-17)

The Old Testament passage the disciples recalled is Psalms 69:9; however, this passage is something David was saying of himself and does not appear to be a Messianic prophecy.

For zeal for Your house has consumed me,
And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. (Ps 69:9)

Psalms 69, the second most quoted psalm in the New Testament (after Psalms 22), is a psalm by David who is lamenting of his suffering to God. Obedient to God and following His word, David calls upon God's judgment for deliverance from his enemies. It is a psalm of a man, who God considers righteous, who is suffering for the sake of God.

But while David is speaking of himself, the New Testament authors refer to this psalm as though it is speaking of David's descendant Jesus; they see the suffering Jesus as the suffering David. Thus, the Psalms passages that the New Testament authors cite about David are considered Messianic prophecies when they are used to describe something about Jesus within the larger context of fulfilling the prophecy of the Promised Messiah.

The following tables provide a side by side comparison of the messianic prophecies in Psalms 69 with their corresponding New Testament quote. This is an example of how one may study so that one can understand their respective contexts and the continuity with the Old Testament.

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Messianic Passage: A Righteous Sufferer	New Testament
<p>Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head; Those who would destroy me are powerful, being wrongfully my enemies; What I did not steal, I then have to restore. (Ps 69:4)</p>	<p>Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, 'They hated Me without a cause.' (John 15:20-25)</p>
<p>David laments of his personal distress with images of drowning and non-stop crying (Ps 69:1-4). The innumerable forces against him are so great that he is forced to unjustly repay what he did not steal.</p>	<p>During His Upper Room Discourse, Jesus refers to David's self-portrayal of the righteous sufferer. The Jews saw God through the good and miraculous works of His Son; but accused Jesus falsely of not being the Son of God. In hating Jesus, the Jews hated His Father. The Jews hate Jesus without cause and will make Him pay for something He did not do.</p>

Messianic Passage: A Zeal for God	New Testament
<p>May those who wait for You not be ashamed through me, O Lord God of hosts; May those who seek You not be dishonored through me, O God of Israel, Because for Your sake I have borne reproach; Dishonor has covered my face. I have become estranged from my brothers And an alien to my mother's sons. For zeal for Your house has consumed me, (Ps 69:6-9a)</p>	<p>And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me." (John 2:14-17)</p>
<p>Hoping that the scorn he's been receiving will not bring shame and disgrace to fellow Believers (Ps 69:6-12), David's passion for God will continue without restraint.</p>	<p>Witnessing Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, regardless of what others thought, demonstrated to the disciples a passion for God in a manner that they could only imagine of David.</p>

Messianic Passage: The Sufferer's example	New Testament
And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. (Ps 69:9b)	For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." (Rom 15:3)
Because of his love of God, the insults people make of God are personally received as insults to David.	To his Jewish audience, Paul refers to David's psalm to show that Jesus' love for God was not motivated by self-interest and instead brought the hostility of those who hate God upon Himself. Paul extends this concept further: in persevering adversity, one's faith encourages the faith of others.

The idea that Psalm 69 is Messianic is given considerable support when David's enemies are contemporaneously identified as Jesus' enemies; suffering the unrighteous and their consequences.

Messianic Passage Suffering the Unrighteous	New Testament
<p>They also gave me gall for my food And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. May their table before them become a snare; And when they are in peace, may it become a trap. May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see, And make their loins shake continually. Pour out Your indignation on them, And may Your burning anger overtake them. (Ps 69:21-24)</p>	<p>What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, Eyes to see not and Ears to hear not, Down to this very day." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, and A stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, And bend their backs forever." (Rom 11:7-10)</p>
<p>Publicly scorned, disgraced, and shamed, David laments of those who mistreat him with impunity and calls on God to judge them.</p>	<p>The elect are Believers who genuinely have faith in God. These Believers, that Paul is referring to, knew the Old Testament and recognized that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies and was the Messiah.</p> <p>The elect knew God's word; but most Jews knew only the Pharisees' commentary of the Old Testament which they understood as authoritative as God's word.</p> <p>With this context, Paul uses the imagery of David speaking of his enemies providing bitter (gall) and sour (vinegar) food / drink, of disbelieving Jews who did not recognize Jesus as the Christ. Their diet of the Pharisees' teachings became a snare and trap preventing them from recognizing the Messiah and being healed of their sin.</p>

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Messianic Passage: Consequences of the Unrighteous	New Testament
<p>May their camp be desolate; May none dwell in their tents. For they have persecuted him whom You Yourself struck, And they tell of the pain of those whom You have wounded. Add guilt to their guilt, And may they not come into Your righteousness. May they be wiped out of the book of life, And may they not be recorded with the righteous. (Ps 69:25-28)</p> <p>When he is judged, may he come out guilty, And may his prayer become sin. May his days be few; May another take his office. (Ps 109:7-8)</p>	<p>At this time Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (a group of about 120 people was there together), and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. And it became known to all the residents of Jerusalem; as a result that field was called Hakeldama in their own language, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms: 'May his residence be made desolate, And may there be none living in it'; and, 'May another take his office.' (Acts 1:15-20)</p>
<p>David calls on God to judge his enemies with complete and eternal consequences by blotting them out of the Book of Life (death and without salvation for their souls). For those in leadership, David's prayer is for their replacement.</p>	<p>Peter applies David's psalm to the enemies of Jesus Christ. Judas Iscariot becomes an example and warning to those who do not place their faith in the Messiah.</p> <p>The two citations, Psalms 69:25-28 and 109:7-8, are messianic because failure of faith in Jesus Christ results in eternal consequences. If Jesus was not the Christ, Judas Iscariot would not have been cited in this manner.</p>

The citations of Psalm 69, where Jesus is associated with the characteristics of David, are identified as Messianic passages. When the enemies of David are seen contemporaneously with the enemies of Jesus Christ, the Messianic passages of Psalm 69 can be more easily recognized as being prophetic in nature.

While David depicts the righteous sufferer, God uses Isaiah to develop the concept of the righteous sufferer further as the Suffering Servant.

Messianic Prophecy	New Testament
<p>Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. (Isa 53:4)</p>	<p>When Jesus came into Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she got up and waited on Him. When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases." (Matt 8:14-17)</p>

In one of His earliest large healing events, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and others who visited "to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 'He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases'" (Matt 8:14-17). Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 53:4 revealed that Jesus' physical healing metaphorically represented the spiritual healing of salvation that results from His atonement.

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Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is largely recognized as the prophecy of the suffering Servant. Isaiah speaks of servanthood, an individual who was rejected, and voluntarily gave up his life suffering an innocent atoning death for “the many” who will benefit.

Today, in contrast, Judaism argues that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is about the nation of Israel. In suffering for the sins of Gentile nations, the nation of Israel fulfilled Isaiah 53. This view was popularized by Rabbi Rashi (1050 A.D.) and others in response to the persecution of Jews for not believing in Jesus Christ during the Middle Ages.

Messianic Prophecy	New Testament
“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.” (Isa 42:1-4)	But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. Many followed Him, and He healed them all, and warned them not to tell who He was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him, And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope.” (Matt 12:17-21)

In the fulfillment of Isaiah’s God chosen servant on whom God has poured out His Spirit, Jesus only does what His Father shows Him (John 5:19) and says only what His Father authorizes (John 14:7-11).

Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in the same way.** (John 5:19)

If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.” Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you for so long a time, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? The one who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? **The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own, but the Father, as He remains in Me, does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me;** otherwise believe because of the works themselves. (John 14:7-11)

Instead of coming as the Son of Man Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus comes in humility and gentleness (i.e. He will not quarrel nor cry out) and with compassion for the weary and burdened (i.e. battered reed and smoldering wick). Jesus did not come asserting His power as the Son of God and Judge; He came with God’s message of salvation. In God’s judicial treatment of sin and evil, bringing justice is a matter of choice: accept God’s provision of Jesus as Savior or face Him as Judge.

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After the gospel accounts, within the same theme of the suffering Servant, the apostles use Messianic prophecies that portray and associate Jesus as the unblemished sacrificial lamb of Passover.

Messianic Prophecy	New Testament
<p>He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;</p> <p>Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth.</p> <p>By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered</p> <p>That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? (Isa 53:7-8)</p>	<p>Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:</p> <p>“He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.”</p> <p>The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (Acts 8:32-35)</p>

There are significant reasons for Messianic prophecies identifying Jesus as the righteous, suffering Servant.

1. They emphasize the divine necessity of the Servant’s voluntary sacrificial death juxtaposed with His vindication and glorification.
2. By associating Jesus Christ with the Passover lamb, the Suffering Servant’s voluntary sacrificial death is understood in the context of atoning for sin. This was the good news Philip explained to the eunuch. The resulting atonement opens the way for repentance and forgiveness – the healing of one’s relationship with God.
3. The Suffering Servant demonstrates the true nature of servanthood where one puts aside self-glorification and obediently follows God’s word. They provide examples for how one serves and carries out His message of salvation to the world. God, who is faithful, vindicates one who is faithful.

References:

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2. Green JB, Mcknight S, Marshall IH, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press (1992).