

Question: Where is the first reference in the Old Testament to the coming messiah?

Answer: There are several difficulties in trying to answer this question. The primary difficulty lies in the history of Israel herself and the stages of understanding the word “messiah” carried through Israel’s development. The term “Messiah” from the Hebrew word *masiah* means “anointed.” The Greek word *christos* means essentially the same thing. Throughout the course of history there have been several understandings of who the messiah was or would be. Some believed the messiah would be a prophet, others the king or Davidic messiah, still others the Anointed Priest or Son of Man (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 77:153).

Throughout the history of Israel there have been three primary understandings of the term messiah. The first is Royal Messianism which believed that the messiah was the anointed king ruling through the line of David. Israelites during the period of the monarchy (1000-587BC) believed that the king had been anointed by Yahweh and placed in his position to protect the people Israel (*NJBC*, 77:155). The king as messiah is articulated in Psalm 89 where it says, “I have chosen David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him (messiah).” Through this passage we understand that David being anointed makes him the messiah, chosen by God as such to rule the people Israel. There are several other references to the royal messiah. Psalm 2 discusses the unique relationship between King David and God, “Kings on earth rise up and princes plot together against the Lord and his anointed (messiah).”

The second understanding of the word messiah is a change in attitude from the first. The reason for this change is a result of the way a few of the kings behaved while ruling Israel. (*NJBC*, 77:158). Books of the Bible written in the 8th century BC like Isaiah allude to a series of bad kings leading the Israelites to believe that the king was no longer the messiah anointed by God. Within the context of the bad kings, the understanding of messiah changed from the current king to a future king who would restore the glory of King David. The anticipation was that the messiah king would be born soon and make the changes that were needed to restore God’s grace on his people. Not only was the messiah king needed for a transition of poor rule to good rule, but the Israelites knew that if they received a good king strong in morality, God was still with them. The want for peace would also come with the messiah king. This restoration of the kingdom of David by the coming king can be found in Jeremiah 23 where it says, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; As king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land.”

The third and final development of the word messiah within ancient Israel is the concept Christians are most familiar with. After the exile (587 BC) and the Davidic line of kings had ceased to exist, the Israelites began to believe that the messiah was a figure of the future that would come as the supreme king placed by God as the ultimate sign of restoring his people Israel (*NJBC*, 77:161). For Christians, this supreme king was fulfilled in Jesus. Several passages found in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the new. Zechariah 9:9 talks about what the king will do, “See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” This passage is fulfilled and paralleled in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19) when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a colt. Zechariah believed that the messiah would bring peace to all the nations and rule from sea to sea. There are many other texts that Christians refer to as places in the Old Testament where prophecy alludes to the coming messiah in Jesus. While the term “messiah” may not be used in concordance with the passages, there is a clear reference that the person who is coming will have a special relationship with God (See: Daniel 7, Isaiah 42:1, 50:6, 53, Proverbs 8:21-31)