From Zedekiah to the Messiah: A Glimpse at the Early Reception of the Sprout

Christl M. Maier

In a considerable portion of his work, John J. Collins has traced various messianic concepts in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish writings. Among these concepts is one that expects a future king of Davidic descent who is righteous and saves Israel from oppression and threats of all sorts. For instance, 4QFlorilegium (4Q174) 1.11 announces a scion (צמח) of David, and the Patriarchal Blessings 4Q252 5.3–4, in an interpretation of Gen 49:10, refer to the future “... until the Messiah of righteousness (צדקה) comes, the Branch (צמח) of David.” In this Qumranic reading of Gen 49:10, the phrase “branch of David” has been developed into a title for the Davidic messiah. Furthermore, the fifteenth benediction of the Amidah asks for the flourishing of the צמח דוד and relates this event to future salvation.

Both the concept and the terminology take up the prophetic oracles in Jer 23:5–6 and 33:14–18 as well as Zech 3:8 and 6:12, all of which announce a צמח, a scion or sprout who in Jer 23:5 is called צדיק. Similar to the oracle about the new-born Immanuel in Isa 7:14–16, most of these prophecies originally aimed at a near future and only later were understood as announcements of a messiah, who would come at the end of time. In my contribution to this topic, I would like to illuminate the original tradition of the “righteous sprout” in Jeremiah with a side-glance to Zechariah. It is my pleasure to present this essay

---


4 According to John Collins’s definition: “In short, a messiah is an eschatological figure who sometimes, but not necessarily always, is designated as a מессיח in the ancient sources” (The Scepter and the Star, 17–18).
to John Collins, my former colleague at Yale, whose writing is always perspicuous and thought-provoking.

Since the book of Jeremiah abounds in oracles of doom for Judah and Jerusalem, as well as in depictions of Jerusalem's demise by the hand of the Babylonians, expectations of a better future are in short supply. Among the more hopeful passages, there are two rather vague references to a future leader in Jer 30:8–9 and 30:21, besides two forthright announcements of a Davidic ruler in Jer 23:5–6 and 33:15–16. As I will demonstrate in the following, the latter passage is a late reworking of Jer 23:5–6; it originates in a different socio-historical milieu and also comments on the expectations of the book of Zechariah. While such dating is not novel, my point here is to show that the idea of a righteous Davidic ruler originated in the last years of the Judean monarchy and was reiterated in the latest additions to the book of Jeremiah. What is later called “messianic hope” is rooted in the political aspirations of the authors' time.

1 Early Expectations Regarding Zedekiah

The announcement of a righteous sprout for David in Jer 23:5–6 is placed within a cycle of oracles about the kings (21:11–23:8) and the prophets (23:9–40). Both parts are framed by Jeremiah’s words to a delegation sent by King Zedekiah (21:1–10) and by the vision about the two fig baskets (24:1–10). Within the collection, the short oracles follow the historical sequence of Judean kings in addressing Shallum (= Jehoahaz, 22:10–12), Jehoiakim (22:13–19), and Coniah (= Jehoiachin, 22:24–30). The names of the kings appear only in introductory verses, indicating that the oracles originally may not have named the monarch. There are several striking features of this collection. First, Zedekiah is not given a short oracle within the collection, although this aspect is obscured by the fact that both frame passages explicitly mention him and negatively assess his reign.5 Second, the oracle about Jehoiakim predicts a horrible fate for this king, the “burial of a donkey… dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer 22:19, cf. 36:30). According to 2 Kgs 24:6, however, Jehoiakim “slept with his fathers,” that is, he died a natural death, and his son Jehoiachin faced the Babylonian response to his father’s anti-Babylonian policy.6 Third,

---

5 Both passages will be further discussed below.