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In What Sense was the First Coming of Jesus Messianic?

An Examination of Micah 2:12-13

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I Introduction

Messianic hopes were varied but high in first century Judaism. Whatever the details, however, the universal expectation was that the Messiah would 'be good for the Jews'. A moderate, pious and inspired example of these hopes is found in Luke 1:74-75. The coming of their Messiah, however, did not usher in an age of peace and righteousness, but was followed by war, the destruction of the Temple, and the dispersal of the people. How do we reconcile this reality with the words of Mary, in Luke 1:54-55?

While many Christians criticize the Jewish people for wanting the deliverance that the OT promised, and Premillennialists generally confine such deliverance to the second coming, either way we are left with the question: 'In what way was Jesus the Messiah for the Jewish people at his first advent?'

That is, in what sense *was* Jesus messianic? This question is important both in its own right, and also because the first response of many Jewish people to the message of the gospel is: 'The Messiah will bring in universal peace and godliness, and rescue Israel. Jesus did not do this, therefore he is not the Messiah.'

This paper will therefore seek to understand the consequences of the first coming of Jesus for the Jewish people. Its approach will be to examine a messianic prophecy in the OT in the light of the NT and Rabbinic literature, to see how it predicts/explains the first advent of our Lord, and the subsequent history of Israel (i.e., to see in what sense they fulfilled messianic prophecy). The NT will be looked at to see if the prophecies are confirmed as messianic within it, and to see how their concepts are developed here. Rabbinic literature will also be consulted along the same lines. The prophecy, Micah 2:12-13, has been chosen for this study because it seems to contain ambiguities that bear directly on the question in focus.

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II Context

Most commentators¹ place the immediate application of this prophecy to the events surrounding the Assyrian invasion of Judah under Sennacherib. Verse 12 has the people being gathered to Jerusalem for safety, yet still frightened by the besieging Assyrian army. Sennacherib would later write how he had 'shut up Hezekiah inside Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage'.² In verse 13, the threat is over (as per Isa 37:32), and their king breaks out of their enclosure, leading the remnant into the wider land. God breaks 'through the gate of the city of Jerusalem that had protected them, but now confines them'.³

Wolff⁴ finds the expression 'the king will go up (*ya'ābōr*) before them' as ruling out Jerusalem as the setting, as one goes down from Jerusalem, but the term can also be used in military sense, e.g. Joshua 1:1; 1 Samuel 7:7. Young describes the original simile as follows;

After the sheep had been confined all night in the makeshift sheepfold, the animals are anxious to break out. In the morning the shepherd will knock down a section of the piled up stones. He will break open

the barricade wall which penned up the sheep all night in a protective enclosure. Anxious to be released from the holding pen, the sheep will rush [note the LXX translation, 'they shall rush forth from among men through the breach made before them'] out as quickly as possible, knocking down more stones from the makeshift fence in order to break outside.⁵

This irresistible force, this bursting through, is seen also in 2 Samuel 5:20.

III Messianic Content

The pairing of the name of God with 'their king' at the end of verse 13 agrees with similar expressions in Isaiah (41:21; 43:15; 44:6 etc.). More importantly for this study is the name *happōrēs* 'the breaker.' The root of this word is *prš* and means to burst through, or make a breach in. It is the name given to Judah's first born (Gen 38:29; Mt 1:3). Perez was an ancestor of David, and 'son of Perez' is a messianic title in Rabbinic literature, and even to this day *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* contains the phrase, 'Through the offspring of Perez we also shall rejoice and be glad'.⁶ In both *Genesis Rabbah* (8:6), and *Leviticus Rabbah* (30) this is due to the 'generations (*toledoth*) of Perez' (Ruth 4:18) being spelt 'complete', with the initial *vav*.

The word generations (*toledoth*) whenever it occurs in the Bible, is

1 E.g. Leslie C. Allen. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976). Ralph L. Smith. *Word Biblical Commentary: Micah—Malachi* (ed. J. Watts; Waco: Word Books, 1984); David W. Baker, Desmond Alexander and Bruce Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (UK: IVP, 1988).

2 Allen, *The Books*, 302.

3 Smith, *Micah*, 29.

4 Hans W. Wolff. *Micah, a Commentary*, trans. Gary Stansell (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1990), 85.

5 Brad H. Young. *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 53.

6 *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, trans. S. Singer (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962), 156.

spelt defectively [i.e., without the *vav*], and for a very significant reason. Thus the word is spelt fully [with a *vav*] in the case of 'these are the generations of the heaven and of the earth', because when God created His world, there was no Angel of Death in the world, and on this account it is fully spelt; but as soon as Adam and Eve sinned, God made defective all the generations mentioned in the Bible. But when Perez arose, his generations were spelt fully again, because from him the Messiah would arise, and in his days God would cause death to be swallowed up, as it says, 'He will swallow up death forever.'⁷

Genesis Rabbah 12:6 adds that the *vav* corresponds to the six things (the numeric value of *vav*) that Adam was created with, yet through his sin were lost or spoiled, i.e., his lustre, his immortality, his height, the fruit of the earth, the fruit of trees and the luminaries. Verses are quoted to show

- a) that Adam originally had these in full,
- b) that as a result of the fall he lost them, and
- c) that the Messiah will restore them.

The root meaning of the name, to burst/break through or breach, always remains in focus, highlighting this dynamic aspect of the Messiah's mission. The Rabbinic expository work, *The Priestly Gift*, says; 'The last saviour is the Messiah, the son of David, who is descended from Judah's son Perez...

This is the Messiah who will soon appear, because it is written of him that, One who breaks open the way will go up before them.⁸ As will also be seen later, there is a thus a strong resonance between 'the Perez' of Micah 2:13, and the Messiah, the 'son of Perez'. To what extent, and in what ways is this messianic prophecy picked up on in the NT?

1. Direct references

The most direct reference to this passage is one that has only recently been identified. It occurs in Matthew 11:12. As Blomberg notes; 'Verse 12 forms an amazingly difficult interpretative crux.'⁹ A number of scholars have suggested the value of seeing the Matthew passage in terms of Micah, and with reference to a Rabbinic interpretation of it.

Concerning these, David Kimchi (the Radak) wrote, 'In the words of our teachers of blessed memory and in the Midrash, it is taught that "the breaker" is Elijah and "their king" is the branch, the Son of David.'¹⁰ In his commentary on Micah 2:12-13, the Radak also wrote that it concerned

the prophet Elijah, who will come before the time of deliverance to extend the hearts of the Israelites to their heavenly father in order to be a herald of redemption to them... but their king is the Messiah king, and

the Lord will go before them for at that time he will send back his Holy Spirit to Zion.¹¹

In the early Jewish midrash, the *Pesikta Rabbati*, it is also written,

When the Holy One, blessed be He, redeems Israel, three days before the Messiah comes, Elijah will come and stand upon the mountains of Israel... in that hour... He will redeem Israel, and He will appear at the head of them, as it is said, he who opens the breach will go up before them.¹²

In Matthew 11:12, John the Baptist is the Elijah of Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6, who goes before the Lord to prepare his way, the last and greatest of the old order, heralding in the new. As in the midrash, Jesus, the king, follows John. Note however, that John does not make the breach, and the least in the kingdom is greater than him. It is Jesus, the Lord himself, who, as in the original prophecy, both makes the breach and leads the sheep through the gate.

As the Matthew passage is dealing with the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, and contains reference both to the kingdom bursting forth, and of others bursting forth with it, the tie in to Micah 2:12-13 seems both clear and helpful. It is the dynamism of the kingdom, breaking in, and the action of those following him that is in focus. Young's rendering of the verse tries to capture this: 'The kingdom of heaven is breaking forth, and

everyone breaks forth with it.'¹³

The big drawback to this is Matthew's use of the word *biazetai*. Arndt and Gingrich, while noting its usually passive sense, also give the option of 'makes its way with triumphant force'.¹⁴ Note also that *pr̥s* itself, like the Greek term, is most often used in a passive sense. Of equal concern, G. Schrenk¹⁵ opts for a passive meaning. He does state however, that 'A first possibility... is to take *biazetai* in the sense of an intr. mid.: "the rule of God breaks in with power, with force and impetus"'.¹⁶

Of the commentators, Blomberg¹⁶ opts for a negative, passive meaning. W. Davies¹⁷ gives a good summary of translations to date, and following Schrenk, goes for the passive, as do Grundy,¹⁸ Hagner¹⁹ ('An infamous crux in the exegesis of Matthew'), and Morris.²⁰ None of these relates it to the

¹³ Young, *Jewish Theologian*, 71.

¹⁴ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. '*biazō*'.

¹⁵ Gottlob Schrenk, *Biazoēai Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1964), 1.609-14.

¹⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 186.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew*, ICC, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

¹⁸ Robert Grundy, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 209.

¹⁹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Bible Commentary, vol. 33a (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 303.

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 281.

⁷ Soncino *Midrash Rabbah* (trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman; Judaic Classics Library CD ROM; Davka: Chicago, 1995). *Leviticus Rabbah* 30.

⁸ Risto Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings*, trans. William Kinnard (Jerusalem: Keren Ahavah Meshihit, 1992), 44.

⁹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 187.

¹⁰ Young, *Jewish Theologian*, 64.

¹¹ Risto Santala, *The Messiah in the New Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings*, trans. William Kinnard (Jerusalem: Keren Ahavah Meshihit, 1992), 59.

¹² Young, *Jewish Theologian*, 63.

prophecy in Micah. Young²¹ lists several occasions where *biazetai* is used in the LXX to translate *pr̥s*. It is the generally negative usage of *biazetai* which sways the commentators.

2. More general usage

The concept of Jesus as 'the breaker' is certainly present in the NT. In Mark 3:27 he compares himself to a thief, breaking in. He is God, breaking in to our world. He has broken down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:14) and he has burst the gates of death, leading out a host of captives. And finally, he will return, bursting in on our unsuspecting world (Lu 12:39).

IV Discussion

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (the Ramban) described the birth of Perez as follows,

He was encircled by a hedge, and he was enclosed within it. That is why it was said 'so this is how you have broken through the hedge and come out from within it.' Perez was the first-born, 'the first-born through the power of the Most High, as it is written, 'I will give to him a first-born son.' This was written about the holy person who is to come, David, the king of Israel—long may he live. Those who are wise will understand.²²

With this profound statement, the Ramban describes the role of the Mes-

siah in terms that directly challenge the central tenet of Rabbinic Judaism, as expressed in the dictum of the Mishna: 'Be patient in justice, rear many disciples and make a fence²³ around the Torah.'²⁴ The Soncino footnote explains;

The Torah is conceived as a garden and its precepts as precious plants. Such a garden is fenced round for the purpose of obviating wilful or even unintended damage. Likewise, the precepts of the Torah were to be 'fenced' round with additional inhibitions that should have the effect of preserving the original commandments from trespass.

Thus the man-made hedge was to protect the Torah, and to help Israel not to break it. For a NT example, see 2 Corinthians 11:24 and Deuteronomy 25:1-3. In *Ruth Rabbah* 25 we likewise read; 'these are the Sanhedrin who... make a hedge round the words of the Torah'. That the Messiah would break through the hedge and come out from within it is a radical thought.

The Sages derived their concept of the fence from the Torah itself, where they found examples of fences. For example;

Hence it is written, *He shall abstain from wine and strong drink*. (And vinegar too is forbidden) on account of drunkenness. Why did the Torah forbid *any infusion of grapes*, seeing

that one does not get drunk thereby, and it likewise prohibited the eating of anything that proceeds from the vine, even such things as do not intoxicate? Why so? From this you can infer that it is a man's duty to keep away from unseemliness, from what resembles unseemliness and even from the semblance of a semblance. From this you can infer that the Torah has put a fence about its ordinances...Thou shalt not approach. This indicates that you must not even approach a thing that leads to transgression. Keep away from unseemliness and from what resembles unseemliness! For thus have the Sages said: Keep away from a small sin lest it lead you to a grievous one; run to fulfil a small commandment, for it will lead you to an important one.²⁵

Also,

R. Judah b. Pazzi asked: Why was the section dealing with consanguineous relationships placed next to the section dealing with holiness? Only to teach you that in every case where you find [regulations serving as] a fence against immorality you also find sanctity; and this agrees with the opinion expressed by R. Judah b. Pazzi elsewhere, namely, that who so fences himself against [the temptation to] sexual immorality is called Holy.²⁶

The concept of a fence developed to include Rabbinic authority²⁷ and even the death penalty;

Come and hear: R. Eleazar b. Jacob stated, 'I heard that even without any Pentateuchal [authority for their rulings]. Beth din may administer flogging and [death] penalties; not, however, for the purpose of transgressing the words of the Torah but in order to make a fence for the Torah.'²⁸

There is some indication that the Sages were uncomfortable with the breadth of licence they had granted themselves, and tried to set limits to it. For example;

Neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die (III, 3). Thus it is written, Add not unto His words, lest He reprove thee, and thou be found a liar (Prov. XXX, 6). R. Hiyya taught: That means that you must not make the fence more than the principal thing, lest it fall and destroy the plants. Thus, the Holy One, be He, had said, For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Gen. II, 17); whereas she did not say thus, but, *God hath said: ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it* [the Rabbis believing that Adam had given her the additional prohibition, thereby adding a fence to it]; when he [the serpent] saw her thus lying [for the fence was Adam's, not God's], he took and thrust her against it. 'Have you then died?' he said to her; 'just as you were not stricken through touching it, so will you not die when you eat it, but For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof,' etc.²⁹

It should be remembered that the Sages were living in Post-exile Judea,

²¹ Young, *Jewish Theologian*, 71.

²² The Ramban, *Mikraoth Gedoloth*, as quoted by Santata, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 44-45.

²³ The word fence here can refer either to a fence of rocks (e.g. *Baba Baratha* 69a), or to one of shrubs, i.e., a hedge.

²⁴ *Soncino Talmud* (trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman; Judaic Classics Library CD ROM; Davka: Chicago, 1995). *Mas. Avoth* Chapter 1. See also *Mas. Yoma*, 73b.

²⁵ *Numbers Rabbah*, 10: 8.

²⁶ *Leviticus Rabbah*, 24: 6.

²⁷ *Ecclesiastics Rabbah*, 10: 9.

²⁸ *Yevamoth*, 90b. (see also *Sanh.* 46a.).

²⁹ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19: 3.

that they had experienced the reality of God's wrath for breaking his commandments, and that they desired to understand, keep and protect them. Zechariah 8:14 can thus use the reality of God's punishment to show the reality of his promises—these people have experienced and know what it is to have God against them. After the Exile, the people were cured of apostasy—knowing that they had been sent into captivity, and lost their sovereignty because they broke the Sabbath etc., they now wanted to understand fully what was required of them, and to do it. That this led to legalism was tragic, but understandable.

Clearly, however, Jesus was opposed to the fence the Rabbis had set around the Torah (Mt 15:9, 5:38-39). The imagery of Micah is helpful here, of a city shut up. Concerning the Pharisees (Mt 23:13) and lawyers (Lu 11:52), he does not even place them within the city, but rather with the enemy, who, as Sennacherib had boasted, had shut the city up, so that no one could leave or enter. For another negative, sectarian view of the Pharisees along the same lines, see the Essene Damascus Covenant 4:19, 'The builders of the wall... are caught in fornication'³⁰—possibly interacting with the Pharisaic word play between *bānāy* and *bōnē* re Isaiah 54:13.³¹

Thus the incredibly radical activity of the Messiah is thrown into sharp relief. Returning again to John the Baptist, Jesus continued, 'For all the

prophets and the law prophesied until John came.' As seen, the Law was given as a fence to Israel, to separate and protect them (Dt 7:6-11). The prophets likewise were those who repaired the fence, who stood in the breach.

R. Nehemiah introduced his exposition with the verse, 'O Israel, thy prophets have been like foxes in ruins (Ezek. XIII, 4). Just as the fox looks about in the ruins to see where it can escape if it sees men coming, so were thy prophets in the ruins. Ye have not gone up in the breaches (ib.) like Moses. To whom can Moses be compared? To a faithful shepherd whose fence fell down in the twilight. He arose and repaired it from three sides, but a breach remained on the fourth side, and having no time to erect the fence, he stood in the breach himself. A lion came, he boldly withstood it; a wolf came and still he stood against it. But ye! Ye did not stand in the breach as Moses did. Had ye stood in the breach like Moses, ye would have been able to stand in the battle in the day of God's anger.'³²

Elijah then betook himself to Moses and said to him: 'O thou faithful shepherd, how many times hast thou stood in the breach for Israel and quashed their doom so that they should not be destroyed, as it says, Had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath, lest He should destroy them (Ps. CVI, 23).'³³

And I sought for a man among them,

that should make up the hedge... but I found none (Ezek. 22, 30)—save Noah, Daniel, and Job.³⁴

See also the Soncino commentary on *Ruth Rabbah*, 11:2; 'Rash. quotes Ezek. 13: 5, where the prophets are criticised for not fencing the house of Israel, whence we learn that 'fence' is metaphorical for the work of prophets'.

But with the coming of the Messiah, everything is changed. He does not simply continue in the tradition of the prophets. Rather than repairing the fence around Israel, he breaks it down. The night is over, and the Shepherd breaks down the protecting wall, and the sheep rush out after him. As in John 10:7-11; before Jesus, the protection was needed, but now the sheep can go out to pasture, and as Micah 2:13 notes, they go out through the Gate. This both affirms the fence as needful in the past, and states that, by his very coming, as the light of the world and the sun of righteousness, the Messiah has changed everything. Note Malachi 4:2; 'But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. *And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall*' (emphasis added).

How then is Jesus the Breaker, the one (as Ramban said), who breaks through the hedge? In Matthew 15:13 Jesus says, 'every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted'. As seen, John the Baptist is also associated with the breaker motif, and in this connection, see Matthew 3:10. Paul, in Ephesians 2:14-15 shows how Jesus destroyed 'the barrier, the dividing wall' by his death.

Indeed, 'He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances', for the Law itself can also be seen as a fence. 'Said R. Eleazar: "Even though the Torah was given as a fence at Sinai..."'³⁵

Surprisingly, this idea of the Messiah abolishing the Law agrees with a minority opinion within Rabbinic thought. The idea of the Messiah as lawgiver goes right back to Genesis 49:10, where 'ruler's staff' *ūmēhōqēq* can also mean 'lawgiver'.³⁶ This suggests that while expressing eternal truths, the Torah in its present form was given only for a certain time, until the Messianic age, where there would be Messianic Torah

The Talmud says; 'The world is to exist 6,000 years. In the first 2,000 years there was desolation [no Torah]. 2,000 years Torah flourished; the next 2,000 years is the Messianic era.'³⁷ The Midrash adds; 'The Torah which man learns in this world is but vanity compared with the teaching of the Messiah.'³⁸ Burt Yellin comments;

The thought of the Torah changing in the 'Age to Come' is again made perfectly clear in the rendering of Deuteronomy 17:18, in Sifra. Here it is stated that the Lord wrote a copy of the Mishna-Torah for Himself, and that He would not be content with the Mishna-Torah of the fathers. The question is asked: 'why

³⁰ Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 111.

³¹ See *Ber.* 64a.

³² *Ruth Rabbah*, Prologue 5. (See also Ezekiel 13:5).

³³ *Ester Rabbah*, 7:13.

³⁴ *Song of Songs Rabbah*, 11:44.

³⁵ *Leviticus Rabbah*, 1:10.

³⁶ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), s.v. 'hqq', 349. See also Isaiah 33:22.

³⁷ *Sanhedrin*, 97a.

³⁸ *Midrash Qohelet*, 71:8.

does He say Mishna [from the root *shana*, to repeat] -Torah? Because it is destined to be changed.³⁹

Note that the *Pesikhta Rabbati* also says that ‘the Torah will revert to its original state’.⁴⁰

There are a number of hints as to how this will occur.

1. Simplification

According to the Talmud;

Moses was given 613 precepts; of these there are 365 (thou shalt) in accordance with the number of days in the year, and 248 (thou shalt not) according to the number of bones in a man’s body... Came David and cut them down to eleven (Psalm 15)... Came Isaiah and cut them down to six (Isaiah 33:15-16)... Came Micah and cut them to three (Micah 6:8)... Isaiah came back and cut them down to two (Isaiah 61:1)... Came Habakkuk and cut them to one, as it is written (Habakkuk 2:4), ‘the righteous shall live by faith.’⁴¹

This prophecy is fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ; ‘For in this gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “the righteous shall live by faith”’ (Rom 1:17).

2. Giving of a new law

Yalqut Isaiah [v. 26, *siman* 296] states that, ‘The Holy One—may He be blessed—will sit and draw up a new Torah

for Israel, which will be given to them by the Messiah’.⁴² The Targum of Isaiah 12:3 also reads in part; ‘And you shall receive new instruction with joy from the Chosen of righteousness.’

This was fulfilled in John 13:34; ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you.’ No one but the Messiah could give a new commandment.

3. Closure of the sacrificial system

This is taught on the Midrash on the inauguration of Aaron’s priesthood; ‘In the Time to Come all sacrifices will be annulled, but that of thanksgiving will not be annulled, and all prayers will be annulled, but [that of] Thanksgiving will not be annulled.’⁴³

This was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus; ‘Unlike the other High Priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day ... this he did once and for all when he offered himself’ (Heb 7:27). Concerning the point of the continuation of the sacrifice of thanksgiving, see Hebrews 13:15.

4. Abolition of dietary laws

The Midrash on Psalm 146:7 states that even the laws of kashrut (diet) will be abolished. “The Lord sets the prisoners free”... What does this ‘setting free of prisoners’ mean?.. in the future the Holy one will make all unclean animals fit for eating.’⁴⁴ This was fulfilled in Mark 7:19; ‘thus he de-

clared all foods clean’. Note that this is in a pericope where Jesus has just stated his hedge-breaking credentials (Mt 15:13).

5. Leading us out from the realm of the Torah

The Rabbis taught that the jurisdiction of the Torah ended with death. ‘And thus R. Johanan said, “What is meant by the verse, Among the dead [I am] free? Once a man dies, he becomes free of the Torah and good deeds.”’⁴⁵ This is also taught elsewhere;

Our Rabbis taught: A garment in which [both linen and wool threads are woven may not be worn by the living] ... but it may be made into a shroud for a corpse. R. Joseph observed: This implies that the commandments will be abolished in the Hereafter. Said Abaye (or as some say R. Dimi) to him: But did not R. Manni in the name of R. Jan-nai state, ‘This was learnt only in regard to the time of the lamentations but for burial this is forbidden’? — The other replied: But was it not stated in connection with it, ‘R. Johanan ruled: Even for burial’? And thereby R. Johanan followed his previously expressed view, for R. Johanan stated: ‘What is the purport of the Scriptural text, Free among the dead? As soon as a man dies he is free from the commandments.’⁴⁶

So, in the resurrection life, we are not under the law. Thus the resurrected Jesus is no longer under the law, and as we follow him (Mic 2:13), so we also

are led out from it. This is the teaching in Romans 7:4; ‘So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.’

So we can see the Messiah as the one who breaks out of the confines of the law, and how we also rush out, following him. As Perez burst out of the womb to new life, so we have left our school master behind. It is through his resurrection that Jesus made the breach, through ‘the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is, through his flesh’ (Heb 10:20).

V Consequences

1. For the Breaker

a) Divinity

‘Their king will pass before them, the LORD at their head.’ The commentators agree that the breaker of verse 12 is also the king, and that the king is the LORD. ‘That [the LORD] is the “breaker” is shown by the parallel terms in lines 7 and 8.’⁴⁷ ‘We also find an allusion to Deutero-Isaiah’s message when v. 13 calls [the LORD] king (41:21; 43:15; 44:6; 52:7), as well as the twofold emphasis that the LORD ‘goes before them’ (Isa 52:12 cf. 45:1f.)’⁴⁸

This linking the Messiah king to the LORD is found also in Rabbinic literature. *Lamentations Rabbah*, 1:51

³⁹ Burt Yellin, *Messiah: A Rabbinic and Scriptural Viewpoint* (Denver, CO: Roer Israel, 1984), 130.

⁴⁰ Santala, *Messiah in the Old Testament*, 71.

⁴¹ *Makkoth* 23-24.

⁴² Yellin, *Messiah*, 131.

⁴³ *Leviticus Rabbah*, 9: 7.

⁴⁴ As cited by Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 194.

⁴⁵ *Shabbat*, 30a.

⁴⁶ *Mas. Nidah*, 61b.

⁴⁷ James E. Smith, *What the Bible Teaches about the Promised Messiah* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 68.

⁴⁸ Wolff, *Micah*, 86.

asks the question; 'What is the name of King Messiah?' The answer given by Rabbi Abba b. Kahana is: 'His name is YHVH'; in the Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 21:3 [Rabbi Simeon] states that God would; 'set His crown upon the head of King Messiah, and clothe Him with His honour and majesty.'... The Midrash continues with two designations of Messiah, stating that He is: 'YHVH a man of war' and: 'YHVH is our righteousness.'⁴⁹

It is also noted that the LORD as breaker ('Perez') is familiar to the OT (Ex 19:22, 2 Sam 5:20; 6:8). It is a cataclysmic bursting forth of the LORD, regardless of the wishes of man. The prophecy of Micah confirms that the Messiah has the divine name, and does divine things.

b) The serpent's bite

Ecclesiastes 10:8 states that 'whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him'.

Having seen how the Sages perceived their task in terms of protecting the status quo, by placing a fence around the Torah (itself perceived as a fence), it is unsurprising that they should have employed this verse to guard both their work ('For whoever breaks down a fence erected by the Sages will eventually suffer; as it is stated, "Whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him"'),⁵⁰ and God's commands;

[You ask (the serpent),] 'Why do you lurk among the hedges?' 'Because I broke through a fence of the world.' R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: The serpent

broke through a fence of the world [by violating God's law] and was therefore made the executioner of all who break through fences.⁵¹

Leviticus Rabbah 26:2 states;

R. Samuel b. Nahman observed: The serpent was asked: 'Why are you generally to be found among fences?' He replied: 'Because I made a breach in the fence of the world'. R. Simeon b. Yohai learned: The serpent was the first to make a breach in the world's fence, and so he has become the executioner of all who make breaches in fences.

To what extent does this understanding apply to the ben Perez, to the breaker? On the cosmic level, he is the one breaking into the world who will restore the Edenic, pre-fall stature of humanity (the second Adam); a run-in with the Snake who opposes this purpose, conforms to the Messianic prophecy from the fall; 'he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel' (Gen 3:15). The serpent in this sense now guards the fallen world against the breaking in of its redeemer.⁵² The strong man has been bound, however, and his goods liberated.⁵³

As for those breaking out with the King, see Romans 16:20. As the one who broke through, the Messiah suffered the consequences (Eccl 10:8), was struck by the Serpent, and tasted death for every one. As to the Oral Torah, it was his criticism of this that led to the Sages desiring that he would suffer the punishment. This is seen in Matthew 15:12, where he speaks

against Rabbinic law, and about the hedge being broken.

c) Ascension

'The one who breaks through, going up before them'. While, as seen, the 'going up' can legitimately be viewed as a military term, the actual word is also used of eagles ascending (Isa 40:31), of going up to meet with God (Ex 19:3) and of offerings offered to God (2 Kgs 3:20). As often, a prophecy fits the time given, but finds its truest meaning only in the Messiah ('All the prophets prophesied only for the days of the Messiah'),⁵⁴ this word of the King breaking through, and then going up from Jerusalem, also finds its ultimate fulfilment in Acts 1:9.

Focusing on the person of the Messiah, this prophecy then speaks of his mission, to break out, and to liberate others; of his divinity; of the cost to him, and of his exaltation on high.

2. For Israel

Isaiah 5:5 and 7 say, 'Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall and it will be trampled... the vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.'

The use of the parallelism of 'hedge' and 'wall' is of interest. The Oral Law was seen as providing an additional layer of protection, yet a city besieged would be surrounded both by its own walls and by the enemy siege mound (2 Kgs 25:1-4; Ezek 4:2; Lu 19:43). The second wall would hem in the city, pre-

venting supplies and reinforcements from reaching it, and those inside from leaving. Does this also describe the Oral Law?

While meant to protect, its actual function has been to stop people at its hedge, and so prevent them from reaching the Torah. As seen, Luke 11:52 and Matthew 23: 13 agree with this image. Concerning its initial setting however, Isaiah 37:33 should be noted. See also Ezekiel 13:10-16, and Isaiah 22:4-12.

The placing of a hedge around something was a form of protection (Job 1:10).

And whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him: i.e. Dinah. While her father and brothers were sitting in the House of Study, She went out to see the daughters of the land (Gen. XXXIV, 1). She brought upon herself her violation by Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, who is called *a serpent*, [Hivite being connected to the Aramaic word for snake] and he bit her; as it is written, And Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, and he took her, etc. (ib. 2). 'He took her' --he spoke seductively to her, as the word is used in Take with you words (Hosea XIV, 3); And lay with her'⁵⁵

It was because she went out from her families' protection/fence that the Hivite was able to bite her.

As the Breaker who creates a breach in the hedge, does the Messiah thereby render Israel vulnerable? Paul tells us that Jesus broke down the wall between Jew and Gentile, and Jesus himself prophesied that Jerusalem

⁵¹ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 10:12.

⁵² John 12:31; John 16:11; John 14:30.

⁵³ Colossians 2:15; 1 John 3:8.

⁵⁴ *Ber.*, 34b.

⁵⁵ *Eccl. Rab.*, 10:9.

⁴⁹ Yellin, *Messiah*, 23-24.

⁵⁰ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 1:25.

would be trodden down by the Gentiles. Is there a causal link here?

Before discussing this further, is there any evidence for a change in the spiritual conditions in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus? Can history inform our discussion?

Our Rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple the lot ['For the Lord'] did not come up in the right hand; nor did the crimson-coloured strap become white; nor did the westernmost light shine; and the doors of the Temple [to the Holy of Holies] opened of their own accord. Then R. Johanan b. Zakkai rebuked them, saying: Temple, Temple, why wilt thou be the alarmed thyself [Predict thy own destruction]? I know about thee that thou wilt be destroyed, for Zechariah ben Ido has already prophesied concerning thee [I.e., concerning this significant omen of the destruction of the Temple]: Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that a fire may devour thy cedars. R. Isaac b. Tablai said: Why is its [The Sanctuary. A play on *lēbānôn* connected with *lēbānôn*] name called Lebanon? Because it makes white the sins of Israel... *Yoma* 39b.

Both the strap changing colour, and the westernmost light shining were seen to be evidences of God's presence and grace; 'as it has been taught:

Originally they used to fasten the thread of scarlet on the door of the [Temple] court on the outside. If it turned white the people used to rejoice, and if it did not turn white they were sad... and it has further been taught: 'For forty years before the destruction of the Temple the

thread of scarlet never turned white but it remained red.'⁵⁶

And

The westernmost light on the candlestick in the Temple, into which as much oil was put as into the others. Although all the other lights were extinguished, that light burned oil, in spite of the fact that it had been kindled first. This miracle was taken as a sign that the Shechina rested over Israel. V. Shab. 22b and Men. 86b.⁵⁷

Rashi states that the above events were signs that the Shechina, the Holy Spirit, was leaving the Temple.⁵⁸ 'Forty years before the destruction of the Temple the Sanhedrin went into exile' *Sabbath* 15a. This 'exile' was when they moved to the Chamber of Hewn Stones (after losing the power of life and death).

'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah' (XLIX, 10): this refers to the throne of kingship', *Numbers Rabbah* 3:12. When this departed the Sanhedrin 'went into exile', and were no longer able to impose the death penalty. Rabbi Rahmon said:

When the members of the Sanhedrin discovered that the rights of life and death had been torn from their hands a general consternation seized hold of them. They covered their heads with ashes and their bodies with sackcloth, shouting, 'woe to us! The sceptre of Judah has been taken away and the Messiah

has not yet come.'⁵⁹

Note that the Sanhedrin lost this power when the Romans took over after the death of Herod the Great. By the time the Roman governor arrived, the Messiah, however, had indeed come. Matthew 2:19-21 states,

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

The prophecy of Genesis 49 was not broken. As the Sanhedrin were moving into exile, the Messiah was entering the land of Israel.

It was also at this time that the priests ceased to pronounce the divine name. It seems therefore, that at the time of Jesus, the Shechina⁶⁰ departed from the Temple, the sacrifice for sin lost its efficacy, the Sceptre seemingly departed from Judah, and the Name of the Lord was no longer used. As a result, it was understood both by ben Zakkai, and a prophet, Jesus ben Ananus,⁶¹ that the Second Temple

was doomed. Just as it was the people forsaking God which led to his removing his Spirit from the first Temple, which then allowed the Babylonians to destroy it, so also with the Second Temple. It will also be noted that all of the above Talmudic references deal directly with the Day of Atonement, the scape-goat and the red heifer.

Seven days before the burning of the [red] heifer the priest who was to burn the heifer was removed from his house to the cell in the north-eastern corner before the Birah. It was called the cell of the stone chamber. And why was it called the cell of the stone chamber [or, the Chamber of Hewn Stones]? Because all its functions [in connection with the red heifer] had to be performed only in vessels made of either cobble-stones, stone or earthenware.⁶²

And 'Our Rabbis taught: Ten times did the high priest pronounce the [Ineffable] Name on that day: Three times at the first confession, thrice at the second confession, thrice in connection with the he-goat to be sent away, and once in connection with the lots.'⁶³ In Ezekiel's description of the Spirit leaving the Temple, the Spirit directly anticipates the departure of Jesus, and this is also the exact reverse of the Lord's final return with the Shechina to the Temple.

These phenomena are explained by the rejection by the nation of Jesus. (Mt 23:38) He was sent out from the Chamber of Hewn Stone (Mt 26:59). It was he who suffered outside the city ('their king will pass on before them' (Mic

⁵⁶ *Rosh HaShana*, 31b.

⁵⁷ Soncino Commentary, *Yoma*, 39a.

⁵⁸ Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 106.

⁵⁹ As cited by Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 104.

⁶⁰ The idea that the Spirit of prophecy had departed earlier is well addressed by John R. Levinson, 'Did the Spirit withdraw from Israel? An evaluation of the earliest Jewish data', *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997), 35-57, and Benjamin D. Sommer, 'Did Prophecy cease? Re-evaluating a revaluation', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115-1 (Spring 1996), 31-47.

⁶¹ Josephus. *The Jewish War*, ed. Gaalya Cornfeld; trans. Gaalya Cornfeld. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 6:30-9.

⁶² *Yoma*, 2a.

⁶³ *Yoma*, 39b.

2:13), bearing the sin of the people (Jn 11:50), and as Hosea 3:4 states, they now abide without their king, sacrifice and priest. For Jesus is all of these, and without him they lack the Sceptre, the Sacrifice and the High Priest (Heb 3:1). In him the Name of the Lord dwelt, and on him rested the Holy Spirit.

The Breaker both breaches the wall and goes out through it, leading his people with him. The wall that separated (i.e., protected) the Jews from the Gentiles, he broke. *Exodus Rabbah* 11:5 describes Israel as a 'fence for the world'. But by then going out from the city he did a number of things:

a) He separated godliness from Israel. This had already been telegraphed by the Breaker's herald (Mt 3:9). Had he broken the wall, yet stayed inside, the Gentiles would have flooded into Judaism, and this was a wine skin that the Breaker did not want to be burst (Lu 5:37).

b) It also meant that all who would follow him must do what he did, and go beyond the city walls, and bear the shame and reproach.

The failure of the Temple, and the destruction of Jerusalem can thus be attributed to the breaking down of separateness of Israel, and the going out of their King (i.e., as understood in terms of the messianic prophecy in Micah). The context in Micah was one of disobedience and rejection by the people and their leaders, and so it is here. This, however, in no way lessens the tears of Jesus for them.

Again, note the radical use of imagery in this prophecy; for a breaker to make a breach and go out is to speak of loss of unity;

There is no breach (*ḥrs*): [that is], may our company not be like that

of David from which issued Ahitophel. And no going forth: [that is] may our company not be like that of Saul from which issued Doeg the Edomite.⁶⁴

In this context, see also Isaiah 8:12-15, Luke 2:34 and Matthew 10:34-36. Note also that it was the breaking down of the walls which caused the breach (naturally), and the division within Israel (Jn 10:19, where verse 9 is the breach), and his rejection (Lu 4:25-29; Lu 12:51; Acts 22:21-22).

This section has concentrated on the consequences for Israel of the breaking of the hedge and the departure of their Messiah. This is legitimate (Lu 23: 28-31), but the focus of the prophecy is rather on the Messiah and those following after him, rushing, breaking out with him. This is the joy of Acts, of Paul—not to escape from the Jewish people, but to burst free of the law and from the sting of death, into the broad pastures to which their shepherd was leading them.

VI Conclusion

This essay began by asking to what extent the first coming of Jesus could be seen as Messianic. Jewish messianic expectations were seen as being somewhat ethnocentric, and as being more naturally fulfilled at what Christians term the second coming. The essay has therefore proved to be something of a surprise, as the prophecy examined proved to have deeper resonance with Jewish messianic understanding than with Christian, yet the Messiah revealed there is very much a universal saviour.

64 Mas. Berachoth, 17b.

As this dovetails with Christian understandings and claims, the warning of Levinson is pertinent; 'when an early Jewish viewpoint, ... provides what appears to be an exceptionally suitable foil for New Testament points of view, New Testament scholars ought to exercise particular suspicion about the manipulation of data'.⁶⁵ I have therefore tried to exercise care that the patterns described are true to the Rabbinic understanding, by means of including both the context and thematic studies. If the NT can then be shown to honestly participate in such patterns, it speaks more of a shared wisdom than of misappropriation, and has profound consequences for both. That is, Jesus may be the Jewish Messiah, and Jewish exegesis may powerfully inform Christian theology.

The essay has also tried to show how Rabbinic literature can help to clarify an obscure passage in the NT. Clearly, the OT view of the Messiah is prophetic, the rabbinical view is theoretical, and the NT view is experiential. As both of the latter are based on the former, there is legitimate reason to expect some common ground.

Looking at the prophecy itself, what do we have? The first thing to note is the radical nature of the image. The Messiah is portrayed as king, God and breaker, who does not stand in the breach, but creates it, bursting through the protective walls and into the wider world. This is a very threatening image within Rabbinic literature. This Messiah is no mere continuation of the old

order, but violently ushers in the new. As *ḥappōrēs*, he circumcises the law by cutting through the hedge of flesh with which the Pharisees had surrounded it. He also circumcises our hearts by cutting away the works of flesh that we try to protect them with (Jer 4:4; Col 2:11). Not only that, he breaks down the walls between Jew and Gentile.

As to the consequences of this for Israel, by breaking down the wall that protected them from the Gentiles, he ushered in the time of the Gentiles, and with his rejection and departure, the Spirit left the Temple, and Jerusalem was trodden down. Even the division this caused within Israel is itself a fulfilment of OT prophecy. Again, the events which followed the first coming of Jesus are seen to conform to the Rabbinic understanding of this prophecy.

In answer then to the question posed by this essay, the first coming of Jesus was Messianic, in part because it fulfilled Jewish understandings of a messianic prophecy, both as it related to the Jewish people and religion, and as it related to the person of the Messiah himself. In his first coming, Jesus wrought messianic effects.

We have seen, however, as ben Perez, he is also Davidic and a restorer (Hos 6:1). While Rabbinic exegesis sees the ambivalence within the prophecy itself, the mood is one of triumph. He is ben Perez, who breaks the walls between God and man (Isa 59:2), bursts the gates of death, and restores the Edenic stature of man. He is thus a universal Messiah, who breaks into this world, who is bitten by and crushes the serpent, and who ascends before them. He has the Name of God, and all his generations are perfect (1 Cor 15: 45-49; Isa 53: 10). He did not break the

65 John R. Levinson, 'Did the Spirit Withdraw from Israel? An Evaluation of the Earliest Jewish Data', *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 1 [January 1997], 57.

wine skins, and will return suddenly to his sanctuary.

The Rabbinic linkage to ben Perez thus expands the scope of this prophecy (which describes the first coming of Jesus, not so much in terms of his substitutionary death, but how it impacts on Jews, Gentiles and the people of God) and looks to the completion of all things. Through this linkage, Perez remains a positive figure for the Jewish nation, and the triumph of the original prophecy is not misplaced. For a hurting people who wonder how Jesus was the Messiah for them, this prophecy is a powerful word from the Lord.

In the end, what do we have? A Messiah who desires to meet with us, who bursts through our walls of separation and will not allow us to deal with him from a distance, who will not interact with us via an intermediary such as the Law, but desires to see us face to face.

*A garden locked is my sister, my
bride, a garden locked, a fountain
sealed...*

*I come to my garden, my sister, my
bride; I gather my myrrh with my
spice..*

*Make haste my beloved, and be like
a gazelle or a young stag on the
mountain of spices.*

From Patristics to the Study of Early Christianity

Wendy Elgersma Helleman

Keywords: *Archaeology, dogma, feminism, Greco-Roman antiquity, Gnosticism, Judaism, orthodoxy, philosophy, reformers, university.*

The earliest years of Christianity have held a special interest throughout the centuries. Early Christian leaders and authors have been highly esteemed, not far below the writers of Scripture themselves. But the period of the Reformation, when the reformers accused the Roman Catholic Church of betraying its heritage, must be noted for its scholarly attention to this period.

That is also the context in which 'Patristics' or 'Patristic Studies' was first recognized as a specific academic focus and scholarly discipline. The title reflects its central focus on the *Fathers* (*patres* in Greek) of Christian thought and belief. The term 'Father' was an honorary title, given to important teachers, bishops and writers who helped guide, shape and develop Christianity in those early years.¹ As a

title, 'Father' may reflect a degree of affection, based on the apostle Paul calling himself a 'father' to the Corinth congregation which he brought into being.² It certainly reflects common acceptance of early leaders as 'orthodox' for teaching which was widely accepted on the principle of apostolic succession, and in agreement with authentic traditions handed down from the apostles. It also reflects commendation for holiness of life.³

The list of such leaders in the west includes figures like Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, and in the east: Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius and the Cappadocians. As such *Patristics* represents an abbreviation for *Theologia Patristica*, further abbreviated to *Patrologia* or *Patrology*, as the study of writings of the early Christian Fathers which have had a significant impact on the early Chris-

² Frances Young, 'The Greek Fathers', 135-47 in Ian Hazlett ed., *Early Christianity. Origins and Evolution to AD 600* (London: SPCK, 1991), 135-6.

³ Drobner, *The Fathers*, 3-4.

¹ H. R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 3.

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