

Messianic expectations in Genesis (part 1): the seed of the woman

Introduction – setting the scene

The writers of the New Testament view the Old Testament as an important testimony to Jesus Christ.¹

New Testament use of the Pentateuch – a few examples

"Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev. 5:5 NIV).

The apostle Paul associates Jesus with the promises "spoken to Abraham and to his seed" (Gal. 3:16).

Paul speaks of Christ being "our Passover lamb," who "has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7).

The author of Hebrews compares Jesus Christ's high priestly ministry with that of the Levitical high priest who serves in the tabernacle.

Reading the Pentateuch – some observations

1. We need to read biblical books in their entirety.
2. We must not "overread" the text.
3. We must not read into the text ideas that are derived from elsewhere.
4. We need to understand the compositional techniques of ancient writers to avoid misreading the text.
5. We must not allow preconceived ideas to restrict our reading of the text.

In Genesis 9:20-27, almost all commentators assume that Ham abuses his father, Noah. Is this what the text says?

Messianic expectations in Genesis

In his three-volume commentary on Genesis Claus Westermann discusses the concept of Messiah in only two passages: 3:15 and 49:8-12.²

"And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15 NIV)

The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his. (Genesis 49:10 NIV)

¹ For an extensive survey of the NT use of the OT, see G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Nottingham: Baker Academic/Apollos, 2007).

² C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (London/Minneapolis: SPCK/Augsburg, 1984), 487, sees a reference to the messianic age in 9:20. He observes briefly that "the vine and its fruit became the sign of the blessed life in the messianic era."

In a recent book on the theme of messianism in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish texts, Torleif Elgvin makes no mention of messianic ideas in the book of Genesis.³

Genesis 3 – an unlikely aetiology

Sigmund Mowinckel wrote with reference to Genesis 3:15:

It is now generally admitted by those who adopt the historical approach to theology that there is no allusion here to the Devil or to Christ as ‘born of woman’, but that it is a quite general statement about mankind, and serpents, and the struggle between them which continues as long as the earth exists. The poisonous serpent strikes at man’s foot whenever he is unfortunate enough to come too near to it; and always and everywhere man tries to crush the serpent’s head when he has the chance.⁴

1. The serpent is no run-of-the-mill creature.
2. The serpent is categorised as being a “wild animal,” more literally “an animal of the field” (Gen. 3:1).
3. This serpent can speak.
4. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is no ordinary tree.

If Genesis 3 is merely an aetiology about people and snakes, we need to ask, why has this story been given such prominence in the Genesis narrative?

All aetiological readings of Genesis 3 fail to interpret the story within its fuller literary context.

Genesis 3 in the light of Genesis 1

God instructs humans to exercise authority over all other earthly creatures, mentioning in particular the wild animals (Genesis 1:26).

While Genesis 3 is often labelled the Fall, it might be better to speak of it as the Great Betrayal.

By obeying the serpent, the human couple become in effect its servants.

Historically, within the Christian tradition, Genesis 3:15 has been known as the *protevangelium* (or *protoevangelium*), the first announcement of the gospel.

The apostle John in the book of Revelation refers to “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9; cf. 20:2, which states, “the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan”).

However, especially during the 20th century, the pendulum has swung away from a messianic reading of Genesis 3:15.

³ T. Elgvin, *Warrior, King, Servant, Savior: Messianism in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022).

⁴ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 11; cf. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 259-60.

E. J. Young, in his monograph on Genesis 3, argues that God's pronouncement against the serpent does not speak of Christ's overcoming the devil. He writes: "By the 'seed of the woman,' then we are to understand, not a personal Messiah, but the entire human race."⁵

In what is a remarkable, and somewhat puzzling turnaround, Young writes,

That there is a reference to Christ, however, is not to be rejected. It is true that the prophecy is uttered in general terms, and its primary meaning is that the human race is to be victorious over the serpent. Nevertheless, it is also true that the way in which man will vanquish Satan is that there will be born of woman One, even Jesus Christ, who will obtain the victory. In this sense, this is a prophecy of Christ, and deserves to be known as the Protevangelium. The Bible does not say that the descendants of Adam will overcome, but the seed of the woman. And it is of note to realize that the word 'seed' is in the singular. It is the seed of the woman as comprehended in the Redeemer that will deliver the fatal blow.⁶

The woman's offspring – singular or plural?

Andrew Abernethy and Greg Goswell in their recent book, *God's Messiah in the Old Testament: Expectations of a Coming King*, write, "It seems most natural, then, to interpret Gen. 3:15 as referring more generally to the continual enmity between evil and the sons and daughters of Eve in general."⁷

They go on to say, "since all the other curses and consequences in verses 14-19 are perpetual and long term, it seems odd to think of verse 15 as pronouncing an isolated occasion of enmity between an individual seed of woman and an individual seed of the snake at a later date."

1. John Collins observes that when זָרַע "offspring/seed" is used with singular verbs and pronouns it denotes one offspring.⁸
2. A plural interpretation of זָרַע is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.

By striking the head of the serpent, the woman's offspring re-establishes God's initial commission that humans were to rule over all other earthly creatures as his vicegerents.

Conclusion

It is important to read Genesis 3:15 in its full literary context.

God's prediction that the woman's offspring will strike the head of the serpent implies its subjugation and a reversal of the human submission to the serpent that has been described in the first part of Genesis 3.

The expectation hinted at in Genesis 3:15 is developed in the rest of Genesis.

⁵ E. J. Young, *Genesis 3: A Devotional and Expository Study* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 114.

⁶ Young, *Genesis 3*, 120.

⁷ A. T. Abernethy and G. Goswell, *God's Messiah in the Old Testament: Expectations of a Coming King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 13.

⁸ C. J. Collins, "A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman's Seed Singular or Plural?," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997) 139-48; C. J. Collins, "Galatians 3:16: What Kind of an Exegete Was Paul?," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003) 75-86. See J. Cheek, "Recent Developments in the Interpretation of The Seed of The Woman in Genesis 3:15," *JETS* 64 (2021) 215-36.