

In scientific areas, whenever two or more models are competing to explain some phenomenon, a crucial experiment is sought to distinguish between the competitors. In a situation like ours (as in any historical investigation), experiments are not possible. However, we can seek certain crucial data which will perform about the same function. Indeed, we find that there are several important features of the Old Testament data concerning the Messiah where certain peculiarities make it particularly difficult to construct a satisfactory model.

The Office of the Messiah

The word "Messiah" itself is a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning "annointed one" just as the word "Christ" transliterates the Greek for "annointed one." In the Old Testament both the high priest and the king were ceremonially annointed to indicate they were God's choice for the office. Thus the question arises, is the predicted Messiah to be a king or a priest?

The Jewish monastics at Qumran apparently expected two Messiahs, as their Manual of Discipline speaks of the coming of "the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel" (1). Since the high priest was a descendant of Aaron and the king ruled over Israel, this is generally thought to refer to a priest Messiah and a king Messiah (2). We should not be surprised at this view, as the Old Testament regulations for Israel kept the priesthood and rulership distinctly separate. Neither Moses, Joshua nor the judges were priests, and the kingship, when established, was not given to descendants of Levi. In fact, when King Uzziah tried to act as priest, God struck him with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16-21).

It is therefore rather striking that the New Testament sees the Messiah as one person (Jesus) who combines both kingship and priesthood in Himself. For example, Heb. 1:8 pictures Jesus as king, and chapters 3 to 10 of the same book consider His priestly activity.

Among the Old Testament data regarding the office of the Messiah, the 110th Psalm is crucial, especially verse 4:

The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent,
Thou art a priest forever after the order of
Melchizedek.

This Psalm was recognized as Messianic in pre-Christian times (3), and it clearly speaks of God establishing someone as ruler who is also called a priest. But just because of the very strict separation of kingship and priesthood in Israel, it was necessary for the Psalmist to go all the way back to the time of Abraham, to that mysterious figure Melchizedek (Gen. 14), in order to find an example of a righteous priest-king.

In this significant aspect, the New Testament model of