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JESUS AS THE RIGHTEOUS BRANCH IN JEREMIAH 33:14-16

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## Introduction

Jerusalem fell under siege by the army of Nebuchadnezzar from 588-587 B.C., confirming the fears and proclamations of the countless prophets of God who spoke of God's coming judgment for the sins and wickedness of the people of Israel. Destruction was imminent, and resistance was futile. But in the midst of the mounting terror, the Lord issued a threefold promise to his prophet Jeremiah, which contained a bright ray of hope for the future of his people.

God confirmed that the coming destruction by the hand of the Babylonians was ordained as a measure of judgment upon the people of Judah in response to their wickedness. Yet issuing from a bleak proclamation of judgment and destruction were a series of divine promises. God's promises evoked a beautiful image of the city of Jerusalem restored to its former glory (33:6-11), and the rhythms of daily life once again returning to the surrounding countryside (v. 12-13). Perhaps most shockingly to Jeremiah's audience, these oracles were followed by the promise of the restoration of the Davidic line on the throne of Israel:

The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.  
"In those days and at that time  
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;  
he will do what is just and right in the land.  
In those days Judah will be saved  
and Jerusalem will live in safety.  
This is the name by which it will be called:  
The Lord Our Righteous Savior (Jer. 33:14-16).

This essay will analyze extensively the fulfillment of God's restoration promises to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 33:6-16. We will see that at least a partial fulfillment of these promises can be observed in Israel's post-exilic history, but the glorious, divine language

and descriptions of the restoration of Israel in Jeremiah's prophecy point to a measure of final fulfillment that had not yet been seen by God's people, even during the post-exilic reconstruction. While the Lord did remain faithful to his promise to bring back Israel and Judah from exile, it is perhaps an overstatement to conclude that the historical return from Babylon in 538 directly and fully satisfies the promises of Jeremiah 33:6-16. There seems to be a sense in which these promises were partially fulfilled in history, but have yet to achieve their full consummation, which will occur in the eschatological arrival of the promised righteous Branch from the line of David.

This essay will consist of three sections. In the first section, I will develop a fuller understanding of the righteous Branch prophecy in Jeremiah 33:14-16 by taking a brief look at the historical context and historical atmosphere surrounding the passage. This will be followed by a brief survey of the literary context of the passage where I will summarize the judgment prophecies and restoration promises that lead up to the Davidic Branch prophecy. At the conclusion of this section, I will assess each of God's restoration promises in terms of their immediate historical fulfillment. In the second section, I will focus in on the righteous Branch prophecy and trace the theme from its origin in Isaiah through the post-exilic Prophetic books, and attempt to determine how prophets other than Jeremiah understood the role of the Branch. Finally, I will discuss the New Testament understanding of the righteous Branch, explore how each promise related to the Davidic ruler promised in Jeremiah 33:14-16 is most satisfied in the coming rule of Jesus at the end of days, and conclude by discussing how Jesus' eternal reign fully satisfies God's restoration promises in verses 6-13.

## PART 1

### Historical and Literary Context

Jeremiah's oracles are deeply enmeshed in the historical events of his day, so a brief overview of the historical context in which Jeremiah was operating is necessary for understanding Jeremiah 33:14-16.

Scholars date Jeremiah's prophecies from the mid-620s B.C to no later than 587. These were turbulent years for the nation of Judah. With Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's attention diverted to protecting his crumbling empire from stronger foreign powers in the Egyptians and the Medes, Josiah, king of Judah, was able to institute widespread reform and a period of national religious resurgence. This was short-lived, however, as the Babylonians destroyed the Assyrian capital and quickly rose to power. Josiah was killed in 605 B.C. attempting cut off Neco and the Egyptian army before they could reinforce the remaining Assyrian troops and advance against Babylon.<sup>1</sup> Josiah's reforms lapsed quickly thereafter as Jehoiakim reinstated foreign cults throughout Judah. In 601, Jehoiakim staged a rebellion against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1), provoking Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to march on Jerusalem in 598. Jehoiakin, the then deceased king Jehoiakim's successor, was exiled to Babylon and Zedekiah was installed as the new vassal king in 597. Zedekiah openly rebelled against the suzerain Babylonians, inciting the final invasion and destruction of the city of Jerusalem: Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem again in 588 and captured the city in

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Peabody; Carlisle: Hendrickson Publishers ; Paternoster Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Peter C. Craigie et al., *Jeremiah 1 - 25*, Nachdr., Word Biblical Commentary, [General ed.: David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin]; Vol. 26 (Waco, Tex: Word Books, Publ, 2000), xlv-xlvii.

587. Zedekiah was captured, and, after being blinded, he was carried away to Babylon. The city of Jerusalem was subsequently demolished.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Coming Judgment (33:1-5)

Jeremiah had prophesied that Jerusalem would be handed over to the Babylonians because of the sins of Israel and that Zedekiah would be exiled to Babylon. Naturally, Zedekiah did not take kindly to this prediction, and confined Jeremiah as a prisoner in the royal palace during Nebuchadnezzar's assault on Jerusalem (32:1-5; c.f. 34:1-3). With the Babylonian hordes on the doorstep and destruction imminent, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time as he was imprisoned in the court of the guard. In this section, God repeated his declaration of judgment by the hand of the Chaldeans (c.f. 32:28-29). The residents of Jerusalem had harvested the choice stone and materials of the city's government buildings in a desperate attempt to fortify the walls and stave off the Babylonian attack.<sup>3</sup> Yet God declared that the efforts of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to repel the Babylonian attack would be futile. His anger burned against Judah such that he hid his face from the city and removed his hand of protection from it.<sup>4</sup>

#### Local and National Revival (6-13)

As he has repeatedly throughout the book of Jeremiah, the Lord follows his declaration of divine judgment with a promise of revival and restoration; a reminder that Israel will not be abandoned and that God will fulfill his covenant promise to make Israel "a priestly nation that could bridge the chasm between the Lord and the peoples of all other

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<sup>3</sup> John L Mackay, *Jeremiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 269.

<sup>4</sup> Tremper Longman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 221.

nations.”<sup>5</sup> With the sounds of the battle raging at Jerusalem’s walls in the background, God issues to Jeremiah a promise of sweeping healing, restoration, and forgiveness throughout the city of Jerusalem (v. 6). God promises to “restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first” (v. 7), extending his blessing to both halves of the divided kingdom.<sup>6</sup> God then promises to forgive and cleanse the nation of all of its sins. Turning his focus back to Jerusalem, he declares, “this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them” (v. 9). Recalling his promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3), God declares that Israel’s restoration will usher in a revival beginning in the streets of Jerusalem and extending outward to the surrounding countryside (v. 10-13)<sup>7</sup>, eventually reaching all the nations of the earth.

#### A Righteous Leader (14-16)

In addition to local and national revival, God promises a ruler, “a righteous Branch” from the line of David, who will lead and administrate the land with justice and virtue. His coming rule will bring about security and safety for God’s people. Through his rule Jerusalem will be issued a new identity and standing: “The Lord is our righteousness” (v. 16). It is widely believed that this is an indictment on the last king of Judah, who was named Zedekiah, which means, “the Lord is my righteousness.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene H Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 129.

<sup>6</sup> John L Mackay, *Jeremiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, 271.

<sup>7</sup> Mackay suggests the imagery of sheep and shepherds is a metaphor for rulers and subjects, making the focus of this section one of political peace. This, he argues, makes for a more fitting transition to the promise of the righteous Branch. *Jeremiah*, 275.

<sup>8</sup> Dane Ortlund, “Is Jeremiah 33:14-26 a ‘centre’ to the Bible? A Test Case in Inter-Canonical Hermeneutics,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (April 2012): 119–38.

Zedekiah was only the last of a long line of kings who failed to live and rule righteously before the Lord. The Bible mentions Zedekiah only sparsely, but perhaps it is enough to know that “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kings 24:19). Jeremiah and Ezekiel fill in some gaps as to the events of his reign. We know that Zedekiah was inept and cowardly, often seeking Jeremiah’s advice but never heeding it, presumably out of fear that the public would find out that he was relying on the prophet (Jer. 37:17). He went back on his oath to free Hebrew slaves, inciting Jeremiah’s harsh indictment (Jer. 34:8-22), and he proved to be an unruly vassal king. His eventual open rebellion against the Babylonians was the impetus for the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

Zedekiah was only the last in a long line of equally obstinate and unrighteous kings. Yet God vowed to remain faithful to his covenant promise to David (2 Sam. 7:16; c.f. Jer. 33:17), promising to raise up a righteous Davidic ruler who would succeed where the previous kings from David’s line had failed.

### **Hope of Restoration Promises in Postexilic Israel**

538 B.C. saw the demise of the Babylonians and Cyrus’ decree permitting the exiles to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. Clearly the returning exiles had Jeremiah’s prophecies in their minds as they immediately set to work on rebuilding the temple (2 Chron. 36:22-23 esp. v. 22; Ezra 1:1). *Finally*, they might have thought, *God’s promises are coming to pass and prosperity will be restored!* Indeed, Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would be conquered and the exiles would be allowed to return to the land (25:11). But what of God’s restoration promises? Would Jerusalem be a beacon for

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<sup>9</sup> R.L Pratt Jr., “Zedekiah”, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Vol. 4: Q - Z*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley, Fully rev., [Nachdr.] (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 1186-1187.

the nations of the world? Would ordinary life and routine return to the towns and cities? Would a righteous Branch from David's line assume the throne and rule with justice?

### The Restoration of the City

The streets of the ruined city of Jerusalem were soon populated once again. Work on the temple proceeded. Yet the biblical authors note an air of apprehension and disappointment among the people as they returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 3:12-13). The temple even in its preliminary stage of construction was only a shadow of its former majesty (Hag. 2:3), and its construction was opposed by many (Ezra 4:1-2). Surely this was a far cry from Jeremiah's hope of a glorious, citywide restoration with praises to Yahweh echoing through the streets.

Of course, restoration was to be preceded by God forgiving and cleansing his people of their sins (Jer. 33:8); While both Ezra and Nehemiah detail community-wide confession and repentance (Ezra 10:1-17; Neh. 9), Nehemiah closes his account by detailing a community still plagued by egregious covenant violation among citizens and priests (Neh. 13:23-30). Hamstrung by the disobedience of the returning exiles, Jerusalem was far from "a name of joy" to the Lord or "a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth" (Jer. 33:9). In contrast to Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's prophecies, the postexilic books, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, include little to no mention of God's direct presence among his people. There are several instances of people speaking *about* God, but only one instance where God is introduced the speaker – and even this occurs in a historical reflection.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Bob Becking, ed., "Temple Vessels Speaking for a Silent God: Notes on Divine Presence in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah", in *Reflections on the Silence of God: A Discussion with Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor*, Oudtestamentische Studien = Old Testament Studies, VOLUME 62 (Leiden ; Boston: BRILL, 2013), 13-28.



While God's sovereign ordering of events is still evident behind the scenes in postexilic Israel, miraculous signs of his presence are noticeably absent.

### The Restoration of the Land

Imagery of a countryside teeming with pastures and flocks (Jer. 33:10-13) speaks to widespread peace, prosperity, and economic stability throughout the land. Shepherds would count their sheep and find none missing from the fold; cities and towns throughout the hill country would once again see sheep and shepherds tending to their flocks in peace and tranquility (c.f. Jer. 31:24).<sup>11</sup>

The return of the exiles surely brought about some measure of agricultural rebirth as the abandoned fields and towns were repopulated. Yet widespread famine in the land forced many to mortgage their homes and vineyards in order to get grain, while powerful members of the community enslaved their sons and daughters for their debts (Neh. 5:3-8). Temple worship was profaned with priestly sacrifices of blemished, blind, lame, or sick animals, or livestock that was taken by violence (Mal. 1:8, 1:13). Was this truly the new age of peace and prosperity that God promised through Jeremiah?

### The Righteous Leader

Perhaps the most difficult of the restoration promises for which to argue historical fulfillment is the decidedly messianic prophecy of the righteous Branch from the line of David who will rule justly over the house of Israel (Jer. 33:14-16). The postexilic community had no king to speak of, and, as has already been noted, justice and righteousness were not executed in the land. Though some semblance of leadership was restored to the community in the form of governors, it is a stretch to say that they

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<sup>11</sup> F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, The New American Commentary, v. 16 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1993), 300.

resembled in any way a righteous, benevolent Davidic king. Christopher J.H. Wright summarizes this well:

It stretches the imagination to think of the post-exilic governors (not kings) of Judah (a tiny province of the Persian empire) as sitting *on the throne of the house of Israel . . . ruling over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, or to speak of them along with the priests and Levites as *countless as the stars in the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore*.<sup>12</sup>

## PART 2

### The Righteous Branch

It is the righteous Branch promise that will receive fuller attention for the remainder of this essay, as we will see that the identity of the Branch is Jesus, whose eternal reign satisfies the promise of justice, peace, and safety in the land. Jesus is the messianic king who will be given “an earthy political and spiritual kingdom over Israel and over the nations in which [he] will rule in righteousness.”<sup>13</sup> We will also see that the first two restoration promises, which have seen partial fulfillment, will be fully satisfied in Christ’s eternal reign at the end of days.

#### The Branch in Other Prophetic Texts

Imagery of the Branch is used in other prophetic texts. An analysis of the use of the imagery elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, as well as in Isaiah and Zechariah will prove helpful in developing a full understanding of the theme as it was developed in the prophetic books. Though explicit mention of the Branch is relatively limited, the prophets give us

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide*, The Bible Speaks Today: Old Testament Series (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 352.

<sup>13</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, Rev. and expanded (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 65.

glimpses of the expectations of God's promised Davidic Branch, and these lend insight as to this righteous king's identity and characteristics.

### *Jeremiah*

**23:1-5.** It should be noted that language of the righteous Branch appears in Jeremiah 23, and the imagery is nearly identical to that in chapter 33. God indicts the unrighteous kings who have destroyed and scattered his people, comparing them to shepherds who have neglected and driven away their flocks (23:1-2). But God promises to gather the flock (the exiles) once again from the surrounding territories, restore them to prosperity, and set over them shepherds who will care for them (3-4; c.f. Ezek. 34:23). Then, God promises a righteous Branch who will be installed as a lasting leader over Israel who will allow them to dwell securely as his people.

Ezekiel 34 should receive mention due to this passage's extensive development of the sheep/shepherd motif. Like in Jeremiah 23:1-8 God speaks of the exiled Israelites as sheep scattered by wicked and uncaring shepherds. He promises to personally gather his lost sheep and set over them "one shepherd, my servant David" (Ezek. 34:23). It is not a far leap to suggest that this Davidic messianic shepherd and the righteous branch are one and the same – unless one were to argue that God promised two Messiahs from the line of David. Ezekiel's reference to the servant picks up on Isaiah's servant theme (c.f. Isa. 53), which, combined with Ezekiel's imagery, views the messianic shepherd-servant as an earthly king with a divine-human nature.

## *Isaiah*

**4:2.** Recalling the imagery of the devoured vineyard (Isa. 3:14; c.f. 5:1-7), the Lord promises that a branch – a remnant – will survive the coming judgment and flourish once again.<sup>14</sup> The fallen stump that was once Judah will once again regenerate and fill the land with spiritual fruit.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the branch seems to be referring strictly to the survivors of the judgment; yet much like Jeremiah, Isaiah's oracle seems to far exceed what could be expected from a historical return from exile. He speaks of God's promise to restore and cleanse Jerusalem and set it before the nations as a beacon of his eternal presence and a safe haven for all who inhabit it (4:5b-6).

In the famous "Suffering Servant" passage, Isaiah uses similar language to refer to a divine-human servant who "grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of the dry ground" (Isa. 53:2). Isaiah may be continuing his metaphor depicting Israel as a devoured vineyard, and the servant as a root of Israelite descent, rising from what was once a flourishing vineyard to bring life once again to the land.

**11:1-10.** Using slightly different imagery of a "shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from its roots" (11:1), Isaiah further develops the theme of the Davidic Branch, looking forward to his coming righteous rule. The implication here is that prior to the coming of the Branch, the Davidic tree will have fallen. However, just as David's line grew from Jesse in the first place, it will do so again in the form of a messianic king.<sup>16</sup> Isaiah speaks of the rule of this messianic king in terms of three familiar themes: 1.) He will be a benevolent, wise,

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<sup>14</sup> John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2012), 50.

<sup>15</sup> A. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, eds., *The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah*, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and Its Literature 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 26.

<sup>16</sup> John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 83-84.

fair, just, and righteous king (11:1-5); 2.) This king will usher in an era of peace and reconciliation throughout the land (6-8); and 3.) The nations of the world will come to a full knowledge of the king (9-10).

### *Zechariah*

**3:8.** In Zechariah's third prophecy, he envisions the high priest, Joshua, standing before the angel of the Lord. The angel orders Joshua's filthy garments and turban to be replaced, symbolizing the cleansing of his sins. The Lord promises Joshua that, if he lives righteously and keeps the Lord's commandments, then he will gain unprecedented access to the heavenly council gathered in God's presence. This is all in preparation for the coming of God's servant, the Branch, who would remove the iniquity of the land and bring about peace and restoration to the land.

Some have suggested that Zechariah is referring to Zerubbabel in 3:8, whom Haggai describes in decidedly Davidic language, as the Branch through whom God would restore David's line on the throne of Israel (Hag. 2:20-23). There are two problems with this theory. First, after his completion of the temple, Zerubbabel seems to have disappeared from the historical record.<sup>17</sup> Though Haggai identifies Zerubbabel as a governor, he never ascended to the throne, despite the subtle messianic overtones of Haggai 2:20-23.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, scholars can confidently place Zerubbabel already in Jerusalem at the time of

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<sup>17</sup> The Bible falls silent on Zerubbabel's life following the reconstruction of the temple. Some scholars theorize that he was removed from office or executed by Darius after rumors of his possible messiahship began to surface. However, this theory only rests on silence from the historical record, and speculation. It is more plausible that Zerubbabel simply did not advance himself, and his governorship fell short of evolving into a full-fledged monarchy. See H.G.M Williamson, "Zerubbabel", in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Vol. 4: Q - Z*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley, Fully rev., [Nachdr.] (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 1193-1194.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kashow, "Zechariah 1-8 as a Theological Explanation for the Failure of Prophecy in Haggai 2:20-23," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (October 2013): 385-403.

Zechariah's prophecy (520 B.C.), so it would be difficult to argue that he was the Branch that the Lord promised to bring to Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

**6:12.** In this instance, the "Branch" initially refers to the leadership of Zerubbabel, who Zechariah states will complete the construction of the temple (6:12; c.f. 4:9-10), and Joshua the high priest, who is crowned as a symbol of the righteous rule of the Messiah. This duality insinuates that the promised Branch will serve both priestly and kingly functions, which disqualifies both Zerubbabel and Joshua as the true fulfillment of the righteous Branch.<sup>20</sup>

### *Summary*

Jeremiah 23:1-5 and 33:14-16 appear to be picking up in the Isaianic language of the righteous Branch to provide hope for a nation facing imminent destruction. After the people suffer judgment for their iniquities, God will gather his people back to himself, and a righteous king from the line of David will ascend to the throne to cleanse the sins of the nation of Israel, rule over the people with fairness and righteousness, usher in an era of peace and stability in the land, and make Jerusalem a beacon of God's presence among the nations. The promised peace and prosperity are linked to the coming of the righteous king; his rule ushers in an era of widespread tranquility, justice, and harmony in Israel.

After Israel returns from exile, the Branch promise is reiterated and further developed in the post-exilic prophecy of Zechariah, providing further proof that the returning exiles had not yet seen the complete fulfillment of the restoration promises. The language of the righteous Branch seems to surround Zerubbabel and Joshua in the post-exilic prophets, but even these men appear to play symbolic priestly and kingly roles that

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<sup>19</sup> George L Klein, *Zechariah* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Pub. Group, 2008), 154.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-206.

point forward to a greater eschatological reality not yet seen, in which the righteous Branch will execute the dual role of high priest and king.

### **PART 3**

#### **The Branch Theme Developed in the New Testament**

Through our brief discussion of God's restoration promises in Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets, we have seen that historical condition of the returned exiles falls seriously short of the nationwide peace, prosperity, and righteous leadership that God promised through Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Though God had fulfilled his promise to rescue Israel from exile, and Jerusalem and the surrounding cities were once again populated with Israelites, we are left with a people Israel still mired by sin and apostasy with no righteous Davidic leader on the throne, ruling in righteousness and restoring peace to the land. Had the canon closed with Haggai, Zephaniah, and Malachi, we would be left wanting. However, the story continues several centuries later as Jesus, the ultimate, eternal fulfillment of God's restoration promises, is born into the world.

As I did with the Old Testament prophets, I will discuss relevant New Testament references to the Davidic Branch and analyze how the theme is developed by the NT authors. We will see that the New Testament continues to pick up the theme of the messianic Branch as it is woven into a theology of Christ's coming eternal rule. It will become apparent that the coming eternal reign of Jesus is the full satisfaction of every facet of the righteous Branch promise. Jesus is the Root, the King, and our Righteousness.

#### **Jesus as the Root from Jesse**

The imagery of the Branch, along with the somewhat more common language of "root" and "stump" are used by the Old Testament authors to collectively refer to an

enduring hope for future restoration in at least two respects:<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, the analogy of a felled tree with still-viable roots was often referenced by the prophets to refer to Israel's hope of a flourishing restoration after a seemingly permanent destruction. In other places, such as in Isaiah 11:1, a shoot and a branch issuing forth from a seemingly dead stump refers to a future restoration of the Davidic kingship. Still, the point is that what was seemingly dead (the root will issue from *Jesse*, David's father, not David, indicating what would become an agonizing break in David's family tree of rulers) is still capable of revitalization by God's hand in God's timing.<sup>22</sup>

Jerome in his work, *Commentary on Isaiah 4.11.1-3*, argues that, while the Jews saw the root and the branch in Isaiah 11:1 to be Yahweh himself, the metaphor is best understood as a reference to the virgin birth. Jesus would arise from the virgin Mary like shoot from a felled stump, which held its roots in the lineage of Jesse (c.f. Mt. 1:6-16), and produce everlasting fruit.<sup>23</sup> Augustine held a similar interpretation: "Insofar as Christ himself was born according to the flesh, he was hidden in the root, in the seed of the patriarchs, and was to be revealed a certain time, like fruit appearing on the branch".<sup>24</sup> Whereas Israel witnessed in history the promised future in which their nation would be rescued from Babylon, the incarnation of Jesus by way of the virgin birth represented the inauguration of the eternal fulfillment of God's restoration promises, in which he himself by

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Job 14:7-9: "For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will but and put forth branches like a young plant". See G.H. Wilson, "Stump; Branch", in Geoffrey William Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Vol. 4: Q - Z, Fully rev., [Nachdr.] (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 642.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Steven A McKinion and Thomas C Oden, *Isaiah 1-39* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 142.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 96.



his own volition would institute peace, justice, and prosperity over all the earth by way of a Davidic Messiah. Jesus' identity as the Root and the Branch are confirmed in his own words,

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16).

### Jesus as King and Priest

In Jeremiah 33:15, God promises that a "righteous Davidic Branch" will arise in the coming days to rule the land in righteousness. Israel will finally be graced with "a king who will rule as Israel's kings were meant to rule."<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, Zechariah's prophecy repeats this promise post-exile. He looks forward to a messianic Branch who will serve a dual role as high priest and king, qualifying Zechariah's visions concerning Zerubbabel and Jacob as a foretaste of the reality of the Branch's arrival but eliminating them from consideration as the fulfillment of the righteous Branch promise.

The New Testament authors are quick to identify Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise of a righteous king. Matthew, after connecting Jesus' lineage to the royal descendants of Jesse (Mt. 1), recalls the confession of the magi: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (Mt. 2:2). Later in Matthew (Mt. 19:28) and in Mark's Gospel, Jesus identifies himself by the title "Son of Man," recalling the Son of Man whom Daniel<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dane Ortlund, "Is Jeremiah 33:14-26 a 'centre' to the Bible? A Test Case in Inter-Canonical Hermeneutics," 126.

<sup>26</sup> "I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. He was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; so that those of every people, nation, and language

prophesied would be ushered before the throne of the Lord and receive honor, authority, and sovereign power to rule over his everlasting dominion in righteousness.<sup>27</sup> Luke's depiction of Jesus' triumphal approach to Jerusalem has a distinct royal tone. Jesus notably refers to himself as Lord (Lk. 19:34) before Luke details the disciples throwing their cloaks down before Jesus, reminiscent of the enthronement of King Jehu (2Kgs. 9:13). The use of the verb *epibibazō* ("to put on") in v. 35 may evoke the language of King Solomon's anointing and enthronement in 1 Kings 33-40. Further, Luke includes in his account Psalm 118, which, in preexilic times, was used as a psalm of enthronement.<sup>28</sup> If that were not explicit enough, Luke recalls Jesus's proclamation of his kingship before Pilate (23:3), and finally the notice placed above Jesus head as he was hanging on the cross, which read, "This is the King of the Jews" (23:38), an ironic twist in which Jesus' accusers did acknowledge his true identity.

Though Jesus' identity as King is certainly no secret in the Gospel accounts, Jesus made it clear that his reign had not been fully consummated. Jesus operated from the understanding that symptoms and signs the kingdom he would inherit had begun to break into the world, and that change and transformation were possible in the present age, but God's kingdom promises would not achieve their full realization until the day Jesus returns and consummates his eternal reign. John's vision of Christ's reign in Revelation gives us a glimpse of the healing and renewal that the reign of Jesus will bring about yet leaves us with no timeline – only the promise that Jesus is "coming soon" (Rev. 22:20).

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should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed" (Da. 7:13-14, c.f. Mk. 2:10).

<sup>27</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Mark*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Luke-Acts*, Rev. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 290-292.

Clearly Jesus fulfills the messianic promise of a righteous king; but recall Zechariah's prophecy, which envisions the Branch executing a dual priest-king role. What can be said of Jesus' role as a high priest? As it turns out, there is plenty to go on. Most notably, Hebrews 4:14-5:28 identifies Jesus as the "great high priest who has ascended into heaven" (4:14), who has been chosen and qualified by God, and tempted in every human way. Thus, Jesus the great High Priest is merciful and compassionate, understanding human weaknesses, pleading for humanity before the Lord, and making intercession for all who draw near to God through him (Heb. 7:25).<sup>29</sup> Paul picks up on the imagery of intercession, reminding his readers that Jesus himself is seated at the right hand of God interceding for them (Romans 8:16; 34). Yet for Paul, Jesus' role is not merely to represent his people before God; he was convinced that Jesus is able to reach out to sustain and protect his people on earth<sup>30</sup> - a duality that may be a (subtle) affirmation of Jesus' dual role as High Priest and benevolent King.

However, Jesus' heavenly advocacy for his people before God is not, in fact, the ultimate expression of Jesus' dual role of Priest and King. Jesus spoke of himself not as a mere *mediator* between God and mankind, but as the actual, physical *meeting place* where God and man will exist together in peace- the Temple. After his triumphal entry, Jesus curses the fig tree (Mt. 21:18-22), an indictment on the unfruitfulness of the temple and the temple officials, before telling his disciples that, by faith, they could command that the temple be thrown into the sea (v. 21-22). In other words, Jesus was illustrating that the

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<sup>29</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, "Hebrews", in Philip Wesley Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 1 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 365.

<sup>30</sup> James D. G. Dunn et al., *Romans 1 - 8*, Word Biblical Commentary, [General ed.: David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin]; Vol. 38,A (Waco, Tex: Word Books, Publ, 1988), 511.

temple would no longer be a necessary intermediary between God and mankind. Following this story, Jesus predicts that the kingdom will be transferred from Israel, the temple would be destroyed, and Jesus *himself* would replace the temple as the meeting place between God and his people (Mt. 21:33-25:46).<sup>31</sup> Again we must look to John's Revelation to see the full realization of this prediction: John makes a point of mentioning that, in the restored Jerusalem, there is no temple (Rev. 21:22); there is only the presence of God and Jesus Christ, reigning in glory on the throne as the kings of the nations of the world bow before them and their subjects walk in their light. It is here that we see the full realization of Jesus' role as King and Priest: he is the meeting place between God and mankind who rules over his eternal kingdom in righteousness.

### Jesus as Righteousness

The final element of the righteous Branch promise of Jeremiah 33:14-16 is new identity of the city of Jerusalem: "This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior" (v. 16). Far from the wickedness and incompetence of ruler Zedekiah, Jeremiah promised that the coming Davidic Branch would embody righteousness such that the city of Jerusalem would be looked upon as a bastion of righteousness before the Lord.

In Judaism, the concepts of righteousness and the Law were closely correlated; righteousness before the Lord was sought through strict obedience to the Law of Moses.<sup>32</sup> Yet the story of post-exilic Israel is one of widespread covenant violation, even after God's incredible display of faithfulness to his people. It becomes apparent that, even after the returning exiles renewed their covenant commitment to the Lord under the Law, they

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<sup>31</sup> A fuller discussion of the parable of the vineyard owner as an indictment of temple authorities in Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008), 266-275.

<sup>32</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 165.

simply could not uphold it. Thus, it is difficult to believe that Jerusalem's promised state of righteousness before the Lord could ever come by way of Israel's obedience to the Law.

Evidently, Jeremiah was speaking of Jerusalem the geographical city in Palestine populated by the Jewish people. Yet as the theme of God's holy city is developed throughout the remainder of the Old Testament and into the New, we are left with a more fully realized image of the city of Jerusalem as the epicenter of a global kingdom inhabited by all who have found forgiveness and redemption in Jesus Christ (Rev. 21:1-8). With this eschatological understanding of redeemed Jerusalem, it is possible to read God's promise of a redeemed Jerusalem as an act of divine grace rather than the result of human accomplishment. This idea is further evidenced by the fact that the *city* receives the name "The Lord is Our Righteousness". This is significant because God is fully credited as the agent of Jerusalem's salvation.<sup>33</sup> Redemption as divine initiative receives a great deal of treatment in the New Testament, and an analysis of a few pertinent passages will shed light on the implications of verse 16.

The function of the Law of Moses was to foster in God's people wholeness of love, faith, and devotion to God, and righteousness before the world. This has been God's desire for mankind since before the foundation of the world. Jesus proclaimed that he himself is the fulfillment of the Law of Moses (Mt. 5:17), and thus the perfect embodiment of love, faith, and obedience to the Lord. Indeed, he is the fundamental example of God's holiness, and the prevailing example of righteousness and heart-level obedience to God. Through his atoning death and resurrection, Jesus embraced the punishment for humanity's

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<sup>33</sup> Gerald L. Keown et al., *Jeremiah 26 - 52*, Nachdr., Word Biblical Commentary, [General ed.: David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin]; Vol. 27 (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 174.

disobedience to the Law, and now offers his own resurrection to all who come to knowledge of him. By the regenerative power of Christ, believers are no longer bound by the Law of Moses but bound by the Law of Christ, who credits his own righteousness to all who come to him by faith. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God offers humanity right standing before him, not as a result of human accomplishment, but of God's restorative grace. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In Romans, he comments on the insufficiency of the Law for salvation and affirms, "righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Rom. 3:22). In 1 Corinthians, Paul urges the church to boast in the Lord, for, because of God's grace, "Christ became for them wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

With the understanding that true righteousness as a result of obedience to the Law is impossible, it is only possible to understand God's promise in Jeremiah 33:16 as fulfilled by none other than Jesus, who is the vehicle through whom God imparts his own righteousness upon his people. At the end of days, Jesus Christ will reign with justice and virtue, and his righteousness will pervade his kingdom such that all who live under his lordship are bestowed with the title: "The Lord is Our Righteousness".

#### Summary: Jesus as Jeremiah's Righteous Branch

We have seen that true and complete fulfillment of God's righteous Branch promise in Jeremiah 33:14-16 is only accomplished through the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and eternal reign of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the root of Jesse, who sprung forward from the stump of David's lineage to inaugurate the eternal fulfillment of God's redemptive promises. He is the King who has

been given all authority on heaven and earth, whose reign was instated in his birth, death, and resurrection, and will see full consummation at the end of days when he returns to rule over restored creation in glory. Jesus is the great High Priest, who sits at the right hand of God, advocating and mediating for his people until he returns to install himself as the eternal meeting place between God and mankind. And Jesus is Righteousness; he is the one who will bestow the righteousness of God upon all who come to him and submit to his lordship.

Promise	Partial Historical Fulfillment	Full Realization
A righteous Branch from the line of David...	Zerubbabel	Restoration of the Davidic line of kings through the virgin birth of Jesus.
... who will execute justice in the land	Zerubbabel and Jacob, ruler and high priest	The reign and presence of Christ on the throne in the eschaton.
... Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior	The return of exiles from Babylon and restoration of the city of Jerusalem	Jerusalem as the epicenter of God's global kingdom, inhabited by all who have received the righteousness of Jesus.

## Other Restoration Promises

Some attention was given to the other restoration promises detailed in Jeremiah 33:6-13. I noted that, while there is some evidence of at least partial fulfillment of these promises, the partial historical fulfillment of these promises certainly does not measure up to their depiction of a messianic kingdom. In the following section, I will briefly discuss how the promises in verses 6-13 are contingent upon the arrival and reign of the righteous Branch, Jesus.

**Restoration of the city and peace in the land.** I have already discussed the redemption of Jerusalem in terms of its eschatological role as the dwelling place of all who have been forgiven in Christ. Much more does not need to be said in this regard. Clearly the restoration hope for Israel did not lie in the returning exiles somehow managing to perfectly obey the Law of God, but in the elective work of Jesus, who grants his righteousness to all who submit to his authority.

Another facet of God's promise relating to Jerusalem was her standing before the nations of the world as a beacon of God's presence among his people and a symbol of hope for the world to see. As we have seen, this was far from satisfied after the historical return from exile. A second facet relates to widespread peace radiating from Jerusalem to the surrounding countryside. Jeremiah prophesied that the fulfillment of God's restoration promises would be marked by an era of peace and prosperity. Of course, the Israelites returning from exile would have attempted to revive the economy and restore some measure of rhythm to daily life. But if the accounts of the postexilic prophets are of any indication, the exiles succeeded to the point that they were quickly bored, unsatisfied, and apathetic toward life and faith. God was undoubtedly at work in the restoration of his



people, but the reality, compared to the promise, left something to be desired. However, a look at the commencement of Christ's reign in Revelation reveals that these facets of the promise, too, are fulfilled in the eternal reign of Jesus, where John pictures a river of life flowing from Jerusalem, bringing healing and restoration to the nations of the earth and a measure of peace, prosperity, and rhythm to the land unseen since the pre-Fall days of Adam:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:1-5)

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

We have taken a detailed look at God's promise issued to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah immediately prior to Jerusalem's destruction and the nation's subsequent exile into Babylon. The promise was threefold: 1.) God promised to restore the city of Jerusalem to a place of honor among the nations; 2.) God promised to restore health, prosperity, and peace to the land; and 3.) God promised a righteous king from the line of David who would rule the land in righteousness and uphold justice in his kingdom.

First, I assessed the restoration promises with respect to their historical postexilic fulfillment and discovered that, though Israel did seem to experience hints of the peace, prosperity, and leadership that God promised, the reality compared to the promise left

much to be desired. In the subsequent sections, I zeroed in on the promise of the Davidic Branch (33:14-16) and cross-referenced Jeremiah's prophecy with those of other preexilic and postexilic prophets to identify any other clues as to the promised Branch's identity, role, or expectations. Then, I traced the theme into the New Testament and showed how Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and coming eternal reign fully satisfy the expectations and role of the Davidic Branch. I concluded by explaining how Jesus as the Davidic Branch fully satisfies the first two restoration promises in his coming eternal Kingdom.

Praise God for his faithfulness to his promises to Israel, but even more so, praise God that his promises extend outward so that all people who call Jesus their Lord can enjoy eternity in God's holy Kingdom! We hold to the same hope of eternal restoration and forgiveness under the sovereign rule of Jesus. This hope motivates us to cling to our salvation hope during trials and hardships, to share the gospel of Jesus with joy and urgency, and to stake our faith and confidence in the expectation of the eternal reign of Jesus rather than in temporary wealth, possessions, or accomplishments.

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