

The Branch

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In our frequent studies of the Old Testament prophecies, we have undoubtedly read the sections on the Branch. In many translations, the word "branch" is in all capital letters so it is obvious to the reader that it refers to the Messiah. Usually, a quick survey of the context shows that the translators were justified in doing so.

Often, when something is so obvious, we tend to take it for granted. We see the simple solution and fail to take the time to dig a little deeper. As Winston Churchill once remarked, "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened." This is human nature at work.

Is there something more to the Branch than we have realized? Is the Branch's identification as Messiah all that the prophets meant to convey? Is there anything more about the Messiah that His identification as the Branch can tell us? Could it possibly tell us something about ourselves and our tremendous potential as children of God?

What Is a "Branch"?

"Branch" is capitalized six times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word used in five of them, *semah*, is fairly insignificant. It simply means "sprout, growth or branch." The remaining occurrence has the word *hoter*, meaning "branch" or "twig." We can see, then, that the literal meaning leads to a more metaphorical one.

The Hebrews and other Semitic peoples used the term in a genealogical sense, meaning that a certain person belongs to or descends from a particular family line. To give the same sense, we might use the term "heir," "descendant," "seed," or "scion." Like Hebrew, English links trees and genealogy in such phrases as "family tree" and "the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree."

Of all the "Branch" passages, Isaiah 11:1 shows this usage the best: "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch [*hoter*] shall grow out of his roots." As the context reveals, the Messiah will descend from the line of Jesse, the father of David. This idea of descent is present in all the "Branch" passages.

The "Branch" Passages

Let's see what the Bible has to say about the "Branch":

Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-17

» "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."

» "In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she [Jerusalem] will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." For thus says the Lord, "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel."

Both of these sets of scriptures focus on the Branch as *King*, descending from David, making righteous judgments, ruling and causing peace and security. Thus Revelation 19:16 calls Him, "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

Zechariah 3:8-9

"Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your companions who sit before you, for they are a wondrous sign; for behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH. For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: Upon the stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave its inscription," says the Lord of hosts, "And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day."

Here the Branch is called God's *Servant*, taking away iniquity in one day. This is exactly what Christ did, and is reminiscent of Paul's description in Philippians 2:7: "But [Christ Jesus] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant. . . ."

Zechariah 6:12-13

Just a few chapters later, Zechariah provides another angle on the Branch:

Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the Lord; yes, He shall build the temple of the Lord. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Here He is highlighted as a *Man* whose job is to build the Temple, be glorified, rule as King and function as priest without any controversy between the two offices, thus bringing peace. The Branch is shown as the one Man who fulfills all things perfectly. He is the perfect man.

In this vein, Paul writes, "For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (I Timothy 2:5-6).

Isaiah 4:2

Finally, we have the ultimate description of the Branch!

In that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped.

He is called "the Branch of the Lord"—He is *God's* descendant! He is the Son of God, not just the son of the man David! Yet this verse also describes Him as "the fruit of the earth," meaning that, though He is God, He is also from mankind. He could claim full descent from both Godkind and humankind!

A Hidden Passage

So we have seen the Branch in four different ways, as a King, Servant, Man and God! Does this ring any bells? John Ritenbaugh gave a series of sermons a few years ago titled "Four Views of Christ." Here we have Old Testament verification of that very same idea! The four views of the Branch are the very same four views that the gospel writers give in the New Testament:

- » Like Jeremiah 23 and 33, Matthew shows Christ, the Branch, as *King*.
- » Like Zechariah 3, Mark shows Christ, the Branch, as *Servant* of God and man.
- » Like Zechariah 6, Luke shows Christ, the Branch, as *Man*, whose job is to build the church and become the perfect Mediator between God and man.
- » Like Isaiah 4, John shows Christ, the Branch, as *God* in the flesh.

At first glance, the New Testament seems not to have picked up on this Old Testament prophetic description of the Savior as the Branch. However, Luke 1:78 contains a hidden reference to the Branch, obscured by the translation:

And you, child [John the Baptist], will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)

This is the end of Zacharias' prophecy of the Messiah, and it seems to contain not even a hint of a reference to "the Branch."

However, there are two ways to translate the word "Dayspring" in verse 78. It is *anatole* in Greek, meaning "rising up," and Greek speakers usually use it of the sun and stars rising. It often has the sense of "from the east," since the sun rises in the east.

Its second meaning, though, is "shoot" or "branch"! It is the same word that the Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, uses in Jeremiah 23:5 and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12 for "Branch"! At the very least, this is a double entendre, a play on both meanings of the word, to describe the Messiah. This could be translated "the Branch from on High," which is very similar to Isaiah 4:2, "the Branch of the Lord [YHWH]."

The translators chose to use "Dayspring" because verse 79 contains the imagery of giving light in darkness, just as the dawn chases away the darkness of night. They are undoubtedly correct in their choice, but the idea of "the Branch" is lurking just behind.

"You Are the Branches. . ."

What makes this topic especially interesting is that it reaches out to touch us too! Like Christ, our Master, we are to be branches also:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, *you are the branches*. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:1-8)

Christ came to this earth as THE BRANCH and fulfilled all righteousness, qualifying to replace Satan and rule as King over all the earth. He proved His worthiness by remaining in full accord with His heavenly Father, and bearing the spiritual fruit that makes redemption and salvation possible.

Likewise, we—whether natural or grafted in (Romans 11:17-24)—are also branches attached to the solid trunk of the tree, Christ. It is only by our abiding in Him—our attachment to Him—our close relationship with Him—that we produce any growth or godly works. As Paul writes in Romans 11:16, "If the root is holy, so are the branches." Our righteousness, works and holiness come to us only because of our connection to Him.

Jesus says that God, in love, prunes us, chastens us, tries us, so that we become more profitable (see also Hebrews 12:3-11). He will do what He must to make us yield. But if we resist and eventually sever our connection with Him, we are fit only to be burned. God has no use for dead wood.

God wants us to use this connection to His Son to "bear much fruit," just as Jesus Christ did. Doing so proves to Him, to ourselves and to everyone else that we are true Christians, disciples of His Son, the Branch. By this, we will glorify God and secure our place in His Kingdom.