DEVELOPING MESSIANISM FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT, TO QUMRAN, TO JESUS

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ABSTRACT

Studying messianism, one encounters a bottomless array of written work all of which are meant to clarify, elaborate, or identify the origins of Christian and Jewish beliefs in a Messiah. The abundance of work done in this field are evidence of the complex nature of the topic, and make it irrefutably clear that emphasis on a different set of primary materials, the use of slightly different versions of the same text, or even any single detail of a difference result in distinctions among scholarly findings. In this paper I seek to identify the definition of “Messiah” through the eyes of Old Testament, Qumran, and New Testament authors, and to trace how and why that definition transformed over time. Through this, I seek to answer the question of whether the Old Testament truly predicts the coming of Jesus, but more specifically, how we have come to believe that it does.

INTRODUCTION

For most of today’s Christians and Messianic Jews, the term “messiah” is a title explicitly linked to Jesus of Nazareth. Many are taught that Jesus is The Messiah — the only divine Messiah, Son of God, agent of the end-time, and savior of our souls — but never question where this belief originates from or what it really means to be called “The Messiah” (capitalized to indicate the modern eschatological understanding of the term). Often the term “messiah” (capitalized or not) is taken to refer to an eschatological savior; therefore, the questions asked tend to be more personal and spiritual questions along the lines of “how do I know if Jesus is my savior? What makes him special? How can we be sure that he will come back at the end of time?” Answers to these questions will then be searched out in New Testament records of his miracles and parables as well as Old Testament prophetic texts. From these one may discover that Jesus is The Messiah because of the miracles he performed that others could not, because of his vicarious crucifixion through which he frees us from sin, because of his promise to return in the end-time, and because Old Testament texts foretell his coming and describe his life before he was
ever on earth. All of this comes from the assumption that all biblical texts are the inerrant Word of God, that it is the only source available from which to learn about “The Messiah,” and that all texts can be explained or elaborated on through other biblical texts. Though this is enough for many people to confirm Jesus’ Messiahship, it certainly is not the complete picture. In this popular approach to answering questions about messianism—the expectation of an eschatological savior—the literal definition of “messiah” as a term rather than a title remains unattended to, and the vast extrabiblical literature remains ignored. In this paper I seek to discover the origin and transformation of messianic beliefs by studying Old Testament texts that may be related to messianism and that are commonly used to confirm Jesus’ Messiahship alongside intertestamental literature from Qumran. In the process I hope to find how each of these may have influenced New Testament authors and how that impacts our reading of the New testament and our understanding of Jesus as the Messiah.

First, it is important to establish the definition of “messiah” by identifying its origin. The term “messiah” can be traced back to the Hebrew noun for “anointed one,” מְשִׁיחַ (mashiakh), which is derived from the verb מָשַח (mashakh) meaning “to anoint;” therefore, “messiah” translates to “The Anointed One.” There is another word in Greek for “The Anointed One,” that is, Χριστός (Christ) from which the term “Christ.” From this information one can conclude that “Christ” and “Messiah,” terms used to describe Jesus, are synonymous.1 This knowledge is useful in the study of messianism because it allows us to consider how Old Testament texts that refer to “anointing” may have influenced messianic ideals. It will also be helpful in drawing conclusions about the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship when we look to New Testament descriptions of Jesus. However, one must also understand that the study of messianism cannot be confined to just one term or phrase, seeing as other titles such as Son of God2 have also been indicative of messianism in the Bible.

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1 Henze, Mind the Gap, 55-56
A BRIEF STUDY OF A SELECTION OF OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

In the Pentateuch, “anointing” is the method used for designating priests and sanctifying liturgical furniture with oil. Genesis only mentions anointing when Jacob pours oil over the pillar at Bethel; therefore, Exodus is the first book in which we find extensive use of anointing. Here, Aaron and his lineage are anointed into the priesthood. Apart from those select people that are anointed, the tabernacle and the liturgical furniture are also consecrated — made holy — through anointment. After this, there are a few more mentions in Leviticus referencing “the anointed priest” and commenting on his expected behavior after “he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God.” There are also a few more mentions of the oil, the anointed priest, and the anointed liturgical furniture throughout Numbers, and the last mention of anointing in the Pentateuch is in Deuteronomy 28:40.

Clearly, anointing is a major aspect throughout the Pentateuch, but this does not provide much information about the messianic beliefs of the original authors. Porter explains that all we learn from these texts is that the only people who were anointed were the priests and that “one who is anointed is set apart to special service to God.” Thus, if one who is anointed and set apart was considered a “messiah,” then there was an expectation of many messiahs for the authors of the Pentateuch. Furthermore, they understood that their anointed priests would be imperfect, as is made evident by the presence of instructions for atonement in the case of the priest sinning. This provides further support for the conclusion that the authors of the Pentateuch defined “messiah” differently from the way modern Christians and Jews do. If there was a concept of “messiah” as a title in the Pentateuch, then from the

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3 Genesis 28:18, 35:14, 31:13
4 Exodus 28:4, 29:7
5 Exodus 29:36, 40:9
6 Leviticus 4:16, 4:3
7 Leviticus 21:12
8 Numbers 3:3, 4:16, 6:15, 7:1, 10, 84, 88; 18:8, 35:25
9 Longman III, “The Messiah: Explorations in the Law and Writings”, 15
10 Leviticus 4:3
texts one can gather that the priests would have been designated messiahs, there would have been many people called messiah, the messiahs were expected in the present not in the future nor eschatological setting, and they were also not expected to be perfect. A clear distinction from the modern expectation of a single, divine, perfect, future, and eschatological savior. This has to remain speculation; however, since the use of “messiah” as a title for the anointed priests has not been proven and is unlikely. Yet according to Craig Evans, this does not necessarily make void all messianic reading of the text. He argues that even though the concept does not originate with the text, later editors may have understood them messianically and translated them according to their understanding, resulting in messianic indications in the final form of the text that may not have been there originally.\footnote{Evans, “The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments: A Response”, 234}

The Histories of the Bible display a shift in the role of anointing; the anointing is now given to the kings rather than the priests. The first official record of this new application of the anointing is when Saul is anointed by the prophet, Samuel, after Israel demands to have a king to rule them. While Saul was still enthroned, David also receives God’s anointing, and he is later anointed again, more ceremoniously, after Saul’s death. David’s son, Solomon, later receives the anointing as well when he inherits the throne.\footnote{1 Samuel 9:16, 10:1, 15:1, 16:3, 2 Samuel 2:4, 5:3, 1 Kings 1} This trend of kingly anointing is interrupted by the anointing of the prophet Elisha in 1 Kings 19; however, the trend continues thereafter. Therefore it seems as in the previous section, that these texts show no indication of an expectation of a single divine Messiah. Instead many messiahs, God’s anointed kings, were anticipated. Again, this is indicating that the perception of a “messiah” was different to the early Israelites than it is to modern Christians and Jews. Just as before, it is still quite unlikely and unprovable that there was a use of “messiah” as a title during this period of biblical history, but this does not mean that messianism cannot be found in these texts. Although the original authors may not have intended to proclaim a future Messiah, later editors or readers may have read the text as messianic prophecy and passed down those traditions to the modern reader.
Lev. 16 is an example of an originally non-messianic text that has developed messianic significance to many modern Jews and Christians. In Leviticus, the priests were the only people that may have been considered messiahs, so it is not surprising if over time this led to the expectation of a priestly Messiah- a future savior with priestly attributes. In fact, one can see evidence of this when we compare the priest's role in atoning for the sins of the people in Lev. 16 with Jesus’ self sacrificial act of atoning for the sins of all people. Since many people believed in his Messiahship because of this priestly act of atonement, there reasonably must be some traditional expectation of a priestly Messiah with ideals originating in the Pentateuch. Jesus’ Messiahship has also found confirmation in Nathan’s prophecy to David:

‘The Lord himself will establish a house for you… I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. 2 Samuel 7:11-14

Jesus came from the line of David, was called the son of God, was said to have established an everlasting kingdom, and suffered floggings by human hands. Anyone with this knowledge of Jesus would be inclined to believe that this passage could only be referring to him. This becomes difficult to do, however, when one takes into consideration the phrase in verse 14, “when he does wrong, I will punish him…” We know that Jesus committed no sin, so can this passage be used to describe Jesus? Can this be read as an Old Testament prophecy of Jesus? I would argue that it cannot. Most scholars agree that the passage was intended as a proclamation of the greatness of the rising Davidic Dynasty rather than a proclamation of a

13 1 John 2:2, Hebrews 9:12
14 Also read Evans, “The Messiah in the New and Old Testament: A Response”, 243 for a comparison of Jesus with the prophets.
15 Matthew 1:1, 8:29, 14:33, 2 Peter 1, Act 2:23, John 19:1, etc.
16 1 Peter 2:22
future Messianic king. Despite all of this, we can still note something important from the fact that New Testament authors referred to the ideas of this passage in their descriptions of Jesus. The use of a kingly text to describe Jesus implies that there must have also been a pre-existing traditional hope for a kingly Messiah as well as a traditional hope for a priestly Messiah. Still, none of these texts in their original context so far have shown indications of the hope for an eschatological Messiah. This modern concept of The Messiah most probably developed in the post-exilic or second temple period after the fall of the Davidic Kings in the Babylonian Exile.

The book of Isaiah was written during the time of the Babylonian exile when the Israelites were scattered and impoverished. The scriptures left to us by Isaiah, and others, from this exilic period demonstrate the Israelites’ longing for salvation, and they indicate that they looked forward to a divine Davidic king to fulfill God’s promises of the past and to bring them everlasting peace. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet proclaims the birth of a child to Judah’s king Ahaz. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Later readers, particularly the gospel writer Matthew, have used this as confirmation of Jesus’ Messiahship because he was brought into the world by a virgin. 

Scholars, on the other hand, have questioned whether the passage can really be read as a messianic prophecy. Collins points out that the original Hebrew version of Isaiah does not refer to a “virgin.” It instead refers to a “young woman” who will give birth to a son. However, Matthew is not referencing the Hebrew text, he is referencing the Greek version. The Greek version of the Bible, known as the Septuagint or LXX, makes an interesting and problematic choice in translating the text to say “virgin” rather than “young woman” as in the Hebrew. Collins further notes that even the word used here in the Greek is typically translated “young woman” in other places. Thus, he concludes that the Greek translation was a much later choice and that the young woman originally was

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17 Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel”
18 Matthew 1, 11
“not necessarily a virgin.” He also goes further to say that “the child was not a messiah, and not even necessarily a future king, but his birth was a sign of hope for Ahaz.”\textsuperscript{19} Though he makes a reasonable and convincing argument about the “young woman,” I must disagree with his statements about the child. Though it is unlikely that the text was ever intended to anticipate the birth of Jesus The Messiah, it is probable that it was intended as an anticipation of a contemporary kingly messiah. While some scholars keep Isaiah 7 and 9 separate, I read them as two ends of the same storyline.

The passage in chapter 7 describes the prophecy of a son to be born, while chapter 9 describes the fulfillment of that prophesy. Therefore, when the passages are read in conjunction, one can conclude that the child is certainly designated as not only a Davidic King, but also as divine.

6 For to us a child is born… And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing… forever. Isaiah 9:6-7

Though the passage in Isaiah 7 portrays the child as a “sign of hope for Ahaz,” he is described as much more than that in Isaiah 9. Isaiah 9 therefore becomes much more messianic in the sense that it describes a kingly figure with divine qualities that will establish a kingdom of peace. Though, it must remain uncertain whether the child was referred to as a messiah.

In the famous Isaiah 11:1-9 passage, a Davidic ruler is prophesied who will have the “Spirit of the Lord,” will rule righteously, and will bring a period of great peace. This has been interpreted as a messianic text by many, including Goswell. However, he has a very different messianic reading of the text. He finds that since “the future Davidic ruler in this passage does not act as deliverer nor does he set up the kingdom over which he exercises rule… [and] the paradisial conditions of 11:6-9 are not due to the actions of the promised ruler,”\textsuperscript{20} he cannot be a king as many have come to believe. Rather, he identifies

\textsuperscript{19} Adela Collins and John Collins, \textit{King and Messiah as Son of God}, 59
\textsuperscript{20} Goswell, “Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 11”, 123
the messianic figure as the “chief judicial officer within God’s kingdom” and concludes that Jesus fulfills that role as the “promised Davidic ruler who will maintain justice in the end-time kingdom.”21 This reading may be accurate and useful in linking the passage to Jesus, seeing as Jesus was not really a king, but the text was most likely meant as part of a coronation ceremony for a contemporary Davidic king. This king was a great hope for the suffering Israelites of the Babylonian captivity, so much so that he was cast in a clearly messianic light. They expected him to bring them peace and salvation in the here and now rather than at a future end-time, which means that the definition of messiah is still distinct between the Israelites and the modern reader. We cannot know if the original author considered the child a messianic figure, but it is likely that editors who knew that the great peace of Isaiah 11:6-9 had not happened, could only see it as an expectation of a future Messiah, leading to the development of the modern definition of messianism.

MESSIANISM IN THREE DOCUMENTS FOUND AT QUMRAN

There are many texts found among the caves at Qumran that could be used to study messianism and which provide important clues about the nature of messianism in the Community. However, the three texts I will look at are the Messianic Rule (1QSa), the Aramaic Apocalypse (4Q246), and the Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521). These three texts bring up interesting questions about what kind of messiah was expected at Qumran, and they each have close relations to New Testament texts that reveal that much of the “radical” ideas from the New Testament, were not so radical after all.

The Messianic Rule describes a public reading of the Torah, the proper life stages of a male member of the community, and then describes certain regulations on who is or is not allowed to hold office.22 The excerpt of interest to our study however, is from column 2 lines 11 through 22. Here we have

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22 Vermes, The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English, 159-161
a description of a meal during which all of the “men of renown” gather and sit according to their status in the hierarchy of offices in the Community.

“When God engenders (the Priest-) Messiah, he shall come with them [at] the head of the whole congregation of Israel with all [his brethren, the sons] of Aaron the Priests… And then [the Messiah of Israel shall [come], and the chiefs of the [clans of Israel] shall sit before him, [each] in the order of his dignity… let no man extend his hand over the firstfruits of bread and wine before the Priest; for [it is he] who shall bless the firstfruits of bread and wine, and shall be the first [to extend] his hand over the bread. Thereafter, the Messiah of Israel shall extend his hand over the bread, [and] all the congregation of the Community [shall utter a] blessing, [each man in the order] of his dignity. 1QSa 2:11-22

The first thing to note is the clear use of “messiah” as a title. This could be an indication that indeed “messiah” became a title prior to the time of the Qumranites, or that the translators assumed that “messiah” should be translated as a title based on their own customs. This means that perhaps the use of “messiah” as a title was not original to Qumran but was imposed onto the text by translators who assumed the Qumranites had the same understanding of messianism that New Testament authors did.

The next important aspect to notice is that there seems to be an expectation of two messiahs at Qumran — Priest and King. Recall now the earlier discussion of the anointing of both the priests and the kings in early biblical history. With that in mind, it would seem to make sense for Qumran to develop an expectation for both to arrive at some appointed time. Yet again, scholars argue that this may be a result of mistranslation or of misunderstanding of the code language used at Qumran. Hurst comments that it is likely that the priest mentioned was not truly messianic. “Naturally the priest would precede any political figure, no matter how exalted or ideal, in a state/religious celebration.” The point he makes is that as the

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23 Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 161-62
25 Hurst, “Did Qumran expect two messiahs?”, 178-69, 179-80
26 Hurst, “Did Qumran expect two messiahs?”, 172-73
head of the Community, the priest’s seat would always be at the head of the table even if the Messiah is also present. He also brings up the possibility that Messiah has a double meaning at Qumran. "'Messiah of Israel' is a technical term for 'the Messiah' while 'Messiah of Aaron’ is the conventional high-priestly designation for an individual eschatological priest."\(^{27}\) The priest from the passage may be referred to as “Messiah” simply because he holds office in the end-time. Also worth considering is that the intention was not to call the priest a “messiah” but to address him as an anointed priest in the manner of the Pentateuch. Lastly, it is impossible to read the passage without bringing to mind the Last Supper scene from the gospels. In both texts, a messianic figure sits at the front of the table and blesses bread and wine. It is tempting to say that the texts are somehow related because of this similarity; however, this cannot be asserted. Cirafici explains that there are several parallels between John and the passage from the Messianic rule. She explains that the “new wine” motif is similarly used in both to symbolize the coming end-time, the presence of an authoritative, messianic figure in in both, and the use of the banquet as a replacement for temple sacrifice is also present in both texts.\(^{28}\) Through these similarities we can see how Jesus was cast in a priestly light once again, and that the communal meal described in John was not unique to Jesus and his disciples.

The unfortunately fragmented Aramaic Apocalypse has been the topic of much debate as scholars fumble to translate and interpret it in the most accurate way. The biggest source of controversy in the text are the lines from column 1:5-2:1 which have been translated and read in two opposing ways. The first, most popular reading, is that the figure described is certainly a positive Messiah that comes to destroy the enemies of God’s people and to establish an eternally peaceful kingdom. The other end of the argument is that the text describes a false Messiah who blasphemously proclaims himself as the Son of God.

5 A great massacre in the provinces… the king of assyria [and E]gypt… he will be great on earth…will make and all will serve… he will be called (or: call himself) [gran]d… and by his

\(^{27}\) Hurst, “Did Qumran expect two messiahs?”, 171
name he will be designated (or: designate himself). The son of God he will be proclaimed (or: proclaim himself) and the son of the most high they will call him. Like the sparks of the vision, so will be their kingdom. They will reign for years on the earth and they will trample all. People will trample people (cf. Dan. 7:23) and one province another province vacat until the people of God will arise and all will rest from the sword. 5 Their kingdom will be an eternal kingdom (cf. Dan. 7:27) 4Q246 1:5-2:1

If the Son of God character described is indeed a negative figure, that can call into question the validity of Jesus’ claims. However, Perrin makes two observations that diminish the possibility for a negative Son of God reading of the passage. Firstly, Perrin notes that “proponents of a negative figure fall short in their reconstructed translations… in their ability to provide both literary and logical coherence with the text that immediately precedes and follows.” He furthermore comments on the passage’s silence on the matter. There seems to be no indication of disapproval towards the messianic figure. A further observation can be made about the text’s reliance on the prophecies of Daniel. The passage in Daniel 7 that is cited twice is typically understood to be a positive prophecy of a soon-to-come kingdom that will bring Israel peace and destroy Israel’s enemies; therefore, the Aramaic Apocalypse must also be read in the same manner. What is being described is the arrival of a kingly Messiah who is also referred to as “the Son of God,” who will establish an everlasting kingdom and bring the people of God rest in a similar way to how John proclaims that all who believe that Jesus is the Son of God will have eternal life. Thus, what the Aramaic Apocalypse really tells us is that the concept of the Messiah being the Son of God was not new in the New Testament. It was already circulating prior to Jesus.

A different Qumran text reveals that another aspect of the New Testament was not as unique as we would otherwise believe. This text is known as the Messianic Apocalypse. It talks of a Messiah who commands the obedience of the heavens and the earth, and then transitions to address the “seekers of the

29 Perrin, “From Qumran to Nazareth”, 218
30 1 John 5:13
Lord.” These are told to do good works in order to be considered pious and to be “glorified.” The text then goes on in a description of what the Messiah, presumably, will do.

II ... [the heaven] and the earth will listen to His Messiah, and none therein will stray from the commandments of the holy ones. Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service! All you hopeful in (your) heart, will you not find the Lord in this? For the Lord will consider the pious (hasidim) and call the righteous by name. Over the poor His spirit will hover and will renew the faithful with His power. And He will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom. He who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the bent (Ps. cxlvi, 7-8). And I will cleave to the hopeful and in His mercy ... And the fruit ... will not be delayed for anyone And the Lord will accomplish glorious things which have never been as [He ... ] For He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor (Isa. lxi, 1).... He will lead the uprooted and make the hungry rich ... Fr. 7... [the earth] and all that is on it; and the sea [and all that is in it] and all the ponds of water and rivers who are doing good before the Lord ... like those who curse and are (destined) for death [when] the Lifegiver will raise the dead of His people. And we will thank and proclaim to you the righteousness of the Lord, who ... 4Q521

The passage notably cites two old testament texts, Psalm 146 and Isaiah 61. These texts contain the common themes of heaven and earth, liberating captives, giving sight to the blind lifting up those who are low, and bringing good news to the poor. All of these themes are also commonly referred to in the New testament,31 indicating that Qumran and the New Testament authors used the same or similar texts from the Old Testament in their own writings.

Matthew 11:5 is a particularly interesting verse that indirectly references the same Old Testament scriptures in describing the works of Jesus. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have

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leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” The similarities between Matthew and the Messianic Apocalypse are astounding, particularly when one takes note of a phrase that is found in these but not in the Old Testament texts that they both reference. “Revive the dead and bring good news to the poor” in the Messianic Apocalypse and “the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” in Matthew. It seems peculiar that they would share this in common with each other but not with their source texts, and it may even be tempting to say that Matthew had knowledge of the Qumran text. However, it is better explained by the fact that both would have had prior knowledge of the book of Daniel and perhaps of 2 Maccabees or Psalms of Solomon all of which mention the revival of the dead in some way. Even if the authors from Qumran and from the New Testament did not have knowledge of these books, their presence during the time of the Qumran Community and before Jesus indicates that the concept of resurrection was very much alive and discussed. Therefore, both Qumran and the New Testament authors must have come from a common “line of tradition that expected a messianic era marked by restored health, good news for the poor and most notably the raising of the dead.”

CONCLUSION

The texts I have chosen to study are only a small selection out of the abundantly many texts that are related to messianism, yet from even just a brief look into these texts one can get an idea of how the use of the term “messiah” has changed over the course of time. The definition of the word, and the expectations associated with it are vastly different from one point in Israel’s history to another. However, there seems to be a general transformation of messianism from an expectation for many contemporary, imperfect, non-divine, authoritative figures -priests and kings- in the Pentateuch and Histories, to a hope for a contemporary and divine king in Isaiah during the Babylonian exile, and ultimately to an expectation

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32 Perrin, “From Qumran to Nazareth”, 226
of a future, eschatological, divine agent of the end time. Furthermore, we learn from the texts at Qumran that ideas and phrases that seem to be unique among the New Testament authors were in fact in existence before Jesus. This fact does not diminish the significance of Jesus nor the claims made about him. Understanding that there were messianic traditions in existence prior to Jesus give the claims made in the New Testament a foundation that they would not otherwise have. The gospel writers did not arbitrarily adapt the Old Testament texts to support the claim that Jesus is The Messiah, they were drawing from ideas and expectations that had developed over the course of thousands of years and which they had adopted.