

The New Testament

A Student's Introduction

FOURTH EDITION

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Josephus argues that it was the Zealots' refusal to surrender, even after Jerusalem had been captured, and their occupation of the Temple precincts that compelled the Romans to destroy the sanctuary. According to Josephus, General Titus, the Roman commander-in-chief, had not originally intended to commit this desecration. This catastrophe and the later bar Kochba rebellion of 132–135 C.E. discredited both the Zealot party and its **apocalyptic** hope of divine intervention in achieving national liberation. Thanks to the Zealot failures, both armed rebellion and end-of-the-world predictions were henceforth repudiated by mainstream Judaism.

The Messiah: First-Century Expectations

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DEBATES ON JESUS' MESSIAHSHIP

Given the vast diversity of first-century Judaism, we should not expect to find general agreement among different Jewish groups about the nature and function of the **Messiah**. It seems that many Jews did not make expectation of a coming Messiah a major part of their religious hope. The Sadducees apparently denied that there would be one, while the Essenes anticipated two separate figures who would, respectively, fill either a priestly or a

political role. The Christian view that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah was not accepted by mainstream Judaism for a variety of reasons that will become clearer as we study the Gospels (see Chapters 6–10). Among other things, Jews could point to the fact that Jesus did not accomplish what Israel's prophets said the Messiah was commissioned to do: He did not deliver the covenant people from their Gentile enemies, reassemble those scattered in the Diaspora, restore the Davidic kingdom, or establish universal peace (cf. Isa. 9:6–7; 11:7–12:16, etc.). Instead of freeing Jews from their oppressors and thereby fulfilling God's ancient promises—for land, nationhood, kingship, and blessing—Jesus died a “shameful” death, defeated by the very political powers the Messiah was prophesied to overcome.

Indeed, the Hebrew prophets did not foresee that Israel's savior would be executed as a common criminal by Gentiles (John 7:12, 27, 31, 40–44), making Jesus' crucifixion a “stumbling block” to scripturally literate Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). To many Jews, the manner of Jesus' death at Roman hands explicitly disqualified him from messianic status. According to Deuteronomy 21,

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you *hang him on a tree*, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for *anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse*. (Deut. 21:23, New Revised Standard Version; emphasis added)

A literal reading of Deuteronomy indicates that when Jesus was officially condemned and hung on the cross—made from a tree—he was necessarily accursed. Confronted with such texts, Christians reinterpreted them creatively, as offering clues to the *meaning* of Jesus' execution. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he skillfully turns a potential weakness into a strength, citing Deuteronomy and arguing that, through his crucifixion, Jesus voluntarily accepted the Law's curse. In his “accursed” suffering, Jesus bore the punishment deserved by others, sinners whom the Law had condemned (Gal. 3:13; see Chapter 16).

Although no canonical prophet specifically predicted that the Messiah would die as a criminal (or

be resurrected thereafter), several biblical passages speak of an unidentified righteous man who suffers unjustly. The most famous of these occurs in Isaiah 53, which describes an anonymous “servant” whose pain and humiliation are borne for the sake of others. This concept of vicarious suffering—in which an innocent person willingly endures unmerited punishment as a substitute for those who are actually guilty—became an important factor in the Christian interpretation of Jesus' death. In the Hebrew Bible, however, none of these suffering servant texts is directly linked to prophecies about the Messiah.

In Mark's Gospel, which scholars believe was the earliest written, the author reveals his awareness of Jewish objections to Jesus as Messiah by emphasizing the unexpected or “hidden” quality of Jesus' messiahship. Mark also utilizes the notion of vicarious suffering, stating that Jesus generously gave his life “as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Of all the Gospel authors, Matthew makes the most sustained effort to defend Christians' messianic claims, literally ransacking the Septuagint translation for passages, or even single words, that could provide scriptural support for the unusual kind of Messiah that Jesus proved to be (see Chapter 8).

Confronted with challenges that Jesus had not fulfilled many scriptural promises, the early Christian movement sometimes found ingenious ways of refuting criticism. According to a tradition contained in both Matthew and Luke, when Jesus resisted the devil's temptations by quoting from the Hebrew Bible, the devil retaliated in kind, citing verses from Psalm 91. This psalm, which states that the truly righteous person will enjoy God's certain favor, includes categorical assurances that Yahweh will protect his favored one from all physical harm:

A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand close at hand,
but you it [misfortune] shall not touch; . . .
For you the LORD [Yahweh] is a safe retreat;
you have made the Most High your refuge.
No disaster shall befall you,
no calamity shall come upon your house. . . .
(Ps. 91:7, 9–10)

God unequivocally promises to deliver the one whose “love is set on me”:

I will lift him beyond danger, for he knows me by
my name . . .
I will rescue him and bring him to honor.
I will satisfy him with long life
to enjoy the fullness of my salvation.

(Ps. 91:14–16)

Dying without “honor” or achievement of “long life,” traditional signs of divine approval, Jesus appeared to many not to be the godly person whom the psalmist described. Convinced, however, that Jesus had suffered only temporary defeat and, through his resurrection, attained “the fullness of [God's] salvation,” the Gospel authors indicated that it was inappropriate to apply the optimistic guarantees of Psalm 91 to Jesus' experience. If opponents cited such passages as evidence that Jesus (who was not rescued by divine intervention) could not have been God's chosen one, Christians had an effective defense: Quoting Scriptures that do not support their claims is the devil's work!

THE ROYAL COVENANT OF KING DAVID

Because the Gospels are a literary battleground in which the authors are continually fending off attacks on Jesus' messiahship, it is advisable to examine their sources—the Hebrew Bible—to trace the historical evolution of this concept. Derived from the Hebrew word *mashiah*, Messiah means “Anointed One” and refers to the ceremony in which priests anointed (poured oil on) the heads of persons singled out or commissioned by God for some special undertaking. In the Hebrew Bible, *mashiah* is most frequently applied to the kings of ancient Israel, particularly those descended from King David (Pss. 18:50; 89:20, 38, 51; 132:10, 17). Because of his outstanding success in establishing a powerful Israelite state, David was regarded as the prototype of the divinely favored ruler, and his kingdom a foreshadowing of the reign of God on earth. According to 2 Samuel 7, Yahweh concluded an “everlasting covenant” or treaty with David's “house” (dynasty). The covenant terms specified Yahweh's unconditional promise to maintain an unending line of Davidic kings on the throne of Israel. If some of David's royal descendants misbehaved, Yahweh would punish them, but he vowed never to remove them from the throne (2 Sam. 7:8–17;

23:1–5). Perhaps as a result of this “royal covenant theology,” David's heirs ruled uninterrupted over the land of Judah for nearly 400 years (961–587 B.C.E.). (By contrast, the northern kingdom of Israel, separated from Judah in 922 B.C.E., saw many changes of ruling families before its destruction by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E.)

Historical End of the Davidic Dynasty David's line of reigning kings came to an abrupt end in 587 B.C.E., when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned King Solomon's Temple, and removed the last Davidic monarch, Zedekiah, from the throne. Nebuchadnezzar also deported much of Jerusalem's upper class to his imperial capital. When a devoted remnant of Judah's former leadership returned to Jerusalem from Babylon in 538 B.C.E., the Davidic monarchy was not restored. The land of Judah was placed under the administration of the Persian Empire, which installed local governors rather than kings over its Jewish subjects. The first of these Persian-appointed governors was Zerubbabel, a descendant of the Davidic family. Zerubbabel was apparently the focus of national hopes for a restoration of the Davidic kingdom and was hailed in messianic terms by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Hag. 2:20–23; Zech. 2:10; 6:12). Hopes for a renewed Davidic state failed to materialize, however, and the figure of Zerubbabel disappeared from history. Israel was never again to have a Davidic king, the “anointed of God.”

During the long years of Persian rule, the Jewish people looked mainly to the spiritual leadership of their High Priest (who was also anointed with holy oil when installed in office [Lev. 4:3, 5]). The High Priest and his many priestly assistants administered the rebuilt Temple and provided a focus of communal religious identity. Without a king or political autonomy, Judah became increasingly a theocratic (God-ruled) community, guided by a priestly class that supervised the Temple sacrifices and interpreted the Mosaic Torah.

ISRAEL'S HOPES FOR A NEW DAVIDIC KING

Even after many centuries of foreign domination, as Judah was successively ruled by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Syrians, and Romans, Israel's

collective memory of the Davidic Covenant did not fade. Yahweh's sworn oath that his people would have a Davidic heir to rule them forever (2 Sam. 7; 23:1–5; Ps. 89:19–31) was reinforced by Israel's prophets, who envisioned a future golden age when a man like David, "anointed of God," would rise to liberate Israel, defeat its enemies, and help bring God's kingdom to earth.

The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, who was a staunch supporter of the Davidic monarchy during the late eighth century B.C.E., had delivered unforgettable oracles (prophetic words) from Yahweh:

For a boy has been born for us, a son given to us
to bear the symbol of dominion on his
shoulder;
and he shall be called
in purpose wonderful, in battle
God-like,
Father for all time, Prince of peace.
Great shall the dominion be and boundless the
peace
bestowed on David's throne and on his king-
dom,
to establish it and sustain it with justice and
righteousness from now and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD [Yahweh] of Hosts shall
do this. (Isa. 9:6–7)

Isaiah's further allusions to a righteous king "from the stock of Jesse [David's father]" (Isa. 11:1–9) and visions of a Davidic Jerusalem to which the Gentile nations would flock (Isa. 2:1–4) not only enhanced the prestige of the Davidic royal family but also associated it irrefutably with the coming earthwide reign of Yahweh.

All of Israel's Davidic kings were literally "messiahs," "anointed ones." They ruled as Yahweh's "sons," adopted as such at the time of their consecration or coronation (Ps. 2:7). Because the prophets had conceived of the Messiah as a warrior-king like David, a hero whom Yahweh chose to act as his agent in establishing a dominion of universal peace, the messianic leader was typically regarded as primarily a political figure. His function was to demonstrate the omnipotence of Israel's God by setting up an earthly kingdom whose righteous government would compel the nations' respect for both Yahweh and his chosen people (Isa. 11; Dan. 2:44).

Messianic Claimants Before and After Jesus

JEWISH UPRISINGS AGAINST ROME

Judea's troubled relationship with Rome inspired a series of prophets, revolutionaries, and other leaders who typically promised the Jewish people relief from Roman economic and social oppression. Some rebel leaders reputedly claimed the title of Jewish king, the crime for which Pontius Pilate executed Jesus. Most of those aspiring to royal status did not claim to be a "son [descendant] of David" but merely to be "like David," a previously obscure youth who was raised from among the common people to become Israel's champion against a foreign military threat. It could be said of these popular national leaders what the psalmist's God said of David: "I have conferred the crown on a hero, and promoted one chosen from my people" (Ps. 89:19).

In his accounts of peasant uprisings against the Romans or their Herodian puppets, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reports that several prominent rebels were also messianic pretenders (i.e., they assumed the function of Israel's *anointed* kings). Most of these popular kings appeared either during the turmoil following the death of Herod the Great (4 B.C.E.) or during the greater upheaval of the Jewish War against Rome (66–73 C.E.). After Herod's death, a rebel named Judas, son of a brigand or terrorist named Hezekiah, led Galilee in a revolt against Roman occupational forces. According to Josephus, this Judas was motivated by an ambition to achieve "royal rank" (*Antiquities*, 17:271–272). Simon of Perea, the territory east of Galilee, similarly donned "the diadem," symbol of kingly status, and plundered Herod's palace in Jericho. After leading a band of unruly followers, Simon was captured by the Romans and beheaded, a fate anticipating that of John the Baptist. A third would-be king, Athronges, resembled David in beginning his career as a shepherd, after which he also wore a royal diadem and, supported by his brothers and their armed followers, attacked both Roman and Herodian armies. Roman retaliation against such popular uprisings was swift and severe: In 4 B.C.E., the Galilean town of Sepphoris, which

had aided the rebels, was burned and its inhabitants sold into slavery. Located only a few miles from Nazareth, Sepphoris was lavishly rebuilt during Jesus' early years, a project on which it is remotely possible that he and his "carpenter [artisan]" father worked.

Early in the first Jewish Revolt against Rome (c. 67–68 C.E.), several large groups of bandits or guerrilla fighters who had been plundering the countryside infiltrated Jerusalem and occupied the Temple area, which they made their headquarters. This impromptu coalition formed a party of radical nationalists—the Zealots. Composed largely of peasants, the Zealots appear to have been as dedicated to overthrowing the Jerusalem ruling class—which they accused of exploiting the poor and collaborating with Rome—as they were to freeing their land from foreign domination.

Whereas the Zealots derived from the rural poor, the Sicarii (from the Latin *sicarius*, meaning "dagger") were a group of urban terrorists and assassins. Well organized, the Sicarii carried out a carefully plotted series of murders, eliminating priests and other Jerusalem authorities who favored compromise with Rome. According to Josephus, one of the Sicarii leaders, Menachem—the son or grandson of the rebel Judas—assumed the trappings of kingship. Menachem ostentatiously entered Jerusalem as the people's king, a warrior-monarch in the tradition of David.

Another Sicarii pretender, Simon *bar* (son of) Giora, who also had messianic pretensions, led the largest and most powerful force resisting the Roman reconquest of Jerusalem. Josephus states that, after Titus's soldiers had captured and demolished the Temple, Simon, arrayed in royal robes, suddenly appeared among the ruins. If he hoped for a last-minute divine intervention to vindicate his kingly aspirations, he was disappointed: The Romans took him as a prisoner to Rome, where he was executed.

The most famous messianic claimant was Simon bar Kochba, who led the second Jewish Revolt against Rome in 132–135 C.E. Akiba, a prominent rabbi, proclaimed that bar Kochba fulfilled the promise in Numbers 24:17 that "a star shall go forth from Jacob." While Rabbi Akiba and other supporters called Simon "bar Kochba," which

means "son of the star," his detractors derisively labeled the revolutionary "bar Koziba"—"son of the lie." His attempt to liberate Judea and restore a theocratic state was doomed by Roman might, which again annihilated Jewish armies and brought a terrible end to Jewish political messianic hopes.

PSALM OF SOLOMON 17

The most striking description of Israel's expected Messiah was written only five or six decades before Jesus' birth. Ascribed to Solomon, the progenitor of Israel's wisdom tradition, a collection of prophetic poems known as the Psalms of Solomon envisions a righteous king who would drive the hated foreigners (Roman occupational forces) from Jerusalem and establish a just sovereignty over both Gentiles and Jews. Psalm of Solomon 17 is the first known work of Jewish literature to use the terms *son of David* and *Lord Messiah* (Christ), distinctive titles that New Testament writers apply to Jesus.

Although Psalm of Solomon 17 sees the Messiah as sinless and powerful, he is clearly a human rather than a supernatural figure, God's agent but not a divine being. His promised activities include gathering together "a holy people" who will be "children of their God," cleansing Jerusalem (presumably including its Temple) and ruling compassionately over the Gentiles. Although a Davidic heir, this "Lord Messiah" achieves his dominion without military conquest because he is "powerful in the holy spirit" and strengthened by "wisdom and understanding." This vision of a peaceful Messiah subduing opponents through "the word of his mouth [his teaching]" is much closer to that adopted by the Gospel authors than the traditional expectation of a warrior-king like the historical David (see Box 5.1).

A REVISIONIST VIEW OF THE MESSIAH

As presented in the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth takes a view of the Messiah's role and the kingdom of God that was disappointing or perplexing to many. Despite some modern commentators' attempts to associate him with the Zealot or revolutionary party, Jesus (as portrayed by the Evangelists) does not present himself as a military or political



Box 5.1 Psalm of Solomon 17

See, Lord, and raise up for them [Israel] their king,
the *son of David* [emphasis added] to rule over your servant Israel
in the time known to you, O God.
Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers,
to purge Jerusalem from gentiles
who trample her to destruction;
in wisdom and righteousness to drive out
the sinners from the inheritance; . . .
To destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth;
At his warning the nations will flee from his presence,
and he will condemn sinners by the thoughts of their hearts.
He will gather a holy people
whom he will lead in righteousness. . . .
For he shall know them
that they are all children of their God. . . .
He will judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness.
And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke
and he will glorify the Lord in (a place) prominent (above)
the whole earth.
And he will purge Jerusalem
(and make it) holy as it was even from the beginning,
(for) nations to come from the ends of the earth to see his glory,
to bring as gifts the children who had been driven out, . . .
And he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God.
There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days,
for all shall be holy,
and their king shall be the *Lord Messiah* [emphasis added].

savior of Israel. As John's Gospel concludes, his "kingdom does not belong to this world" (John 18:36).

Many scholars believe that during his lifetime Jesus did not claim to be Israel's Messiah, but that after the experience of his resurrection—regarded as proof of divine vindication—his followers claimed the title for him. In recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, however, Jewish Christians were faced with a dilemma: They were convinced that he was David's predestined heir, the royal figure whom Isaiah and other prophets had foretold, but, as their detractors pointedly observed, he had "failed" in the essential messianic task of reestablishing David's

kingdom. In Luke-Acts, the writer express this tension between Christians' belief in Jesus' authentic messiahship and the seeming incompleteness of his earthly work. Repeatedly, the disciples voice their expectation that Jesus will finally make God's kingdom a reality (Luke 19:11) and that he will "establish once again the sovereignty of Israel" (Acts 1:6). Ordered not to speculate about when or how God's imperial domain will actually arrive, the disciples are instead assigned the task of carrying Jesus' message "to the ends of the earth" (Acts. 1:7–8).

With the fulfillment of biblical promises thus postponed to the indefinite future, Christians soon made an enormous leap of faith: The Messiah will

(For) he will not rely on horse and rider and bow,
nor will he collect gold and silver for war.
Nor will he build up hope in a multitude for a day of war.
The Lord himself is his king,
the hope of the one who has a strong hope in God.
He shall be compassionate to all the nations
(who) reverently stand before him. . . .
And he himself (will be) free from sin, (in order) to rule
a great people.
He will expose officials and drive out sinners
by the strength of his word.
And he will not weaken in his days, (relying) on his God,
for God made him powerful in the holy spirit
and wise in the counsel of understanding,
with strength and righteousness. . . .
Faithfully and righteously shepherding the Lord's flock,
he will not let any of them stumble in their pasture.
He will lead them all in holiness
and there will be no arrogance among them,
that any should be oppressed.
This is the beauty of the king of Israel
which God knew,
to raise him over the house of Israel
to discipline it. . . .
Blessed are those born in those days
to see the good fortune of Israel
which God will bring to pass in the assembly of the tribes.

make a second visit to earth to accomplish what was left unfinished at his first coming. Although the Hebrew Bible, the source of both Jewish and Christian messianic ideas, says nothing about the Messiah dividing his work into two separate installments—an initial earthly career that culminates ingloriously in a criminal's death and a second (long-delayed) reappearance as an all-powerful supernatural king—early Christianity readily embraced this belief in a two-part messianic sequence. In the oldest surviving Christian documents, Paul urges his Gentile converts to be prepared for Jesus' imminent return as world judge (1 Thess. 4–5; 1 Cor. 1:7–8; 7:29–31). Paul fully expects to witness

Jesus descending in glory from heaven to gather up his loyal followers, who will be "caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:16–17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51–55).

For those living in the protracted interval between Jesus' ascension to heaven and his return to earth, New Testament writers emphasize the spiritual significance of Jesus' innovative messiahship. Instead of coming to earth to conquer political enemies and forcibly establish a theocratic monarchy, Jesus is seen as having appeared primarily to conquer less tangible but more formidable foes—human sin, evil, and death. After his sacrificial death, paying the ultimate penalty to redeem

humankind, Jesus then ascends to the celestial throne room, standing at God's "right hand" (a position symbolic of his unity with God) (Acts 8:55–56; cf. Rev. 1:11–20, etc.). In thus being portrayed as God's co-regent, an immortal being of cosmic stature, the ascended Jesus becomes infinitely more powerful than a Davidic Messiah, ruling invisibly but eternally over human minds and hearts (Phil 2:6–11). In Christian reinterpretation, traditional expectations of a renewed Davidic kingdom are transformed into the concept of a heavenly messianic reign, one in which believers—joined by sacrament and spirit—can participate.

The strongly apocalyptic nature of much (not all) New Testament Christianity serves to direct believers toward a culminating future, when the Deity's intentions will be accomplished "on earth, as in heaven," an omega point (ultimate goal) toward which all creation is now moving. The Christian concept of its Messiah is thus a paradox, a God-anointed king who is rejected and killed, but whose voluntary death is a triumph over forces of darkness and an unfailing sign of hope for humankind.

Summary

As New Testament documents reveal, their authors present Jesus as far more than a Davidic king. Taken together, the canonical writings present Jesus as a composite figure, one who represents the sum of all Israel's heritage. He is not only the anointed monarch whom David foreshadowed; he is also a lawgiver and prophet like Moses, a blameless and humble servant who suffers for others, a heavenly sacrifice and eternal priest, a teacher of supreme wisdom, and the icon or "image of the invisible God" by, through, and for whom the universe was created.

Translating the Hebrew *mashiah* as the Greek *Christos*, the New Testament writers commonly speak as if Christ were not a title but part of Jesus' proper name. Composed in a Hellenistic context and for a Greek-thinking audience, the New Testa-

ment books present Jesus almost exclusively in his function as Christ, a universal savior whose role goes far beyond that of the Davidic ruler. In interpreting Jesus' religious meaning, the New Testament authors apply to their hero many different concepts borrowed from the rich vein of Hellenistic Jewish ideas about the Messiah.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Define some essential differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees. Which party controlled the Jerusalem Temple and was apparently on better terms with the Romans?
2. Discuss some of the beliefs that Pharisees, Essenes, and Christians held in common. What connection did the Essenes have to the Dead Sea Scrolls and possibly to John the Baptist?
3. Discuss the role that the Zealots played in the Jewish Revolt against Rome. What happened to the Jewish state and religion as a result of the revolt? How does Josephus contribute to our understanding of the Jewish War for independence?
4. Summarize the concept of the Messiah found in the Hebrew Bible. To what degree is the biblical Messiah a political figure related to the restoration of King David's royal dynasty? How do New Testament writers modify the concept of the Davidic Messiah?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. How do you account for the extreme diversity of first-century Jewish religious groups, all of whom believed they were following the Mosaic Torah? Why do you think the Essenes regarded themselves the only "true" Israel, the sole group loyal to its covenant obligations? Discuss the similarities between the Essenes' conviction that they alone served God's plan and the later Christian belief that their community uniquely represented the "true Israel."
2. Most passages in the Hebrew Bible present the future Messiah as a descendant of King David who, as a God-empowered conqueror, would restore Israel to its former political independence and prosperity. Because Jesus did not deliver the covenant people from their oppressors, the Romans, or restore David's throne,

how can he be accepted as the Messiah whom Israel's prophets envisioned?

TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER

Sadducees	Essenes
Pharisees	Dead Sea Scrolls
oral law (traditions of the fathers)	Zealots
Mishnah and Talmud	apocalyptic
Jews and rabbi-led Judaism	Messiah
Jamnia (Yavneh)	Psalms of Solomon

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