“Who Do You Say I Am?”: Second Temple Messianism and the Historical Jesus

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The goal of this study was to examine Second Temple messianic literature to determine the nature of Jewish messianic speculation in that period and compare Jesus’ messianic theology as recounted in the Synoptic Gospels to determine how the historical Jesus adopted, adapted, and expanded previous Jewish messianic notions into his own time. Examining the points of contact and divergence between Jesus and his religious predecessors reveals that, while he added his own contributions to Second Temple Jewish messianic theology, Jesus interpreted his own in specifically Jewish ways, adopting many of the diverse aspects of messianic speculation that permeated Jewish thought in the first century CE. In this sense, Jesus is a microcosm of the diversity of Second Temple Jewish messianic speculation. Additionally, the early church that inherited Jesus’ legacy did not interpret every aspect of his messianic theology in the same manner he did, understanding several aspects in distinctly non-Jewish ways. This phenomenon was the product of the much larger impulse to distinguish early Christianity from Judaism, a process that began with the Gospel writers and continued into the early church period.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was born, lived, and died as a first century Palestinian Jew. He observed the Jewish Law, celebrated Jewish festivals, read from the Jewish scriptures, and participated in Jewish communal worship. It is indisputable that the historical Jesus was a product of his own time. But Jesus did not merely regurgitate the Jewish ideas and practices he inherited from his predecessors, he also added his own unique interpretation of the religious concepts passed down to him. One area where this is particularly evident is Jesus’ messianic theology. The existence of several Jewish messianic works that pre-date Jesus tells us that he was not the first Jew to expect the coming of a messianic figure. Examining these documents provides a basis for understanding how the historical Jesus, as a Jew, would have interpreted his own messianic theology.

Messianism in the Hebrew Bible

Evidence for clear messianic speculation in the Hebrew Bible is incredibly scarce. The Hebrew word for Messiah (moshiach) occurs several times in the Hebrew Bible, and referred to a wide variety of things and people. The word is translated as “anointed,” and was most often used in the context of the ritual consecration of a person, usually a priest or king, by anointing them with holy oil. This act symbolized their special role in God’s plan for humanity. The Hebrew Bible inaugurates the tradition of referring to a person specially chosen by God as a messiah, but does so in a non-eschatological context.

The title “Son of Man” also appears in the Hebrew Bible, but in a different form than in later Jewish literature. The phrase “son of man” is not used as a proper title referring to a specific eschatological figure, but as a general phrase referring to the author as a mortal in contrast to God or humanity in general. The best equation one could make is to the English word “human,” “humankind,” or “mortal.” It is not a respectful description, and is meant to convey the inferior status of the one holding it.

The most intriguing use of the phrase in the Hebrew Bible occurs in the Book of Daniel. In chapter 7, Daniel receives a vision of four beasts symbolizing the four kingdoms that had conquered the land of Israel. After a description of the beasts comes a judgment scene involving a messianic figure described as “one like a son of man” and another figure called “the Ancient One.” This passage is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to describing a messianic figure in an apocalyptic context using the phrase “son of man.” The figure is portrayed in the guise of kingship, although not Davidic, and is described in the context of judgment, although the text indicates that it is the “Ancient One”—that is, God—who actually renders judgment. Additionally, its philological use resembles its use in the rest of the Hebrew Bible—that is, as a way of describing the human appearance of the figure. Symbolically, the phrase “coming on the clouds of heaven” indicates that the figure is transcendent and belongs, like the Ancient One, to the heavenly realm. The nature of this individual has been the subject of debate. Perhaps the most compelling theory as to the symbolic interpretation of the Son of Man figure is that he is a heavenly, angelic being (probably the archangel Michael). Therefore, we must distinguish between two very different kinds of messianic speculation: 1) A “Son of Man” figure that is a transcendent, heavenly, angelic being and 2) A “Messiah”
figure who is an exalted human being that comes from the royal Davidic line.

**Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS)**

Messianism in the DSS is, at first glance, a highly variable phenomenon. In some scrolls, the messianic figure is totally absent—God and his angels are the sole agents of salvation. In others, there are multiple messiahs. In general, scholars have assumed a high level of doctrinal consistency within the scrolls and have attempted to fit messianic allusions into a coherent system. The core group of Qumran texts that deal with messianism envisage the presence of two messiahs—a Messiah of Aaron and a Messiah of Israel. The Messiah of Israel is described as a kingly Messiah, a human being from the Davidic line. This kingly Messiah of David, also referred to as the “Branch of David,” the “Prince of the Congregation,” or the “Messiah of Israel” was to overthrow the enemies of the Jews, usher in a new utopian Jewish kingdom, and destroy the ungodly. The other messiah, the Priestly Messiah, is always presented as being superior to the Davidic Messiah, who was to defer to him and his priests in all legal matters. Also known as the “Messiah of Aaron” or the “Interpreter of the Law,” this Priestly Messiah was to be the final teacher who “shall teach righteousness at the end of days.” He was to be the Community’s religious leader, reinstating what they believed was the correct way to worship God (e.g., religious calendars, sacrifices, purity laws, etc.) both inside and outside the Temple, an orthopraxy that they laid out in other writings like the Temple Scroll and Community Rule. Those scrolls that do envisage two messiahs pair them together as co-rulers in the eschatological kingdom.

Before leaving the subject of messianism in the DSS, it is necessary to discuss the “Son of God” fragment (4Q246). The fragment is incomplete and recalls Daniel 7. A Daniel-like person explains to a king a vision alluding to wars involving Assyria and Egypt, as well as the arrival of a final absolute ruler to whom all would be subject. The interpretation of this fragment is disputed, but I have chosen to adhere to a messianic interpretation since the individual most often called “son of God” in the Hebrew Bible is the Davidic king or his eschatological counterpart, both of whom are always said to be “anointed,” although in a non-eschatological sense. The Florilegium (4Q174) shows that 4Q246 also had messianic significance at Qumran. The connection between the title “Branch of David” and the Davidic messiah is explicitly made elsewhere in the Qumran corpus, specifically in the Patriarchal Blessings (4QpGen), where he is referred to as “the Messiah of Righteousness.” Taken together, the evidence presented above makes a strong case for a Davidic, messianic interpretation of 4Q246, which is significant for understanding the gap between the messianic theology of the historical Jesus and the early church’s misunderstanding of it.

**1 Enoch**

1 Enoch contains a rich complex of messianic speculation. The bulk of it occurs in the second part of the work known as the Similitudes (chs. 37-71). 1 Enoch refers to its messianic figure by a number of names including: the Elect One, the Righteous One, the Messiah, and the Son of Man. Perhaps the most striking feature of messianic speculation in 1 Enoch is its depiction of the Son of Man as a pre-existent being whom God had concealed until the end time. The presence and unveiling of this figure marks the beginning of a new age of righteousness in heaven and on earth, an eschatological kingdom where the wicked and sinners have no place and the righteous constantly praise God and His Elect One. In this context, the messianic figure in 1 Enoch is presented primarily as a cosmic judge, a figure who passes judgment on a multitude of characters including the living, the angels, and the dead. Another striking feature of 1 Enoch is its identification of the Son of Man with Enoch in chapter 71. The precise reading of this passage is disputed since the Ethiopic makes it difficult to distinguish whether the phrase is intended as a proper title (Son of Man) or as a reference to Enoch’s humanity in the style the phrase is used in much of the Hebrew Bible (see above). However, a reading that assumes some form of identification of Enoch with the Son of Man has some implications for this study. Chiala notes that this identification marks a new phase in the development of “Son of Man” speculation:

In the second scene, though, there is a new variation: it is no longer the Son of Man who is called into the presence of the Beginning of Days, but Enoch himself who is proclaimed Son of Man and told that he is to exercise righteousness. Here the metaphor, initially transformed into a character (first level of reinterpretation), receives a human face (second level of interpretation).

Assuming that the epilogue the passage in question is contained in is a later addition to the text, the identification of the Son of Man with Enoch is the first instance where the Son of Man is given a human form, a tradition that is taken up in the New Testament with Jesus. For the purposes of this study, I will assume that, at some stage in the development of 1 Enoch, the Son of Man and Enoch were equivocated.

**Psalms of Solomon**

Messianic theology played a role in the psalmists’ theology as a way of reconciling their belief as God’s chosen people with the harsh reality of foreign domination and oppression they saw around them. Only the final two Psalms (17 and 18) contain messianic speculation. Psalm 17 describes the Messiah as a descendant of David who
will purge Jerusalem of gentile influence using only the
words of his mouth. Again, we see the notion of a militant,
kingly, Davidic Messiah who removes the enemies of
Israel and establishes a holy nation with himself as king,
which he leads in righteousness, justice, and holy wisdom.
The Jewish diaspora will return (17:31), the land will be
distributed according to the old tribal system (17:28), and
Jerusalem and the Temple will be re-sanctified (17:30f).
The Messiah himself is said to be free from sin (17:36) and
is considered to be so holy that he is said to be invincible in
action and perfect in judgment. This is a unique feature in
Jewish messianic theology. However, the concept of a
sinless human being in Judaism was not (Isaiah 53:9). The
issue of Israel’s purity and sanctification is particularly
emphasized in the author’s depiction of the Messiah and
his eschatological kingdom, a theme that is echoed
throughout the work. This holiness and purity was
understood in the context of separation from gentiles
(17:28), who would be subjugated under the rule of Israel
and its king, the Messiah (17:30). There is no indication
that the author thought the Messiah would be something
other than an anointed human being.

**Jesus**

Elements of each of the works examined thus far are
present to some degree in Jesus’ teaching. It is very rare
that Jesus ever uses the title “Messiah” to refer to himself, but the Gospels give us the impression that his followers (Mark 8:29, 10:46ff, 11:10), his opponents (Mark 14:51), and the Romans (Mark 15:26) all ascribed a messianic role to Jesus in the tradition of Davidic kingship. On this basis, it can be argued that Jesus had a messianic consciousness without using the title Messiah, since he arose messianic expectations among the people and his followers and was executed as a royal pretender. Several times he is confronted with these expectations directly. The first and most notable is Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ in Mark 8. Considerable debate has been waged over the interpretation of this passage. The most likely interpretation is that it illustrates the novel idea of the suffering Messiah. Thus, the saying about Satan is not a sign of Jesus’ rejection of the title, but a criticism of Peter’s idea of what being the Messiah entails. This is critical, since it represents the first instance where the idea of the suffering Messiah appears. The connection of this suffering with atonement is also made explicit in Mark 10:45: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to
give his life a ransom for many.” This is the first instance
where Jesus’ messianic theology departs from his predecessors. The source of this idea is uncertain, although there are texts in the Hebrew Bible, namely Isaiah 53 (the “Suffering Servant” passage), that contain the idea that the suffering of a particular individual bearing the sins of others brings about redemption and salvation. It is important to note, however, that this passage is not explicitly connected with Jewish notions of messianism. Traditional interpretations viewed it as a reference to Israel rather than a particular individual, a view bolstered by Isaiah’s numerous references to Israel as God’s servant (Isaiah 41:8, 43:10). The fundamental Jewish tendency to thank God for redemption rather than his chosen instrument also lends credence to a more symbolic interpretation of the passage. The question, then, is whether Jesus would have held to a traditional interpretation of this passage or would have reinterpreted it into a messianic context. The latter scenario seems more likely, since a precedent exists for a Jewish writer interpreting an idea from a non-messianic passage into a messianic context: the author of the Psalms of Solomon took the concept of a sinless Messiah from Isaiah 53. Jesus was not the first Jew to re-interpret passages from the Hebrew Bible into a messianic context, nor was he the first Jew to do so with Isaiah 53. Ultimately, however, the answer to the question of whether Jesus reinterpreted Isaiah 53 in a messianic context largely depends on the confidence placed in the reliability of the sources narrating his life.

Perhaps the most frequent messianic title Jesus used was that of the “Son of Man.” Every Synoptic Gospel’s depiction of Jesus as the Son of Man involves the Danielic paradigm at some point, evidenced by Jesus’ description of the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 24:30, Mark 14:62, Luke 21:27). On the basis of multiple attestations, the sayings about Jesus as the Son of Man are most likely historical and therefore not inserted into the tradition at a later date. Bolstering this hypothesis is the fact that there are very few instances in the New Testament of others identifying, addressing, or confessing Jesus as the Son of Man. Thus, the Son of Man sayings pass the majority of the historical criteria cited above: they appear in the earliest traditions, they appear in multiple traditions, and they are contextually credible. Unlike 1 Enoch, the Son of Man is not said to be preexistent, but he is active in the present and expected to come in the future. In the present, he is given the authority to forgive sins and break the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). As already stated, he is to be rejected, suffer, die, and rise again for the forgiveness of sins. As stated above, this idea of a suffering or resurrected Son of Man does not figure in any prior Jewish description of that figure. Jesus also speaks of the Son of Man as coming in the future eschaton. This idea is attested across the Synoptic tradition and is contained in a passage referred to as the “Olivet Discourse.” According to these passages, the coming of the end would be preceded by a period of apocalyptic woes such as earthquakes, famines, and wars. After these, the Son of Man would take his seat on the throne and sit in judgment over the world, inaugurating the Kingdom of God (i.e., God’s ethical rule and redemption of creation). Despite Jesus’ graphic apocalyptic statements, the passages do not seem to indicate that the Son of Man would be directly involved in any violent or militant manner. His sole role in the end
times was to serve as a judge and marker of the beginning of God’s rule on earth. By referring to himself as the Son of Man, Jesus continues 1 Enoch’s tradition of giving this heavenly figure a human face. In all, we see two elements from previous Son of Man speculation present in the Gospels: the Danielic tradition of a heavenly being “coming on the clouds of heaven,” and the Enochic tradition of describing the Son of Man as a cosmic judge. What Jesus has added is the idea that the Son of Man must suffer and die for the forgiveness of sins.

As we have already seen in the DSS and the Psalms of Solomon, there was a common notion that the Messiah would be from the line of David and would act in a royal capacity in the coming eschatological kingdom. All three Gospels take up this tradition, making it likely that the idea of Jesus’ Davidic lineage was historical or at least original to the tradition. Both Matthew and Luke include David in Jesus’ genealogy, and Jesus’s triumphal entrance into Jerusalem fits the biblical paradigm for a kingly messiah, as Matthew 21’s quotation of Zechariah 9:9 illustrates. Conspicuously absent are the earlier messianic portrayals of the Davidic messiah being a militant ruler who would lead a violent revolt against the enemies of Israel to establish the eschatological kingdom. As we have already seen, Jesus made it explicit that this was not his messianic intention. Jesus’ acceptance of the title “Son of God,” which we have already established as a royal messianic title, also supports his claim of Davidic messiahship. Historically, it is unlikely that Jesus ever used the title as a description for himself since he only uses it twice in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 13:32/Matthew 24:36, Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22). The majority of instances come from the lips of others (e.g. demons, the centurion, etc.). Even if this does not disprove Jesus ever using the title “Son of God” as a self-description, it is clear that, if he did use it, it would not have had the connotation of divinity it does for Christians today. We have already established the Davidic messianic connection of the title in the DSS, and the Gospels continue this tradition.11 If Jesus did use the title “Son of God,” he would have used it in reference to his Davidic messiahship, not as an indicator of his divinity, since such an identification would have been unthinkable to a first century Palestinian Jew.12

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Examining Jewish literature reveals an incredible level of diversity in the realm of Second Temple messianic speculation, so much so that it is extremely difficult to draw any overarching conclusions about the nature of this phenomenon in the few centuries before Jesus. Looking at Jesus’ messianic theology, we see that it represents an amalgam of different aspects of each of these diverse theologies. As an itinerant rabbi, Jesus would have come in contact with many, if not all, of the traditions discussed above. It is indisputable that previous Jewish messianic ideas influenced Jesus’ theology. What is not clear is whether his theological innovation of the idea of a non-violent Messiah who would suffer, die, and resurrect to atone for the world’s sins was adopted from the historical teachings of Jesus or added later by early Christians. By citing passages in the Hebrew Bible that contain these ideas (e.g., Isaiah 53), we find that these notions were available to Jesus in the Jewish thought of his day, albeit outside the context of messianic speculation. Citing the precedent of the Psalms of Solomon doing the same kind of reinterpretation further bolsters the strength of this hypothesis. Although they do not occur in connection with messianic speculation in the Hebrew Bible, the DSS, or the Pseudepigrapha, it would be unwise to dismiss them as inventions of the early Christian church. While it does not prove with absolute certainty that these were original to Jesus, the presence of these ideas in previous Jewish literature does not rule out the possibility that Jesus took older, non-messianic ideas and reinterpreted them into a messianic context. Additionally, these traditions are present in all of the earliest traditions about Jesus. It is therefore historically unwise to dismiss them as mere invention.

Examining Jewish literature prior to the first century CE reveals that Jesus represented another niche in the diverse spectrum that made up Second Temple messianic speculation and has shown how the historical Jesus, as a first century Palestinian Jew, would have understood his messianic theology. But how did the early church interpret his messianic teachings? Using this study as a basis for understanding how the historical Jesus interpreted his messianic teachings we can see how the early church adopted and re-interpreted these ideas. When one examines the Gospels, a slowly evolving split between early Christianity and Judaism becomes apparent. This process continued to evolve throughout the New Testament and beyond. But the early Christians could not simply abandon their connection to Judaism. In the Greco-Roman world, cultural and religious validity was measured by tradition. Roman religion was good because it was old. The Romans viewed any kind of religious innovation as superstition (“superstition”) and saw those who adhered to these beliefs as arrogant innovators, religious fanatics, and self-righteous outsiders. Because of the close relationship between religion and the Roman state, any group who did not participate in the imperial cult endangered society by refusing to worship the gods who protected and ensured the prosperity and peace of Rome.13 With no ancestral claims to validity, the early Christians were open to persecution and blame for any disaster the gods might send against Rome. Thus, it was imperative that the early Christians make a strong case that their religion was a fulfillment and continuation of the Jewish faith rather than a movement away from it, since it was the antiquity of the Jewish religion that gave it imperial protection. They did this by only worshipping the God of the Jews, as well as by believing in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. Although the
Romans found it difficult to distinguish between Jews and early Christians at first, it soon became evident that the early Christians, at least the majority of them, did not keep the same customs Jews did (e.g., circumcision), a fact that led the Romans to view them as a group distinct from Judaism. Thus, we see an inherent tension in early Christianity as it tries to simultaneously hold on to and distinguish itself from Judaism.\textsuperscript{14}

This dialectic process is evident when one looks at the early Christian interpretation of Jesus’ messianic theology. One can see the early Christian concern to connect itself with Judaism by believing that Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jews and by adopting the terminology that was associated with that role. However, the meanings behind those terms shifted as they were transferred from a Jewish context into a Greco-Roman one. This is particularly evident with the titles “Son of God” and “Son of Man.” Early church fathers used these terms as a way of signifying Jesus’ divine and human natures. For them, Son of Man did not bring up images of a cosmic judge, but were used to signify Jesus’ human nature and birth. This idea was viewed as the opposite complement to Jesus’ divine nature, which was signified by his designation as the Son of God.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, we see a disconnect between the way Jesus would have understood these terms as a first century Palestinian Jew and the way the early church interpreted them as Greco-Romans. There are two reasons why this happened. First, the largely Gentile composition of the early church would not have been familiar with Jewish works that contained messianic speculation. Therefore, a Jewish understanding of these texts would have been unavailable to them. Second, as members of a predominately polytheistic society that believed in a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses, the early Christians would have been familiar with the notion of divinities producing offspring. Therefore, it would have been natural for an early Christian to assume that Jesus was the literal, divine Son of God rather than understanding that title as a designation for God’s Davidic Messiah, a title that we have seen did not imply any kind of divinity in Jewish thought.\textsuperscript{16} As time passed, the original Jewish interpretations of these terms faded further from early Christian consciousness, and these new interpretations would eventually become codified as orthodoxy in the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries CE.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

\footnote{1}{For more on the scholarly debate on Daniel 7, see Collins 1993: 304–310.}
\footnote{2}{Collins 1994.}
\footnote{3}{CD vi, 11.}
\footnote{4}{For more on the different theories surrounding the interpretation of 4Q246, see Oegema 1998: 122–127.}
\footnote{5}{Collins 2010: 183–185.}
\footnote{6}{Chiala 2007: 162.}
\footnote{8}{Merz and Theissen 1998: 538.}
\footnote{9}{Exceptions include Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:13, 14:14; Heb. 2:6.}
\footnote{10}{Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21.}
\footnote{11}{Mark 14:61; Matthew 16:16, 26:23.}
\footnote{12}{Vermes 2001: 166–186.}
\footnote{13}{Wilken 2003: 48–67.}
\footnote{14}{Ehrman 2000: 375–377.}
\footnote{15}{Skarsaune 2007: 436.}
\footnote{16}{Vermes 2001: 186.}