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## Introduction: Messiah in Judaism: Rethinking the Question

WILLIAM SCOTT GREEN

What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.

Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

Probably no religious category appears more endemic to Judaism than the messiah. That the messiah is a Jewish idea is a Western religious cliché. A broad academic and popular consensus holds that the messiah, a term conventionally taken to designate Israel's eschatological redeemer,<sup>2</sup> is a fundamental Judaic conception and that conflicting opinions about the messiah's appearance, identity, activity, and implications caused the historical and religious division between Judaism and Christianity. It is standard practice to classify Jewish messianism as national, ethnic, political, and material, and to mark Christian messianism as universal, cosmopolitan, ethical, and spiritual. That Jewish anticipation of the messiah's arrival was unusually keen in first century Palestine and constituted the *mise en scène* for the emergence of Christianity is a virtual axiom of western history. The study of the figure of the messiah thus is inextricable from the quest for "Christian origins" and persists as a major scholarly strategy for discerning early Christianity's filiation and divergence from the Jewish religion of its day.

At the outset of his influential essay on the messianic idea in Judaism, Gershom Scholem observed: "Any discussion of the problems relating to Messianism is a delicate matter, for it is here that the *essential conflict* between Judaism and Christianity has developed and continues to exist."<sup>3</sup> Scholem's claim embodies three suppositions that have guided most research on the question and figure of the messiah. First, it assumes the constant centrality of the messiah in the morphology and history of Judaism and in the Jewish-Christian argument. Second, it makes the object of

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inquiry “messianism” – an ideology or theology – rather than “the messiah” – a concrete textual term or category. Third, by proposing an “essential conflict” between Judaism and Christianity, it construes both religions as invariable monoliths that share a single fixed point of mutual exclusivity.

In harmony with these suppositions, most scholarship on the messiah has postulated for both Judaism and its Israelite precursor(s) a single, uniform religious pattern in which messianic belief was both decisive and generative. Consequently, scholarly work on the topic has tended to be neither analytical nor interpretive, but crudely historical. The major studies have sought to trace the development and transformations of putative messianic belief through an incredible and nearly comprehensive array of ancient literary sources – from its alleged genesis in the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament, rabbinic literature, and beyond – as if all these writings were segments of a linear continuum and were properly comparable. Such work evidently aims to shape a chronological string of supposed messianic references into a plot for a story whose ending is already known; it is a kind of sophisticated proof-texting. This diegetical approach to the question embeds the sources in the context of a hypothetical religion that is fully represented in none of them. It thus privileges what the texts do not say over what they do say.

Any notion of a messianic belief or idea in ancient Judaism necessarily presupposes that “messiah” was a focal and evocative native category for ancient Jews. But a review of Israelite and early Judaic literature, the textual record produced and initially preserved by Jews, makes such a conclusion dubious at best. The noun *mashiah* (“anointed” or “anointed one”) occurs 38 times in the Hebrew Bible, where it applies twice to the patriarchs, six times to the high priest, once to Cyrus, and 29 times to the Israelite king, primarily Saul and secondarily David or an unnamed Davidic monarch.<sup>4</sup> In these contexts the term denotes one invested, usually by God, with power and leadership, but never an eschatological figure. Ironically, in the apocalyptic book of Daniel (9:25f), where an eschatological messiah would be appropriate, the term refers to a murdered high priest.<sup>5</sup>

The term “messiah” has scant and inconsistent use in early Jewish texts.<sup>6</sup> Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Pseudepigrapha, and the entire Apocrypha, contain no reference to “the messiah.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, a messiah is neither essential to the apocalyptic genre nor a prominent feature of ancient apocalyptic writings.<sup>8</sup> A rapid survey of the most pertinent materials helps to justify these generalizations.

The Maccabean documents, which disdain the revival of the Davidic dynasty, ignore the term. There is no messiah in Jubilees, nor in Enoch 1–36 and 91–104, nor in the Assumption of Moses, nor in 2 Enoch, nor

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in the Sibylline Oracles, though, as Morton Smith observes, “all of these contain prophetic passages in which some messiah might reasonably have been expected to make an appearance.”<sup>9</sup> The messiah is absent from Josephus’ description of Judaism in both *Antiquities* and *Against Apion*, and also from the writings of Philo.

In Ben Sira, which has no interest in a future redeemer, the “anointed one” or “messiah” is the Israelite king. The Qumran scrolls report at least two messiahs, one Davidic and one priestly, who are not necessarily eschatological figures.<sup>10</sup> The scrolls also apply the term to the prophets. In Psalms of Solomon 17, which is neither apocalyptic nor eschatological, the messiah is an idealized, future Davidic king who also exhibits traits of sage and teacher. The term appears only twice in the Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71), where it denotes not a king but a transcendent, heavenly figure. In any case, its use in Enoch is dwarfed by other titles, such as “the Chosen One” and “the Son of Man.” The half-dozen references in the first century text 4 Ezra offer conflicting pictures of the messiah. In 7:28ff. the messiah dies an unredeeming death before the eschaton, but later chapters portray him as announcing and executing the final judgment. In 2 Baruch, which contains five references, the term applies primarily to a warrior, the slayer of Israel’s enemies. In the Mishnah’s legal contexts, messiah refers to an anointed priest, and the messiah as redeemer is negligible.

Nearly a quarter century ago, Morton Smith assessed these data as follows:

Now all this variety in the matter of messianic expectations is merely one detail – though a particularly striking one – of the even greater variety of eschatological expectations current in the two centuries before and after the time of Jesus. To say nothing of mere differences in personnel and program, these expectations run the whole gamut of concepts, from ordinary kingdoms in this world, through forms of this world variously made over and improved, through worlds entirely new and different, to spiritual bliss without any world at all. But the point to be noted is that these contradictory theories evidently flourished side by side in the early rabbinic and Christian and Qumran communities which copied the texts and repeated the sayings. What is more, quite contradictory theories are often preserved side by side in the same document.<sup>11</sup>

The disparate uses surveyed above conform to Smith’s judgment. They offer little evidence of sustained thought or evolving Judaic reflection

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about the messiah. In early Jewish literature, “messiah” is all signifier with no signified; the term is notable primarily for its indeterminacy.

In view of these facts, one may legitimately wonder about the reasons for conceiving “the messiah” as a fundamental and generative component of both Israelite religion and early Judaism. One may wonder about the justification for the assertion that “from the first century B.C.E., the Messiah was the central figure in the Jewish myth of the future,”<sup>12</sup> or for the claim that “belief in the Messiah” is one of the four “good gifts which the people of Israel have left as an inheritance to the entire world,”<sup>13</sup> or for the widespread assumption that “In the time of Jesus the Jews were awaiting a Messiah.”<sup>14</sup> One may wonder, in other words, how so much has come to be written about an allegedly Jewish conception in which so many ancient Jewish texts manifest such little interest.

The primacy of “the messiah” as a subject of academic study derives not from ancient Jewish preoccupation, but from early Christian word-choice, theology, and apologetics. Early Christians, and particularly the earliest Christian writers, had to establish a discourse that made Jesus’ career reasonable, his unexpected death believable, and their audacious commitment and new collective life plausible.<sup>15</sup> The New Testament’s gingerly application of multiple titles to Jesus<sup>16</sup> suggests a crisis of classification, the dilemma of a signified without a signifier. The New Testament records various solutions to this problem. Two of them were determinative for the study of the messiah.

First, early Christian writers gave Jesus a surname. From all the titles and adjectives that are applied to him in the New Testament, they elected *christos*, the Greek for *messiah*, to attach to Jesus’ name. That *christos* was perceived as a name rather than a title seems likely from its use in the Pauline epistles and from the addition to it of the designation “son of God” in the superscription of the Gospel of Mark. Despite such initial indeterminacy, the usage valorizes *christos* and thereby makes “messiah” seem a revealing and important category, and thus a subject to be studied.<sup>17</sup> To be persuaded that the word *christos* itself was pivotal in shaping later understanding, one need simply imagine the consequences for western history, religion, and theology had, for example, “lord,” “son of man,” or “rabbi” prevailed instead.

Second, in addition to tagging Jesus with the name “messiah,” New Testament authors, particularly of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, made the Hebrew scriptures into a harbinger of his career, suffering, and death. The “promise-fulfillment” motif, which casts Jesus as a foreseen figure, is perhaps the major achievement of New Testament apologetics. Apparently a later development of early Christian writing, the motif is a major focus of neither Paul’s letters, nor the Q source, nor the Gospel of Mark.<sup>18</sup>

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It is richly articulated and elaborated in the Gospel of Matthew, particularly in Matthew's distinctive use of fulfillment formulas ("All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord declared through the prophet . . .") to make various prophetic statements into predictions of Jesus' birth and career. That nearly half of those statements are not predictions, but the prophets' comments about Israel's past or their own present,<sup>19</sup> suggests that the fulfillment formulas and their attached verses are strategic devices, the results of *post facto* choice, rather than remnants of an exegetical heritage. The ideology for the motif is explicit at Luke 24:13–27. On the road to Emmaeus, two disciples unknowingly encounter the risen Jesus and express their disbelief at his death, which seems to disconfirm their early supposition about him ("But we had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel"). Jesus rebukes their lack of perception and claims that his death was predicted in the Hebrew scriptures ("Then he began with Moses and all the prophets, and explained to them the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures"). The Hebrew scriptures are thus classified as anterior literature, to be read only as the messiah's textual antecedent, as a story that moves in a single direction and points beyond itself.

The "promise-fulfillment" motif, along with the genealogies devised by Matthew and Luke, embed Jesus in the Hebrew scriptures and forge an indelible continuity between him (and thus the early Christians) and Israel. The strategy solved the crisis of classification in three ways. First, it legitimated Jesus by giving him an Israelite pedigree. Second, it rendered his death intelligible by making it predetermined. Third, it made early Christian community plausible by providing an instant and urgently needed tradition. As Jaroslav Pelikan remarks, the "struggle over the authority of the Old Testament and over the nature of the continuity between Judaism and Christianity was the earliest form of a quest for a tradition that has, in other forms, recurred throughout Christian history."<sup>20</sup> The success and implications of this tactic should not be underestimated.

By naming Jesus *christos* and depicting him as foretold and expected – "not something brand-new, but something newly restored and fulfilled"<sup>21</sup> – early Christian writers gave the figure of the messiah a diachronic dimension. They situated the messiah's origin not in the present but in Israelite antiquity and thus established the Hebrew scriptures as a sequence of auguries. Reading scripture became, and to a large extent has remained, an exercise in deciphering and tracing a linear progression of portents. In Gerhard Von Rad's words, "The Old Testament can only be read as a book of ever increasing anticipation."<sup>22</sup> Or, as Joachim Becker put it, "the Old Testament itself and even the history that lies behind it

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possess a unique messianic luminosity.”<sup>23</sup> It was not simply, as Paul claimed, that the messiah exhibited a typological similarity to important biblical characters such as Adam.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the messiah was rooted in Israel’s past, and his appearance could be tracked and plotted, perhaps even calculated, through time. On the model provided by Matthew and Luke, the messiah emerges not as an abrupt response to a contemporary crisis, but as the ultimate fulfillment of centuries of accumulated hope and intensifying expectation. He is a constant desideratum, an inevitability, an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary figure. In a word, the messiah is the culmination and completion of an ancient Israelite tradition.

This strategy of representation established on enduring convention of western discourse about the messiah. The model limned by an apologetic use of scripture was accepted by later scholarship as a literary fact and a historical reality, not only of scripture itself, but also of Israelite and Jewish religion. To preserve the model against the challenge of a textual record incongruent to it, scholars have been forced to resort to evasive argument.

We have seen that in Jewish writings before or during the emergence of Christianity, “messiah” appears neither as an evocative religious symbol nor as a centralizing native cultural category. Rather, it is a term of disparity, used in few texts and in diverse ways. Not surprisingly, therefore, studies of the messiah in ancient Judaism that employ the inherited model tend to assign little importance to the function or meaning of the term in discrete documents. For example, Franz Hesse’s widely used article asserts that “. . . none of the Messianic passages in the OT can be exegeted Messianically. Nevertheless, the so-called Messianic understanding is implied in many of the passages, although this is more evident in texts in which the term *mashiah* is not used.”<sup>25</sup> Nearly a quarter of his study of the use of *mashiah* in the Hebrew Bible deals with passages in which the term does not appear. Likewise, Geza Vermes acknowledges that the meaning of “messiah” will appear variable “. . . if each single usage of the term in the Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls and early rabbinic sources is taken into account and accorded equal importance.” But Vermes doubts the value of such a procedure: “It would seem more appropriate to bear in mind the difference between the general Messianic *expectation* of Palestinian Jewry, and the peculiar Messianic *speculations* characteristic of certain learned and/or esoteric minorities.”<sup>26</sup>

These arguments, which are representative of a type, appear to suggest that the best way to learn about the messiah in ancient Judaism is to study texts in which there is none. Indeed, the devaluation of empirical textual references and the concomitant emphasis on such terms as “understanding” and “expectation” show that the real object of research is not a figure

entitled “messiah” but the religious ideology that purportedly made one possible. Thus, the standard works on the topic typically devote less attention to concrete textual references than to discussion of a religious attitude allegedly at the core of Israelite and Jewish experience: the so-called “future hope.” In Mowinckel’s words, “An eschatology without a Messiah is conceivable, but not a Messiah apart from a future hope.”<sup>27</sup> The revised version of Emil Schürer’s monumental history depicts that hope as the driving force of ancient Judaism:

. . . it was . . . expected that Israel’s faithfulness would be suitably rewarded in the life both of the nation and of the individual. Yet it was obvious that in actual experience the reward came neither to the people as a whole, nor to individuals, in the proportion anticipated. Accordingly, the more deeply this awareness penetrated into the mind of the nation and the individual, the more they were forced to turn their eyes to the future; and of course, the worse their present state, the more lively their hope. It may therefore be said that in later eras religious consciousness was concentrated upon hope for the future. A perfect age to come was the goal to which all other religious ideas were teleologically related. As the conduct of the Israelite was essentially observance of the Torah, so his faith was centered on awaiting God’s kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

The establishment of future hope as the subject of study has three important consequences. First, it makes it possible to collect an extraordinary number and range of biblical and postbiblical texts under a single “messianic” category and to treat their contents as species of a genus. Almost any textual reference to the future, or to eternity, or to an idealized figure – to say nothing of verses with unclear temporal limits – is an immediate candidate for inclusion. The absence of eschatology or of the title “messiah” is no barrier. With this rubric, Joseph Klausner could begin his history of the messiah idea in Israel not even with David, but with Moses!

Second, the use of future hope as the primary taxon of messianism also permits those varied texts to be arranged chronologically and cast as components of a continuous and unitary tradition. Indeed, the notion that messianic belief or expectation originated in Israel’s experience and then developed in Judaism is the cornerstone of nearly every major scholarly treatment of the subject. This supposition has been relentlessly applied to the study of the messiah even when the evidence admittedly fails to support it or even contradicts it. For instance, Hesse concluded his survey of messianic references in biblical and postbiblical writings with the following claim:

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It is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct a history of the Messianic movement in Israel and post-exilic Judaism from these scanty passages, many of which cannot be dated with any certainty. There undoubtedly must have been such a movement. This is shown by the examples given and it may also be concluded from the fact that Messianism emerges into the clear light of history in later centuries, not merely as a trend that has just arisen in Judaism, but as a movement with hundreds of years of history behind it.<sup>29</sup>

If, by Hesse's own admission, the evidence is minimal and inconclusive, it is difficult to understand how to know that there "must have been" a messianic movement in Israelite religion and Judaism, much less that later versions of it were the product of "hundreds of years of history."

To violate ordinary scholarly principles of evidence and inference with such forced arguments requires powerful external motivations. It would be disingenuous and unhelpful to pretend that a question as significant and sensitive as the messiah has escaped the vagaries of theological interests, both Christian and Jewish. Joachim Becker makes some of these explicit:

We have seen that the messianic prophecies cannot be considered visionary predication of a New Testament fulfillment. In fact, there was not even such a thing as a messianic expectation until the last two centuries B.C. Does this eliminate the traditional picture of messianic expectation? Such a conclusion would contradict one of the most central concerns of the New Testament, which insists with unprecedented frequency, intensity, and unanimity that Christ was proclaimed in advance in the Old Testament. Historical-critical scholarship can never set aside this assertion of the New Testament. We must therefore find an explanation that does justice to both this historical approach and the witness of the New Testament. A synthesis must be sought in which both are preserved. To appeal to the light of faith for this synthesis is not a schizophrenic act of intellectual violence, for revelation and faith go hand in hand with a manifestation of their rationality. . . . The christological actualization of the Old Testament in the New is so commanding that it confronts exegesis with the question of conscience whether the historical-critical methods . . . is in fact a way at all of carrying out the exegesis of the Old Testament *as such*.<sup>30</sup>

If, in a Christian context, scholars have used the model of an Israelite-Judiac messianic tradition to claim the Israelite legacy and thus demon-



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strate Christianity's authenticity, scholars in a Judaic context have employed the same model for the opposite purpose. Mowinckel, for example, concluded his classic work with the claim that Jesus definitively refashioned the Israelite–Judaic messianic tradition. In Jesus, he asserted,

The Jewish Messianic concept is . . . transformed and lifted up to a wholly other plane. In fact, the Jewish Messiah, as originally conceived, and as most of Jesus' contemporaries thought of him, was pushed aside and replaced by a new redeemer and mediator of salvation. . . . For Jesus, the Jewish Messianic idea was the temptation of Satan, which he had to reject. The new conception of a saviour, which Jesus created, unites in itself the loftiest elements in both the Jewish and Aryan spirit, and fuses them in a true unity, which is realized in Jesus himself.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Klausner's judgment that “. . . in the belief in the Messiah of the people of Israel, *the political part goes hand in hand with the ethical part, and the nationalistic with the universalistic*”<sup>32</sup> surely makes the ethical-universal messianism he attributes to Christianity seem a mere shadow of the real thing. In both instances, the scholarly results leave something to be desired.

Third, the postulate of a proto-messianic or messianic hope as coextensive with, and the generative force of, Israelite and Jewish religions presupposes that the practitioners of both understood themselves to have lost on the temporal plane. Schürer's assertion that a “perfect age to come was the goal to which all other religious ideas were teleologically related” entails a prior claim of explicit Jewish awareness of religious failure and defeat. The demarcation of “future hope” as a primary category of Israelite and Judaic experience suggests that those who had it regarded their present existence as both provisional and ultimately unredeeming. Scholem developed the idea more abstractly and applied it to the entire history of Judaism:

There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. It diminishes the singular worth of the individual, and he can never fulfill himself, because the incompleteness of his endeavors eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value. Thus in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled *a life lived in deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished. . . . Precisely understood, there is nothing concrete which can be accomplished by the unredeemed. This makes for

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the greatness of Messianism, but also for its constitutional weakness.<sup>33</sup>

If, as the established consensus holds, the messiah really is indigenous to Judaism, then, on the arguments of Schürer and Scholem, it must follow that Judaism was and is constitutionally incapable of success.

The model of an Israelite–Judaic tradition driven by a “future hope” is finally unpersuasive because it uses so little to account for so much. It makes disappointment and defeat the sole cause of both the origination and development, the genesis and crystallization, of messianism. It also requires the postulation of a chronic and endemic religious problem in Judaism, to which the messiah is then portrayed as the necessary and only possible solution. In this regard, Scholem’s claim that for Jews the consequence of messianism was – and, indeed, has been – a “life lived in deferment,” however forceful and dramatic, is counter-intuitive. Admittedly, the case on both sides of the issue remains to be demonstrated, but it is at least questionable that Jews who adhered to some sort of halakic practice would have advocated, much less understood, an ideology that in principle declared their religious behavior nugatory.

In the past quarter century, the established consensus about the messiah in ancient Judaism has begun to break down, and there now are powerful reasons to ditch it altogether. Careful word-studies, fresh and disciplined readings of well-known texts, and a new appreciation of ancient writings as social products and cultural constructions have revealed religious worlds of ancient Jews (and Christians) considerably more diversified and complex than was hitherto imagined.<sup>34</sup> The new agenda requires that we reverse the procedures of earlier scholarship. Instead of treating the literary sources as reflections of a preconceived and synthetic Judaism, or as segments of a hypothetical (and, frankly, fictive) uniform and linear tradition, we must employ them as the context out of which a critical description of Jewish religion must be constructed. It is no longer possible to justify the standard, homogenous reading of the varied Jewish writings or to assume that different Jewish groups, even within Palestine, shared a single outlook, social experience, or religious expectation simply because they were Jews. The evidence in this book shows that preoccupation with the messiah was not a uniform or definitive trait, nor a common reference point, of early Jewish writings or the Jews who produced them. As a speculum for the analysis and understanding of early Jewish religious life, the category “messiah” probes less obliquely, and with rather less precision and discernment, than we have come to suppose.