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0521349400 - Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era - Edited by
Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To the memory of
GEORGE MACRAE, S. J.
teacher of us all
in the science of religion
especially Gnosticism
and
in the art of collegiality.
We miss him every day.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xv
1 Introduction: Messiah in Judaism: Rethinking the Question WILLIAM SCOTT GREEN	1
2 Wisdom Makes a Difference: Alternatives to “Messianic” Configurations BURTON L. MACK	15
3 Salvation without and with a Messiah: Developing Beliefs in Writings Ascribed to Enoch GEORGE W. E. NICKELSBURG	49
4 How the Authors of 1 and 2 Maccabees Treated the “Messianic” Promises JONATHAN A. GOLDSTEIN	69
5 Messianism in the Maccabean Period JOHN J. COLLINS	97
6 Waiting for the Messiah: The Spiritual Universe of the Qumran Covenanters SHEMARYAHU TALMON	111
7 Philo and Messiah RICHARD D. HECHT	139
8 Messiah and Gospel GEORGE MACRAE, S.J.	169

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by
Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Christology in Mark's Gospel HOWARD CLARK KEE	187
10	The Question of the Messiah in 4 Ezra MICHAEL E. STONE	209
11	From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology: Some Caveats and Perspectives J. H. CHARLESWORTH	225
12	Mishnah and Messiah JACOB NEUSNER	265
	<i>General Index</i>	283
	<i>Index to Biblical and Hermeneutical Texts</i>	287

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

A Judaism comprises a world view and a way of life that together come to expression in the social world of a group of Jews. The “Judaisms” of the title therefore constitute several such ways of life and world views addressed to groups of Jews. A Messiah in a Judaism is a man who at the end of history, at the eschaton, will bring salvation to the Israel conceived by the social group addressed by the way of life and world view of that Judaism. Judaisms and their Messiahs at the age of the beginning of Christianity therefore encompass a group of religious systems that form a distinct family, all characterized by two traits: (1) address to “Israel” and (2) reference to diverse passages of the single common holy writing (“Old Testament,” “written Torah”).

In this book we propose to describe how several Judaisms treat the Messiah-theme. These diverse systems may define teleology by invoking that theme or may do so by referring to some other, nonmessianic explanation altogether. What we want to know is where the Messiah-theme matters when it does, and, when that theme proves uninteresting, why, as in the Mishnah’s system and in the thought of Philo, the Messiah-theme makes no contribution to the definition and symbolization of a Judaism’s teleology. Ultimately, of course, we should like to propose a rule to predict and to explain when and why a system’s teleology will reach expression in an eschatological form (hence, in the world at hand, using the Messiah-theme) and when and why it will not. So we hope to contribute toward the formation of a rule, a generalization, in that generalizing science known as the study of religion. In all inquiry into the study of religion, what we learn about a given religion should at some point tell us something beyond it. A religion in particular may exemplify a trait of religion in general, presenting us with a “what else?” Our goal here is to clarify,

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface*

for religion, the rule on when teleology will, and will not, reach definition in an eschatological, hence a messianic, doctrine.

The Judaisms under discussion here do not wholly conform to a single pattern, and the evidence at hand also proves diverse. So we stand a long way from our goal of systematic description, then analysis through comparison and contrast, and finally interpretation through the framing of a useful hypothesis subject to testing among a number of systems. Some of the systems at hand reach us only in fragmentary form, such as the rather broad category of systems we call, all together, the apocalyptic, treated by George W. E. Nickelsburg in the case of Enoch, Michael Stone in the case of Fourth Ezra, and the like. In other cases we have writings produced by not a social group but a political institution, discussed in the case of the Maccabees' writings by Jonathan A. Goldstein and John J. Collins. In one instance we have not a social group but a solitary philosopher, Philo, dealt with by Richard Hecht. In yet another, we deal with a book composed by a social group of a rather special character, the philosophers who stand behind the Mishnah, whom I describe. Two Judaisms come to representation in sources that address a community of a distinctive character, the Essene writings of Qumran, dealt with by Shemaryahu Talmon, and the Christian community represented by Mark's Gospel, treated by the late George MacRae, of blessed memory, and by Howard Clark Kee. Among this evidence, all of a literary character, one chapter treats not a single book or a small library, as in the case of Enoch, Ezra, Maccabees, Mark, Philo, and the Mishnah, but an ongoing literary genre. Burton L. Mack on the Wisdom writings describes a set of sources not wholly congruent in type with the cogent books of Mark and the Mishnah, on the one side, and the coherent writings of Qumran and of the apocryphal writings of Fourth Ezra and Enoch, on the other. Finally, reflecting in more conventional terms on the two subdivisions of ancient Israel in the first century, James H. Charlesworth attempts some broader generalizations. The contribution of William Scott Green, setting the stage for the sustained studies to follow, requires no introduction.

Since, as we see, what we treat here are books and no religion ever was born in a book or lived in a book or even died by a book, we had best return to the notion of a Judaism, a system. For a book is not a system, and what we hope, in time to come, is to learn how to describe a system, not merely to paraphrase and to analyze what is in a book. But a book does form a detail of a system, and, in the study of a religion, God lives in the details. So, as in everything we undertake to study, we have to teach ourselves to move from the detail to the whole, to generalize on the basis of only a part, but then to test our generalization. The reader may well wonder why, if at all, the conception of a Judaism proves helpful and sugges-

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

tive, as we believe it does. For are we not merely working our way through fairly standard, and well-known, received sources? Indeed so, but we take a road of our own. So let us revert to this notion of a Judaism, which is our map.

If we insist that we speak not of Judaism but of *Judaisms*, does that mean we have also to speak not of Christianity but of *Christianities*? Indeed it does – and that proves our point. People familiar with the rich diversity of Christianity today and throughout the history of the Christian faith will find routine the allegation that, just as history has yielded its diverse *Christianities* – in some ways autonomous, in some connected, in some continuous – so history testifies to more than one *Judaism*. Why does everyone understand that there is not now, and never was, a single *Christianity* (except, I hope, from God’s perspective)? Because people consider the alternative: a construct of total confusion, of a harmony of opposites. Imagine the *Christianity* we should define and describe, were we to treat all evidence as uniform in the manner in which we treat the evidence about “*Judaism*.” That would be a *Christianity* to which Orthodox and heterodox, Arian and Athanasian, Greek and Russian, Armenian and Latin, Catholic and Gnostic, not to mention Protestant and Roman Catholic today, equally testify – and all totally out of context. Such a single *Christianity* unites around the cross, but divides on all else.

Then how about the *Christianity* of the first century? Do we not here, at least, deal with a single Christ? Few who have studied the problem would say so. The Gospels speak for diverse records of a single person. Each represents matters in a way distinctive to its authorship. All address points of disharmony in the nascent and tiny churches of the day. From the explanation of repeated stories and sayings settled by the theory of a Sermon on the Mount and a Sermon on the Plain (parallel to the harmonization of the two versions of the Ten Commandments, the one in Exodus, the other in Deuteronomy, by the theory that “remember” and “keep” were said at one and the same time), nearly all scholarship has taken a fond farewell. The last persuasive harmony of the Gospels found its original audience in the third century. For Christians it is routine therefore to read Matthew’s Gospel as the statement of his school and its version of matters, not as part of “the Gospels’” single testimony to the one and uniform “life of Jesus.” To speak of Mark’s viewpoint, the particular perspective of the author of Hebrews, not to mention the Christian systems of Aphrahat on east, Chrysostom in the center, or Augustine in the far West – that is routine. No one proposes to force all evidence to testify to one *Christianity*.

So too with *Judaism*. In ancient times, as in every age of the history of the Jewish people, diverse groups of Jews have defined for themselves dis-

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Preface*

inctive ways of life and world views. A Judaism therefore constitutes the world view and the way of life that characterize the distinctive system by which a social group of Jews works out its affairs. True, these several systems produced by different groups of Jews assuredly do exhibit traits in common. For example, they universally appeal to the same Hebrew Scriptures. But in fact points in common underline the systems' essential diversity. For if we ask a group to specify those verses of Scripture it finds critical and to explain their meaning, we rarely hear from one a repertoire of verses found equally central in the system of some other distinct group. Still less do the interpretations of those verses of Scripture shared among the several groups coincide. It follows that, in the history of Judaism, we can identify numbers of different Judaisms. Whether we deal with a long period of time, such as a millennium, or a brief period of just a few centuries, the picture is the same. Like Christianities, these Judaisms relate to one another in diverse ways. Some stand essentially autonomous, as the Christian Judaisms of the first century came to do. Some proved connected to one another, yielding shared holy books, for example. All together, of course, we observe continuities, but these prove hardly definitive of the distinctive traits of any one system. So, in all, Judaisms flourished side by side. Or they took place in succession to one another. Or they came into being out of all relationship with one another. Thus, some Judaisms took shape all by themselves, remaining autonomous; other Judaisms related to one another through connections whereby shared doctrine or practice joined one Judaism to the next; and still other Judaisms turn out, upon inspection, to have formed a continuity and stood in sequence with one another, so that the frontier between one and the next proves difficult to delineate.

So far I have written as though people in general used such words as "a Judaism" and understood that the Messiah-theme in diverse Judaisms either may take an important systemic position or may contribute little to the system at hand. But this very mode of thought is fresh to the study of Judaism. People have written books on the messianic doctrine in Judaism, but this is the first book on the Messiah-theme in Judaisms. So let me back up and deal with the terms and categories people do know. How do people ordinarily define categories in sorting out Judaic data? What modes of thought dictate the questions they ask and methods of answering them and why do we reject the received modes of description? There is one category, "Judaism," and a single mode of thought, collecting and arranging Judaic data to testify to doctrines and practices of that Judaism, which people call Orthodox. Accordingly, people invoke the term "Judaism," meaning, "the Jewish religion." They further employ the category of "messianism," or "the messianic doctrine in Judaism." Hence, as I just

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

said, we have books constructed upon the foundation of the species, “Judaism,” within the genus, religion, “messianic.” What follows? Books on “the messianic idea in Judaism.” Here we turn matters on their head. How so? We ask about the classification, or genus, Judaisms, and we invoke the Messiah-theme to help us differentiate one species of the genus, Judaisms, from another, thus, Judaisms and their messiahs. We accordingly move from one set of categories and modes of analysis to another.

What is wrong with the established view is simple. People join together books that do not speak the same language of thought, that refer to distinctive conceptions and doctrines of their own. If books so close together in topic and sentiment as the four Gospels no longer yield harmonization, books so utterly remote from one another as the Mishnah and Philo and Fourth Ezra and Enoch should not contribute doctrines to a common pot: Judaism. But if we do not harmonize, then what we have to do is quite the opposite: analyze. In fact all we propose is to describe things item by item, and to postpone the work of searching for connections and even continuities until all the components have had their say, one by one. For, as we see throughout this book, each of the components – the distinct books – makes its own distinctive statement.

I cannot imagine a more self-evidently right approach to any problem of learning. We take each relevant item of information as it comes, working inductively from item to item, building a larger picture out of smaller components. That work of sifting and sorting of evidence characterizes all fields of Western learning. The analytical method has defined all learning from the beginning, in Greek science and philosophy, to our own day: observation, reflection. Curiosity reaches expression then in the questions, why? what if? and why not? and, above all, so what? But that mode of thought, based on observation and testing through experiment, scarcely characterizes the deductive system commonplace in the received and established methods of Judaic learning, a system that shamelessly invokes *a priori* facts of history, and that knows things before proof or without proof. So the present approach – so self-evidently right to us – contradicts the established conviction, which is that all pieces of evidence deriving from Jews, whoever they were, wherever and whenever they lived without regard to context and circumstance, testify to one and the same Judaism. That proposition remains to be demonstrated. What we cannot show we do not know, and here we propose to begin to find out. We propose in the setting of the public (hence, not theological) inquiry into the nature of religion to describe, analyze, and interpret. The “we” in this book is made up of learning people – atheists, Christians, and Jews alike – who respect the religions that have emerged from late antiquity to define the civilization of the West and of the world – the Christianities, the Juda-

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xiv *Preface*

isms. But we come to this study because we are children of the tradition of Western philosophy, that is, because we want to know how things came to be the way they are: What if? and why? and why not?

The book speaks for us all and is the work of us all. The three editors consulted throughout, both in organizing the papers, as some were originally read orally, and in planning the project, beginning to end. We consulted also with Professor Jonathan Z. Smith. The book emerges from sessions of the American Academy of Religion, which, from 1982 on, provided the meeting place and the occasion for our continuing conversation, over a period of years, on a common topic. Our tribute to the Academy finds a place on every page of this book. We pay tribute also to our editor at Cambridge University Press, David Emblidge, who knew just what he wanted, and who always was right.

A principal partner in the organization of these studies, George MacRae, died in September 1985. We grieve at his death and our loss and offer this book as a tribute to him. He had a mind of remarkable clarity; he could lead us through confused and difficult data; he not only enlightened our learning, but, to those of us fortunate enough to enjoy his friendship, he also illuminated our lives. We dedicate our work to his memory.

Jacob Neusner

Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

0521349400 - *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* - Edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi *Contributors*

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