

What's a Messiah to Do?

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1. Introduction

There have been many individuals whose followers have proclaimed as the Jewish messiah. These include, in modern times, Rabbi Schneerson; in the 2nd century CE, Bar-Kokhba; and in the 1st century Theudas, another person simply referred to as “the Egyptian,” and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth.

What criteria must an individual satisfy in order to be deemed “a” or “the” Jewish messiah? To say of any person that he is “a” or “the” messiah must mean that that person satisfies specific pre-existing criteria for this role. But what exactly are these criteria? What must a messiah do in order to qualify for this title?

This paper examines three models of what constitutes a messiah. Two were current in Jewish literature prior to the time of Jesus. These models will be examined in historical sequence and, in so doing, neglected passages from Zechariah and the Psalms of Solomon will be discussed. These set forth the job requirements.

A third model, from the writings of Paul after the death of Jesus, advances a different concept of the messiah. His Christ concept of a dying-rising savior God-human does not match the expectations for a Jewish messianic figure. This contention reinforces the view that Paul has created a distinctive religion, one that has little to do with either Judaism or the Jesus Movement under James in Jerusalem.

Let's examine two Jewish criteria for being a messiah.

2. Jewish Criteria for Being a Messiah

Model #1

The first model is the oldest one. Psalm 2 in the bible imagines a situation where the kings of the earth conspire to act against “*the Lord and his anointed*” [Psalm 2:2]. Here the anointed one (*Mashiach*) refers to the king, whom God is described as having installed on Zion. The king, moreover, is said to be a son of God [Psalm 2:7] and has

the mandate to make other nations his vassals. Rulers who wish to conquer Israel are advised to heed this decree and come to serve the Lord.

In inception, the root concept of being a messiah is political.

Model #1: Messiah as Designated Political Activist

A Messiah is a person anointed by the Lord to perform a task

Typically such individuals are spoken of as “*the Lord’s anointed.*” They include: Samuel [1 Samuel 24:7]; David [2 Samuel 19:22]; Zedekiah [Lamentations 4: 20]; Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, for his role in permitting the Jewish exiles to return to Judea; Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest [Zechariah 4:14].

A messiah in this initial sense is a political leader, an ordinary human being who is recognized as a messiah by being anointed. There is nothing strange or mysterious about these anointed ones any more than there is with the rulers of England who are also anointed as they are crowned.

Model #2

Some time towards the end of the Babylonian Exile or shortly thereafter, religious discourse for some shifts from a political to an eschatological dimension. A *political* discussion refers to changes in civil structures, now, at this point in time, on earth. These changes will happen in the normal course of history, through human agents. An *eschatological* discussion, on the other hand, refers to massive changes on a worldwide scale -- universal change. These changes are said to happen “soon,” that is, at some time to come, in an age to come. They will be brought about, not by ordinary human historical dynamics but by the actions of God intervening dramatically in history.

Eschatological discourse characteristically features secret and mysterious information about the inner dynamics of world history - “the inside scoop,” as it were, populated by strange supernatural beings. It is markedly dualistic: us, the righteous people, versus them, the evil doers. Let’s examine some of these writings that are eschatological in nature. They demonstrate how unrealized expectations create hope for an agent of change, a messiah.

a) Second Isaiah - Israel, the Moral Beacon for Humanity

Second Isaiah, that is, the Isaiah of chapters 40-55 in our present book of Isaiah, paved the way. Writing just before 539 BCE, that is, just prior to the conquest of the Babylonian Empire by Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, Second Isaiah imagines a

wonderful political future for Israel. He announces the New Israel, the servant of God [Isaiah 44:21], whose cities will be rebuilt, Jerusalem included, along with the Temple [Isaiah 44:26-28].

This prophet then shifts to an eschatological dimension. He urges Israelites within the Babylonian Diaspora to get ready to move. There will be geological changes: mountains will be leveled and valleys raised. This represents his poetic way of saying that redemption, the way home, will be easy [Isaiah 40:3-5; Isaiah 49:11]. Likening the return to a new Exodus - even a new Creation - Second Isaiah imagines the desert blooming [Isaiah 44:3; Isaiah 51:3] and Israel adopting a new role on the world stage as a moral beacon to the nations [Isaiah 42: 6; Isaiah 49:6; Isaiah 51:4]. He imagines all exiles returning, not only from Babylonia but also from Egypt and from the west [Isaiah 49:12]. Waxing eloquently about the new state of affairs, he depicts the return as the major news on the world stage. The wealth of other nations will flow into Jerusalem. Israel will be a prominent country [Isaiah 45:14-18].

The return did not happen quite the way Second Isaiah envisaged, however. Not all the exiles returned. Israel was not an independent state, but a vassal of Persia. It did not experience the influx of wealth from surrounding nations. Some exiles straggled back to Judah over a 100-year period. The Temple was modestly rebuilt in 515 BCE. Old-timers who remembered the former temple Solomon had built wept when they saw its replacement. So, in spite of Second Isaiah's lovely words, there were dashed dreams -- prophecies that failed to materialize as described. Perhaps, some thought, the Exile was not yet fully over. Perhaps the real restoration lay some time in the future.

(b) Third Isaiah - A New Universe

A writer we refer to as "Third Isaiah," that is Isaiah chapters 56-66, writing closer to the year 500 BCE, announces that God is about to create a new heavens and a new earth [Isaiah 65:17], creating Jerusalem as a joy and its people a delight, envisaging the time of universal peace when "*wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox*" [Isaiah 65:25]. All humanity will come to worship the one God [Isaiah 66:23].

This represents a vastly different world altogether, but it was not the reality on the ground in the new fledgling Jewish state. The Jewish world after the Babylonian Exile looked somewhat like the world before that event but with reduced circumstances with limited political autonomy and a modest replacement Temple.

The juxtaposition of expectations versus reality again sparked views that perhaps someday, in an age to come, the universe would be recreated so that all humanity would live in peace, unity and harmony, under the one God and that Israel would lead the way to this new state of being.

(c) 2 Samuel: Covenant with David -- There will always be a David ruling Israel

Another failed expectation had to do with one of the covenants. There are a number of covenants recorded in the Hebrew Bible - one with Noah, another with Abraham, one between God and the Jewish people conveyed through Moses and one regarding David. This latter covenant has far-reaching consequences for it sets up enormous expectations. God is depicted as saying to David through the prophet Nathan, “*Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever*” [2 Samuel 7:16]. From the time of David down to the Babylonian Exile there was always a descendant of David on the throne in Jerusalem. The lineage ended during the Babylonian Exile, for the monarchy was not re-established upon the return. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, smeared with oil, exits from history without the monarchy being reestablished.

What, then, of this covenant? What did God intend? Would there, in the future, be a restoration of the Davidic monarchy? Would this occur at the “end time” when God will recreate the entire universe? What role might this new Davidic monarch play in these momentous happenings?

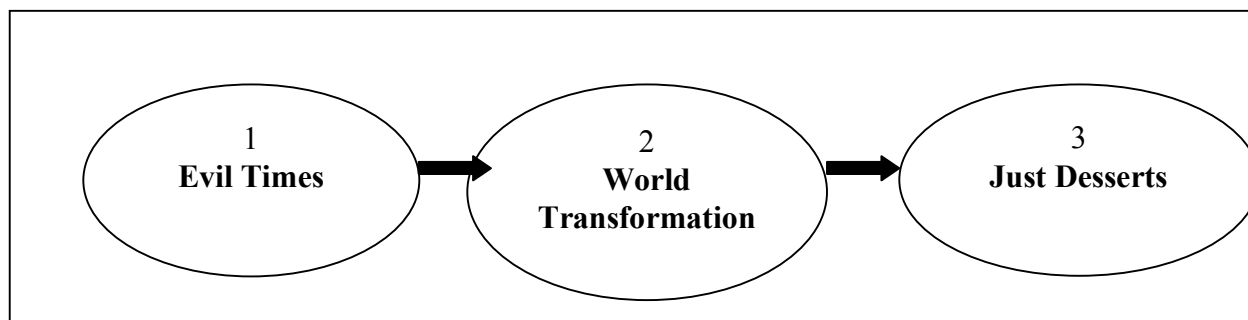
So dashed expectations that arose when reality did not match prophetic utterances helped fuel eschatological dreams. That’s one reason for eschatological discourse. But another dynamic was also at work. Justice, said some, demands that God act to end evil times. Some came to the position that the times were so corrupt that surely God would act to correct a world gone wrong.

(d) Zechariah - The Eschatological DreamWorks Factory of Ancient Israel

The last chapters of Zechariah --chapters 9-14 - create an eschatological framework.¹ Dated some time to the Greek period, that is after Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Middle East around 333 BCE, Zechariah give us an indication of how some thought the world would dramatically change sometime in the not-too-distant future.

In Zechariah chapters 12-14, God is the main actor. The scenario is described as occurring “*on that day.*” It is a time of great warfare, with many nations coming up to wage war against Jerusalem. The city will be captured with ensuing looting and rape, and two-thirds of its inhabitants will be slaughtered. Yet God will prevail. Jerusalem will be purified. There will eventually be universal recognition of God - “*And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one*” [Zechariah 14:9]. Survivors of the nations of the world will annual trek up to Jerusalem, “*to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths*” (Succoth) [Zechariah 14:16].

Zechariah creates the contours of Israel’s eschatological dream. There are three phases: (1) evil times, (2) world transformation, and, finally, (3) just desserts when the righteous will be rewarded, evil doers punished and the righteous dead restored to life.



These passages in Zechariah are often overlooked in discussing messianic expectations because, while they set forth the conceptual framework, they make no provision for a messiah.

Zechariah's importance is that he establishes *what* eschatological times will be like. This was the main Jewish focus. *How* it would come about was another matter. Some believed it would be accomplished directly by God (Zechariah). Others describe a coalition of forces - God assisted by a Lord of the Spirits and a supernatural messiah [Book of Enoch]. Others thought warring angels. Still others, as we shall shortly see, thought a human messiah.

So the *how* differed; the *what* was constant.

(e) Psalms of Solomon: The Triumphant Davidic King

The Psalms of Solomon, a 1st century BCE document, gives us the fullest account of the role of the messiah and shapes the dominant Jewish understanding of his job description.²

The situation that prompts this writing is the capture of Jerusalem by the Roman leader, Pompey, in 63 BCE. Welcomed into the city, he seized Temple Mount by force, executed the Jewish resisters led by the high priest and entered the Temple. Sometime after these events, a group of devout Jews compose what we refer to as the "Psalms of Solomon" [*note, not the Book of Psalms we have in the bible*].

This writing gives us eye-witness testimony to the devastation within Jerusalem. Psalm 17 begins with a recollection of the perpetual covenant with David and with a summary of the current evil times - devastation, massacre of Jerusalemites, exile, worship of false gods, leaders misleading the people. This psalm, having established that these are clearly evil times, works within the threefold framework established by Zechariah and looks forward next to world transformation and just desserts.

According to the Psalms of Solomon, the messiah is the righteous Jewish king, a descendant of David, who assists God in bringing about world transformation. The result will be a transformed world in which Israel becomes the pre-eminent country, God is acknowledged as the universal God and is worshipped by everyone everywhere,

evil-doers are eradicated and the righteous are rewarded. Presumably with sinners destroyed, the world will achieve peace. Exiles will return.

Model #2: The Human Eschatological Catalyst

The Messiah is a Davidic king who assists God in bringing about world transformation in eschatological times.

Specifically this individual must

- **be the Davidic king of an independent Jewish state, having eliminated foreign domination**
- **judge humanity, rewarding the righteous and eliminating the unrighteous**
- **help usher in an era of universal peace reflecting the universal rule of God**

During this time exiles will return from the Diaspora and the righteous dead will be restored to life.'

At the time of Jesus, Model #2 predominated. The messiah would be a human political leader who would emerge at the time of God's transforming the world. The world after the appearance of the messiah will differ vastly from the world before. It was not part of the expectation that the messiah would be an incarnate deity who has a special birth and exceptional death. The focus is not on *who the messiah is* but on *what the messiah must do*.

3. Paul's Christ Messiah

Let's turn to the influential views of Paul, writing in the 50's, some 20 years after the death of Jesus. Paul refers to a *Christos*. *Christos* is the Greek translation of *Mashiach*, but much is lost in translation, as we shall see.

The source of Paul's religion was his mystical experience of the Christ which dramatically changed his life. Emphasizing that he had minimal contact with the leaders of the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem, Paul devised his own set of beliefs and practices. His Christ Movement differed significantly from theirs. To cite only one instance, he developed a torah-free religion, whereas the Jesus Movement under James in Jerusalem was torah-observant, as was Jesus. Moreover, Paul was not at all concerned with the Jesus of history, telling us only minimal details -- that he was born, that he was Jewish and that he died. He did not quote the Jesus of history nor

did he refer to his teachings, even when he has the opportunity to do so.³ His source of inspiration is the mystical Christ.

Paul advanced his views of the Christ in his Letter to the Philippians, written some time either in the 50's or early 60's. The view of the Christ that he presented there is as follows. The Christ was a pre-existing being who was born in human form. He was obedient to God. He died. He was exalted so that all humanity can worship him. Those who become like him in death can attain resurrection [Philippians 2:5-11].

Paul thus focuses on *who* the messiah is: the *Christos* or messiah is a dying-rising savior God-human. His task, according to Paul, is to save those who participate in his suffering and death.

Model #3A: Savior of Humanity

A Christ is a dying-rising savior God-human who saves those who participate in his suffering and death.

The focus for Paul is on personal salvation. "*Living is Christ,*" he says [Philippians 1:21], and he stresses he wants "*to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead*" [Philippians 3: 10, 11]. A believer lives "*in Christ*" and in life and death is united with Christ. It is because of this mystical unity and also because Christ himself was raised from the dead that the believer can experience resurrection.

Paul probably recognized, however, that this idea of the Christ was insufficient to meet prior criteria for messiah-ship. Where were the expected world transformation and the "just desserts"? In some passages, Paul indicates that he expects the Lord Jesus to return. When Jesus returns - what Paul calls "*the day of Jesus Christ*" [Philippians 1:6] - Christ will "*hand over the kingdom to God the Father*" [1 Corinthians 15:24]. At this time, the dead will be resurrected, those who are alive and righteous will assume a "*spiritual body,*" all evil powers will be destroyed including death [1 Corinthians 15:20-57]. Paul, it appears, is in fact proposing a two-stage messiah-ship for Christ.

Model 3B - The Christ as Savior Messiah

Phase One: Savior

Christ, a dying-rising savior God-human, saves those who participate in his suffering and death.

Phase Two: Messiah
Christ returns to destroy evil, conquer death, reward the righteous
with eternal life. The dead are resurrected

4. Conclusions

Conclusion #1: Paul's Christ is not yet a Messiah

The development of a two-stage messiah-ship is an invention of Paul. Clearly Jesus had not fulfilled the job description on his first go-around. World transformation had not occurred and the righteous had not been truly rewarded. So Paul contends, there has to be a "return" when Christ will return to complete the tasks expected of a messiah.

There was, however, no antecedent in Jewish thought for a two-stage messianic operation. The messiah either would or would not accomplish world transformation. If he did, then he was the messiah. If he didn't, then he was just a messiah-claimant. In Paul's case, the Christ is simply a messiah-who-is-yet-to-be. He hasn't yet performed the tasks necessary to qualify as a messiah. The correct way of describing the Christ, then, is as a messiah-claimant, much the same as Bar-Kokhba or Rabbi Schneerson who have yet to return.

Conclusion #2: Paul's Savior figure derives from Graeco-Roman mystery religions.

Paul places the Christ's death-and-resurrection as central to the idea of the messiah, a notion foreign to all previous Jewish views of the messiah. Prior to Paul there was no requirement that the messiah be resurrected. Nor was it expected that he would act as the "savior-vehicle" through whom all humanity will be saved. These represent new twists on the idea of a messiah.

It would appear as if Paul builds his view of the Christ on models found outside Judaism, in the mystery religions of the time. The Christ is like Dionysus or Mithras or many other figures - heroes who die and rise again to save humanity and whose followers can achieve salvation through participation in the hero's life and death. While *Christos* translates *Mashiach*, it transports the concept from a Jewish environment into a vastly different world.

Conclusion #3: Paul's Christ, even if he were to return as Messiah, does not fully correspond to Jewish messianic expectations.

Some crucial elements are missing in Paul's description (Model #3B) versus the Jewish expectation (Model #2).

For one thing, Paul's concept *ignores the political dimension of the Jewish messiah*. On his approach, the Christ, when he returns as messiah, will not be the Davidic king who will govern Israel and assist God in bringing about world transformation.

For another, Paul *de-Judaizes the concept of the messiah*. The Christ is a cosmic savior, a spiritual being who pre-existed his earthly life and whose only task it appears is to save those who participate in his life and death. There is nothing particularly Jewish about him. Paul would probably argue that he was universalizing the messianic notion, but that wasn't the expectation. The Christ is not the Jewish monarch come to restore Israel to prominence, who encourages the return of Jews from the Diaspora and who overthrows Roman rule.

Thirdly, for Paul, *the messiah was not primarily human*. The expectation was that the messiah would be born, live and die -- fully human -- with virtues and flaws, but chosen by God as a catalyst, to help bring about a new world order. Paul's concept, however, is that of a pre-existing spiritual or divine being who appears in human form. For Paul, the Christ has to be a divine figure in order to act as a savior-vehicle, saving all who participate in his life and death and to eventually overcome all cosmic forces of opposition to God's will.

Finally, proclaiming the Christ as messiah now, in advance of world transformation, *ignores the eschatological dimension of the Jewish expectation*. The world before and after Jesus appeared looks very much the same. Paul would probably have argued, however, that at least for the individual who is "in Christ," there are new possibilities that did not exist hitherto. But on a political level, the world was the same. Israel was still ruled by Rome; the righteous continue to suffer; and eschatological times have yet to appear.

Kindly put, Paul has "jumped the gun," proclaiming the Christ figure as messiah when he is a messiah who is not yet.

Conclusion #4: Paul's Christ represents a substitute being

Paul's Christ concept reinforces the view that Paul's religion is different from that of either Judaism or the early Jesus Movement in Jerusalem. Denying the validity of torah, including male circumcision, the dietary laws, the festivals and the Jewish basis for ethics; and by ignoring the teachings of the Jesus of history, Paul creates a religion based upon a believer's mystical participation in the Christ.⁴ But Paul's Christ is not the Jewish Messiah: it's a substitute being, a mystery religion dying-rising savior God-human whom Paul tries to graft on to the Jewish notion of the expected messiah.

Not the real thing at all.

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Appendix A: What Must a Messiah Do?

The Job Description according to the 1st century BCE *Psalms of Solomon*

The Messiah must do the following:

- destroy unrighteous rulers [17:21]
- purge Jerusalem of gentiles [17:21]
- destroy all unlawful nations [17:24]
- condemn and destroy the wicked [17:25; 17:27]
- gather the righteous people together and lead them [17:26]
- judge peoples and nations [17:29]
- remove the alien and the foreigner from righteous Jews [17:28]
- make Gentile nations subservient [17:30]
- glorify the Lord from a prominent place above the whole earth [17:30]
- make Jerusalem a holy city [17:30]
- encourage nations to visit Jerusalem, to see the glory of the Lord [17:31]
- Jews from the Diaspora will return [17:31]

The Messiah must be:

- a son of David [17:21]
- a righteous king [17:32]
- the Lord Messiah {alternative translation: The Lord's Messiah} [17:32]
- subject to God as his king [17:34]
- compassionate to all the subservient nations [17:34]
- free from sin [17:36]
- exhibit understanding, strength and righteousness [17:37]

¹ There are two collections of oracles appended to the Zechariah scroll, chapters 9-11; chapters 12-14.

² Essentially the same view of the messiah and of the eschatological age is found in the Dead Sea Scroll community. Demonstrating this will be the subject of another paper.

³ For instance, on the subject of torah observance in Galatians, Paul never refers to the teachings or practices of Jesus in support of his rejection of torah. In terms of ethical instructions in Galatians, he never refers to the ethical teachings of Jesus. On the subject of divorce in 1 Corinthians, he never refers to what Jesus taught on this topic as mentioned in the gospels. Furthermore, on the subject of eating meat sacrificed in temples dedicated to pagan deities, he never refers to the teachings of James in Jerusalem that required Gentiles to abstain from meats obtained from such temples and which were not properly slaughtered. On these topics of major importance - overall lifestyle, ethics, marriage and divorce, food - Paul does not refer to the teachings of Jesus.

⁴ See my paper, *"Taking Paul at his Word"* presented at the American Academy of Religion, Eastern Division meetings, May 6th, 2006.