



MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS

in the First Century

Messianic thinking was fueled by hunger for a return of a king like David who would deliver God's people from their enemies and establish them in their land in the fullness of God's *shalom*.

By Kevin Hall

LEARNING DURING MY seminary studies about the many expressions of Judaism and multiple ideas of the Messiah that the Jews of Jesus' day held was an unexpected revelation. I witnessed my students experience the same revelation years later as they learned of the diversity of messianic expectations during a lecture at our university by the same Jewish scholar whose writings had first opened my eyes to the rich textures of Jewish speculations about the Messiah. Christians, steeped as we are in the New Testament's witness to Jesus the Christ (meaning "Messiah"), seemingly have seldom recognized Jewish messianic hope as the varied tradition that it was. Considering the Jewish traditions of the Messiah, however, can help us appreciate more fully the New Testament statement about Jesus being born in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4).

Biblical texts that Christians call "messianic" draw inspiration from the richness of the biblical witness to God's covenant with David as the Lord's *Anointed*, or in Hebrew, the Lord's *Mashiach*. The hunger for a return of a king like David, who would deliver God's people from their enemies and establish them in their land in the fullness of God's *shalom*, fueled the people's messianic thinking. It was, however, life in the land without a king, from the end of the Babylonian Exile and return to the land as Persian subjects (538 B.C.) through the subsequent conquests of the Greek Alexander the Great to the ultimate subjugation by the Romans (beginning in 63 B.C.) that led to diverse speculations about the Messiah.

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Left: Coin of Antiochus IV Epiphanes dated 175-164 B.C.; obverse-bust of Zeus Cassius, looks right, wears laurel crown with

symbol of Osiris in a circle of fine dots; reverse-inscription reads "King Antiochus" to the right of eagle. "God who is manifest" to the

left of eagle.

Above: Overlooking the ruins at Qumran, just west of the Dead Sea, which is on the horizon to the left.

During this span, three historical settings seem to have been especially influential in the development of messianic expectations.

The Maccabean Period

Although the Persians and Greeks had ruled with a measure of tolerance, frustrations were evidently gradually mounting among the Jews when fulfillment of the prophecies of the post-exilic prophets seemed unduly delayed. Not until the atrocities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned 175-163 B.C.), however, did the foreign rule become intolerable, which resulted in the rise of messianism of the Maccabean period.

The second-century writings of Ben Sira (Sirach) indicate that the biblical traditions, which support Davidic messianism, were important at this time. Ben Sira extolled the exploits of David and especially highlighted that "The Lord took

away his sins, and exalted his power [horn] forever; he gave him [David] a covenant of kingship and a glorious throne in Israel" (Sirach 47:11, NRSV). Despite, however, David's obvious significance during this period, the political leaders of the Jewish dynasties that arose after the Maccabean Revolt (ca. 168-142 B.C.) embodied the hopes of most Jews. Josephus, the Jewish historian, remembered John Hyrcanus I (ruled ca. 135-104 B.C.), the greatest of the Hasmonean rulers, as one who "was esteemed by God worthy of the three privileges,—the government of his nation, the dignity of the high priesthood, and prophecy."¹ Not until the end of his dynasty in 63 B.C. did the impulse to look again for a restored Davidic dynasty flourish.

The Roman Period

In the middle of the first century B.C., Rome's General Pompey brought

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his army to Jerusalem and placed the Jews under Roman control. Herod, an Idumean, took advantage of a rift among the Hasmoneans; Rome granted him the title King of Judea. Herod, who ruled 37-4 B.C., brought peace to his realm, but did so by using intense cruelty. After his death, the region returned to direct Roman rule, further agitating the Jews against Rome. Turmoil and strife eventually erupted in the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 66. During this period of Roman intervention and rule, the strongest expression of Davidic messianism emerged.

The Psalms of Solomon, a non-canonical work written shortly after Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., were the first Jewish writings “to express complete hostility toward Rome.”² Whereas other messianic writings applied the term “messiah” to historical individuals of the past or present, the Psalms of Solomon gave extravagant witness to the eschatological hope for a kingly “son of David” who would be “the Lord Messiah.”³ Alongside these ideal, eschatological longings were the revolutionary activities of rebel leaders such as those that both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Book of Acts described.⁴

After the dismal failure of the first Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-73), messianism took a decidedly other-

worldly turn. Pseudepigrapha texts such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch paint portraits of the Messiah that differ significantly. Yet the transcendence of the figure they portray draws a number of Old Testament themes and titles into their unfolding messianic visions. This transcendent dimension of messianic thinking added richness to the developing traditions.

The Qumran Community

The Qumran community of the Dead Sea Scrolls spanned three centuries. A small band of advocates of the Zadokite priesthood initially settled this sectarian community in the mid-second century B.C. It grew in waves, however, in response to John Hyrcanus’s reign and the later tensions with Rome. Qumran was not a simple entity; but, we can summarize the community’s messianic interests and emphases fairly simply. The community’s messianism was closely connected with the community’s

Below: In Israel, looking across the Ajalon Valley at Modiin, which is the large city on the left side of the horizon. Modiin was home of the Maccabees.

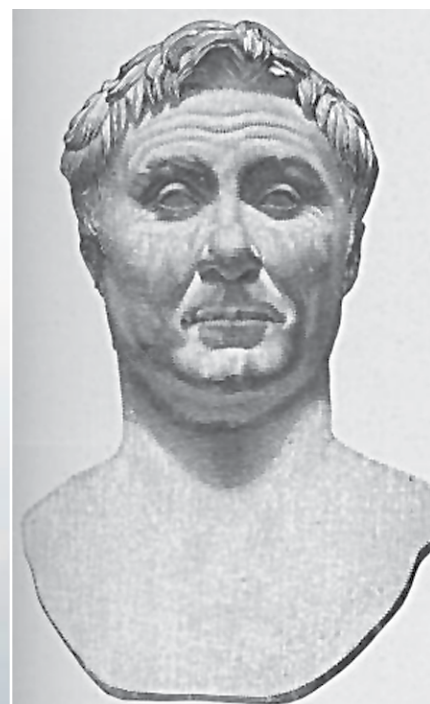
Right: Bust of Rome’s General

Pompey. Upon coming to Jerusalem in 63 B.C., Pompey entered the temple and even the most holy place. He took control of Jerusalem and placed the Jews under Roman control.

structure and discipline. Returning from Babylonian exile, the Jews had two leaders, Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor (Hag. 1:14). Taking this as the model, the people at Qumran developed and solidly adopted a two-messiah concept. Alongside the political, kingly messiah, the Qumran community anticipated a more dominant priestly messiah.

Basic Pieces of the Puzzle

Any attempt to summarize the various streams of thought that



PUBLIC DOMAIN



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Right: Overlooking the Dead Sea and rising 1,300 feet, Masada was one of Herod the Great's fortress palaces. Here the last Zealots of the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70 holed up after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. The Roman army worked for three years building a siege ramp. As the army was within catapulting and scaling range of the summit, the Jews, under the leadership of Simon bar Kokhba, chose to die by their own hands rather than be taken by the Romans.

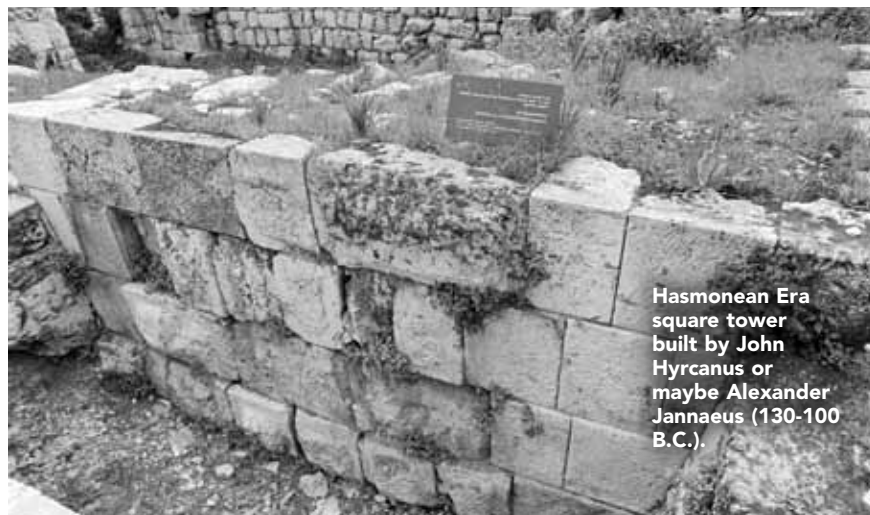


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Right: Encampment for the Roman army at the foot of Masada.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (145/14)

contributed to the messianic expectations at the time of Jesus is a bit like trying to put together a puzzle. Identifying the puzzle pieces is easier than making them all fit. Examination of the relevant texts within the appropriate historical contexts reveals four basic puzzle pieces. Some expected messiahs

who were “perpetuators of the Maccabean spirit.”⁵ Some expected a Davidic messiah like those the Psalms of Solomon described. The two-messiah concept expressed the need for both political and spiritual leadership. As Jewish aspirations became more apocalyptic, prophetic promises for the nation began to

give rise to expectations of a temporary messianic kingdom coming at the end of the age and lasting for various lengths.⁶

Unassembled, these various pieces show that the Jews indeed held widely varying expectations in Jesus’ day. No wonder that even the expectations of Jesus’ followers were at times at odds with His mission! Yet the New Testament reveals that in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the puzzle pieces were transformed and woven into a rich tapestry, wondrously portraying God’s Messiah, Jesus the Christ. **B**

1. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 13.10.7 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 355.

2. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 412.

3. *Psalms of Solomon* 17:21,32. For an introduction to these writings see by Joseph L. Trafton, “Solomon, Psalms of” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:115-17; for the text of the two explicitly messianic chapters 17-18, see James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 665-70.

4. See Acts 5:36-37; 21:38; Ferguson, 420, summarizes each of the Josephus references.

5. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 462, n. 3.

6. The pseudepigraphical works 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch give evidence of this development.

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