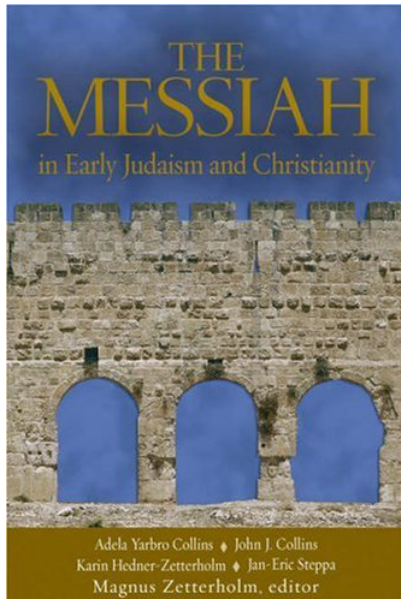


RBL 06/2008



Zetterholm, Magnus, ed.

The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Pp. xxvii + 163. Paper.
\$18.00. ISBN 0800621085.

James H. Charlesworth
Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey

The concept of the Messiah is not only a central theme in Western culture but continues to fascinate many readers; thus, this book is a welcome overview to that discussion. The publication, the proceedings of a symposium at Lund University in 2006, is divided into three sections.

Introduction. Magnus Zetterholm (Linköping University) crafts a succinct introduction that is helpful, reliable, and informative. He outlines four major transformations of the concept of the Messiah, following the traumatic loss of Jerusalem in 587 or 586 B.C.E. First, within Second Temple Judaism the Messiah evolved to become a superhuman eschatological figure. Second, in the early first century C.E., the Palestinian Jesus movement added a new element: the Messiah of Israel will suffer and die and become the risen Savior who provides salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Third, within a non-Jewish symbolic culture, which was sometimes anti-Jewish, the Messiah was perceived to be Jesus Christ, God. Fourth, while in the Tannaitic period messianic ideas flourished within folk literature, in the Amoraic period messianic ideas were shaped to serve the rabbis' Torah-centered worldview, and the coming of the Messiah was dependent on the rabbis' interpretation of Torah. Thus, "the Messiah" evolves to become "the most important concept that *distinguishes* Christianity from Judaism" (xxiv). Zetterholm hopes that the

suppleness of the concept of the Messiah and its adaptability “may suggest that the prevalent incompatibility of Jewish and Christian interpretations of messianism also could change” (xxv).

Formation. J. J. Collins (Yale Divinity School) argues that the Messiah obtained an eschatological meaning only in Second Temple Judaism. The cause of this messianic expectation is the discrepancy between God’s promises and the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. He shows how the translators of the Septuagint introduced messianic references into the biblical text (e.g., Amos 4:13). Daniel 7 does not refer to the Messiah but to an angelic figure, and the *māshiah* in Dan 9 refers to “priestly leaders,” although later Jews interpreted the references messianically. In Qumran’s pesher on Genesis (4Q525) “the Messiah of Righteousness” is “the branch of David.” The two messiahs of the *Rule of the Community* (1QS 9:11) seem to develop messianically from the concept of “the two sons of oil” (Zech 4:14). While Collins may be guilty of seeking more synthesis than is warranted, he is certainly correct to point out that Righteous Teacher was not regarded as the Messiah. The Parables of Enoch were composed before the mid-first century C.E. (he is correct), and the Son of Man, an angelic figure on the throne of glory, is identified as the Messiah (although not associated with a Davidic messiah) in 48:10 and 52:4.

Adela Yarbro Collins (Yale Divinity School) argues that, although Mark opens with a proper name, “Jesus Christ,” the epithet has “not lost its messianic connotations” (22) and should be understood in relation to pre-70 Jewish texts. Mark reinterprets the traditional understanding of the royal Messiah, adding that he must suffer and die. Matthew and Luke present Jesus as “Son of God” more strongly than Mark.

In “Paul and the Missing Messiah,” Zetterholm argues that, in contrast to the Evangelists, Paul uses “Son of God” not to reveal Jesus’ messiahship but to indicate his relationship with God. For Paul, Jesus is “God’s loyal servant, the exalted Lord of heaven and earth” (39). Zetterholm presents a novel thesis: Paul did not stress Jesus’ messiahship because “non-Jewish believers *were too involved with Jewish traditions*” (40).

Development. Karen Hedner-Zetterholm (Lund University) explores the similarities between the Messiah and Elijah in the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud. She clarifies the variety of opinions concerning the Messiah in rabbinic literature. Generally speaking, the Messiah is an earthly political figure who has no or little miraculous or supernatural features. While the Tannaitic literature has few messianic references, the Amoraic and post-Amoraic literature—due to the force of liturgy, Targumim, and folklore—assigned a greater role to the Messiah. Both Messiah and Elijah are transformed in rabbinics. Both

were connected to the end of time, yet Elijah is transformed from prophet to rabbi and the Messiah's arrival is dependent on proper sanctification and Torah observance.

Jan-Eric Steppa (Lund University) shows how the early Christians answered the Roman rejection of Christianity as too novel and recent by stressing the antiquity of the Jewish Bible and the promises in it that were fulfilled in Christ. Thus messianism served to legitimize Christianity. Origen shifted the concept of the Messiah to the concept of Christ as the preexistent Word, while Irenaeus's emphasis on personal growth and maturation rendered obsolete the hopes for a messianic kingdom.

The "Timeline" presented on pages xvi–xvii is inaccurate at two points: Jesus was most likely crucified in 30 C.E., not 33, and the Bar Kokhba revolt lasted from 132 until 136, not 135. Given the renewed interest in the Gospel of John as a historical source, it is unfortunate that this Gospel plays little role in the discussions. Many scholars will be surprised that Yarbro Collins claims Jesus accepts Peter's confession. Zetterholm's novel thesis deserves serious discussion; he rightly assumes that some of those targeted by Paul were well informed of Judaism, but a large percentage of them were not, including the devotees of Asclepius. The concept of "the Messiah" would need to be defined and would not be an easy concept for Greeks and Romans who did not share the Jewish teleological view of time and God acting within it.

The book is attractive for the beginning student and those interested in the shaping of seminal ideas and hopes in Western culture. The glossary helps the beginning student learn the jargon (though Bar Kokhba was not killed in 135 in Jerusalem). Unlike other books on the Messiah, this one is not only focused on the origin and development of the concept of the Messiah within Second Temple Judaism but also includes the creative developments in post-70 Judaism and Christianity.