

Jewish Expectations for the Messiah

The starting point for many of our discussions of the Trinity has been the work that Ryan has done on the Davidic Covenant. In that discussion are considerations not only about theological content and what God intended by instituting the Davidic Covenant but also a discussion of the various names and titles that were given to that individual that was to be the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. For those of us who believe that Jesus is indeed that ultimate fulfillment it has been instructive to look at what was meant by the Old Testament writers by the names and titles assigned. And it is the title “Messiah” that is generally agreed upon by writers of both the Old and the New Testament as the one that encompasses the meaning and significance of all of the other names and titles. Yet currently it is those who embrace the Old Testament and not the New Testament as their Scriptures who would dispute whether or not Jesus could possibly be the long expected Messiah. It is at this point that there is a complete divergence between Jews and Christians...those who look to just the Old Testament (the Tanach) versus those who look to both the Old and the New Testament.

So it is a worthwhile endeavor to spend a little time trying to better understand the Jewish expectations regarding the Messiah. That is particularly true because perhaps the first tenet of Messianic studies in contemporary Judaism is that Christians have completely misunderstood the Old Testament understanding of the Messiah.

With that as the goal...to better understand the Messiah from a Jewish perspective...it is the purpose of this paper to consider three things. First to briefly discuss what is likely to be the 21st century Jewish understanding about the Messiah. Secondly to try to understand what a Jew in Jesus’ day might be expecting with regard to the Messiah, attempting to find some original, extra-Biblical sources that might address the question. And thirdly to look at the Old Testament itself and to see if there is any warrant to be found there for a conception of the Messiah that more closely matches that of the Christian perspective (although clearly even the “orthodox” Christian understanding about the Messiah needs to be tweaked in order to better conform to the Scriptures.

JEWISH CONCEPTIONS OF THE MESSIAH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

With regard to how a religious Jew in the 21st century would think of the Messiah it is not the intent here to provide anything close to an exhaustive understanding. The sources consulted were very few in number but very quickly something of a consensus emerged fairly quickly. And that consensus emerged primarily around not an understanding of who or what the Messiah was but rather who it was not...specifically that the Messiah was not Jesus. That was a very strongly held position that came through repeatedly and forcefully.

It was actually a little difficult to find much information about what a knowledgeable Jew today believed about the Messiah. In some cases I had the impression that it was thought to be something of a waste of time and energy to have a conversation with a Christian about the

Messiah, perhaps because the assumption was that the last 2000 years of history have shown us that there was no common ground so there was no point in having a discussion now.

I did have a close Jewish friend recommend a book to me that he had found extremely helpful...Revolution in Judaea by Hyam Maccoby, published in 1973. Maccoby was a British scholar with the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Leeds. He wrote extensively about the roots of anti-semitism and about what he considered to be the Christian distortions about Judaism in the first century and the development of the New Testament to support those distortions. The book contains a relatively brief chapter entitled "The Messiah". Oddly enough in this chapter there were some assertions that were thought by the other to be evidence of the unreasonableness of some Christian beliefs when, in the context of our study, they were actually things about which we might find common ground.

The chapter begins with the simple assertion: "The title 'Messiah' (Greek – 'Christos') was not a divine title among the Jews. It simply means 'anointed.' It was given to two Jewish officials, the King and the High Priest...Every Jewish king of the House of David was known as Messiah, or Christ, and a regular way of referring to the High Priest was 'the Priest Messiah,' " In the same paragraph he goes on to say "It is necessary to labour this point because the word "Christ" has become so imbued with the idea of deity that it is very hard for a non-Jew to appreciate what those words meant to the average Jew in the time of Jesus. This is not to deny that the word "Messiah" had acquired a strong aura of romance and glamour. It had come to mean not just "King" but the deliverer who would rescue the Jews from their subjection to the cruel and humiliating power of Rome. It meant the unknown descendant of the House of David who, with the miraculous aid of God, would one day restore Israel's independence under the rule of its own much-loved Davidic dynasty."

He goes on to state that some Jews also expected Elijah as a precursor to the Messiah and some thought God would bring deliverance through an angelic being called the Son of Man. He is clear however that the Son of Man was not divine and that "In Jesus's day, the idea of a divine Messiah was unknown." And further that "The idea of a human being who was also divine was unthinkable."

It would seem that conviction is foundational to the specific Jewish position that Jesus is not the Messiah. Upon further reading and study it becomes clear that at this point it is Jewish Monotheism that trumps any notion that Jesus could be God. After all, it generally defies rationality for the Jew to accept the orthodox Christian formulation of the Trinity...the idea that there is one transcendent God but in three distinct and completely separate persons. To a Jew this is polytheism plain and simple and so any discussion of Jesus being God is a philosophical and theological non-starter and as such disqualifies the Christian Jesus from any possibility of being the Messiah.

He goes on in the chapter to make some other interesting observations about what a first century Jew would believe about the Messiah. "...the most popular belief among the Pharisees and among the people was undoubtedly that salvation would come through the Son of David who would be heralded by the return of the prophet Elijah. The Son of David would claim his

right to the Jewish throne and, at the head of an army, put the Romans to flight...He would be more than an ordinary king; he might have prophetic power like King Solomon, and be able to work miracles like Moses or Elisha. Like Moses, he would perhaps be able to feed the people in a wilderness, and like Elisha (and Elijah) he would perhaps be able to raise people from the dead. Such miracles would not prove him to be divine but only that he was the equal of the prophets and miracleworkers of old.”

That seems to be another recurring theme amongst Jews today and that is the idea that the Messiah is to be a conqueror. This is specifically in contradiction to the idea that this Messiah might be called upon by God to suffer. And thus obviously, Jesus is again disqualified from consideration as the Messiah.

Maccoby’s ideas about the Messiah then take a turn in a less personal direction when he says: “...the Jewish Messiah represents an era rather than a person; he is the figurehead of a stage of human development. There is hardly any reference in the Prophetic writings of the Old Testament to the Messiah as a person. There is no splendid shining figure judging mankind coming very near to eclipsing God Himself by his glory.” Again his belief about the Messiah would clearly exclude Jesus from qualification as the Messiah and the last sentence quoted above betrays what must be a significant bone that religious Jews would have to pick with Christians today and that is the observation that for many Christians God the Father now plays second fiddle so to speak to Jesus.

Moving on from Maccoby’s book it was difficult to find many other sources of information about a Jewish understanding of the Messiah. A quick search on the internet offered up the position of the “Messianic Judaism” community as well as the virulently anti-Messianic Judaism perspective. With regard to the latter group as seen on a website entitled “Messiah Truth Project”, it was actually a bit surprising to see some of the very strong hostility expressed toward Christian groups, either Jewish or Gentile, that would have the temerity to attempt to proselitize Jews. There were a couple of groups that went out of their way to not only tear down the orthodox Christian understanding about the Messiah but to take it a step further and attempt to tear down the most significant Christian pillars of faith with regard to the historicity of the person of Jesus, the integrity and truthfulness of the authors of the New Testament and any sort of authority or even authenticity that might be accorded to the books of the New Testament. This same quite militantly anti-Christian perspective trotted out many of the tried and true comments about how the “Jesus Mythos” had come about and actually reflected so many other mythologies and that it was the political work of the church (specifically the Council of Nicea) in the fourth century which actually settled the “orthodox” positions of Christian doctrine.

But there were other places that more helpful information was to be found. One such web site is “Judaism 101” and the specific article on “Mashiach: The Messiah” written by Tracey R. Rich. This article begins with the assertion that “Belief in the eventual coming of the mashiach is a basic and fundamental part of traditional Judaism.” Further “...traditional Judaism maintains that the messianic idea has always been a part of Judaism. The Mashiach is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah...However the Torah contains several references to ‘the End of Days’

which is the time of the mashiach; thus the concept of mashiach was known in the most ancient times.”

It goes on to make several points about the Messiah presented here in a numerical order that does not come from the article but it intended to represent the salient points in the article.

1. “The term ‘mashiach’ literally means ‘the anointed one...’ “
2. “The mashiach will be a great political leader descended from King David (Jeremiah 23:5).”
3. “He will be well versed in Jewish law, and observant of its commandments (Isaiah 11:2-3). He will be a charismatic leader, inspiring others to follow his example. He will be a great military leader who will win battles for Israel. He will be a great judge, who makes righteous decisions (Jeremiah 33: 15).”
4. “But above all, he will be a human being, not a god, demi-god or other supernatural being.”
5. “...most authority suggests that the conduct of mankind will determine the time of the mashiach’s coming. In general, it is believed that the mashiach will come in a time when he is most needed (because the world is so sinful), or in a time when he is most deserved (because the world is so good).”
6. “The mashiach will bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by bringing us back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem (Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5). He will establish a government in Israel that will be the center of all world government, both for Jews and gentiles (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:10; 42:1). He will rebuild the Temple and re-establish its worship (Jeremiah 33:18). He will restore the religious court system of Israel and establish Jewish law as the law of the land. (Jeremiah 33:15).

This article draws to a close first with a section entitled “What About Jesus?” with these comments: “Assuming that he existed, and assuming that the Christian scriptures are accurate in describing him (both matters that are debatable), he simply did not fulfill the mission of the mashiach as it is described in the biblical passages cited above. Jesus did not do any of the things that the scriptures said the messiah would do.” End of story apparently. Mr. Rich names a couple of others whom he says better exemplified who the Messiah was supposed to be but they too fell short of fulfilling all of the qualifications.

His conclusion is a list of “Biblical Passages Referring to the Mashiach” with this being the complete list:

Isaiah 2, 11, 42, 59:20
Jeremiah 23, 30, 33, 48:47, 49:39
Ezekiel 38:16
Hosea 3:4-5
Micah 4
Zephaniah 3:9
Zechariah 14:9

Daniel 10:14.

There was also a helpful article about the Messiah on the “Jewish Virtual Library” website. There was quite a bit of duplication about the ideas already expressed but a few additional thoughts are helpful here. The article suggests that Messianic expectations are deeply rooted in Jewish tradition but seems to acknowledge that much of that tradition is much more recent than the New Testament. Specifically several sources have mentioned that Messianic expectations are central to “Maimonides Thirteen Principles of Faith” but those of us who are Gentiles need to understand that Maimonides (also known as “Rambam”) lived in the 12th century in Spain and northern Africa. These Messianic expectations most clearly addressed the political expectations associated with the Messiah: “He will: be a descendant of King David, gain sovereignty over the land of Israel, gather the Jews there from the four corners of the earth, restore them to full observance of Torah law, and, as a grand finale, bring peace to the whole world.” The obvious conclusion then is that Messianic expectations are yet to be realized and the argument against Jesus being the Messiah was the lack of a true political and civic component to his earthly activities. The author of this article goes on to make the observation that it is in Reform Judaism that the Messianic ideal has been transformed from the hope and expectations rooted in an individual and have become a movement toward “...a future world in which human efforts, not a divinely sent messenger, will bring about a utopian age.” It is suggested that this impulse might be behind the attraction that liberal and leftwing political causes often have for Jews. But it goes on to say that more recently there has been a resurgence of the traditional expectation that an individual and personal Messiah will some day appear. As recently as the ‘50’s and ‘60’s the Messiah was not even discussed at the Yeshiva of Flatbush attended by the author as a child. But today the Lubavitch movement within Orthodoxy “has place increasing emphasis on the imminence of the Messiah’s arrival.” And indeed “...the subject of the Messiah has become increasingly central to many religious Zionists in Israel, particularly to many disciples of the late Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.” (What an unfortunate assignment of a surname.)

Thus there were some recurring themes in most of these contemporary expressions of who or what the Messiah was to be. But as stated above, by far and away the one unifying theme was the absolute conviction that, whatever else may or may not be said about the Messiah, all would agree that Jesus was not, indeed could not possibly have been the Messiah. And that seems to have, at its root, the closely held belief that Jesus deity was inextricably entwined with the Christian understanding of his role as Messiah and that was a logical and theological impossibility for one to believe and still hold with integrity a monotheistic conviction. In addition the expectations about the Messiah also have of primary importance the idea of political might and the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty not only in their own land but also internationally. While the re-establishment of the nation of Israel would seem to be a step in the right direction, the establishment of Jewish sovereignty over the whole world is far from being a reality. Obviously the “meek and mild” Jesus does not fit that picture at all.

JEWISH CONCEPTIONS OF THE MESSIAH IN AND AROUND THE TIME OF JESUS

The second part of this paper is intended to explore what a Jew in the first century might be expecting with regard to the Messiah. And that is an even harder job to tackle because of the seeming lack of primary sources on the subject. Where can one find the writings and teachings of a Jew living within a couple of hundred years of Jesus time which are explicit about the Messiah.

The Rabbi Hillel is traditionally one of the most important rabbis in Jewish history and was the grandfather of Rabbi Gamaliel of New Testament note. Indeed there is some conjecture that Hillel might have even been one of the Jewish teachers with whom Jesus had discussions when he came to the temple at the age of 12. The dates might possibly match up. But a quick survey did not turn up a body of teaching by Hillel or Gamaliel even about the Messianic expectations that were extant at that time.

A helpful source was found in a paper entitled “The Messiah in the First Century: A Review Article” by I. Howard Marshall, himself the Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen and a notable New Testament commentator. In this paper he was summarizing a fairly massive work the published papers that came out of an October 1987 international symposium held at Princeton Theological Seminary that was tasked specifically with studying messianism in and around the time of Jesus. The papers by various authors were published in a book edited by J.H. Charlesworth titled “The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity. There were many different perspectives presented in the papers but there were several points that are worth noting for our study here.

The first is the assertion that not only was there not a unified understand of who or what the Messiah might be at that time but indeed there were many Jews of that day that simply either weren't interested or weren't informed about what might be expected by the coming of the Messiah. There were definite undercurrents of Messianic expectations but they were not necessarily the defining impulse of Judaism in the time of Jesus.

The Dead Sea Scrolls found a prominent place in the discussions as they will just a little later in this paper.

Marshall goes to some pains to discuss the conclusions that Charlesworth drew from editing together these very disparate papers from different authors and challenges many of the conclusions that Charlesworth had reached. For our purposes I will only discuss a few of those conclusions. One is that there is indeed, from roughly 250 BCE to 200 CE, a paucity of original sources that discuss the Messiah specifically using that title but rather a number of places where Messianic hopes and expectations are clearly under discussion.

Marshall notes that “It has to be remembered that the amount of literature which has survived is limited and much of it is linked to individual groups. We are also dealing with a society in which oral teaching and tradition were highly significant, and in the nature of things such teaching has not survived in any systematic kind of way.” This is his way of reiterating that it is very difficult to come to firm conclusions about what was the common Jewish understanding about the Messiah in Jesus' day.

But all that is not to say that there was no discussion of or understanding about the coming Messiah. Charlesworth himself asks a great question in this regard: “If most Jews were not looking for the coming of the ‘Messiah,’ and if Jesus’ life and teachings were not parallel to those often or sometimes attributed to the coming of “the messiah’ or ‘the Christ’, then why, how and when did Jesus’ earliest followers contend that he was so clearly the promised Messiah that the title ‘Christ’ became his proper name by at least 40 C.E. or ten years after the crucifixion?” Indeed the early Christian understanding and teaching about the Messiah, the “Christ” was not made up out of whole cloth by the earliest Christians. It was something that fit easily and neatly with the Jewish understanding about the Messiah that would have been shared or at least readily available to all of Jesus’ first followers...themselves first century Jews. So there was some Messianic understanding there already, waiting to be assigned by early Christians to the person of Jesus. That understanding is simply hard to find in the few extra Biblical original sources that have survived the centuries for us to study.

In light of the infrequency of specifically Jewish literary sources of discussion of the Messiah, this observation from A. F. Segal, a Jewish professor of religion at Barnard College, is quite interesting. Quoting from Marshall’s article Segal says: “In violation of the usual scholarly methods, I would like to use Christian documents to explore larger issues within the Jewish community. After all, rabbinic Judaism has left us documents of uncertain origins in oral tradition from the third century and later, while the New Testament, while also having oral roots, was in written form by the beginning of the second century. The New Testament is hence much better evidence for the history of Judaism than is rabbinic Judaism for the origins of Christianity.” Therein lies such good common sense that we will find ourselves just a little later addressing what the New Testament had to say about the Messiah as part of our discussion about the Jewish perspective in the first century.

Now we turn to some observations drawn from the Dead Sea Scrolls. And what a fascinating study indeed is the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Consider their history. This is a “library” of 972 documents collected by Essenes in the Qumran community, written on parchment and papyrus and collected and stored in hot, dry caves between 150 BCE and 70 CE. There they lay untouched and forgotten for almost 2000 years before a Bedouin shepherd boy tossed a rock, heard a funny sound, became curious and discovered the first of eleven caves holding the surprisingly well preserved documents. With their discovery we gained a window into the teaching and thoughts of Second Temple Judaism as well as a complete validation of the integrity of the Old Testament canon.

It would be great for our purposes to be able to report that there was one cave dedicated to “Messianic Studies” or something like that but, alas, ‘tis not to be. It is important to note that, as incredible is the finding of documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, most of them are fragments and not complete works. So it isn’t like pulling a book off the shelf and having everything that the author intended to say in completely legible print. That means that the documents are usually subject to a wide range of interpretation as to what the author intended. And it is further complicated by the uneven access to the documents. One of the sources I

consulted on Messianic Judaism suggested that the Messiah wasn't even mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But that was when only about a fourth of the documents had been released for study. With pressure from Biblical Archaeology Review (BAR) the majority of documents were finally released in 1991. Prior to that time many of those documents had been parceled out to scholars who studied and published their findings about the documents at their leisure. So when all of the documents were forced out into the public view there were all sorts of surprises about what was and was not in them.

For example, right after those documents were released Professor Robert Eisenman of California State University, Long Beach published a discovery he made about a five line fragment that has come to be known as the "Pierced Messiah" text (technically known as 4Q285...document #285 found in the 4th Qumran cave). In contrast to previous opinions about the contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Eisenman suggested that this was the "missing link" between Judaism and Christianity as it talks not about a triumphant warrior king Messiah like David but rather about a Messiah that will be killed (future tense) and had references to being pierced (suggesting perhaps crucifixion). But since this was based on a fragment it wasn't long at all before Geza Vermes, professor emeritus of Jewish Studies at Oxford University convened a seminar which concluded unanimously that the fragment said no such thing.

This was followed by another paper written in BAR by James D. Tabor which goes through an extensive analysis of every word and letter of the fragment as well as looking at some other documents. A fairly extensive quote from his article would be helpful here: "Vermes is correct to emphasize that other Qumran texts, which speak of a Davidic messiah figure, emphasize his triumph over his enemies (4Q161, 1Q5b, etc.). There is no doubt that the Qumran community had faith in the ultimate victory of such a messiah over all evil. However, a closer reading of these texts reveals an additional theme, equally dominant – that of an initial, though temporary, triumph of the wicked over the righteous. For example, in 4!171, an important commentary on Psalms 37, 45 and 60, this theme is extensively developed. Indeed, in colum 4 of 4!171 there is a direct reference, using the precise verb form of our text (HMT), to a Wicked one putting to death a Righteous one (based on Psalm 37:32). The Qumran community interpreted the persecution and death of their own Righteous Teacher not as a final defeat but as a temporary triumph of the wicked before the eschaton (end of days)." The importance of this is obvious because it suggest, in contrast to the virtually unanimous voice heard in contemporary Judaism, that at least some Jews in and around the time of Jesus had, as part of their Messianic expectations, the concept of a suffering Messiah.

There is more interesting information in another BAR article by Michael O. Wise and James D. Tabor, entitled "The Messiah at Qumran". This article analyzes the "Messianic Apocalypse" Dead Sea Scroll fragment (4Q521) which went unstudied when the scholar to whom it had been assigned, Abbe Jean Starcky, died in 1988 without publishing it. When BAR published facsimiles of all of the documents in 1991 it began to get some attention as "an extremely important text". This article analyzes "14 mostly broken lines" from one of the fragments of the text which was thought to have been written somewhere between 200 BCE and 70 CE. The

authors have this to say about their findings: “Three striking features of this text are significant: First, it speaks of a single messianic figure who will rule heaven and earth. Second, in the clearest possible language, it describes the resurrection of the dead expected to occur during the time of this Messiah. And third, it contains an exact verbal parallel with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.” This is important for our study at several points. The idea of a “single messianic figure” is certainly different from a modern day Reform Judaism perspective that the “Messiah” is not a person but is a movement or an era. This is also different from an understanding shared by many Qumran scholars that the documents suggested two very different Messianic figures...a priestly one and a kingly one. In addition the idea that this Messiah figure “will rule heaven and earth” sounds like something more than simply a powerful but simply human political figure. There is also the note about the prominent role that the resurrection of the dead was to play in the unveiling of the Messiah. And finally, the verbal parallels with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke would lend some support to the idea that the New Testament documents themselves, albeit charters of the Christian faith, might also accurately reflect Jewish thoughts about the Messiah at that time as noted above in the comment by A. F. Segal. Wise and Tabor go on to say that “Our Qumran text, 4Q521, is astonishingly, quite close to this Christian concept of the messiah. Our text speaks not only of a single messianic figure (“[the hea]vens and the earth will obey His Messiah, [the sea and all th]at is in them”) but it also describes him in extremely exalted terms, quite like the Christian view of Jesus as a cosmic agent.” And “In contrast, the Messiah of our text, 4!521, controls heaven and earth, heals the wounded and raises the dead. He rules over nature. Even death, that old enemy, cannot stand before him (he will resurrect the dead).” They briefly mention another text saying “In 4QAaron A, as in our text, the messianic figure or priest is described in extremely exalted terms, much like the Christian messiah.”

Yet another BAR article, entitled “A Pre-Christian ‘Son of God’ Among the Dead Sea Scrolls” by John J Collins, draws on an analysis of other fragments found in Qumran Cave 4. (On second thought, perhaps Cave 4 was indeed where the “Messianic Studies Department of the Qumran University” stored their papers.) This fragment (identified as 4Q246) “consists of two columns of nine lines each in the Aramaic language” but are missing the “beginnings of the lines in the first column.” Apparently there was a third column also so, like most of the fragments, trying to come to some conclusions requires quite a bit of analysis and detective work. But for our purposes this quote from the article is most significant: “This text, dated to the late first century B.C.E., has extraordinary parallels to the annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:31-35), including use of the titles “Son of God” and “Son of the Most High,” the earliest known references to these terms in a messianic context.” And later in the article: “Three phrases in this quotation from Luke’s Gospel are translation equivalents of phrases in the Dead Sea Scroll fragment: ‘will be great’ (column 1, line 7), ‘he will be called Son of the Most High’ (column 2, line 1) and ‘he will be called Son of God’ (column 2, line 1). Luke also speaks of an unending reign; the Dead Sea Scroll fragment speaks of an ‘everlasting kingdom’ (column 2, line 5).” The significance of this text is clear in light of modern Jewish assertions that these concepts are completely absent from a Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

And finally in this section allow me to draw on another BAR article by Sidnie White Crawford which is a review of a book edited by John J. Collins entitled The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature. Following are some helpful quotes from this article. “He (i.e. Collins) reaches the somewhat startling conclusion that ‘messianism was virtually dormant from the early fifth to the late second century B.C.E.’ and only emerged as an active ideology in the first century B.C.E., the period of the waning of the Hasmonean dynasty and the emergence of Rome.” Collins analyzed “all of the Qumran texts that use the word ‘messiah’ or appear to allude to messianism in any way...” He also concluded that “the group living at Qumran was a sect with a distinctive ideology (probably the Essenes) but was not hermetically sealed off from the outside world. Therefore, the collection of manuscripts found at Qumran coheres as a collection (that is, it is not haphazard) but also reflects trends that were widespread in Judaism and can thus be used to make statements about Second Temple Judaism in general.” Of greatest interest for our study is that “According to Collins, there are four distinct messianic paradigms in Second Temple Judaism: king (son of David), priest, prophet (the new Moses) and heavenly messiah (Son of Man). *These paradigms can be combined, and the emphasis on one or the other varies from community to community.*” (emphasis mine)

As a final note before we leave the extra-Biblical sources about the coming Messiah we must touch briefly on the BAR article by Israel Knohl entitled The Messiah Son of Joseph: “Gabriel’s Revelation” and the birth of a new messianic model. It discusses what it calls “a Dead Sea Scroll in Stone... a 3 foot long stone dated from the late first century B.C.E. or the first century C.E. which is “clearly apocalyptic in nature”. Without going into all of the detail of the article suffice it to say that it presents further evidence that Judaism around the time of Jesus certainly contained the idea of a “suffering Messiah”, including perhaps the suggestion that the text reads, in part, “...By three days you shall know that thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the evil has been broken by righteousness” (Lines 19-21). Knohl suggests that the text goes so far as to observe that “The archangel is ordering someone to rise from the dead within three days.”

We cannot leave a discussion of Messianic expectations in and around the time of Jesus without addressing the content of the New Testament. It is not the goal (nor is there the space) here to make an exhaustive study of that particular subject. I hope we can be satisfied with a somewhat cursory but at the same time convincing look at ways that the witness of the New Testament suggests that Messianic expectations were “in the air” at the time of Jesus life. And rather than dealing with the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistles or the book of Revelation, we will look at the synoptic gospels as a whole and then at the Gospel of John separately.

Of course the argument against the observations that are to follow is that the gospels were written long after the time of Jesus’ life and the establishment of the church and that they were indeed written long after the fact to provide an “apology” for the idea that Jesus was considered by many of his contemporaries in the Jewish community to be the long awaited Messiah. Without going into any detail whatsoever to support the belief in the early dating and authentic

authorship of the gospels, suffice it to say that these observations follow from the conviction that the gospels simply and plainly provide an account of Jesus' life and ministry and accurately report the words of the participants in the story as real life historical figures living in the first half of the first century C.E.

Starting with the Matthew it is significant that the very first verse of this gospel starts with "The book of the genealogy of Messiah Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham", thereby rooting Jesus firmly in both the Messianic tradition of Judaism as well as the line of promise that we will discuss in greater detail in the final section of this paper. Then Mark begins with "The beginning of the gospel of Messiah Jesus, the Son of God" accomplishing the same thing as the first verse of Matthew. And in Luke 2:11 is the account of the angels announcing to the shepherds that "...today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord." It seems possible that this goes even a step further by not just tying in to the current Messianic expectations but also by suggesting an even closer identification of the Messiah with God himself. It would bear further study but let me just note here that the common Greek word for "Lord" is "Κύριος". And it must not escape our notice that when the Septuagint translates YHWH it virtually always translates it with the same Greek word. Is it a stretch to suggest that the Luke, in writing his gospel, was willing to use language which would identify Messiah Jesus with YHWH himself?

There are several other specific Messianic references that are found in very similar form in one or more of the three synoptic gospels so for the sake of brevity we will look just at those found in Matthew. In Matthew 2, the story of the visit of the "wise men" to Jerusalem, it is recorded that they asked about the location of the one "who has been born King of the Jews?" Apparently that was all the information needed for Herod to enquire of the chief priests and the scribes as to "...where the Messiah was to be born." In other words it was an easy step for Herod and the Jewish scholars of his day to associate the "King of the Jews" with the "Messiah".

Then in Matthew 11:2-6 John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the "expected one" and Jesus responds in Messianic terms taken from Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1. It is worth being reminded here that one of the Qumran Messianic texts also referenced Isaiah 61:1 directly. In this passage Jesus is clearly suggesting that he was fulfilling the Old Testament Messianic expectations.

Matthew 16:13-16 is where the disciples recount some confusion on the part of the multitudes as to the identity of Jesus. But it is Peter who affirms here that Jesus is the Messiah. A few verses later, in v. 20, Jesus orders his disciples to tell no one that he is the Messiah.

In Matthew 22 is the account of the Sadducees failed attempt to trap Jesus with their trick questions. Observing this the Pharisees decide to try the same tactic. After responding to them Jesus asks them a question of his own in v. 42: "What do you think about the Messiah, whose son is he?" Their answer is clearly in the Messianic tradition that we now know to be understood in Jesus' day: "The son of David." To which Jesus replies with another question that completely stumps them, including a quote from Psalm 110:1. "Then how does David in the Spirit call him 'Lord,' saying 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put thine enemies beneath thy feet' If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is he his son?" Some of the scholars who have discussed the Messianic tradition take this to be Jesus' unequivocal rejection of the teaching that the Messiah is to be the son of David. But it is easy to make the case (as many scholars have done) that Jesus was simply trying to see if they were willing to enter into a deeper understanding of who the ultimate Messiah was to be and the relationship of that Messiah to God himself.

In the account of Jesus' examination before Caiaphas and the scribes and the elders, Caiaphas himself backs Jesus into a corner by saying (in Matthew 26:63+): "I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Messiah, the son of God." So evidently the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day knew enough of the Messianic tradition and of the rumors that were swirling around Jesus and of the accounts of his words and deeds to ask that very salient question: "are you the Messiah". And Jesus answered quite clearly and forcefully: "you have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you; hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The accounts in the gospel of John are a little different. Clearly the discussion of Messianic expectations was a topic of conversation because in John 1:20 the gospel records that John the Baptist "...confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'" He was asked that question more than once and needed to disavow his followers of that notion, eventually pointing them to Jesus as the Messiah. Thus in 1:41 we are told that Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, "...found first his own brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah (which translated means Christ)...'"

Then in the account of the woman at the well in John 4, after a lengthy conversation with Jesus the Samaritan woman said to him in v. 25: "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us". So even the Samaritans who were related to but hated by the Jews, maintained a tradition about the coming Messiah such that this woman was quick to bring the Messiah into the conversation. And Jesus didn't hesitate to identify himself as that Messiah. And she apparently was somewhat convinced, encouraging others to come and see for themselves if Jesus was the Messiah.

In John 7 there is by that time a great deal of discussion about who Jesus is. Indeed by that time the Jewish leaders were considering drastic measures to rid themselves of this problem person. In the middle of that chapter Jesus has taught at the temple and the streets are full of discussion about whether or not Jesus is the expected Messiah. In 7:42 is even the observation that it was common knowledge that the Messiah was to be a descendant of David.

By John 9:22 the Jews were clamping down and sanctioning anyone who might publicly suggest that Jesus is the Messiah.

In John 10:24 it was "the Jews" (a rather vague description with no clear idea how many or what "class" of Jews were here referenced) who said to Jesus "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." To which Jesus replied that "I told you and you do not believe; the works that I do in my father's name, these bear witness of me but you do not believe..."

In John 11:27 Martha affirms of Jesus that "you are the Messiah, the son of the living God".

In John 12:34 the "crowd" discusses what apparently was common knowledge and that is that the Law taught them that the Messiah was to live forever. That was in the context of enquiring yet again about Jesus' identity.

In his prayer in John 17:3 Jesus refers to himself as Messiah.

And John wraps up his gospel account with his statement of purpose in John 20: 30-31: "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

If A.F. Segal is right in saying that the New Testament provides some of the best original source material about Messianic discussions and expectations in the first century C.E., then this brief summary should suffice to point out the wide extent of the conversations going on at that

time as well as much of the very sophisticated, detailed and nuanced content of the discussions about the Messiah.

THE OLD TESTAMENT EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE COMING MESSIAH

It is my purpose in this section to consider what Jesus' Jewish contemporaries might have expected when considering the writings of the Old Testament. To do that we will look at three things: the passages mentioned above that are often referenced by Jews today when they talk about Messianic expectations; a look from a little different angle by discussing the expectations that might well have been carried down from the very beginning of time as reported in Genesis 3 and 4; and finally a look at the introduction to the New Testament book of Hebrews.

OT PASSAGES ABOUT THE MESSIAH FROM A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

In the first section of this paper we saw a list of several passages from seven prophetic books in the Old Testament...passages that ostensibly gave a fairly clear picture of what to look for in the coming Messiah. And in one of my sources there was a link to a website that claimed to be able to debunk the notion that over 300 Old Testament passages could be used by Christians to support their view of the Messiah. It does not necessarily seem fruitful to rehash the same passages that both Jews and Christians have argued about for literally millennia regarding the Messiah. Indeed it would seem that often both Jews and Christians get so lost in the detailed minutia about biblical passages regarding the Messiah that there is more confusion than enlightenment because of the desire to match up very specific details that might well indeed be open to interpretation. So here let us consider briefly the passages referenced above and see what light they shed on the question of Messianic expectations from a Jewish perspective with passages that come directly from the Old Testament. On the "Judaism 101" website these passages were introduced with this comment: "The following passages in the Jewish scriptures are the ones that Jews consider to be messianic in nature or relating to the end of days. These are the ones that we rely upon in developing our messianic concept."

Isaiah 2...It is worth noting that the word "mashiach" is not found in any of the Isaiah passages mentioned here. But clearly they are discussing the Messiah. This particular chapter starts off, in verse 2 "Now it will come about, in the last days..." This is the sort of verse that led to Jewish speculation (as seen in the discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls) about whether there was one Messiah or two Messiahs. There seem to be some passages that talk about a "suffering" savior/Messiah while others talk about the triumphant Messiah who reigns in judgment and sovereignty. This chapter describes the triumphant Messiah who will appear on the scene "in the last days."

Isaiah 11...The first part of this chapter could apply to either "version" of the Messiah: "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse...And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding..."etc. But clearly the end of the chapter refers to yet a distant fulfillment of Messianic expectations at a time when "...he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked...the wolf will dwell with the lamb...the leopard will lie down with the kid..."

Isaiah 42...A passage like this is seen to be a prediction of the Messiah and/or a Messianic age when God will reign over the whole earth and will be like a man of war rather. Vs. 4 "He

will not be disheartened or crushed, until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for his law.” And vs. 13 “The Lord will go forth like a warrior. He will arouse his zeal like a man of war. He will utter a shout, yes he will raise a war cry. He will prevail against his enemies.”

Isaiah 59:20 seems to be a picture of an personal and individual Messiah who will redeem and save from sin. “ ‘And a Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,’ declares the Lord.”

Jeremiah 23 As with the Isaiah passages, the word “Mashiach” does not appear actually anywhere in Jeremiah. But that is clearly what Jeremiah had in mind with passages like vs. 5-6 “ ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I shall raise up for David a righteous branch; and he will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely and this is his name by which he will be called, “the Lord our righteousness.” ’ ” It is from passages like this that the Jews would clearly make the connection to the lineage of David but also to the political and spiritual supremacy of this coming Messiah.

Jeremiah 30 As with many of the relevant passages, this chapter builds the future messianic expectations with the oft-repeated phrase: “Behold, the days are coming.” And the expectations are usually of the glorious and ultimate restoration of Jewish supremacy. Vs. 18...”Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwelling places and the city shall be rebuilt on its ruin and the palace shall stand on its rightful place.’ ” Vs. 20 “And their children also shall be as formerly, and their congregation shall be established before me; and I will punish all their oppressors.” Vs. 22 “And you shall be my people and I will be your God.”

Jeremiah 33 Here again are messianic expectations of the future supremacy of the line of David and Jewish sovereignty. Vs. 14-18 “ ‘Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and he shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she shall be called: the Lord is our righteousness.’ For thus says the Lord, ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to prepare sacrifices continually.’ ”

Jeremiah 48:47 reads “ ‘Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days,’ declares the Lord. Thus far the judgment on Moab.” Moab is the territory on the western shore of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River just above the Dead Sea.

Jeremiah 49:39 reads “ ‘But it will come about in the last days that I shall restore the fortunes (perhaps “captivity”) of Elam,’ declares the Lord.” Elam is a territory that was in what is now southwest Iran. I’m not at all sure to what exactly this is referring.

Ezekiel 38:16...this verse about some future invasion of Israel by Gog.

Hosea 3:4-5... “For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the Lord and to his goodness in the last days.”

Micah 4...this chapter begins “And it will come about in the last days..” What follows then is much more a description of a messianic age under the sovereign rule of the Lord rather than a specific and personal expectation of a Messiah.

Zephaniah 3:9... “For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord, to serve him shoulder to shoulder.” In the context it is clearly “the Lord” who will be doing this rather than some other messianic figure.

Zechariah 14:9... “And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one.”

Daniel 10:14...this is simply the introduction to a vision: “Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days for the vision pertains to the days yet future.”

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING “THE SEED” BEGINNING IN GENESIS 3 & 4

Another place to turn to look at Messianic expectations from a little different perspective would be to go to Genesis 4:1 which says: “Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, ‘I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord.’” The exact translation of that passage is up for debate and the NASB, from which we drew the quote, gives a clue as to an alternative rendering. By putting the words “the help of” in italics it signals that those words supplied rather than being found in the Hebrew text. And the word that is translated “with” could also simply be the definite article. So the NASB actually offers an alternative reading that would go like this: “...I have gotten a man, the Lord (Yahweh).”

What makes that so interesting is what was recorded in the previous chapter of Genesis when, in God’s curse directed at the serpent, he said: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” Clearly in this passage in Genesis 3 God is proclaiming, before the progenitors of the entire human race, that he was making it his own responsibility to deal with the sinful plight of all mankind by bringing some kind of savior as a human descendant of the woman. And apparently Eve took that quite literally so that when she, much to her surprise I’m sure, was delivered of the first baby in the entire human race, she naturally supposed that this first descendant of hers was in fact the expected savior seed...perhaps even was, in some mysterious way, God himself now in human form. Certainly that translation and interpretation of Genesis 4:1 is not universally accepted but even if it is not, what is unmistakable is that in Genesis 3:15 God put the entire human race on notice that the struggle between Satan and humanity would ultimately be resolved when a descendant of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.

Worth noting is the fact that the word “seed” is, both here and several other places that it is used, singular even though it is almost always translated with the plural noun “descendants”. But in Genesis 3:15 it is obviously intended to suggest one person because the “seed” is then immediately referred to as “he”.

What follows then throughout the Old Testament is an interesting handful of references to the “seed” that help us to see that a Jew who knew their Tanach would have good reason to think that God was planning to miraculously intervene in human history by way of a human descendant of Eve who would deal with the sinful condition of the human race. Going back to this passage in Genesis which records one of the very first events in the history of the human race, it would be reasonable for the “faithful” Jew (meaning by that the Jew who responded with sincerity and a heartfelt affirmation of the truth God’s revelation) to be on the lookout more for a Messiah who would deal with the sinful weakness of humanity rather than a Messiah who was a strong political and military leader, neither of which are envisioned in the Genesis passage.

With regard to the use of this word throughout the Old Testament, allow me to quote from the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament in an entry written by Walter Kaiser: “The most important theological usage is found in the fourth category. (Note: he has already recognized three other ways that the word is used in the OT.) Commencing with Genesis 3:15, the word “seed” is regularly used as a collective noun in the singular (never plural). This technical term is an important aspect of the promise doctrine, for the Hebrew never uses the plural of this root to refer to “posterity” or “offspring”... Thus the word designates the whole line of descendants as a unit, yet it is deliberately flexible enough to denote either one person who epitomizes the whole group (i.e. the man of promise and ultimately Christ) or the many persons in that whole line of natural and/or spiritual descendants. Precisely so in Genesis 3:15. One such seed is the line of the woman as contrasted with the opposing seed which is the line of Satan’s followers. And the surprisingly the text announces a male descendant who will ultimately win a crushing victory over Satan himself.”

Kaiser then calls our attention to a couple of different passages, the first of which is II Samuel 7 where God is laying out for David what could be termed “Messianic expectations” for both the short and the long term. Starting in the middle of the passage in verse 12 it says: “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant (literally seed) after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.” And shortly after in verse 16: “And your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”

And toward the end of David’s life he wrote a song with the following lines from II Samuel 22:51... “He (i.e. God) is a tower of deliverance to his king, and shows lovingkindness to his Messiah, to David and his seed forever.” The same words are found in Psalm 18:50 with “Messiah” and “seed” made parallel terms in both places.

Then in Psalm 89, a Maskil of Ethan who is here commenting on the Davidic covenant he says, starting in verse 3: “I have made a covenant with my chosen; I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your seed forever and build up your throne to all generations.” Then in verse 29: “So I will establish his seed forever, and his throne as the days of heaven.” And verse 36: “His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me.”

It certainly would have been easier if God had, in his inspiration of the authors of the Old Testament, given a simple and succinct list of things to look for in the Messiah. Preferable would be a list that was very specific and not open to interpretation or disagreement. But that has never been God’s way. As always his expression of truth has been for those who have “ears to hear” and evidence a receptivity and willingness to act upon the truth given them by God. But if there has been any place to go to look for some idea of how God was to bring about a resolution of the sinful predicament of mankind in the coming of the Messiah, it would be to go back to the beginning and see what God promised in the record of this most personal and intense

interaction between Adam, Eve, the serpent and God. Here he lays out the fact that all of humanity can confidently wait for God to act again in human history through the agency of a descendant of Adam and Eve. That would certainly make Jesus a candidate to be called Messiah because, as Hebrews notes, in his life he expressed the ultimate communication of and from God himself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NT BOOK OF HEBREWS

Finally let us look at the opening observation from the author of the book of Hebrews: “God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in his son...” This would suggest two things that are important for our study. First is the idea that God has, from the very beginning, communicated something of his plan and purposes. That would include his communication about his Messiah and thus we can look to the texts of the Old Testament and expect to see God’s communication there. But beyond that is the idea that God’s ultimate and final communication was in his son Jesus. So it has been suggested that even without matching up exact details of Old Testament prophecies as to times and places and characteristics with regard to the Messiah, a contemporary of Jesus who was sincerely seeking to know the plans and purposes of God and had been devoted to the study of the Old Testament would in fact recognize Jesus to be the Messiah. Being the ultimate communication of and from God, a responsive heart would resonate with the person of Jesus and would see him to be the promised Messiah. I find that perhaps the most profound thought of all regarding how one might recognize the Messiah.

CONCLUSION

Although there is certainly much more that could be said, the three sections of this paper are intended to simply bring to light some of the possibilities for what Jews, those living now in the 21st century, those who were contemporaries of Jesus and those who lived long before Jesus, either were known to be expecting as they considered the Messiah or what they might reasonably have expected given the information available to them. It is hoped that this will help to give some additional historical context to the rest of our studies.