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The Grammar of Messianism

Chapter 1

After the Messianic Idea

An anonymous seventh-century CE Jewish writer tells the story of a mythical woman named Hephzibah, the mother of the messiah ben David, who fights alongside the messiah ben David and the messiah ben Joseph in the final eschatological battle against Armilus. Hephzibah slays wicked gentile kings with a rod of almond wood that had belonged to Adam, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and David in turn and was hidden away until the last day to be wielded by the mother of the messiah. The text is the late ancient apocalypse *Sefer Zerubbabel*, and among its contributions to Jewish legend is the striking image of the mother of the messiah as a righteous avenger in the last battle.[1] *Sefer Zerubbabel* falls at the end of the historical period in view in the present book, but it does as well as any of its antecedents to illustrate the phenomenon with which the book is concerned—namely, the participation by ancient Jews and Christians in a common scriptural discourse in texts about their respective messiahs.

The character of Hephzibah reflects late ancient Jewish familiarity with the figure of the virgin Mary in Byzantine Christian art and liturgy. As the Byzantine armies carried the image of the mother of their messiah into battle with the Sasanian Persians, so, for the

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[1] The best text is Israël Lévi, "L'apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès," *REJ* 68 (1914): 131–44, an edition based on Oxford MS 2797. A fine English translation with critical introduction and notes is John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 40–66.

author of *Sefer Zerubbabel*, the mother of the Jewish messiah will one day march into battle on behalf of her own people.[2] But if, in a sense, Hephzibah comes from Jewish experience with Byzantine mariology, in a different sense she also comes from the Bible. Hephzibah is the name of an ancient Judahite queen mother, the wife of king Hezekiah and mother of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1).[3] Indeed, if, likely as not, Manasseh was anointed with oil upon his accession to the throne, then this ancient Judahite Hephzibah will have been a mother of a messiah, strictly speaking.[4] Hephzibah also appears in etymologized form in Third Isaiah, where the feminine name is applied figuratively to Zion:

> You [O Zion] shall no more be called Azuvah [עזובה, "forsaken"], and
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> your land shall no more be called Shemamah [שממה, "desolate"]; but you
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> shall be called Hephzibah [חפצי־בה, "my delight is in her"], and your land

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[2] See Martha Himmelfarb, "The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Sefer Zerubbabel," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. 3 (ed. Peter Schäfer; TSAJ 93; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 369–89; Joseph Dan, "Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist and the Origins and Dating of the Sefer Zerubbavel," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen; SHR 77; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 73–104.

[3] On Hephzibah the queen mother, see Hermann Michael Niemann, "Choosing Brides for the Crown-Prince: Matrimonial Politics in the Davidic Dynasty," *VT* 56 (2006): 225–38.

[4] On the ritual anointing of Israelite kings, see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume.

Beulah [בעולה, "married"]; for YHWH delights [חפץ] in you, and your

land shall be married [תבעל]. (Isa 62:4)[5]

Before *Sefer Zerubbabel*, there is no mother of the messiah named Hephzibah.[6] When *Sefer Zerubbabel* undertakes to imagine a mother of the messiah, however, he draws on intelligible biblical imagery—in this case, a queen mother in the ancient Judahite house of David (2 Kgs 21:2) and a poetic picture of a restored Jerusalem (Isa 62:4). In this respect, *Sefer Zerubbabel* illustrates the way that all ancient messiah texts, both Jewish and Christian, typically work. This book comprises a demonstration that this is the case.

After the Messianic Idea

Writing twenty years ago, Shemaryahu Talmon commented, "A renewed examination of messianism in early Judaism can with some justification be likened to carrying coals to Newcastle or balm to Gilead."[7] In view of the steady flow of publications on the topic

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[5] On the name Hephzibah in this oracle, see Baruch Halpern, "The New Names of Isaiah 62:4: Jeremiah's Reception in the Restoration and the Politics of 'Third Isaiah,'" *JBL* 117 (1998): 623–43, especially 637–43. Here and subsequently, translations of primary texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

[6] But compare the unnamed mother of the messiah in *y. Ber*. 2:4 (5a), as well as the possibly related myth of the woman, child, and dragon in Rev 12, on which see Israël Lévi, "Le ravissement du Messie à sa naissance," *REJ* 74 (1922): 113–26; and Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah."

[7] Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Concept of *Masiah* and Messianism in Early Judaism," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), 79–115 at 79.

since the early 1990s, Talmon's sentiment is perhaps even truer now than it was then.[8]

And yet. Talmon justified his own study by appealing to new evidence from recently

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[8] To speak only of monographs, leaving aside for the moment the many journal articles and edited volumes, major contributions in the two decades since Talmon's essay include Gerbern Oegema, *Der Gesalbte und sein Volk: Untersuchungen zum Konzeptualisierungsprozess der messianischen Erwartungen von den Makkabäern bis Bar Koziba* (SIJD 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); ET *The Anointed and His People: Messianic Expectations from the Maccabees to Bar Kokhba* (JSPSup 27; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998); John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010 [1st ed. Doubleday, 1995]); Kenneth E. Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism* (EJL 7; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995); Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997); William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998); Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1998); Johannes Zimmerman, *Messianische Texte aus Qumran: Königliche, priesterliche und prophetische Messiasvorstellungen in den Schriftfunden von Qumran* (WUNT 2.104; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); Michael O. Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior before Jesus* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper, 1999); Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (trans. David Maisel; Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000); Stefan Schreiber, *Gesalbter und König: Titel und Konzeptionen der königlichen Gesalbtenerwartung in frühjüdischen und urchristlichen Schriften* (BZNW 105; Berlin:

De Gruyter, 2000); Timo Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Christian Exaltation Discourse* (WUNT 2.142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); Ernst-Joachim Waschke, *Der Gesalbte: Studien der alttestamentliche Theologie* (BZAW 306; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001); William Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003); Andrew Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation: Jewish Messianic and Visionary Traditions and New Testament Christology* (WUNT 207; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007); Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich,: Eerdmans, 2008); Eric F. Mason, *You Are a Priest Forever: Second Temple Jewish Messianism and the Priestly Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (STDJ 74; Leiden: Brill, 2008); Albert L. A. Hogeterp, *Expectations of the End: A Comparative Traditio-Historical Study of Eschatological, Apocalyptic, and Messianic Ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (STDJ 83; Leiden: Brill, 2009); Israel Knohl, *Messiahs and Resurrection in "The Gabriel Revelation"* (London: Continuum, 2009); Shirley Lucass, *The Concept of the Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity* (LSTS 78; London: T. & T. Clark, 2011); James Waddell, *The Messiah: A Comparative Study of the Enochic Son of Man and the Pauline Kyrios* (JCTC 10; London: T. & T. Clark, 2011); Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York, N.Y.: New Press, 2012); and Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012).

published manuscripts from Qumran.[9] In my case, the justification is not so much new

evidence (although there are several recently published primary texts to be discussed

here), but rather an alternative model for understanding a familiar set of primary texts.

The modern study of ancient messianism has suffered from a lamentable naiveté with

respect to theory—that is, meta-level reflection on what we talk about when we talk

about messianism. Most modern studies engage in no such reflection at all, but a

praiseworthy minority do bring conceptual questions to bear.

> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, for instance, suggests:
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> Messianism should be, and in fact has been, studied from two
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> perspectives: that of the historian of ideas, and that of the social historian.
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> In other words, a distinction must be made between messianism as a
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> complex of ideas, doctrines, hopes and expectations on the one hand, and

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Reflecting in 2007 on the state of research on the question since 1991, Andrew Chester

aptly comments:

> It is striking . . . that the main questions I focused on then [in 1991] are
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> still [in 2007] seen as central, not least whether messianism appears to be a
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> significant and coherent phenomenon, or whether it is merely peripheral
>
> and disparate. There is still no consensus, and the issues remain very
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> contested. (Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 191)

[9] Talmon, "Concept of *Masiah*," 79–80.

messianic movements on the other. Messianism is the potentiality of

messianic movements; messianic movements are messianism in action.[10]

If Werblowsky conceives of two basic approaches to the study of messianism—the

history of ideas and social history—Moshe Idel identifies at least four approaches and

imagines the possibility of others, as well:

> Messianism may be approached from various vantage points. The
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> sociological approach emphasizes the expressions of messianism that
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> appear in various strata of the population, particularly the masses, while
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> the psychological approach is ideal for analyzing the messianic
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> consciousness of the masses and the extraordinary personality of a
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> Messiah. Messianism may also be studied as part of a complex of religious
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> concepts, with the aim of integrating them into a certain theology or
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> placing them within the framework of the history of ideas. Yet it is also
>
> possible to investigate the relationship between messianic awareness and
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> an individual's private mystical experience.[11]

Despite the notional plurality of approaches to the study of messianism, however, in

actual practice modern research on the topic has tended overwhelmingly to take what

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[10] R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Jewish Messianism in Comparative Perspective," in *Messiah

and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity* (ed. Ithamar Gruenwald et al.;

TSAJ 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 7.

[11] Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.

Werblowsky calls the history-of-ideas approach.[12] Consequently, as William Scott Green has shown, most modern studies of ancient messiah texts are actually studies not of the texts themselves, but of a concept abstracted from them—a concept most often called the messianic idea.[13]

The messianic idea is a firmly established trope in biblical studies and Jewish studies from the mid nineteenth century to the present.[14] The particulars vary from one

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[12] Thus rightly Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 17: "Though the great variety of literatures under inspection would invite an assumption that many sorts of messianic ideas would compete, the phrase *messianic idea* looms too prominently in the titles of many books and articles."

[13] See William Scott Green, "Introduction: Messiah in Judaism: Rethinking the Question," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (ed. Jacob Neusner et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7: "The standard works on the topic typically devote less attention to concrete textual references than to discussion of a religious attitude allegedly at the core of Israelite and Jewish experience: the so-called 'future hope.'"

[14] See the survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship in Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians*, 1–22. Representatives of this trope include Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, "Die Messiasidee zur Zeit Jesu," *JDT* (1867): 389–411; David Castelli, *Il Messia secondo gli Ebrei* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1874); Maurice Vernes, *Histoire des idées messianique depuis Alexandre jusqu'à l'empereur Hadrien* (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1874); James Drummond, *The Jewish Messiah: A Critical History of the Messianic Idea among the Jews from the Rise of the Maccabees to the*

writer to the next, but the common core is the notion that ancient messiah texts belong in an extraordinary way to *Geistesgeschichte* or *Ideengeschichte*, the history of ideas.[15] On this model, the pertinent texts in Daniel, or the *Psalms of Solomon*, or the *Parables of Enoch*, or the Talmud Bavli are so many instantiations of a single suprahistorical idea that exists independently of them all. This idea itself is not just—as the word *messiah*

Closing of the Talmud (London: Longman, 1877); James Scott, "Historical Development of the Messianic Idea," *The Old Testament Student* 7 (1888): 176–80; Julius H. Greenstone, *The Messiah Idea in Jewish History* (Philadelphia, Pa: JPS, 1906); W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Evolution of the Messianic Idea: A Study in Comparative Religion* (New York, N.Y.: Dutton, 1908); Ernest F. Scott, "What Did the Idea of Messiah Mean to the Early Christians?" *JR* 1 (1921): 418–20; Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* (trans. W. F. Stinespring; New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1955); Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York, N.Y.: Schocken, 1971); Isaiah Tishby, "The Messianic Idea and Messianic Trends at the Beginning of Hasidism," *Zion* 32 (1967): 1–45 (in Hebrew); Dov Schwartz, "The Neutralization of the Messianic Idea in Medieval Jewish Rationalism," *HUCA* 64 (1993): 37–58 (in Hebrew).

[15] On the notion of *Geistesgeschichte*, see Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History* (ed. Richard Rorty et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49–75, especially 56–61. On the *Geistesgeschichte* motif in the academic study of messianism, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (2d ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 35–50.

might suggest—an anointed ruler, but rather a uniquely and characteristically Jewish hope for a utopian future.

Thus Heinrich Graetz, writing in the mid nineteenth century, comments, "The messianic idea, that constant hope for a better and more beautiful future, is the elixir of life which has granted the Jewish people its remarkable tenacity."[16] Julius Hillel Greenstone, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, claims:

> The Messianic idea is characteristically Jewish. The nations of antiquity, despairing of the present and heedless of the future, gloried in their past, in which they saw the perfection of all happiness, social and national. . . .
> The Jew looks for happiness and virtue, not to a past golden age, but to the future, to "the end of days," a favorite phrase with prophet and sage.[17]

Writing in the same vein some twenty years later, Joseph Klausner praises "the greatness and loftiness of the Messianic idea, that original Hebrew idea which has influenced all humanity so much."[18] Klausner's messianic idea is "the summation of the most exalted hopes for a shining future, which our greatest and most venerated dreamers await," and, more precisely, "the prophetic hope for the end of this age, in which there will be

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[16] <IBT>Heinrich Graetz</IBT>, "Stages in the Evolution of the Messianic Belief," in idem, *The Structure of Jewish History, and Other Essays* (trans. Ismar Schorsch; Moreshet 3; New York, N.Y.: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1975), 152; German original in *Jahrbuch für Israeliten 5625*, vol. 11 (ed. Josef Wertheimer and Leopold Kompert; Vienna: Engel, 1864–1865).

[17] Greenstone, *Messiah Idea*, 22–23.

[18] Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 2.

political freedom, moral perfection, and earthly bliss for the people Israel in its own land, and also for the entire human race."[19] A generation later and still more famously, Gershom Scholem undertakes to explain how "the Messianic idea . . . became an effective force after its crystalization in historical Judaism";[20] and how "the Messianic idea appears as a living force in the world of Judaism."[21] On Scholem's account, "The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, when it was unprepared to come forward onto the plane of world history."[22]

More recent writers on ancient messianism have criticized the synthesizing tendencies of their nineteenth- and twentieth-century forebears, who of course did not have the benefit of the scores of newly discovered and published texts that we now have.[23] But despite this significant shift in opinion in favor of the diversity of ancient

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[19] Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 6, 9.

[20] <IBT>Gershom Scholem</IBT>, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in idem, *Messianic Idea*, 1–36 at 2.

[21] Scholem, "Messianic Idea," 4.

[22] Scholem, "Messianic Idea," 35.

[23] See Morton Smith, "What Is Implied by the Variety of Messianic Figures?" *JBL* 78 (1959): 66–72; Marinus de Jonge, "The Use of the Word 'Anointed' at the Time of Jesus," *NovT* 8 (1966): 132–48; Jacob Neusner, "Preface," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs*, ix–xiv; Green, "Messiah in Judaism"; James H. Charlesworth, "From Messianology to Christology: Problems and Prospects," in *The Messiah*, 3–35; Pomykala, *Davidic Dynasty Tradition*, 1–9, 265–71.

messianism, many of these same recent interpreters perpetuate the older history-of-ideas approach in other respects. James Charlesworth, for instance, has documented thoroughly the diversity of messiah figures in the Second Temple-period pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls;[24] but he nevertheless writes in a *geistesgeschichtlich* vein about how "Jewish messianology exploded into the history of ideas in the early first century B.C.E."[25] And elsewhere how "in the history of western culture no concept has been more crucial than messianism."[26] More polemically, in a 2007 monograph Joseph Fitzmyer sharply criticizes other recent writers on ancient messianism for "failing to respect the history of ideas."[27] For Fitzmyer, the important question about the messiah in ancient texts is "when and how the idea emerged in Jewish history."[28] As he sees it, his bibliographical predecessors offer inadequate readings of the primary texts because they are not sufficiently attuned to the history of ideas. In short, despite the major

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[24] See <IBT>James H. Charlesworth</IBT>, "The Concept of the Messiah in the Pseudepigrapha," *ANRW* II.19.1:188–218; idem, "From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs*," 225–64; idem, "From Messianology to Christology"; idem, "Introduction: Messianic Ideas in Early Judaism," in *Qumran Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. James H. Charlesworth et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 1–8.

[25] Charlesworth, "From Messianology to Christology," 35.

[26] Charlesworth, "Messianic Ideas in Early Judaism," 1.

[27] Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, viii, ix, 7.

[28] Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 7, 182.

developments in the last generation of research on ancient messianism, the messianic idea trope is still very much with us.

Even so, recent research has seen increasing discontent with the dominant paradigm, as well as halting steps in creative new directions. A leading figure in this development is Jacob Neusner, who introduced a 1987 collection of state-of-the-art essays in this way:

> People have written books on the messianic doctrine in Judaism, but this is the first book on the Messiah-theme in Judaisms. . . . What is wrong with the established view is simple. People join together books that do not speak the same language of thought, that refer to distinctive conceptions and doctrines of their own.[29]

Neusner's own distinction between "the messianic doctrine" and "the messiah theme" is arguably imprecise and, to just that extent, unpersuasive, but his criticism of previous research is to the point. For the most part, the modern study of ancient messianism has been organized around an artificial concept, not a corpus of texts, and the result has been a kind of interpretive anarchy.[30] Neusner rightly notes the need for an alternative model, but his principal contribution is the deconstruction of the dominant model, not the articulation of a new one.[31]

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[29] Neusner, "Preface," xii.

[30] On this diagnosis, see Green, "Messiah in Judaism."

[31] Elsewhere, similarly, Neusner writes:

> We find in the rabbinic canon no such thing as the messianic idea. . . . Klausner and Scholem provide portraits of a composite that, in fact, never

More recently, several other scholars have made ad hoc observations that point in the direction of a more excellent way. John Collins has introduced a crucial distinction between messianic expectations as such and the cluster of scriptural texts that provided that language in which such expectations were expressed. He writes:

> Whether we may therefore speak of a "general messianic expectation" is another matter. We do not know how important these traditions were to the populous at large; interest probably fluctuated with historical circumstances. When interest in messianic expectation arose, however, there was at hand a body of tradition which could be used to articulate it.[32]

Peter Schäfer has challenged the conventional premise that it is possible to plot ancient messiah texts as points on an arc running from the early Iron Age to late antiquity. He writes:

> It is tempting to view the various facets of the Messianic expectation as stages of a certain historical development, and I confess that I couldn't resist this temptation completely. However, I should like to re-emphasize

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> existed in any one book, time, or place, or in the imagination of any one social group, except an imagined "Israel" or a made-up "Judaism." (Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* [Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1984], 227).

On the subsequent influence of Neusner's deconstruction, see Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 276–84.

[32] John J. Collins, "Messiahs in Context: Method in the Study of Messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 722 (1994): 213–27 at 222.

that the different Messianic figures cannot be reduced to a uniform underlying pattern; they are to be described adequately only as the dynamic interaction of various and changing configurations within different historical constellations.[33]

John Gager and Loren Stuckenbruck, among others, have questioned the methodological convention of taking only non-Christian Jewish texts as evidence for Jewish messianism in antiquity.[34] Gager writes, "The presence of the term *christos* in a first-century [CE] text, even attached to one put to death by his enemies, does not place that figure outside or even at the periphery of messianic Judaism."[35] Similarly Stuckenbruck: "If we allow for such diversity in both early Christian and Jewish communities, there is no reason to suppose that, beyond the reconciliation of 'Messiah' by Christians to the experiences of Jesus, Jewish and Christian ideas were necessarily very distinct from one another."[36]

The present book picks up where these interpreters leave off. My project is not simply to do what the classic surveys (e.g., Klausner, Mowinckel, Scholem, and, more recently, Collins and Fitzmyer) have done, only a bit more critically or more up-to-date,

[33] Peter Schäfer, "Diversity and Interaction: Messiahs in Early Judaism," in *Toward the Millennium*, 15–35 at 35.

[34] On this complicated issue, see Chapter 6 in this volume.

[35] John G. Gager, "Messiahs and Their Followers," in *Toward the Millennium*, 37–46 at 38.

[36] Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "Messianic Ideas in the Apocalyptic and Related Literature of Early Judaism," in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 90–113 at 113n44.

but rather to ask a different set of questions altogether. I take it that the two questions that have dominated modern research on the subject—first, where is the phenomenon of messianism attested in antiquity? and second, what are the major types of messiah figures represented in the sources?—are more or less settled.[37] Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars of ancient Judaism tended to claim that messianism was widespread in antiquity and that it centered on a single mythical ideal: the future king from the house of David.[38] After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a reactionary trend in scholarship argued that, in fact, messianism is attested only very sparsely in antiquity and that, even where we do find it, there is no consistency in the forms it takes.[39] In the past quarter century, several interpreters have suggested that this post-Dead Sea Scrolls reaction was

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[37] As Chester (*Messiah and Exaltation*, 191) rightly notes, one still finds these questions contested in the secondary literature, but not, in my view, in ways that advance the discussion significantly.

[38] For example, Drummond, *Jewish Messiah*; Greenstone, *Messiah Idea*; Klausner, *Messianic Idea*; and similarly Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes et al.; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–1987 [1st German ed., 1885]), 2:488–554; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930), 2:323–76.

[39] For example, Smith, "What Is Implied"; de Jonge, "Use of the Word 'Anointed'"; Neusner, "Preface"; Green, "Messiah in Judaism"; Charlesworth, "From Messianology to Christology."

an overreaction, and consequently the discussion of these two classic questions has arrived at, if not a consensus, at least a moderate common ground.[40]

Regarding the first question, as Collins writes, "We cannot be sure just how widespread messianic expectation was. Our sources do not permit us to speak with confidence about the majority of the Jewish people."[41] With this caveat, however, he notes, "The evidence suggests that messianism was virtually dormant from the early fifth to the late second century BCE."[42] Regarding the second question, as Schäfer writes, "The respective traditions range mainly within the triangle (Davidic) Messiah-king, priestly Messiah, and Son of Man."[43] Or, slightly differently, per Collins's summary, "We shall find four basic messianic paradigms (king, priest, prophet, and heavenly messiah), and they were not equally widespread."[44] Of course, it may be that new primary sources will come to light and necessitate a serious reevaluation, but for the present these two questions have been answered as satisfactorily as they are likely to be answered.[45]

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[40] See Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 191–205, 324–27; Collins, *Scepter*, 1–20.

[41] Collins, *Scepter*, 18.

[42] Collins, *Scepter*, 50–51.

[43] Schäfer, "Diversity and Interaction," 35.

[44] Collins, *Scepter*, 18.

[45] Knohl, *Messiahs and Resurrection*, has argued that the Hazon Gabriel stone does necessitate such a reevaluation, but in my view this is not the case. See the discussion in Chapter 5 in this volume.

One might get the impression from the secondary literature that these are the only questions worth asking about the primary sources.[46] In fact, however, they represent only the beginning, not the end, of a historical study of early Jewish and Christian messiah texts. Granted that we can sketch a rough timeline of the production of ancient messiah texts and identify a taxonomy of types of messiahs, we are now in a position to ask a whole range of potentially enlightening interpretive questions, especially questions about the inner logic of each text, why it makes the particular choices it does—questions, that is, about the grammar of messianism.

The Grammar of Messianism

In speaking of the grammar of messianism, I am taking methodological cues from a number of scholars in related subfields. One immediate influence is Nils Dahl, who—in an incisive 1977 lecture—drew attention to the conceptual models presupposed by scholars in their discussions of early Christian Christology.[47] Dahl observes that many mid-twentieth-century writers on early Christology share the curious habit of talking in fluminous terms of "streams" or "tributaries" of tradition that "flow" into christological doctrine,[48] and he raises the sensible question why the metaphor of a river basin holds such sway over this particular scholarly discussion. In fact, Dahl suggests, the metaphor

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[46] A few creative exceptions notwithstanding. Among recent studies, one such exception is Yarbro Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*.

[47] <IBT>Nils A. Dahl</IBT>, "Sources of Christological Language," in idem, *Jesus the Christ* (ed. Donald H. Juel; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991), 113–36.

[48] The most prominent example is Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; 2 vols.; New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 1951–1955).

is poorly suited to the subject matter, since it is not the case that early Christology becomes increasingly homogeneous over time or that any particular motif, once combined with others, disappears from the literary record. Dahl, therefore, proposes an alternative conceptual model:

> Several works on the origins of Christology speak about sources and influences in a manner that evokes the image of a complicated watershed. . . . It might be wise to exchange this image for the notion of a "language game," to use the term of Wittgenstein. . . . What really matters . . . are the rules of the game. They allow for innumerable moves, so that one game of chess [for example] is never like any other. But if the basic rules are changed, it becomes a different game.[49]

Dahl refers here to the tremendously influential *Philosophical Investigations* of the Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, which appeared posthumously in 1953.[50] The term "language game" (*Sprachspiel*) encapsulates the later Wittgenstein's theory that human language is best conceived not as a set of symbols corresponding to things in the world, but rather as a set of rules for participation in various kinds of discourse (e.g., giving a command, deliberating about a course of action, telling a joke, reporting an experience, making up a story, and so on). As he famously puts it, "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined

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[49] Dahl, "Sources of Christological Language," 132–33.

[50] The standard German–English diglot edition is Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[51] If the meaning of its word is its use, then the implicit rules according to which people communicate in various concrete situations constitute the single most significant factor in determining meaning. Wittgenstein writes:

> How many kinds of sentence are there? . . . There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. . . . The term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.[52]

Clearly, Dahl's use of the term *language game* is a reappropriation of Wittgenstein's. Whereas the latter is giving an account of the phenomenon of human language as such, the former is simply identifying a conceptual model suitable for describing a particular cluster of ancient texts. In fact, Dahl's invocation of language games is just one moment in the late twentieth-century reception history of Wittgenstein in religious studies circles.[53] At about the same time, but more famously and on a grander scale, Dahl's Yale

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[51] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 1.§43.

[52] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 1.§23.

[53] On which, see Fergus Kerr, "The Reception of Wittgenstein's Philosophy by Theologians," in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy* (ed. D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr; Surrey: Ashgate, 2005), 253–72; I. U. Dalferth, "Wittgenstein: The Theological Reception," in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, 273–302.

colleague George Lindbeck appropriated the notion of language games by way of articulating a general theory of the function of doctrines in religions. Lindbeck writes:

> A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. . . . Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully employed.[54]

On Lindbeck's model, religions are like languages in that they prescribe a set of rules for communicating successfully within a particular community. Being a practitioner of any given religion means learning and abiding by the grammar of that religion. For example, I can use the phoneme *dog* to mean "an aquatic animal with bones, gills, and scales," but in that case it is clear I am not speaking English. By the same token, I can use the phoneme *Jesus* to mean "a merely human prophet who came after Moses and before Muhammad," but in that case it is clear I am not speaking Christian, as it were. Being a proper English speaker or a proper Christian means consenting to use the relevant terms according to the communal rules.

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[54] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1984), 33.

The discussion of the Lindbeckian and other cultural–linguistic theories of religion proceeds apace;[55] but that larger theoretical discussion lies beyond the purview of this book and my own professional competency. Nevertheless, although I have no stake in the debate whether whole religions are best conceived on an analogy to languages, I do take the view (analogous to Dahl's) that ancient messiah texts comprise a body of evidence very well suited for cultural–linguistic analysis. Although one might not know it from the modern history of research, what we call messianism is most basically a way of talking about the world, a set of linguistic resources—and, equally important, linguistic constraints—inherited from the Jewish scriptures. Ancient Jewish and Christian texts about "messiahs"—from Second Isaiah to the Talmud Bavli, and at myriad points in between—are participants in one great ancient Mediterranean language game. As different as these texts are from one another in many other respects, they are all involved in negotiating a common set of social realities by using a common set of scriptural source texts to solve a common set of interpretive puzzles (which are themselves generated by the same scriptural source texts). If messianism is a language game, then what I am calling "the grammar of messianism" is the rules of the game: the way messiah language worked for the ancient authors who chose to use it, the discursive possibilities it opened up, as well as the discursive constraints it entailed.

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[55] See, for example, Paul Dehart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2008); John Allan Knight, *Liberal versus Postliberal: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2013).

To say ancient discourse about messiahs is a language game is not to say it is frivolous. Indeed, many of the pertinent primary texts reflect very serious circumstances. The first-century BCE *Psalms of Solomon*, for instance, invokes the idea of the messiah by way of earnest protest against both the Hasmonean ruling dynasty in Jerusalem and their Roman successors.[56] The psalmist prays:

> Because of our sins, sinners rose up against us; they attacked us and thrust us out, to whom you did not promise; they took possession by force, and they did not glorify your honorable name. They set up in glory a palace corresponding to their loftiness; they laid waste the throne of David in arrogance leading to change. But you, O God, will overthrow them and will remove their offspring from the earth, when there rises up against them a person that is foreign to our race. . . . See, O Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David [Ἰδέ, κύριε, καὶ ἀνάστησον αὐτοῖς τὸν βασιλέα αὐτῶν υἱὸν Δαυιδ], at the time which you chose, O God, to rule over Israel your servant. . . . He shall be a righteous king, taught by God, over them, and there shall be no injustice in his days in their midst, for all

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[56] On the targets of the psalmist's protest, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1981), 195–230; Kenneth Atkinson, *I Cried to the Lord: A Study of the Psalms of Solomon's Historical Background and Social Setting* (JSJSup 84; Leiden: Brill, 2003). Compare Johannes Tromp, "The Sinners and the Lawless in *Psalm of Solomon* 17," *NovT* 35 (1993): 344–61; and Kenneth Atkinson, "Herod the Great, Sosius, and the Siege of Jerusalem (37 B.C.E.) in *Psalm of Solomon* 17," *NovT* 38 (1996): 313–22.

shall be holy, and their king the Lord's messiah [βασιλεὺς αὐτῶν χριστὸς κυρίου]. (*Ps. Sol.* 17:5–7, 21, 32)[57]

The psalmist is distressed by the polity of which he finds himself a part, and a messiah from the house of David represents the ideal divine solution to his plight. Likewise serious, but for altogether different reasons, is the messiah language in the Gospel of John. Writing at the turn of the second century CE, the evangelist fears an apparently very real prospect of estrangement from the Jewish community for the crime of taking a certain controversial view of the identity of the messiah: "The Jews agreed that if anyone should confess him [Jesus] as messiah, that person would be put out of the synagogue [ἐάν τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσῃ χριστόν, ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται]" (John 9:22; cf. 12:42; 16:2).[58] For the Gospel of John, as for the *Psalms of Solomon*, the stakes of this particular language game are very high, indeed.

Having made this caveat, however, we should also note there are some ancient messiah texts in which the language game (in the technical sense) is also a game (in the

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[57] Trans. mod. from NETS.

[58] See the seminal study of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3d ed.; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2003 [1st ed., 1968]). Significant objections to Martyn's reconstruction have been raised, for example, by Adele Reinhartz, "The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal," in *What Is John? Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), 111–38. But a formidable defense of a modified version of Martyn's thesis is provided by Joel Marcus, "Birkat Ha-Minim Revisited," *NTS* 55 (2009): 523–51.

popular sense). An example is the account in the Bavli of a debate among several rabbinical schools about the name of the messiah:

> What is his [the messiah's] name? The school of R. Shila said: His name is Shiloh, for it is written, *Until Shiloh comes* [Gen 49:10]. The school of R. Yannai said: His name is Yinnon, for it is written, *His name shall endure for ever; e'er the sun was, his name is Yinnon* [Ps 72:17]. The school of R. Haninah maintained: His name is Haninah, as it is written, *Where I will not give you Haninah* [Jer 16:13]. Others say: His name is Menahem ben Hezekiah, for it is written, *For Menahem, who would relieve my soul, is far* [Lam 1:16]. The rabbis said: His name is "the leper scholar," as it is written, *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we regarded him as him a leper, smitten by God and afflicted* [Isa 53:4]. (*b. Sanh.* 98b)<mark>[59]</mark>

The latter part of the dialogue relates two unprovenanced proposals for the name of the messiah: Menahem ben Hezekiah (from מנחם, "comforter," in Lam 1:16) and "the leper scholar" (from נגוע, the "leper," of Isa 53:4). In the first part of the dialogue, however, in which proposals are offered by three rabbinical schools in turn, each proposal is actually a midrashic argument that the name of the messiah corresponds to the name of the teacher of that particular school: Shiloh for the school of R. Shila, Yinnon for the school of R. Yannai, and, closest of all, Haninah for the school of R. Haninah. These proposals are doubly clever, because they have to work both as midrashim on scripture and also as

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<mark>[59]</mark> Trans. mod. from Soncino.

puns on the respective teachers' names. In this case, the language game of messiah discourse is also a *jeu de mots*.[60]

Another playful example of ancient messiah language is an exegetical riddle attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic tradition (Mark 12:35–37; Matt 22:41–46; Luke 20:41–44).[61] The three versions of the riddle differ slightly, but the oldest version reads as follows:

> As Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the messiah is the son of David? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, *The Lord said to my lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.* [Ps 110:1]. David himself calls him lord; so how is he his son [αὐτὸς Δαυὶδ λέγει αὐτὸν κύριον, καὶ πόθεν αὐτοῦ ἐστιν υἱός;]?" And the great throng heard him with pleasure. (Mark 12:35–37)

In its wider Markan literary context, this saying has a genuine theological point—namely, that Jesus himself is the messiah son of God (cf. Mark 1:1; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61–62; 15:39).[62] But the logion itself is a riddle, a question that identifies and exploits a contradiction in the biblical text in order to confound its hearers. The Markan narrative frame even preserves something of the genre of the saying, commenting after the punch

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[60] On this passage, see further Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 463–65.

[61] On this passage, see in particular Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004 [1st ed., 1992]), 130–52.

[62] See W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30–54.

line that "the crowd heard him with pleasure [ἡδέως]" (Mark 12:37). Here, as in the previous example, the postbiblical messiah text makes an actual word game of the biblical source text. Some ancient messiah texts are playful, others gravely serious, but they are all participants in a common language game.

Viewed from this angle, ancient messiah texts constitute one example—an excellent example—of the vast, sprawling ancient Jewish and Christian project of scriptural interpretation. As the last generation of scholarship, especially, has shown, in antiquity, virtually all Jewish discourse—and, *mutatis mutandis*, Christian discourse— consisted of scriptural interpretation of one kind or another. To speak about anything significant was to speak in the language of scripture.[63] As James Kugel writes, for Persian- and Hellenistic-period Jews, "the past was everywhere. It was what explained the present, and was the standard by which the present was to be judged and upon which

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[63] I say "scripture" as opposed to "Bible" to signify a phenomenon that was current long before the late ancient advent of canons and pandect codices. On this point, see Robert A. Kraft, "Para-mania: Beside, Before, and Beyond Bible Studies," *JBL* 126 (2007): 5–27; and Eva Mroczek, "The Hegemony of the Biblical in the Study of Second Temple Literature," *JAJ* 6 (2015): 2–35. On the phenomenon in general, see Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (2d ed.; Leiden: Brill 1973 [1st ed., 1961]); Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (trans. Batya Stein; Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996); and the recent state-of-the-art collection edited by Matthias Henze, *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012).

future hopes were to be based; and it was legitimacy."[64] For these ancient interpreters, "the past was not approached in the spirit of antiquarianism but for what message it might yield, and this is necessarily predicated on an interpretive stance, indeed, a willingness to deviate from the texts' plain sense."[65] Again, as Donald Juel puts it:

> By the first century, biblical interpretation had become an essential feature of Jewish intellectual life. . . . [Interpreters] had developed an elaborate hermeneutical mechanism with which to make sense of sacred texts, to fit them into a harmonious whole, and to apply them to the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world. . . . Exegesis had become a primary mode of intellectual discourse.[66]

Or again, as Shaye Cohen writes:

> All Jews knew at least something of the Tanak, especially the Torah. The educated knew it by heart, studied it closely, cited it liberally in their conversations, drew inspiration from it in their writings, and labored long

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[64] <IBT>James L. Kugel</IBT>, "Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Later Forms of Biblical Exegesis," in idem and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1986), 9–106 at 36.

[65] Kugel, "Early Interpretation," 38.

[66] Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1988), 32.

and hard to establish its correct text and to clarify its numerous obscurities.[67]

This is true not only of Jews in the homeland who encountered the scriptures in the ancestral language, but also of their hellenophone countrymen in the Mediterranean diaspora.[68] As Tessa Rajak has pointed out:

> [In the diaspora,] a language for self-expression was forged by the Greek Bible. The translators devised a vocabulary and with it a range of concepts that could not, in the nature of things, represent exactly their Hebrew prototypes. . . . It is often when we explore that basic level of individual lexical units that we are struck by the pervasive influence of the Greek Bible on its communities of Jewish users.[69]

And again, "The mental furniture of literate Jews was biblical when they expressed themselves in Greek at moments of crisis and drama."[70] In sum, the scriptures, whether in

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[67] Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (2d ed.; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2006), 193.

[68] See John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 399–444, especially 424–26.

[69] Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 225.

[70] Rajak, *Translation and Survival*, 230.

Hebrew or in Greek, functioned not only as a holy book but also as a mode of expression for literate Jews throughout the ancient world.[71]

This is the historical context within which ancient messiah texts become intelligible. They represent so many creative reappropriations of an archaic scriptural idiom to talk about matters of contemporary concern to their latter-day authors and audiences. As Martin Karrer has pointed out, in Judaism of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the actual performance of ritual anointing was associated primarily not with persons (and, in any case, certainly not with kings) but with sacred artifacts, especially the altar and related cultic paraphernalia in the Jerusalem temple.[72] Despite this fact, however, almost without exception Hellenistic- and Roman-period Jewish texts use the language of anointing in a manner that reflects the archaic Israelite practice, not the contemporary one.[73] It is deliberately antiquarian usage; that is precisely the point. To borrow Kugel's idiom, ancient messiah texts interpret, order, and legitimate the present by using the language of the past, which is to say, the scriptures.

To speak of the grammar of messianism is not to turn back the clock on recent, salutary developments in the social history of ancient messianism. Since the 1980s, well-placed discontent with the long-dominant *Geistesgeschichte* approach has yielded efforts to describe ancient messianism as a social phenomenon among the nonliterate Jewish

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[71] For an illuminating modern analogy, see Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

[72] Martin Karrer, *Der Gesalbte: Die Grundlagen des Christustitels* (FRLANT 151; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 95–213.

[73] *Pace* Karrer, *Gesalbte*, 214–67.

majority. A groundbreaking study in this regard is the 1985 monograph of Richard

Horsley and John Hanson, who complain: "As a field whose principal purpose has been

to interpret sacred literature, [biblical studies] has generally focused almost exclusively

on literature, with corresponding attention to the ruling elites and other literate groups

that produced or appeared in the literary records."[74] In contrast, Horsley and Hanson's

approach to messianism is "to analyze and present some of the movements and leaders

among the common people in the late second temple period."[75] More recently, John

Gager has likewise argued that ancient messianism is best understood from the

perspective of social history:

> There is little need to trace new furrows in the well-plowed field of
>
> semantic studies; the terms *maschiach* and *christos* have received more
>
> than their fair share of scholarly attention. . . . Many of these semantic
>
> studies have limited themselves to literary manifestations of messianic
>
> titles and thus fall prey to the abstractness and rigidity that beset all forms
>
> of the history of ideas. . . . Few studies have bothered to look at what
>
> constitutes 99% of all messianic movements—whether in first-century
>
> Palestine or anywhere else—the followers of the movement.[76]

Gager's point is well taken, and this development in research is all for the good. There is,

however, one obstinate problem having to do with the possibility of epistemic access—to

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[74] Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular

Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston, 1985), xiii.

[75] Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, xiii.

[76] Gager, "Messiahs and Their Followers," 37.

wit: What evidence do we modern historians have for the messianism of the ancient ninety-nine percent? Granted, most ancient messianic movements will have consisted largely of nonliterate low-status people, but with a very few exceptions there simply are no extant sources for messianism as experienced by these people.[77] On the other hand, we do have a respectable corpus of primary texts attesting ancient messianism, but these texts only directly reflect the ideologies of their elite authors, not of the nonliterate majority. How, then, to proceed? One sophisticated solution to this problem is that of William Horbury, who isolates strands in the literary record that might plausibly be taken to reflect ancient popular piety—for instance, folklore traditions such as Tobit, synagogue liturgies such as the Amidah, and widely adopted scripture translations like the Septuagint and Targumim.[78] But even with a suitably refined methodology, there

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[77] Horsley and Hanson acknowledge this problem but remain methodologically optimistic: "We moderns have almost no access to what the peasants were doing and thinking. . . . [But] they did gather together in certain types of groups and movements, as we know from the Jewish historian Josephus, the Christian gospel tradition, and other fragmentary reports" (*Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, xiii).

[78] For example, regarding the LXX: "Not long after Alexander the Great, messianism was sufficiently prominent in communal Jewish understanding of the scriptures to find its place in interpretation of the Pentateuch, the 'book of Moses' which was central and universally revered in the Jewish community" (Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*, 47).

remain serious questions about how close these sources can take us to the piety of the

ancient Jewish laity, as Horbury's critics have rightly pointed out.[79]

Research into the social history of ancient messianism can and should go on, but

it awaits a methodological innovation (or, better still, an archeological discovery) that can

put it on a surer footing.[80] My point in this book is that there is a way of handling the

pertinent literary texts that does not, to borrow Gager's phrase, "fall prey to the

abstractness and rigidity that beset all forms of the history of ideas."[81] In other words, if

one response to the failures of the traditional *Geistesgeschichte* approach is to abandon

literary texts in favor of material history, then another response is to demonstrate a more

satisfactory reading strategy for the pertinent literary texts.[82] This is what I propose to do

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[79] See, for example, Judith Lieu, review of Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ,* in *JTS* n.s. 50 (1999): 673: "We need to know how far what we are seeing is a literary, exegetical, conceivably scribal, exercise, or, on the other hand, how far it is the literary deposit of considerable currents of popular expectation: how do these texts relate to the wider society?"

[80] Yigael Yadin's excavations at Masada and at the Bar Kokhba caves (ca. 1960–1965) are extremely important in this respect, although in both cases there are difficulties interpreting the material remains alongside the corresponding literary texts. For a basic overview, see Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1971).

[81] Gager, "Messiahs and Their Followers," 37.

[82] Thus rightly Wayne A. Meeks, review of Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians*, in *JQR* 95 (2005): 336–40, following <IBT>Nils A. Dahl,</IBT>

here. What follows is a demonstration of an alternate, better way of conceiving what it is that ancient messiah texts do. My title, *The Grammar of Messianism*, is not a promise of a survey of terrain, but rather a thesis statement with a suppressed verb. That is to say, my goal in this book is not to map exhaustively the rules of ancient messiah discourse (to do so would be painfully tedious, even if it were possible), but to show that the relevant primary texts do amount to such a discourse, that messianism is effectively a grammar. To this end, each chapter of the book takes up a classic problem in the modern study of ancient messianism—for example, the messianic vacuum hypothesis, the quest for the first messiah, and the Jewish messiah–Christian messiah distinction, among others—and shows how the problem dissolves when viewed from the revisionist angle advocated here. The book thus takes the form of a proof, by means of a series of related studies, that in antiquity the messiah was not an article of faith but a manner of speaking.

An Idiom and Its Users

I have already broached the not uncontroversial subject of the range of primary texts that are allowed to count as evidence for messianism. In my view, a proper study of messiah language in antiquity ought to account for all the texts that use the pertinent language, and these, significantly, include both Jewish and Christian texts.[83] These two corpora, however, have often not been read together in this connection, because the prevailing

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"Eschatology and History in Light of the Qumran Texts," in idem, *Jesus the Christ*, 49–64.

[83] On this point, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Messianism between Judaism and Christianity," in *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism* (ed. Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2014), 23–62.

view has been that early Christian texts redefine "messiah" to mean just "Jesus" and so effectively recuse themselves from ancient Jewish discourse about messiah figures.[84] In Chapter 6, I advance a full-fledged argument against this Jewish messiah–Christian messiah distinction, but for now it is enough to give a more general indication of my approach to the issue.

It has often been noted that much modern scholarship on ancient messianism, being preoccupied consciously or unconsciously with explaining the origins of Christianity, has failed to give sufficient attention to Jewish messiah texts in their own right or for their own sake.[85] This indictment is probably accurate, and the situation it

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[84] See, for example, <IBT>Nils A. Dahl,</IBT> "The Messiahship of Jesus in Paul," in idem, *Jesus the Christ*, 15–25 at 17: "The name 'Christ' does not receive its content through a previously fixed conception of messiahship but rather from the person and work of Jesus Christ. An *interpretatio christiana* is carried out completely." Similarly Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 519–31; George MacRae, "Messiah and Gospel," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs*, 169–85; <IBT>Charlesworth,</IBT> "From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology"; idem, "From Messianology to Christology"; Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 32–47; Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 182–83.

[85] See, for example, Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 3: "Thus do all Christian theologians. And no wonder; for they investigate the Messianic idea of the Jews not as a scientific end in itself, but as a means of becoming acquainted with the Messianic ideas which prevailed in the time of the rise of Christianity"; Green, "Messiah in Judaism," 4:

> One may wonder . . . how so much has come to be written about an
>
> allegedly Jewish conception in which so many ancient Jews manifest such

describes is probably explicable in terms of the social history of the discipline of biblical studies in European and North American universities.[86] Happily, the decades since World War II have witnessed the flourishing of the discipline of Jewish studies, as a result of which we now have many valuable studies of ancient messianism that are not influenced disproportionately by the concerns of Christian theology. Meanwhile, the admonition to give attention to ancient Jewish messiah texts in their own right, as appropriate as it undoubtedly is, has had one unfortunate side effect in the secondary literature—namely, the artificial quarantining of Jewish evidence from Christian evidence. What we need is an approach that is not blinkered by the single-minded quest for the origins of Christianity but that can nevertheless accommodate pertinent ancient Christian texts as well as Jewish ones.

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little interest. The primacy of "the messiah" as a subject of academic study derives not from ancient Jewish preoccupation, but from early Christian word-choice, theology, and apologetics.

Such complaints lie behind the apt insistence of Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 192: "I would want to stress again . . . that the Jewish evidence (as also Jewish belief and practice more generally) are intrinsically important in their own right, and should very much not just be seen as a backdrop to the New Testament."

[86] See Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2011).

Such an approach has been pioneered, for instance, by Geza Vermes, who calls for a "Schürer-type religious history of the Jews from the Maccabees to AD 500 that fully incorporates the New Testament data . . . a reliable guide to the diverse streams of post-biblical Judaism in all their manifestations and reciprocal influences."[87] Similarly, with particular reference to messianism, Alan Segal has suggested:

> The New Testament is . . . much better evidence for the history of Judaism than is rabbinic Judaism for the origins of Christianity. This is precisely the converse of standard methodology. Instead of producing scholarly documents like Strack-Billerbeck . . . we should be writing a commentary on the Mishnah which includes Christian and other first-century sectarian evidence.[88]

In other words, we ought to think of ancient Christianity as a chapter in the history of ancient Judaism rather than think of ancient Judaism as the antecedent of ancient Christianity. Note that this alternative model, like the crypto-Christian model to which it is a response, implies that the history and literature of ancient Judaism and ancient Christianity are deeply interrelated. The way forward is not to deny this interrelation in the interest of "interpreting the Jewish texts in their own right," but rather to describe it in a more accurate way.

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[87] <IBT>Geza Vermes</IBT>, "Jewish Literature and New Testament Exegesis: Reflections on Method," in idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983), 88.

[88] Alan F. Segal, "Conversion and Messianism: An Outline for a New Approach," in *The Messiah*, 296–340 at 299.

In this connection, recent research has seen no little discussion—both for and against—of the notion of an ancient "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity.[89] The term is a recent coinage, but the idea for which it is a shorthand has a long history. James Dunn, perhaps the most formidable recent proponent of an early second-century parting of the ways, rightly points to the nineteenth-century precedent of F. C. Baur and J. B. Lightfoot, who, for all their considerable disagreements, both speak in terms of the emergence of Christianity from Judaism around the time of Ignatius of Antioch.[90] There is, however, significant second-, third-, and even fourth-century evidence of close interaction, both friendly and hostile, between Jews and Christians around the Mediterranean, and scholars such as Robert Kraft, Judith Lieu, Daniel Boyarin, Annette Reed, and Adam Becker have recommended scuttling the "parting of the ways" rubric altogether.[91] Reed and Becker write in a programmatic essay, "We wish

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[89] On the "for" side, see in particular <IBT>James D. G. Dunn,</IBT> *The Partings of the Ways: Between Judaism and Christianity and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 2006 [1st ed., 1991]); idem, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999 [1st ed., 1992]).

[90] See F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ* (2 vols.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1873–1875 [German original, 1845]); J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 1865).

[91] See in particular Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted* (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines:*

to call attention to the ample evidence that speaks against the notion of a single and simple 'Parting of the Ways' in the first or second century CE and, most importantly, against the assumption that no meaningful convergence ever occurred thereafter."[92]

It is the case that rabbinic and patristic orthodoxies established themselves over the course of the first four centuries CE, and it is the case that this late ancient process had certain discernible roots in the first century CE. But the creation of Judaism and Christianity as discrete religions was a centuries-long discursive exercise, and the subject matter of this book (namely, ancient messiah texts) was part of the warp and woof of that exercise, so that to quarantine the Jewish and Christian texts from one another would be to miss the historical context altogether.[93] A few recent interpreters, Segal among them, have offered new analyses of messianism from this alternative perspective.[94] Gerbern Oegema, for instance, adduces all messiah texts, both Jewish and Christian, from the Maccabees (160s BCE) to Bar Kokhba (130s CE) by way of arguing for an analogy

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The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[92] Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam H. Becker, "Introduction," in *Ways That Never Parted*, 22.

[93] On the interaction between the two developing religious traditions, compare the recent proposals of Daniel Boyarin, *Jewish Gospels*, and Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[94] Segal, "Conversion and Messianism."

between messiah myths and the political circumstances of their respective authors.[95] William Horbury, although concerned partly with explaining the origins of the Christ cult, also takes both Jewish and Christian messiah texts as evidence for the more general phenomenon of messianism in antiquity.[96] As will become clear, I have some not insignificant disagreements with these scholars regarding their particular conclusions, but I think their methodological outlook on the whole range of relevant primary texts is profoundly correct, and I intend this book as a contribution to the very productive research project begun by them.

The time frame of this study is antiquity, broadly understood. I consider texts spanning roughly a millennium from the Judahite exile in the sixth century BCE to the redaction of the Talmud Bavli in the sixth century CE. The medieval and modern Jewish and Christians traditions carried on using messiah language, of course;[97] but the end of the classical rabbinic and patristic periods forms a natural endpoint for our purposes. This is, of course, a long period of time, and it subsumes a large number of primary texts, but as a heuristic it suits the subject matter. At the one end, before the composition of the texts that comprise the Hebrew Bible, there simply was no discourse about "messiahs" in

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[95] Oegema, *Anointed and His People.*

[96] <IBT>Horbury</IBT>, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*; idem, *Messianism among Jews and Christians.*

[97] On medieval and modern messiah texts, see Klausner, *Messianic Idea*; Wim Beuken et al., eds., *Messianism through History* (London: SCM, 1993); Idel, *Messianic Mystics*; Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*; Schäfer and Cohen, eds., *Toward the Millennium*; Morgan and Weitzman, eds., *Rethinking the Messianic Idea.*

ancient literature;[98] and at the other end, after late antiquity, there was no longer the production of the kind of formative Jewish and Christian literature that there had been during the days of the rabbis and church fathers.[99] For the millennium between, say, Second Isaiah and *Sefer Zerubbabel*, however, it is possible to identify, both within and between Jewish and Christian scribal circles, an ongoing, often spirited project of scriptural interpretation surrounding the ancient Israelite trope of an anointed ruler.

Of course, a number of historical events along the way—the building of the Second Temple, the accession of the Hasmoneans, the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, the destruction of the Second Temple, the Bar Kokhba revolt, and the accession of Constantine, to name some of the most important—marked this discourse in decisive ways.[100] Contrary to the *Geistesgeschichte* model, however, none of these events entailed the supersession of one form of the messianic idea by another. On the contrary, what the primary texts actually suggest is the resilience of literary features of messiah texts from one epoch to subsequent ones. Granted, a certain feature (e.g., a gentile messiah or a suffering messiah) may only come about in the first place because of a certain historical development (e.g., the decree of Cyrus or the crucifixion of Jesus), but ever after that feature remains part of the trove of discursive resources on which the exegetical project

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[98] See Franz Hesse, "χρίω κτλ.," *TDNT* 9:493–509; Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005 [1st ed., 1956]), 23–56; and Chapter 2 in this volume.

[99] See Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971); Boyarin, *Border Lines*.

[100] Thus rightly Oegema, *Anointed and His People*.

draws.[101] But—this is the main point—the whole thing is an exegetical project, a centuries-long discussion within and between the two religious communities about their common scriptures, their overlapping polities, and what the former has to do with the latter.

Where to Begin

It is standard procedure in modern treatments of ancient messianism to begin by establishing a working definition of *messiah* and then to use that definition as a rubric for classifying ancient texts as either properly messianic or not. Definitions of *messiah* vary from one scholar to the next. For Joseph Klausner, *messiah* means "a strong Redeemer [who], by his power and his spirit, will bring complete redemption, political and spiritual, to the people Israel, and along with this, earthly bliss and moral perfection to the entire human race."[102] For H. L. Ginsberg, "a charismatically endowed descendant of David who the Jews of the Roman period believed would be raised up by God to break the yoke of the heathen and to reign over a restored kingdom of Israel to which all the Jews of the exile would return."[103] For Sigmund Mowinckel, succinctly, "an eschatological figure. He belongs 'to the last time'; his advent lies in the future."[104] For Marinus de Jonge, *messiah* "denotes the special relationship to God of various figures which are expected in

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[101] Thus rightly Schäfer, "Diversity and Interaction."

[102] Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 9.

[103] H. L. Ginsberg, "Messiah," *EncJud* (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1971–1972), 11:1407.

[104] Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 3.

God's future."[105] R. J. Zwi Werblowsky defines *messiah* in a broad sense as "a person with a special mission from God" and in a technical sense as "the expected king of the Davidic line who would deliver Israel from foreign bondage and restore the glories of its golden age."[106] Jacob Neusner writes programmatically, "A Messiah in a Judaism is a man who at the end of history, at the eschaton, will bring salvation to the Israel conceived by the social group addressed by the way of life and world view of that Judaism."[107] William Scott Green appeals to the popular definition: "Israel's eschatological redeemer."[108] For James Charlesworth, *messiah* means "God's eschatological Anointed One."[109] For J. J. M. Roberts, more specifically, "an expected figure of the future whose coming will coincide with the inauguration of an era of salvation."[110] Similarly, for Shemaryahu Talmon, "a unique superterrestrial savior who will arise in an indeterminably distant future."[111] For Gerbern Oegema, "a priestly or royal figure, or one that can be characterized otherwise, who will play a liberating role at the end of time."[112] For John Gager, "a human or human-like figure who, in the final days of history, would

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[105] De Jonge, "Use of the Word 'Anointed,'" 147.

[106] Werblowsky, "Jewish Messianism in Comparative Perspective," 1.

[107] Neusner, "Preface," ix.

[108] Green, "Messiah in Judaism," 1.

[109] Charlesworth, "From Messianology to Christology," 4.

[110] J. J. M. Roberts, "The Old Testament's Contribution to Messianic Expectations," in *The Messiah*, 39–51 at 39.

[111] Talmon, "Concept of *Masiah*," 82.

[112] Oegema, *Anointed and His Peopl*e, 26.

restore the fortunes of Israel to the imagined conditions of Israel's ideal past."[113] William Horbury's definition specifies "a coming pre-eminent ruler—coming, whether at the end, as strictly implied by the word 'eschatology,' or simply at some time in the future."[114] Andrew Chester's, "a figure who acts as the agent of the final divine deliverance, whether or not he is specifically designated as 'messiah' or 'anointed.'"[115] John Collins defines *messiah* as "an eschatological figure who sometimes, but not necessarily always, is designated as a משיח in the ancient sources."[116] And Joseph Fitzmyer, responding to Collins's definition, "an awaited or future anointed agent of God."[117] This is just a sample; further examples of definitions of *messiah* by modern historians and exegetes might be multiplied many times over. Chester exaggerates only slightly when he writes, "It can easily appear that there are as many different definitions of messianism as there are those who write about it."[118]

Not all of these scholars presume to establish their respective definitions as governing criteria for classifying ancient messiah texts. Some simply report on conventional usage.[119] Others reject any definition of *messiah* that does not accommodate

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[113] Gager, "Messiahs and Their Followers," 38.

[114] Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*, 7.

[115] Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 201.

[116] Collins, *Scepter*, 17–18.

[117] Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 4.

[118] Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 193.

[119] For example, Green, "Messiah in Judaism."

all and only ancient instances of the lexeme.[120] Also, none of these modern definitions is entirely arbitrary, because each one is based on its author's awareness of certain features of the primary texts. These caveats aside, however, it is the case that the prevailing approach in modern research has been to establish a definition for *messiah* and then to sift through the ancient texts judging each one either a match or a mismatch for the definition stipulated. As one might expect, some scholars find more matches than mismatches, while other scholars find vice versa, and for any particular ancient text there are some scholars who call it messianic and others who call it not so. Such disputes, however, are not actually about the ancient texts. They are about the modern definitions, which enjoy a kind of functional immunity from criticism. The logic of this approach is such that each author's findings are more or less true by definition, but also—to just that extent—more or less trivial. Once one defines a term to one's satisfaction, it is a easy enough to sift through a body of data, sorting items into "in" and "out" columns. The really interesting question, of course, is whether the definition proposed actually illuminates the evidence.

In the case of ancient messiah texts, most of the definitions on offer do not illuminate the evidence very well. Or, more generously, they illuminate a particular subset of the evidence reasonably well. Nevertheless, the prevailing definition-first approach has frequently resulted in the bizarre spectacle wherein a modern interpreter claims that a figure called *messiah* in an ancient text is actually not a messiah *sensu*

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[120] For example, de Jonge, "Use of the Word 'Anointed.'"

stricto,[121] while another ancient character is indeed a messiah despite never being so called in the primary sources.[122] The reason for this spectacle is clear enough. It comes about because scholars are keen to identify the origins of the concept "eschatological redeemer" (or equivalent), and because of the weight of tradition they insist on using the word *messiah* for this concept.[123] The glaring problem with doing so is that *messiah* is an ancient word with its own ancient range of meaning, so to assign it a definition as a modern technical term is, *ipso facto*, to obscure its meaning in any given ancient text.[124] Modern scholarship has been so preoccupied with the quest for the origins of the

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[121] Frequently cited examples include Cyrus of Persia in Isa 45:1, the anonymous "anointed one" in Dan 9:26 (probably Onias III), and Shimon bar Kosiba in *y. Taʿan.* 4:8 (68d); *Lam. Rab.* 2:2 §4.

[122] Frequently cited examples include the white bull in the *Animal Apocalypse* (*1 En.* 90.37), the Interpreter of the Law in the Damascus Document (CD 7:18) and 4QFlorilegium (4Q174 1:11–12), and the man from heaven in *Sib. Or.* 5:414.

[123] See Green, "Messiah in Judaism"; Fitzmyer, *One Who Is to Come*, 1–7, 182–83.

[124] Thus rightly Helmer Ringgren, "Mowinckel and the Uppsala School," *SJOT* 2 (1988): 39, on the dispute between Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1943) and Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*:

> [Mowinckel] defines the Messiah in eschatological terms, while Engnell understood messianism as "elaborate kingship ideology." In a way it may be said that Engnell uses the term in accordance with the Old Testament itself, for there "the anointed one" always refers to the actual king of Israel.

eschatological redeemer myth that we sometimes seem to have lost the capacity simply to interpret ancient messiah texts in their own right.

This felt compulsion to classify ancient texts as either "properly messianic" or not often leads, understandably, to a kind of taxonomic anxiety. Charlesworth, for instance, worries, "How can we be convinced that we have translated משיח or χριστός correctly as 'the Messiah,' rather than as 'a messiah,' or 'the Anointed One,' rather than 'an anointed one?'"[125] How, indeed? The reader will note the contrasts between the uses of the definite article ("the") and indefinite article ("a"), capital initial letter ("Messiah") and lowercase initial letter ("messiah"), transliteration ("messiah") and translation ("anointed one"). These are so many ways of representing the self-same academic distinction between "properly messianic" and not. It is telling, however, that the primary sources themselves make none of these distinctions. Neither capitalization of initial letters nor the choice to transliterate rather than translate is a feature of ancient messiah texts. The definite article is a feature of some such texts (in languages that have a definite article), but it does not carry the significance in those texts that it does in Charlesworth's usage here. This taxonomic anxiety, then, is misplaced. It is a manufactured problem.

In a departure from the prevailing approach, I opt not to begin this book by assigning a definition to *messiah* or *messianism*.[126] Because my goal is to describe the

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[125] Charlesworth, "From Messianology to Christology," 10.

[126] *Pace* R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Messianism in Jewish History," in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History* (ed. Marc Saperstein; New York, N.Y.: NYU Press, 1992 [orig. pub., 1968]), 35–52 at 35: "The least that can reasonably be asked of a writer on messianic ideas and messianic movements in Jewish

grammar of messiah language, I count as evidence any and all uses of such language.[127]

By "messiah language," I simply mean discourse that uses the Hebrew word משיח

(transliterated "messiah," translated "anointed one") and its translation equivalencies

(Aramaic משיחא, Greek μεσσίας and χριστός, Latin *christus* and *unctus*, and so on). As

John Collins has rightly noted, this does not entail examining only those sentences that

use the pertinent words; many figures called *messiah* go by other names, as well, in their

respective texts, and these wider literary contexts are relevant to the study of messiah

language per se.[128] It does, however, entail examining only those texts that use the

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history is to provide an adequate definition of the term 'messianism.'" For as

Werblowsky himself rightly complains, "The term . . . seems to mean all things to all

men—or at least, to all theologians" (Werblowsky, "Messianism in Jewish History," 35).

[127] See <IBT>Morton Smith</IBT>, "Historical Method in the Study of Religion," in

idem, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh* (2 vols.; ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen; Leiden: Brill, 1996),

1:3:

> Nothing is more wearisome than to have some philosopher invent his own
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> meaning for the word religion and then go through history, either
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> distinguishing "true religion," which fits his definition, from "religion
>
> falsely so called," which does not, or, even worse, trying to force all
>
> religion whatever into his own mold. By contrast with this philosophical
>
> procedure, the normal philological—and that is, historical—way of
>
> finding out what a word means is to determine what it has been used to
>
> mean and then describe the range and distribution of its uses.

[128] See Collins, *Scepter*, 16–18.

pertinent words. For the purposes of this book, I am methodologically uninterested in eschatological redeemers in general. Eschatological redeemers are fascinating, to be sure, and we encounter some of them in what follows, but they have received their fair share of scholarly attention. My goal, in contrast, is to seek to understand the discursive possibilities and constraints that presented themselves to ancient Jews and Christians who chose to write about "messiahs." If this is the goal, then the only hope of success is to refuse steadfastly to assign *messiah* a definition in advance.[129]

At just this point, a potential objection looms. One important strand of recent research has challenged the premise that *messiah* is an analyzable category at all. According to this objection, which was raised during the 1980s by Burton Mack and has been developed further by Merrill Miller, ancient Jewish messiahs are simply instances of the broader taxon of ideal figures, which are commonplace in Greco-Roman literature,

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[129] Compare James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980), 9, on the analogous problem with the concept *incarnation*:

> I have not attempted to define "incarnation" at the outset. This neglect is deliberate. There is considerable risk that any such definition would pre-set the terms and categories of the investigation and prevent the NT authors speaking to us in their own terms. He who defines too closely what he is looking for at the start of a NT study in most cases will find it soon enough, but usually in his wake will be left elements which were ignored because they were not quite what he was looking for, and material and meaning will often have been squeezed out of shape in order to fit the categories prescribed at the outset.

religious and otherwise. An implication of this objection is that modern research on ancient Jewish messianism, because it naively takes the category *messiah* to represent something unique, is fundamentally wrongheaded. In a provocative 1987 essay, Mack takes issue with what he calls "the magical word messiah."[130] About the use of that word in modern scholarship, he writes, "The singular notion of 'the' messiah is disclosed for what it has always been—a scholarly assumption generated by the desire to clarify Christian origins."[131] On this premise, studies of messiahs or messianism simply will not do. Mack proposes an alternative: "I suggest the use of a formal pattern of characterization that can be used to control comparative studies of the so-called messianic texts with other ideal figures of high office imagined during our period."[132] For Mack, in other words, there are no messiahs, only ideal figures.

More recently, Merrill Miller has argued a similar point at greater length:[133]

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[130] <IBT>Burton L. Mack</IBT>, "Wisdom Makes a Difference: Alternatives to 'Messianic' Configurations," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs*, 15–48 at 15; see also idem, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1988), 51–52; idem, "Why Christos? The Social Reasons," in *Redescribing Christian Origins* (ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller; Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 2004), 365–74.

[131] Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference," 15.

[132] Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference," 18.

[133] See <IBT>Merrill P. Miller</IBT>, "How Jesus Became Christ: Probing a Thesis," *Cont* 2 (1993): 243–70; idem, "The Problem of the Origins of a Messianic Conception of Jesus," in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, 301–36; idem, "The Anointed Jesus," in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, 375–416.

> Messianic expectations and messiahs as categories for comparison and
> analysis may be quite problematic, especially when they tend to shift the
> focus away from what can be seen as more fundamental structures and
> issues. . . . Different ways of casting and relating leadership roles entail
> the sort of intellectual effort concerned with how a society works.[134]

For Miller, as for Mack, ancient texts about ideal leaders are really literary efforts to justify certain social structures. Messiah texts might be considered one subset of this category, but they do not share any pertinent features with one another that they do not also share with other texts about ideal figures. There is, then, no such category as *messiah*.

Both Mack's and Miller's objections to the category *messiah* are expressly dependent on Jonathan Z. Smith's criticism of the notion of religious uniqueness. In one influential treatment of the topic, Smith writes, "The 'unique' is an attribute that must be disposed of, especially when linked to some notion of incomparable value, if progress in thinking through the enterprise of comparison is to be made."[135] Smith's problem with the notion of uniqueness is that it excludes, by definition, any comparison:

> The "unique" . . . expresses that which is *sui generis, singularis,* and,
> therefore, incomparably valuable. "Unique" becomes an ontological rather
> than a taxonomic category; an assertion of a radical difference so absolute

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[134] Miller, "The Anointed Jesus," 383.

[135] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 36.

that it becomes "Wholly Other," and the act of comparison is perceived as both an impossibility and an impiety.[136]

Smith's point about the concept of uniqueness in the academic study of religion is well taken; the concept is effectively a conversation-stopper and so, to that extent, hinders rather than helps understanding. What is more, Mack and Miller are right to say that in much modern research the category *messiah* has been liable to precisely this kind of abuse. But their cynicism is too thoroughgoing. It is simply not the case that all modern research on ancient messianism is complicit in a subtle apology for Christianity; there are at least as many exceptions to this trend as there are instances of it. And even if there were no exceptions, that would not resolve the question of what categories are appropriate to the ancient texts, for that question stands regardless of the modern ideological ends to which those ancient texts may have been put.[137] It is right to say that interpreters ought not to use the word *messiah* to smuggle in notions of religious uniqueness, but it is a mistake to say that the word *messiah* does not admit of analysis at all and to throw it out of court.

In fact, ancient messiah texts are intelligible both as messiah texts and as ideal figure texts, and indeed, as instances of other heuristic categories as well (e.g., liturgical texts, exegetical texts, political texts, religious texts, and so on), relative to the particular questions and interests of the modern interpreter. This is the crucial point. Taxons have

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[136] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 38.

[137] Thus rightly Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*, 117, in response to Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 66–84, 134–43.

value only relative to particular questions and interests.[138] There is no single correct taxon to which ancient messiah texts belong. To be sure, there are some taxons that would be entirely inappropriate to the evidence, but there are many that are conceivably appropriate, relative to certain questions and interests. The present book is concerned with the relatively narrow category of messiah texts as such—that is, texts that use the word *messiah* and its translation equivalencies. The reason for this focus is not that this is the only appropriate category for these texts, but that it is one patently appropriate category that, surprisingly, has not been explored adequately.

Of course, scholars are free to define their objects of inquiry as they please, but some objects of inquiry are more epistemically accessible and more heuristically fruitful than others. If we want to know where in antiquity a given scholar's definition of *messiah* is attested, then the conventional approach will surely lead us to an answer. But why (except in the cases of a few exceptionally interesting scholars) would we want to know such a thing? For historians and exegetes, a more productive question is: How do ancient writers actually use the word *messiah* and its attendant concepts?[139] If we want to know that, then the conventional approach actually begs the question entirely. A more fitting

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[138] See Jeffrey Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?" *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 1–12.

[139] Thus rightly Charlesworth, "From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology," 248: "The major discrepancies [in the primary sources] . . . must not be ignored in an attempt to construct a content for Jewish messianism. Definitions of messianism must be rewritten to absorb the aforementioned complexities."

course of action is to eschew all definitions of *messiah*, return to the pertinent ancient

texts, and follow the way the words run.