

REX IUDÆORUM: FROM THORNBUSH TO THE CROWN OF THORNS

The *aim* of this study is to trace the development of the messianic thought from its pre-monarchic roots (Pre-Temple) to the monarchic period (First Temple), to the post-exilic period (Second Temple), and to the post-Second Temple period. I *hypothesize* that the first identification of the messiah (the anointed) with the military leader was an intellectual and religious endorsement of the “original sin” of kingship described in the allegory of the trees (Judges 9:8-15). However, the Babylonian exile catalysed the process by which Jews learned to abstract their expectation of the messiah from the “pagan” worship of the extant commander-in-chief. I trace this gradual process of learning to its acme in the Qumran literature: where historical and extraterrestrial strains of messianic thought are reconciled. Then I follow Mack and Juell in arguing that Mark the Evangelist used the wisdom pattern (learned after the Babylonian exile) as the foundation on which to rethink the concept of kingship from scratch. Thus it was no longer kingship that “seemed” divine but wisdom that “seemed” royal. The significance of Jesus’s scandalous ministry could only be captured by the irony which Mark uses to narrate his Gospel: Jesus’s coronation as a king could only happen as mockery because his claim to kingship does not make the slightest sense. Hence the idea of messianism was liberated from the confusion with the powers-that-be by being identified with the powerless teacher whose life embodied the wisdom tale pattern at the heart of Israel’s history – Egyptian slavery and Exodus, trial and vindication, exile and homecoming, death and resurrection.

Keywords: *bronze age, axial age, modern age, messiah, paganism, Judaism, Christianity, political theology, monarchy.*

Introduction: Pre-Monarchical Critique of Kingship

I think it is sane to read Judges 9:8-15 as the foundational Jewish critique of the idea of kingship.

This critique is set in the context of Jews degrading into idolatry, worship of their own power. At first, when the sons of Israel ask Gideon, their military leader, to “rule over us, both you and your son, for you have delivered us...” he refuses by saying “the Lord shall rule over you”.

The kingship was not established because their social relations were still sustained by their worship of Yahweh.

However, as soon as the sons of Israel “made a covenant with Baal that he would be their god” and “chose to no longer remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies”, they felt victims to the delusion that their success is of their own making. They became pagans, “guilty people, whose own strength is their god” (Habakkuk 1:11).

And since worship of power tends to degrade into worship of powers-that-be, this time they could not help but enter into a relationship of dominance with their leader – they “went ahead and made Abimelech king” (Judges 8:6).

It is at this point in the story that we hear the critical allegory of kingship: “One day the trees decided to choose a king to rule over them. The trees said to the olive tree, ‘You be king over us’. But the olive tree said, ‘my oil is used to honour gods and humans. Should I stop making my oil just to go and sway over the other trees?’” (Judges 9:8-9).

The meaning is clear: the one who refused their offer of kingship, Gideon, kept obedience to the two tablets of the Mosaic Law: piety towards God and justice towards neighbours.

The one whom the Jews made their king, Abimelech, was a fratricidal and violent man. “Finally, all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘Come and be our king’”. “The thornbush said to the

trees, ‘If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, may fire come from me...’ (Judges 9:15).

It seems that the institute of monarchy is prophesied a dim future from the get go. If we’re lucky and anoint “in truth” – if the king will truly *represent* us¹ – then we’re invited to “find shelter” in the shade of a thornbush. An offer which frankly sounds risky and painful. But if we’re not lucky – if the king does not truly act *in our name*, if he rules arbitrarily – then we’re in real trouble, in danger of being consumed by the fire that comes from the thornbush. I read this as a dramatic image of the violent escalatory spiral that erupts from the tyrant.

I think this critique provides a proper setting for the discussion of messianic thought.

(1) The Monarchy and the First Temple (1000 BCE - 587 BCE).

This study is shaped by two questions. First, “can the unprecedented identification of the ‘anointed’ with the militaristic ruler, the king, can be understood as the ‘original sin’ of messianic thinking, one that goes against the grain of Jewish national history?” Second, “if so, can the particular shape of Jesus’s messiahship be understood as its radical redemption?”

According to S. Talmon, “Initially the *māsiāh* idea is an intrinsically sociopolitical notion which must be assessed primarily in the historical setting and the conceptual context of the biblical institution of kingship” [Talmon, 1987, p. 81].

It seems that the identification of the “anointed” with the “king” can be understood as a Jewish reimagining of the “king” as one whose power derives from something like the wisdom of the people.

In the Jewish context, “the requirement that the king be anointed by the people reveals his dependency on his constituents and the control which the citizens of the realm retained over the *māsiāh*” [Ibid, p. 90].

However, Talmon shows how “the gradual emergence of an increasingly critical attitude toward kings in actual history, voiced predominantly by the prophets, caused the title *mā-siāh* to be transferred to the idealised figure of a ‘King to Come’ who was expected to arise in an appreciably near future.” [Ibid, p. 90-91].

The messianic hope was still set within the frame of earthly history, but gradually postponed to a more and more distant future. Jeremiah and Isaiah “perceive the onset of the messianic “Age to Come” as lying within... one or three generations ahead of the respective present time” [Ibid, p. 99]. According to Ezekiel, a period of punishment for Israel and Judah is to last 390 plus 40 years (Ezek. 4:4-6).

In Daniel, “a proclivity toward as time beyond history reaches its climax... “The appointed time” is deferred to the end of a period of 1,335 years and is conceived as being coterminous with “the end of all time”” [Ibid, p. 81].

(2) The Second Temple (516 BCE - 70 CE).

“The loss of political sovereignty in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE had undermined the status of royalty” [Ibid, p. 106] and catalysed the development of extraterrestrial messianism.

Meanwhile, the wisdom tradition also goes through a change.

“Wisdom in a broad connotation was the Jewish analogue to Greek *paideia* and philosophy” [Mack, 1987, p. 194].

In the First Temple Period, wisdom seemed to be primarily about adjustment to the present state of affairs. In the Second Temple Period, like her messianic counterpart, wisdom thought became focused on the extraterrestrial location of wisdom that pronounces judgement on the current order and vindicates the righteous.

¹ “In biblical society, the ritual of unction was the formal expression of approval of the ‘anointed’ by representatives of the religious-cultic echelons of the society—prophet or priest, and by ‘the people’—in whatever composition, rep-representing the body politic *in toto*” [Talmon, 1987, p. 89].

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon addresses the heart of the matter. The “ungodly” think that “might makes right” whereas the “pious” know that righteousness will prevail. “What the ungodly kings have done cannot be accepted as the way the world is made to work”¹. Discussion of different worldviews culminates with the midrash on Exodus — the history of Jews, vindication and rescued by God, has the form of a wisdom tale.

The whole of the Jewish nation is thus imagined as undergoing a drama that befits a righteous protagonist of a wisdom tale. “For Philo, all Israel was, by definition, in the “school of Moses” – one learned to “follow” the path that Moses laid out in the synagogue school with its lessons and teachers” [Mack, 1987, p. 195].

According to P. Borgen, Philo thought that there is a robust correspondence between the order of the universe and the Laws of Moses: “The man who observes the Law is thereby constituted a loyal citizen of the world” who lives “in kinship with God’s own Logos”.

At Qumran, the messianic expectations of both kinds – historical and extraterrestrial – coalesce. “Salvation is viewed as transcendent and imminent at the same time. The new order to be established by the anointed is not otherworldly but rather the realisation of a divine plan on earth, the consummation of history in history... It is the *politeia* of the New Commonwealth of Israel and of the New Universe” [Talmon, 1987, p. 112].

(3) The “Third” Temple (from 70 CE).

After the destruction of the Temple, in search of a radically new way to account for the nascent Christian identity, Mark combined “Jesus” traditions with “Christ” traditions by focusing on the martyr myth of trial and vindication as a common link between them.²

It seems that Jesus was first recognised as a teacher of wisdom and later his wisdom-drama of trial and resurrection was recognised as pointing to the king-like sovereignty over the creation.

This Gospel christology stresses that royal authority derives only from the participation in divine wisdom, from *logos* (and never vice versa, like in the delusional mindset of the ‘ungodly’ described in the Wisdom of Solomon).

D. H. Juell argues that, in Mark’s Gospel, we can clearly see how a variety of religious and political characters “provide a sense of how the title “Christ” sounds as an epithet for Jesus” [Juell, 1987, p. 450].

Even though Peter confesses Jesus as “Christ”, he rebukes Jesus when he’s fortelling messiah’s rejection, death, and resurrection. Peter still cannot imagine a messiah fully stripped of power because he still worships power: his mind is focused on “human rather than divine ways” (Mark 8:31-33).³

Chief priest thinks that the idea that a human can be a child of God is “blasphemous” and “outrageous”.

For Pilate who executes Jesus his claim of being “Christ” is both “seditious” and “comical”.

Roman soldiers simply understand “Christ” to mean “King”.

In short, whereas for Jews such a “descent” of God is a “blasphemy”, for Romans, such an “ascent” of a no-name to the claim of kingship is a “folly”.

But in the refusal to have anything in common with the institute and power of kingship (“when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed...” (John 6:15)), Jesus gives a radical answer to the quest for messiah.

Relations of dominance as the basis of governance give way to the familial relationships between Son of Man and Father “who art in heaven”. King-ship as the metaphor for relations with God gives way to the metaphor of kin-ship. Mark uses intense irony to bring the point home about how subversive the whole thing with Jesus’s claim to be the “Christ” is: earthly

¹ Mack paraphrasing Wisdom of Solomon 2:11.

² Again, according to Mack.

³ “Peter finds the combination of messiahship and suffering incongruous” [Juell, 1987, p. 452].

authorities are so sure Jesus is neither king nor messiah, in fact, they find this claim so comical, that they're cannot help but mockingly call him "Christ" and give him a crown of thorns (thus unwittingly making the history of kingship that begins with the image of a "royal" thornbush "eat its own tail"). Once Jesus is crowned with thorns this history reaches its end.

Conclusion. Messiah Now and Then: Passivity and Concentration, Intensity and Democratization.

In our time, the messiah is often understood as "someone else who does something in our stead". With regard to God, such an understanding presumes that in order to act God has to "oust" humans out of the equation.¹ I think that this is not the style in which the orthodox soteriology has developed. The *leitmotif* of the Great Councils was to enable the salvation of the whole human person: if the messianic agency – i.e. Jesus – inhabited all of it, then no inch of a human being is spared salvation (and potential divinization). There was no competition for literal or conceptual space between the divine and the humans, a human person was the "space" where the 100% of both could fit without a zero-sum game dynamic. If we are to retain the resemblance to the classical view of messianism, we'll have to emphasize the idea that God is most "at work" in us not when we have amputated some part of our humanity or diminished our personal agency so as to create the space in which God can act unperturbed but, rather, at the times when we are most uniquely ourselves and most intensely alive. In other words, God is at work in us when we are *not passive at all*.

The other problem with the notion of the Messiah is that today we do not think that there is anything we ought to be saved *from*. "Those of old" had intimate experience or at least knowledge of the despotism, whereas today's Westerners are hardly aware of what the life under tyranny implies. It is the people of those societies that are aware of it who can appreciate the idea that they ought to be *saved*.

As to the kingship roots of messianism, the concentration of the messianic agency in a single individual, the Messiah, is another point of contestation. Today we are uncomfortable with the language of messianism because we came to see salvific agency as distributed in the network of interdependent agents who can more or less think for themselves and self-legislate accordingly. I contend that today's oblivion of the language of messianism is a witness to the "finished work of Christ". The Gospel finalizes and overturns the tradition of placing hope in an individual hero. It ushers in the Modern Age in which the "anointment" is democratized so as to give every person a right to (in one way or another) be "present" both in the "saving work" of the present age and in the ages to come (in the secular politics and in the liturgy).

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¹ One thinks here of the way in which some of the Sethian Gnostics imagined God coming into earthly existence: "I approached a bodily dwelling and evicted a previous occupant, and went in" (*The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, page 263 of Bart Ehrman's *After the New Testament*)

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REX IUDÆORUM: ВІД ТЕРНОВОГО КУЩА ДО ТЕРНОВОГО ВІНЦЯ

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Мета цього дослідження - простежити розвиток месіанської думки від її домонархічних коренів (Передхраму) до монархічного періоду (Першого Храму), до періоду після вигнання (Другого Храму) і до періоду після Другого Храму. *Гіпотеза* полягає в тому, що перше ототожнення месії (помазаника) з воєначальником було інтелектуальним і релігійним схваленням “первородного гріха” царства, описаного в алегорії дерев (Книга Суддів 9:8-15). Однак вавилонське вигнання каталізувало процес, завдяки якому євреї навчилися абстрагувати своє очікування месії від “язичницького” поклоніння теперішньому головнокомандувачу. Я простежую цей поступовий навчальний процес до його акме в літературі Кумрана: де історичні та позаземні напрямки месіанської думки приміряються. Потім я слідом за Мак і Джуел стверджую, що євангеліст Марк використав модель мудрості (вивчену після вавилонського вигнання) як основу для переосмислення концепції царства з нуля. Таким чином, вже не царство “здавалося” божественним, а мудрість “здавалася” царською. Значення скандального служіння Ісуса можна було передати лише за допомогою іронії, з якою Марк розповідає своє Євангеліє: Коронація Ісуса як царя могла відбутися лише як насмішка, тому що його претензії на царство здавалися такими, що не мають ані найменшого сенсу. Таким чином, ідея месіанства була звільнена від конфузії з можновладцями через ототожнення з розг'ятим вчителем, чий життя стало втіленням сюжету мудрості, що лежить в основі історії Ізраїлю: єгипетське рабство і Вихід, випробування і виправдання, вигнання і повернення додому, смерть і воскресіння.

Ключові слова: бронзовий вік, оsovий вік, новий час, месія, язичництво, юдаїзм, християнство, політична теологія, монархія.

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