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# The messiah: developments in earliest Judaism and Christianity

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## **The Messiah, Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity**

James H. Charlesworth, Editor  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992

We now have the published results of the First Princeton Symposium in October 1987 on Judaism and Christian Origins. This book contains the contribution of twenty-eight senior scholars from Norway, France, Germany, Scotland, and England. Many essays have been slightly revised since the conference. The aim of the conference was to determine the first century Jewish views of the messiah(s) and to analyze the roots of the views as well as to determine how those views were appropriated and adapted to within the early Christian movement. The book contributes a great deal toward these goals but the results of the studies illustrate the difficulty in achieving them.

The book is divided into six sections. In part one, Charlesworth introduces the reader to the problems and possible solutions tracing from messianology to Christology. In part two messianic ideas are traced through the Hebrew scriptures. Concepts of messiah in early Judaism and rabbinics is the focus of part three. The next section is about messianism in social contexts and in Philo, and part five deals with the term "messiah" and Jesus of Nazareth. The final part is an attempt to sort out the terms "the messiah", "the Christ", and the New Testament.

I cannot give space to all of the findings of the Symposium, nevertheless to illustrate the depth and the detailed analysis, I shall comment briefly on the content of a few papers.

Charlesworth notes that many changes have taken place in the last two decades and especially in the last five years. Instead of 7 Dead Sea Scrolls, there are now over 170 of them. In sifting for early Jewish writings we now ponder at least 65 documents in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.

In the first article, Charlesworth notes that there are widely held assumptions that Judaism held a monolithic view as to the expectation of the appearance of a messiah and of his functions. Many scholars assume that one can move smoothly from Jewish messianology to Christian christology, that what the Jews expected in a messiah was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, and that his disciples thought he was the messiah. Charlesworth asserts that these assumptions have not been researched. An examination of Jewish literature before 70 C.E. poses a serious challenge to these assumptions. Convinced that messianology developed out of the crisis of the Maccabean wars of the second century B.C.E., Charlesworth finds that there was no "coherent concept of the messiah among Jews" (p. 13). Neither is there consistent views about the functions of the messiah. In fact, many references do not indicate a function at all. Of the functions attributed to the messiah in early Jewish sources, the following are the main ones: "he will judge the wicked, destroy them, deliver God's people, and/or reign in a

blessed kingdom" (p. 7). Jesus does not perform any of these functions. The messiah in early Judaism is not a miracle worker and there was no idea in early Judaism that the messiah would come and suffer. Although there was a high interest in David during the time of Jesus, the NT writings do not elevate Jesus as a type of David (except Mark 2:23-28). The lack of standardized concepts of the messiah does not indicate a chaotic thought but rather the rich creativity and liveliness of pre-70 C.E. Jewish thought. The diversity represents the "unsystematic expressions of Jews subjugated to the experienced evilness of a conquering nation" (p. 24). The earliest explicit use of the *terminus technicus* "Messiah" or "Christ" in the first century B.C.E. is the Psalms of Solomon and in the Parables of Enoch. Prior to that time the Jews had considered the Hasmoneans the agents of God and the Romans their allies. There was no need for a yearning for a messiah.

What has been the impact of the discovery is that there is little consensus as to messianology within Judaism at the time of Jesus? Wrede's work on the messianic secret of Mark needs to be rethought because Wrede, like others, made large assumptions about Judaism and its hope for a messiah and his functions. In fact, according to Mark, Jesus does not "proclaim that he is the messiah, does not accept Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, and repeatedly orders those who comprehend who he is to keep this understanding secret" (p. 33). The problem arose because Jews claimed Jesus to be messiah and had to struggle against a Jewish background that did not specify what such a declaration meant and also did not allow for a crucified messiah. Charlesworth emphasizes the polemical setting of the debate among Jews who rejected Jesus and Jews who affirmed him. Charlesworth notes that the gospels and Paul must not be used as reliable sources for pre-70 C.E. Jewish views about the messiah because they represent a post-Easter faith.

A word about the last two sections because they revolve around NT studies. There is a range of opinions about reliability of the evidence. For instance, John D. G. Dunn approaches the Synoptic tradition with a fair bit more confidence than many of his colleagues. He understands the writers more as preservers than innovators. The preaching of Jesus with its strong eschatological note is part of a "broader stream of eschatological and apocalyptic expectation which served as the seed bed within which messianic ideas flourished during the various crises of Israel's history in the two centuries prior to Jesus' ministry" (p. 372). Dunn explores the terms "priestly messiah, royal messiah, prophet, suffering righteous man". He argues that Jesus reacted against some ideas (royal messiah), but other ideas were taken up by him. Still, there is no fixed category which Jesus filled which provides an agenda for his mission. He was shaping messianic ideas as well as being shaped by them.

Martin Hengel is less optimistic about the seed bed of ideas about the messiah. "New Testament christology cannot be explained solely on the basis of the history of ideas. There is no 'trajectory' within post-biblical

Judaism that can account for the widespread confession of Jesus as Christ. There is something historically contingent about the confession—something that seems to call attention to those events during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate that culminated in the execution of Jesus as the ‘king of the Jews’.”

In D. H. Juel’s article “The Origin of Mark’s Christology”, the title “Christ” is explored exegetically to determine the views of the political and religious leaders compared with those of the narrator and his readers. The term “Christ” appears infrequently (most notably Mark 1:1, 8:29, 14:61, 15:32) but climaxes in the narrative. Although there is some ambiguity about Jesus’ attitude toward the title in 8:30, he does accept it in 14:61. Mark does nothing to play down the difference between ideas of the royal messiah in Judaism and Jesus’ own behaviour. Rather he plays on it in the scene of the mockery of Jesus on the cross (15:31–32). Jesus’ ministry does not fit established patterns or expectations. “God’s truth is disclosed only by way of confrontation with established tradition and human institutions. There is a tension between ‘God’s ways’ and ‘human ways’” (Mark 8:33).

Theological endeavour must now take into consideration the work of this symposium. It is certain to lead to a more balanced historical picture and ultimately to better theology.

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### **The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant**

John Dominic Crossan

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991

xxxiv + 507 pp. \$12.00 in 1993

### **Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography**

John Dominic Crossan

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994

xiv + 209 pp. \$16.00

### **Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan**

Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig, Editors

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994

xi + 180 pp.

He comes as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee. He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants living long enough at