

**One, Two, or Three Messiahs:  
Dynastic and Priestly Pedigrees from the Maccabees to Masada  
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I often begin my classes in Christian Origins by asking the students a kind of “trick” question—Who was the *first* Messiah mentioned in the Bible? Given that most of my students come from Christian backgrounds the question invariably creates just the kind of incredulous response that I intend. After all, could there possibly be a Messiah before Jesus? We then turn to Exodus 29:7-9 where Moses is given the following instructions regarding his brother Aaron:

“You shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and *anoint* him . . . and the priesthood shall be theirs by a perpetual ordinance.”

The verb here, *mashach* in Hebrew, “to anoint,” or “to smear with oil,” forms the basis of the noun *mashiach*, meaning “an anointed one,” or a messiah. When translated into Greek we get the verb *chrío* and the noun *christos* or Christ. Thus we read in Leviticus 4:5, speaking of Aaron and his sons who served as priests in ancient Israel: “The priest, the messiah (anointed one), shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting.” The shortest Psalm in the Bible, Psalm 133, celebrates the event:

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there Yahweh ordained his blessing, life forevermore.”

In the same way, we read of the anointing of Saul, first king of Israel:

And Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "Yahweh has *anointed you ruler* over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of Yahweh and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around. Now this shall be the sign to you that Yahweh has anointed you ruler over his heritage (1 Sam 10:1).

Likewise the shepherd boy David: "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and *anointed* him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon David from that day forward (1 Sam 16:13). And henceforth we find David is referred to as Yahweh's messiah or anointed one (2 Sam 19:21). He is told that one of his bloodline descendants would always be the one chosen as king in Israel (2 Sam 7:16).

What these texts begin to reflect are the beginnings of a set of ancient messianic dynamics which played an extraordinary role in the post-Exilic period of Israel's history, particularly from the Maccabean period (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.) forward. Indeed they form the essential framework against which apocalyptic expectations for the redemption of Israel, and the eschatological salvation of the world, are developed and played out. Every priest of Israel, as a descendent of Aaron, is indeed a "messiah," as is every king sitting on the royal throne and ruling over the nation. In both cases we have both a *dynasty* and a tribal and a family *pedigree*.

But we also have within these texts another figure, not the one anointed, but the one who anoints—the Prophet, whether Moses or Samuel or one of their successors. One has to ask—who then is the greater, the one who anoints or the one anointed? After all, it

is Yahweh himself who has *anointed* the Prophet, not with oil, but with the Spirit, and the priority of such a one, who needs no dynasty or pedigree, is clear (Num 11:25; Isa 61:1; 11QMelch).

The prophet Jeremiah, looking beyond the Babylonian Exile of 586 BCE, picks up on this very theme and projects it into an idea future:

“The days are surely coming, says Yahweh, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a *righteous Branch to spring up for David*; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. . . For thus says Yahweh, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time” (Jer 33:14-18).

What begins to develop then is the expectation that one of the tribe of Judah, but more specifically of the lineage of David will reign as king, while a descendent of Levi, but specifically of the family of Aaron, will serve a priest.

The post-exilic prophet Zechariah (520 B.C.E.), addressing the little community that had returned to Jerusalem following the decree of the Persian King Cyrus, makes it even more explicit, addressing Joshua, who had been appointed high priest, and Zerubbabel, the most prominent figure of the family of David during that time:

“Thus says the Yahweh of hosts: Here is a man whose name is *Branch*: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of Yahweh. It is he that shall build the temple of Yahweh; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit

upon his throne and rule. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding *between the two of them*” (Zech 6:12-13).

This idea of *two* messiahs, or anointed ones, surely lies behind Zechariah’s vision in chapter 4 where he sees two olive trees, one on each side of a menorah. The interpretation is then given:

“Then I said to him, ‘What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?’ And a second time I said to him, ‘What are these two branches of the olive trees, which pour out the oil through the two golden pipes?’ He said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’ Then he said, ‘These are the *two anointed ones* who stand by the Lord/Adon of the whole earth” (Zech 4:11-14).

It should not be assumed that in this text, nor in subsequent interpretation of this and related texts, that the “Adon of the whole earth” refers to Yahweh. Both in the Dead Sea Scrolls and within the Jesus movement, the “middle figure” is Yahweh’s chief agent, and although divinely empowered, is none the less a human being, at whose right and left hand are the two messiahs or anointed ones. This is undoubtedly what lies behind the question asked Jesus in Mark 10: 37 by the sons of Zebedee: “And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Indeed these two figures are pictured in the book of Revelation as carrying on after the death of Jesus as the “two witnesses” and also being killed and resurrected from the dead after three days (Rev 11). The model for this middle figure is first and foremost a “Prophet like Moses” based on a futuristic reading of Deuteronomy 18:15: “Yahweh your God will raise up for you a *prophet like me* from among your own people; you shall heed such a

prophet” (cf. 1QS 9:11; Acts 3:22). This is the one to whom Yahweh speaks “face to face,” and in the case of both the Qumran “Teacher of Righteousness” and Jesus of Nazareth, though “born of a woman” is understood to have had some kind of heavenly “pre-existence.”

This multiplicity of figures, which becomes muted and collapsed in emergent Christianity and later Judaism, shows up in surprising places. In the copy of Malachi found in the Dead Sea Scrolls we have a significantly different textual reading than the traditional Masoretic:

“Therefore behold I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me; and *they* will suddenly come to his temple, the Lord (Adon) whom you see, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire, behold he himself comes, says Yahweh of hosts. But who can endure them when *they* come” (Mal 3:1-2).

As various forms of messianic apocalypticism developed within late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism, whether popular or sectarian, it was clear that the entire focus was upon the arrival and subsequent “success” of such ideal figures. In other words, without these Messiahs, there would be no redemption, no Kingdom of God. As the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* puts it:

“And now my children, submit to Levi, and through Judah you will gain your freedom, and do not set yourselves up against these two tribes, because it is from them that God’s salvation will come to you” (*Simon 7:1*).

“And there will arise to you from the tribe of Judah and from Levi the Lord’s salvation” (*Dan 5:10*).

The problem is, hard historical reality has a way of crushing the most ardent prophetic ideals. During the Persian period, shortly after the return from Exile, there is indeed a high priest appointed, one Joshua, as Zechariah indicates. But Zerubbabel, despite his lineage from the house of David, was never installed as a native “King of the Jews” by the Persian governor. Under the Seleucids, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., a succession, or dynasty, of the Maccabee family, known as the Hashmoneans (lit. “sons of Asamonaeus”), were installed as high priests (particularly the brothers Jonathan (152-142 B.C.E.) and Simon (142-135 B.C.E.), John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.E.) and Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.E.), while at the same time exercising the power, militarily and otherwise, of Hellenistic monarchs. But what they lacked was the Davidic lineage. Josephus writes, in a remarkable passage praising John Hyrcanus: “He was the only man to unite in his person three of the highest privileges: ruler (*arche*) of the nation, the high priesthood, and the gift of prophecy” (*JW* 1.68). His son Aristobulus, according to Josephus, was the first of this dynasty of high priests “to assume the diadem” (*JW* 1.70). There was an attempt to conflate the two notions of “priest” and “king,” and at times it is difficult to know whether this dynasty of rulers falls more into one category than the other. After all, Alexander bequeathed his kingdom to his wife Alexandra, who could hardly serve as high priest. The eulogy of Simon which appears in 1 Maccabees 14:4-15 expresses ideas that are precisely parallel in striking ways to the royal Psalm 72, that celebrates the ascension of the Davidic king.

Even Herod the Great, though declared “King of the Jews” by Mark Anthony, and later confirmed by the Emperor Augustus himself, could not manufacture a Davidic

lineage. He did try to achieve some measure of legitimacy by marrying Mariamme, a Hashmonean princess. He had genealogical records destroyed in an attempt to thwart higher pedigreed usurpers, and Josephus claims that he fortified Masada for fear that a “native king” (presumably of proper Davidic pedigree) might arise. According to several ancient sources the Emperors Vespasian and Domitian were arresting and interrogating anyone of the lineage of David, including two grandsons of Jesus’ brother Jude. At the end of the *Jewish War*, Josephus makes a most telling observation about the conflict:

“Thus the Jews, after the demolition of Antonio, reduced the temple to a square, although they had it recorded in their oracles that the city and the sanctuary would be taken when the temple should become four-square. *But what more than all else incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world.* This they understood to mean someone of *their own race*, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. The oracles, however, in reality signified the sovereignty of Vespasian, who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil’ (*War.* 6.311-13).

Many scholars have concluded that the “ambiguous oracle” can not be identified, but I have argued elsewhere the reference is to none other than the “Seventy Weeks” prophecy of Daniel 9.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from the Maccabean period and stretching into Roman times, offer us a most fascinating glimpse into the political, textual, and psychological dynamics of “real life” messianic movement of the time. In this precious, though fragmented collection, we are able to ascertain a rather full and reliable portrait of

both the community that produced the scrolls and the “life and times” of their otherwise unidentified leader or Prophet: the Teacher of Righteousness. Indeed, if Michael Wise is correct in his popular book, *The First Messiah*, we have the extraordinary good fortune as students of late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism and Christian Origins to hold in our hands first-hand documentation of what was perhaps the *first* such movement in Western history—and thus the career of the *first* Messiah.

The complicated complex of terminology related to an understanding of the apocalypticism in the Scrolls, and in particular to the expectation, appearance, function, and outcome of the various “Redemptive Figures” mentioned, has received careful attention by scholars [John Collins, *The Star and the Scepter*]. These designations arise, for the most part, directly from the Hebrew Scriptures—Prophet, Priest, Messiahs, Stone, Branch, Prince, Messenger, Servant, Star, Scepter, and so forth. I am using “Messiah” here in the most generic sense—not merely to refer to an ideal Davidic King, but one who is understood to function as a central figure or chief agent in ushering in and mediating the expected arrival of the Kingdom of God, whether Prophet, Priest, or King.

Indeed the Scrolls, as a corpus, do not refer to just one figure, but reflect a developing and shifting, even speculative, application of the complexity of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves.

I begin with the *Community Rule* (1QS) where we find no indication that any such messianic figures have appeared on the scene. Rather the community itself expresses its self-understanding as the new covenant community of the Last Days.

Col VIII: “And when these become members of the Community in Israel according to all these rules, they shall separate from the habitation of



ungodly men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare of way of Him, as it is written, ‘Prepare in the wilderness the way ... make straight in the desert a path for our God...’”

Col IX: “This is the time for the preparation of the way in the wilderness...”

In Col IX.10ff we read:

“They shall depart from one of the counsels of the Torah to walk in all the stubbornness of their hearts, but shall be ruled by the primitive precepts in which the men of the Community were first instructed *until there shall come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.*”

Here we have clearly have three figures in view. The Prophet is clearly the “Prophet like Moses” (Deut 18), elsewhere identified as the Star (Num 24:17) or Interpreter (*Doresh HaTorah*) or Teacher of Righteousness. The Messiahs, if taken as two, refers most likely to the coming of both a Davidic “Prince of the Congregation” (elsewhere called the Scepter; Num 24:17 again), as well as a Priestly/Aaronic Messiah or anointed one. These are referred to in Zech 4:14 as the two “sons of fresh oil” (*b’nai HaYitzhar*), “who stand before the “Lord” (*Adon*) of the whole earth” (Rev 11).

In terms of these expectations we can definitely document the appearance of the Prophet or Teacher of Righteousness. I find no evidence anywhere in the entire DSS corpus of the appearance of his two messiahs. The *Damascus Document* (CD) is absolutely crucial in this regard. Two manuscripts (A & B), found in the Cairo Geniza by S. Schechter in 1897, as well as extensive fragments in Caves 4, 5, & 6 at Qumran. The introductory lines of Col I clearly refer to the appearance of the Teacher 390 years after

the Babylonian Exile (586 BCE), but twenty years after the origin of the New Covenant movement:

“He visited them and He caused a plant root to spring from Israel and Aaron to inherit His Land and to prosper on the good things of His earth. And they perceived their iniquity and recognized that they were guilty men, yet for twenty years they were like blind men groping for the way. And God observed their deeds, that they sought Him with a whole heart, and He raised up for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them in the way of His heart.”

What I find rather striking is that in CD manuscript A, other than in this introduction, there are no direct reference to the arrival and career of this Teacher. Indeed, in Col VII, we find reference to the “Star and Scepter” promise of Number 24, with a decidedly “future” cast to it—as if neither figure has appeared. And in Col VI we read: “He raised up from Aaron men of discernment and from Israel men of wisdom...*until he comes who shall teach righteousness at the end of days.*” In contrast, in the important fragment we call manuscript B, we find direct references to the “gathering in” (i.e., death) of the Teacher of the Community:

Col B19: “From the day of the gathering in of the Teacher of the Community until the end of all the men of war who deserted to the Liar, there shall pass about forty years.”

Col B 20: “None of the men who enter the New Covenant in the land of Damascus and who again betray it and depart from the fountain of living waters, shall be reckoned with the Council of the people or inscribed in its

*Book, from the day of gathering in of the Teacher of the Community until  
the coming of the Messiah out of Aaron and Israel.”*

In fact, this fragment contains two additional references regarding the community holding fast to its mission “until the coming of the Messiah of Aaron and Israel.”

What is even more striking is that CD manuscript B recasts manuscript A (Col VII) and quotes Zech 13:7: “Awake O Sword against my Shepherd, against the man who is my fellow, says God—*smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered*, and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.” This “smiting” of the Shepherd, whom I take here to be the Teacher, appears parallel in this fragment to his “gathering in.” The same fragment B, at this very point in the text, edits out the reference in A to the Numbers 24 “Star and Scepter” prophecy—obviously seeing it as in the past. It is more than ironic that in Mark’s Gospel Jesus quotes this very text from Zechariah on his way to Gethsemane (Mark 14:27). One has to ask whether there is perhaps a conscious attempt here to recapitulate the career of the Teacher who apparently flourished in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E.

Here we find a period of “about 40 years” tied to the demise of the Teacher. There is a fragment from Cave 4 (4Q171) that refers to the same period: “A little while and the wicked shall be no more; I will look towards his place but he shall not be there (Psa 37:10). Interpreted, this concerns all the wicked. At the end of the forty years they shall be blotted out and not an man shall be found on earth.” Here things get a bit prophetically complicated, unless one is steeped in the chronological schemes of the book of Daniel, particularly the “70 weeks” prophecy of Daniel 9. It essentially sets forth a 490 year period, which the DSS community understood neatly as Ten Jubilees, 49 years each. We then find references in various fragments (11QMelch; 4Q390) that attempt to

fit the history of the community within this time scheme. The Teacher himself is to arise, as one would expect, “in the first week of the Jubilee that follows the nine Jubilees” (11QMelch), or just over 40 years from the End.

In the DSS commentary on Habakkuk (1QpHab) we find that the community has obviously lived past this 40 years “countdown” period, with the Teacher long gone and the apocalyptic expectations of the arrival of the Kingdom of God as anything but fulfilled. The Romans have by now invaded the country, enforcing the puppet priests that the community despised as utterly corrupt (Hyrcanus II). Col I interprets the cry of the prophet Habakkuk of “How long?” as referring to the “beginning of the final generation.” Col VI/VII is critical:

*“...Write down the vision and make it plain upon the tablets, that he who reads my read it I will take my stand to watch and will station myself upon my fortress speedily [Hab 2:1-2]. [VII] And God told Habakkuk to write down that which would happen to the final generation, but He did not make known to him when time would come to an end. As for that which He said, That he who reads may read it speedily: interpreted this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets. For there shall be yet another vision concerning the appointed time. It shall tell of the end and shall not lie. Interpreted, this means that the final age shall be prolonged, and shall exceed all that the Prophets have said; for the mysteries of God are astounding. If it tarries wait for it, for it shall surely come and shall not be late. Interpreted, this concerns the men of truth who keep the Torah,*

whose hands shall not slack in the service of truth when the final age is prolonged. For all the ages of God reach their appointed end as he determines for them in the mysteries of His wisdom. *Behold, his soul is puffed up and is not upright.* Interpreted, this means that the wicked shall double their guilt upon themselves and it shall not be forgiven when they are judged...*But the righteous shall live by his faith.* Interpreted, this concerns all those who observe the Torah in the House of Judah, whom God will deliver from the House of Judgement because of their suffering and because of their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness.”

I think the evidence is strong, both internally and externally (dating of the texts—paleography/C-14), that the crisis of belief that this text reflects come to a climax in the mid-first century BCE. In other words, surely by the time of the Roman invasion of Palestine (63 BCE) and the reign of Herod the Great (37 BCE), such hopes and expectations had been severely tried and found wanting. I do not think the more general movement completely perished. What continues is what I think is best tagged “the Messianic movement in Palestine”—from the Maccabees to Masada, with its various theological particulars (whether “Enochian, Essene, or Nazarene).

Within earliest Christianity, and later within Judaism, likely in response to the emergent Christian movement, there developed a strong tendency to focus on a single Davidic Messiah. This trend is best represented in the book of Hebrews in the N.T., where Jesus, of Davidic lineage, is none the less held to be King Messiah, Prophet, and Priest. He is greater than Moses, and at the same time of the lineage of David. Lacking

the priestly lineage, he is declared to be a “heavenly priest” forever, after the “order of Melchizedek” (Heb 7:17).

This strategy, of conflating the figures when one’s pedigree, or the political conditions, prohibit a fulfillment of the full entourage of Messiahs, also takes other directions in the case of Jesus. Matthew’s genealogy traces the line of David down to Jesus’ father Josephus, following the lineage of the kings of Judah. However, this includes “Jechoniah and his brothers” who are cursed by Jeremiah at the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judea: “Thus says Yahweh: Record this man (Jehoiachin) as stripped, a man who shall not succeed in his days; *for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah*” (Jer 22:30). The Christians connected this text with Genesis 49:10 which implies Judah will have the rule or sceptre “until he comes whose right it is,” as well as Daniel 9:26, which speaks of the “anointed one being cut off” before the time of the end. They understood Jesus as the one who has rightfully come to take over as King of Israel following the long and abortive demise of the Davidic monarchy (Eusebius). Epiphanius even goes so far as to say “David’s throne and the royal seat is the priesthood in the holy church which royal and high-priestly dignity the Lord joined together into one and bestowed them upon his holy church, transferring to it David’s throne which will never disappear (*Panarion* 29.3. 1-2). He goes on to argue that “at Christ’s arrival the rulers in succession from Judah came to an end.” With the coming of Jesus all dynasties and pedigrees become obsolete and the entire enterprise becomes moot in the face of a heavenly figure who “does it all.”

The Christians also explored an alternative option. Hippolytus, for example, refers to Jesus’ ancestral right to serve as both priest and king in that he was a descendant

of *both tribes*—that is, Judah and Levi. Origin takes up the same point and pushes this point that the final Christ figure was “tribally mixed.” The model actually goes back to Aaron, who marries the chief princess of Judah—Elisheva, thus producing a line of priests who are “tribally mixed” with Judah (Exodus 6:23). Likewise, Caleb, the leading figure of Judah in the time of Moses, was thought to have married Miriam, sister of Moses. This notion is reflected in the alternative genealogy provided for Jesus in Luke 3. There his Davidic ancestry is traced through Nathan, the third son of David, not through the “cursed” line of Solomon via Coniah, and Levitical names abound: Matthat, Levi, Mattathias, Mattatha, etc. Further, Mary, according to Luke, is said to be a “kinswoman” to Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptizer, who is of priestly lineage (Luke 1:36). Luke, in making such connections, and implying that Jesus actual “bloodline” is tribally mixed through his mother Mary, is possibly influenced by the mysterious prophecy of a “slain messiah” in Zechariah 12. There the families of David and *Nathan*, as well as Levi and the priestly family of Shimei, mourn the loss of their fallen Davidic ruler:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself,

and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves (Zech 12:10-13).

We also have a tradition in the early church that Mary's father, Joachim, who would be a Davidic descendent, nonetheless served as a Levitical priest, making Mary "tribally mixed" (Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 23.4.9).

The early Christians, especially Hegesippus, imply that James, the brother of Jesus, though clearly descended from the tribe of Judah, also had the pedigree and position of an Aaronic priest:

He alone was allowed to enter into the sanctuary, for he did not wear wool but linen, and he used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for the forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people (Eusebius, *HE* II. 23:4-5).

Epiphanius makes it even more explicit. He says that in addition to being a Nazirite, James was also a distinguished member of the priesthood because the two tribes, Judah and Levi, were linked exclusively to one another (*Panarion* 78.11.13.5-6).

It is the case that following the death of Jesus, his brother James takes over, and when James is murdered by rival priests in 62 C.E., a second brother Simon takes over, and when Simon is crucified as an old man in the reign of Trajan, Jude (known as Justus) takes over, being either the third brother, or perhaps grand-nephew of Jesus. At least for the first one hundred years of the Jesus movement, in Jerusalem at least, we have a "Jesus Dynasty" operating with all the political ramifications of such. This view would stand as



rival to that dominant in Synoptics, John, and Paul, that Jesus is ultimately a heavenly figure who combines in himself all such “earthly” things.