A Pierced or Piercing Messiah? — The Verdict Is Still Out

JAMES D. TABOR

Despite the unanimous and confident conclusion of Geza Vermes’ Oxford Forum that the so-called Pierced Messiah text (4Q285) actually celebrates the triumph of a piercing Messiah who slays his enemies, things are not so clear. Vermes’ bald conclusion, “The fragment does not speak of a slain messiah,” surely goes beyond the evidence. It also ignores other perfectly plausible possibilities and gives the non-specialist reader the impression that Vermes’ view is the only scholarly option. Given the fragmented nature of the text in its present state, all interpretations are necessarily preliminary. I offer here a number of points that might be included in this discussion.

First, Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise should be commended for immediately releasing their preliminary translation of such a fascinating text. After all, J. T. Milik had the text for decades, and none of us even knew it existed until November 8, 1991, when the Associated Press story came out. Here we have a highly legible fragment that mentions within five lines a Davidsic messiah figure, someone being judged and killed, and the notion of woundings or piercing. Whatever it means, it is undeniably of intense interest to scholars and the public. Thanks to Eisenman and Wise, who located this fascinating fragment among hundreds of photos, we have all now had a chance to discuss its meaning. The original AP wire story expressed the normal caveat: “if the translation is correct,” etc.

From a strictly grammatical standpoint, the Eisenman-Wise translation is without fault. This Vermes admits. The crucial question is how one places the vowels in the verb “to put to death” (hama, line 4). The reading “and they put to death (hama) the leader of the community, the Branch of David,” is perfectly plausible. Vermes prefers, “and the Prince of the Congregation, the Branch of David, will kill him (hama).” Again, strictly on the basis of grammar, this too is perfectly plausible. It all turns on a single vowel, and vowels are not supplied in these texts. According to Vermes, the interpretation must depend on the context.

However, before I go to contextual arguments, there are other internal grammatical points that should be considered. In line 3 we have the broken phrase: “[the] Branch of David and they will enter into judgment with . . . .” This plural verb form, “they will judge,” could well be parallel to the disputed verb form in the next line, “and they put to death,” thus supporting the Eisenman-Wise option. In other words, some unspecified “they” is acting against a messiah figure. So, although it is true that Isaiah 11:4 has the messiah (singular) judging (and slaying), the text from Qumran clearly has the plural verb, possibly indicating that he (the messiah) himself is judged and killed, by order of a Wicked Priest. Further, it is more likely, given the Hebrew style of the scrolls, that the phrase in line 4, “and the Prince of the Congregation, the Branch of David,” is the object, not the subject, of the verb “to put to death.” If it were the subject, given the length of the phrase, it would more likely come before the verb.

Still, Vermes is right, both the wider and immediate contexts are the key to interpretation. Vermes is correct to emphasize that other Qumran texts, which speak of a Davidsic messiah figure, emphasize his triumph over his enemies (4Q161, 1QSb, etc.). There is no doubt that the Qumran community had faith in the ultimate victory of such a messiah over all evil. However, a closer reading of these texts reveals an additional theme, equally dominant—that of an initial, though temporary, triumph of the wicked over the righteous. For example, in 4Q717, an important commentary on Psalms 37, 45 and 60, this theme is extensively developed. Indeed, in column 4 of 4Q717 there is a direct reference, using the precise verb form of our text (HMT), to a Wicked one putting to death a Righteous one (based on Psalm 37:32). The Qumran community interpreted the persecution and death of their own Righteous Teacher not as a final defeat but as a temporary triumph of the wicked before the eschaton (end of days). The sufferings of the community as a whole were cast in the same light (1QpHab 8). Indeed, 4Q161, the commentary on Isaiah 10:11 upon which Vermes relies for his interpretation of our text, also contains this subtheme. Fragments 8-10 of 4Q161 speak of the wicked Kittim crushing the humble, with every heart melting, and temporarily triumphing over the righteous. This is based on Isaiah 10:28-32.

Still, the question is: Given their triumphant view of the Davidsic messiah figure, is it likely that the Qumran group conceived of such a one being crushed? Such a connection is implied in the fascinating text 11QMelchizdekel, which deals with the end of days. There Daniel 9:25 is quoted, which mentions the coming of a messiah who is subsequently (in Daniel 9:26) cut off. This verse is followed immediately in 11QMelchizdekel by a quotation from Isaiah 61:2-3, a messianic text of hope and comfort (see 4Q521, which interprets Isaiah 61 as the messiah’s triumph). We know the Qumran group was intensely interested in this “Seventy Weeks” prophecy of Daniel. They tried to place themselves within this chronological scheme as they calculated the eschaton. They must have made something out of this messiah figure who is cut off.

The history of the Jesus movement and the writings of Josephus offer some instructive parallels. John the Baptist is beheaded, Jesus is crucified, James is clubbed to death, Paul is beheaded, Peter is crucified—all before the First Jewish Revolt against Rome. Both Jesus and his brother James were potential Davidsic candidates. Josephus mentions several other messianic types.


** This verb (hama) appeared incorrectly transliterated as hama in the original Vermes article, and therefore subsequently in the BAR report which was based on Vermes (“The ‘Pierced Messiah’ Text,” July/Aug. 1992). See Geza Vermes, “Oxford Forum for Qumran Research: Seminar on the Rule of War Cave 4 (4Q285),” Journal of Jewish Studies 43 (1992), pp. 85-94, and esp. p. 88, n. 8. The verb is a high perfect, third person masculine singular with a third person masculine singular suffix; accordingly, the first vowel is shortened to a (hamb) in this form.


‡ C.E. (Common Era), used by this author, is the alternate designation corresponding to A.D. often used in scholarly literature.
COUNTERPOINT

Geza Vermes Replies

I warmly welcome Professor Tabor’s courteous criticism of the summary of my Journal of Jewish Studies paper, “Seminar on the Rule of War from Cave 4 (4Q285),” renamed by BAR as “The Pierced Messiah” Text—An Interpretation Evaporates.” His rejoinder allows me to clarify the situation.

It is rare that absolute certainty can be attained in the interpretation of an ancient Jewish text, and in the case of a fragment, such assurance is never possible. What we are dealing with are varying degrees of probability.

This being said, it is up to the enlightened readers of BAR to assess the relative likelihood of the two competing theories. That advanced by Professors Eisenman and Wise, and argued to some degree by Professor Tabor, is essentially based on the reading of one line, the meaning of which, especially in the absence of et (the Hebrew particle of the accusative) before “the Prince of the Congregation,” is equivocal and would lead to an interpretation otherwise unparalleled at Qumran. The other theory, involving the triumphant Messiah, starts with the one certain fact in these mutilated six lines: the quotation of Isaiah 11:1. It then assumes—and no one has queried this assumption—that the sequence is linked to, and develops, the Isaiah citation. With the help of careful decipherment, aided by the computer, and supported by the relevant entries in the Preliminary Concordance, it is concluded that Isaiah 11:1 is preceded by Isaiah 10:34, letters of which, belonging to the first and last words of the verse, have survived. The exegesis of these verses of Isaiah in the sense of the defeat of the final enemy, the Kittim, and the triumph of the messianic Shoot of Jesse = Branch of David, judging the people by “the sword,” is firmly attested in 4Q161, and also, on the basis of Isaiah 11:1ff., in the Blessing of the Prince of the Congregation in 1QSb. The phrase, “Prince of the Congregation,” is well documented at Qumran in a triumphant messianic meaning.

Professor Tabor, in order to associate the fragment with the notion of the slain Messiah, hardly suggested by Isaiah 11, introduces the otherwise unconnected 11QMelchizedek, which quotes Daniel 9:25, speaking of a Messiah (Anointed One, usually identified as the High Priest Onias III). He then reminds us that in Daniel 9:26 this figure is to be “cut off.” But verse 26 is not cited in the Melchizedek document; neither does its context accommodate a dying Messiah.

Not wishing to prolong the argument, I let my case rest here, except that two particular criticisms leveled by Professor Tabor require direct answers.

1. According to him, the phrase “Isaiah the prophet” in line 1 of 4Q285 is unlikely to be suddenly followed by a quotation of Isaiah 10:34. I beg to differ. 4Q174 (Florilegium) and 4Q177 and 182 (Catena) contain a series of abrupt Bible quotations introduced by, “as it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet,” “Ezekiel the prophet,” “Daniel the prophet,” etc. This is how I see line 1: [as it is written in the book of] Isaiah the prophet,” followed by Isaiah 10:34.

2. Professor Tabor questions my transliteration of binyan as hemito and replaces it by hemito. This issue is admittedly of little importance because we do not know the vowel system in Qumran Hebrew.

Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize that my version follows the most authoritative Hebrew Grammar by Gezninius-Kautzsch-Cowley 72w (p. 200): “Before a suffix in the 3rd sing. masc. . . . the vowel of the initial syllable is לַעֲפֵּר-ֶגֶשֶׁת (i.e. a short ä)."