

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

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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 nonspecialist 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 Davidic 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 caveats: "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" (*hmytu*, line 4). The reading "and they put to death (*hemitu*) the leader of the community, the Bran[ch of David]," is perfectly plausible. Vermes prefers, "and the Prince of the Congregation, the Bran[ch of David] will kill him (*hamito*)."^{**} 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. I agree.

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 Davidic 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 4Q171, an important commentary on Psalms 37, 45 and 60, this theme is extensively developed.¹ Indeed, in column 4 of 4Q171 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).² Indeed, 4Q161,³ the commentary on Isaiah 10:11 upon which Vermes heavily 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 Davidic 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 11QMelch[zidek],⁴ 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 11QMelch[zidek] 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 Davidic candidates. Josephus mentions several other messianic types

† See Robert H. Eisenman, "A Messianic Vision," BAR, November/December 1991, p. 65, and the article on this text by James Tabor and Michael Wise, on page 60 of this issue.

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

* See "The 'Pierced Messiah' Text—An Interpretation Evaporates," BAR, July/August 1992.

** This verb (*hamito*) appeared incorrectly transliterated as *hemito* 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 hiphil perfect, third person masculine singular with a third person masculine singular suffix; accordingly, the first vowel is shortened from *e* to *a* (*hatef patah*) in this form.

(Theudas, the Egyptian, etc.) who are wiped out. As late as the second century C.E.,^{††} the emperor Hadrian was arresting descendants of David as potential "messianic branches." In other words, in Roman Palestine it was common rather than uncommon for the leaders, in which sectarian groups had placed their eschatological hopes, to be suddenly killed. When this happens, the group turns to its holy texts to interpret events. At Qumran we know this happened with their Teacher of Righteousness, who may well have been of Davidic descent. It is certainly not farfetched to think it may have also happened to a Davidic descendant in whom they had hope. This is what our text, by one reading, seems to record. And their use of Daniel 9:25 indicates that they have worked this out in some way.

We have to remember that the commentary, or *pesher*, material from Qumran reflects the ongoing experience of the community over more than 200 years. We should not posit one static meaning—for example, "Davidic figure always means triumphant warrior"—through all the texts.

Finally, how convincing are Vermes' supplemental arguments that this messianic fragment speaks of the defeat of the Kittim? He accepts Dr. Timothy Lim's suggestion that the three letters (only two are clear) beginning line 2 come from the last word of Isaiah 10:34.⁵ This is a fascinating suggestion, but seems unlikely given the placement of the words in lines 1 and 2. In line 1, "Isaiah the Prophet" has been specified. It is unlikely that the text would suddenly follow with a fragmented quote of Isaiah 10:34. The words do not appear to fit well. The letters *wl* form a fairly common word ending. Also, Vermes' reconstruction of line 6 regarding "the slain of the Kittim" is extremely tenuous. One can not confidently restore such a text in such an exact way. But, even if this reading is correct, the "slain of the Kittim" could mean those the Kittim have slain. Indeed, our closest parallel to this text, 4Q161, fragments 8-10, speaks of this very idea, the Kittim crushing the humble ones. The Vermes proposal has many unknowns. Precisely who is it that is slain by the messiah? The War Scroll knows of no specific figure being killed. Who are the "they" who enter into judgment, and with whom? Who receives the wounds? Who is the priest who commands? We are not even sure of the genre of this text, nor of the verb tenses.

For these reasons, I think the verdict is still out on this fascinating text. Perhaps

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 conflicting 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 those 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 11QMelch(izedek), 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 *hnytw* as *hemito* and replaces it by *hamito*. 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 Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley 72w (p. 200): "Before a suffix in the 3rd *sing. masc.* . . . , the vowel of the initial syllable is *Hateph-Seghol*' (i.e. a short *e*).

other texts or fragments will surface that will definitively cast it one way or the other. We should be extremely cautious about proclaiming the "evaporation" of either view when both are based on plausible translations and wider contextual considerations.

¹See Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3rd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), pp. 291-292.

²Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 287.

³Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, pp. 267-268.

⁴Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 301.

⁵"The 'Pierced Messiah' Text—An Interpretation Evaporates," BAR, July/Aug. 1992, p. 82.