

MESSIANIC MOVEMENTS
OF THE FIRST CENTURY

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to determine bona fide messianic movements of the first century. Many have written articles using the term “messianic” or “messianic movement” but few seem to define the terms.¹ Other terms such as “messianic pretenders”² and “messianic consciousness” are also used without definition. In order to avoid the ambiguity that comes with using undefined terms, I will attempt to define the terms “messiah” and “messianic movement” using criteria drawn mainly from Jewish writings of the 200BC to 100AD period. This will allow us to determine messianic *expectations* that were prevalent among Jewish people at the time under discussion. I will then use the *common* expectations as criteria for determining bona fide “messianic movements” of the first century.

It is the thesis of this paper that there are seven figures that led Jewish movements which can be considered “messianic” between the years of 4 BC and 100AD. These movements were led by (1) Judas, son of Ezekias, (2) Simon, a slave of King Herod, (3) Anthronges, a shepherd, (4) Jesus of Nazareth, (5) Menahem, a descendent of Judas of Galilee, (6) John of Gischala, and (7) Simon bar Giona.

¹ Richard A. Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus,” CBO 46 (1984): 471-95, uses the term “messianic” but does not seem to define it. David M. Rhodes, Israel In Revolution: 6-74 C. E. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) also uses the term without defining it. An article that has attempted to define this idea is M. De Jonge, “The Use of the Word ‘Anointed’ in the time of Jesus,” Novum Testamentum 8 (1966): 132-48.

²David Hill, for example, uses the term “messianic pretender” in “Jesus and Josephus’ ‘messianic’ prophets” in Text and Interpretation, edited by E. Best (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 143-59, without defining it.

II. MESSIANIC MOVEMENT: TOWARD A DEFINITION

In this chapter, I will survey Jewish literary works written near the first century, which seem to speak of a coming messiah. I will then attempt to discover common characteristics of the messiah from those different writings. These characteristics will qualify a person as “messianic”. I will focus, but not limit, my search to those literary works that actually use the term “messiah” or “christ.”³ As for the term “messianic movement,” it will be determined in association with someone who claims to be, is acclaimed to be, or shown to have the characteristics of a “messiah”.⁴

The term “messiah” (Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ, Greek: χριστος) means “anoint”⁵ or “anointed one.” Most Old Testament references to this word “have to do with the pouring of specially prepared ointment on a person or object as part of a ritual of inauguration”.⁶ With respect to leadership, “the bulk of the references occur with regard to the establishment of the kingships in Israel” or a type of “change in dynasty”.⁷ The person anointed was one who was chosen by God for the purpose of doing God’s will. Oswalt states that the concept of “the anointed one” in its own right in the sense of an eschatological messiah occurs only in

³There are indeed many other terms that have been associated with a messianic age. These include terms such as “Branch of David,” “son of man,” “son of God,” “Prince of the Congregation,” “stump of Jesse,” etc. These terms, in my opinion, do not add much to the *general* concept of messiah found in the texts that use the explicit terminology of “messiah” or “christ”. Compare how this is true in the Qumran texts discussed by Kenneth Atkinson, “On the Herodian Origin of Militant Davidic Messianism at Qumran: New Light From *Psalm of Solomon 17*,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 435-59, and the general characteristics of “messiah” this paper sets forth at the end of this chapter.

⁴It is my opinion that it is necessary to focus our attention on the passages which clearly use the term “messiah” in order not to assume or extrapolate from a text more than it might allow. De Jonge (p. 132-33) cautions that “. . . the word ‘messiah’ is commonly used to denote *any* figure that brings about future salvation of any kind, regardless as to whether the source in question uses the term or not”. He goes on to say, “The word ‘messianic’ has acquired a correspondingly wider range of meaning and is even used in connection with passages which do not speak of a future deliverer (let alone one who is actually termed messiah) at all”.

⁵ John N. Oswalt, “מָשִׁיחַ” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1123, and Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 602. “Χριστος” means “anointed one, the messiah” according to Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974), 895.

⁶Oswalt, 1124.

⁷Oswalt, 1123, 1126. Oswalt says the term is used 15 times of Saul’s anointing, 16 of David’s, and 5 of Solomon’s. It is also used several times with Jehu, Absalom, Joash, Jehoahaz, and Hazael. All of these have a special circumstance of some type of change in dynasty.

Daniel 9:25-26.⁸ Here the “anointed one” is one who “comes” and is described as מָלִיךְ, which means “ruler, prince”.⁹ Hence, we find our first note as to the nature of the messiah. He is to be a ruler or prince.

Nearer to the first century, we find several other writings that speak of the messiah. *Psalms of Solomon* 17, now possibly to be dated during the time of Herod the Great (37-4 BC) instead of 63BC,¹⁰ speaks of a messiah that will be a true son of David (as is shown in 17:21), one who will reign as king in Israel with “power, wisdom, and righteousness,” as well as being a future deliverer.¹¹ *Psalms of Solomon* 17:26-32 states:

He will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness; and he will judge the tribes of the people that have been made holy by the Lord their God. He will not tolerate unrighteousness (even) to pause among them, and any person who knows wickedness shall not live with them. For he shall know them that they are all children of their God. He will distribute them upon the land according to their tribes; the alien and foreigner will no longer live near them. He will judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness. Pause. And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke, and he will glorify the Lord in (a place) prominent (above) the whole earth. And he will purge Jerusalem (and make it) holy as it was even from the beginning, (for) nations to come from the ends of the earth to see his glory, to bring as gifts her children who had been driven out, and to see the glory of the Lord with which God has glorified her, and he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God. There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.¹²

This Davidic messiah is to lead a “violent rebellion against occupying forces”¹³ until all Jerusalem is under his control. The psalm also states that the messiah will “smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter’s jar, to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.”¹⁴ He will rule in Jerusalem as a righteous king and “purge Jerusalem from gentiles” (17:22). All this will be done by his faith in God and not by his own strength. He will thus be a “national figure using political means and even military power”¹⁵ to accomplish his goals. Hence, we see here a righteous military messiah, one who is victorious because of his trust in God, one who delivers the Jewish people from foreign domination, and rules as king.

⁸Oswalt, 1126.

⁹Brown, Driver, Briggs, 617-618.

¹⁰This dating is supported by Atkinson, 435-60.

¹¹De Jonge, 135.

¹²From James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., (New York: Doubleday, 1988), Vol., 2, 667.

¹³Atkinson, 441.

¹⁴Charlesworth, 667.

¹⁵De Jong, 136.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran (250BC-68AD), the term “messiah” is also found in several places. In the Damascus Document (CD 12:23-13:1; 14:19; 19:10-11; and 20:1) the messiah is seen as one who will pardon sins and save some, but who will also deliver others up to the sword. CD 19:9b-11 states:

those who are faithful to him are the poor ones of the flock. These shall escape in the age of visitation; but those that remain shall be delivered up to the sword when there comes the messiah of Aaron and Israel.¹⁶

Here the Messiah is seen as someone to come in the future. The term is singular even though it is stated as being “of Aaron and Israel”. Wcela believes this phrase refers not to two messiahs but to “messiah of all Israel”.¹⁷ At one point, however, a Qumran scroll seems to be indicating two messiahs, a royal/political one and a priestly one. This is found in the Manual of Discipline IQS 9:11. It states:

They should not depart from any counsel of the law in order to walk in complete stubbornness of their heart, but instead shall be ruled by the first directives which the men of the community began to be taught until the prophet comes, and the messiahs of Aaron and Israel.¹⁸

¹⁶From Wilfred G. E. Watson, The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 45.

¹⁷Emil A. Wcela, “The Messiah(s) of Qumran”, CBQ 26 (1964): 340-41.

¹⁸Wilfred G. E. Watson, 13-14. The probability that one messiah is meant here is argued by Robert B. Laurin, “The Problem of Two Messiahs in the Qumran Scrolls,” Revue De Qumran 4 (1963): 39-52. Emil Wcela, pp. 348-349, notes J. Starcky’s proposed four-stage evolution of messianic teaching in Qumran as an explanation of the plural messiah concept. Starcky feels that the two-messiah concept developed in Qumran with the Hasmonean era (the messiahs of Aaron and Israel) and then the teaching was reversed in the Pompeian era to a single messiah (messiah of Aaron and Israel). Terry L. Donaldson, “Levitical Messianology in Late Judaism: Origins, Development and Decline”, IETS 24 (1981): 193-207, believes that Qumran expected a *levitical* messiah (i.e., a “messiah of Aaron”) up until the end of their existence. Donaldson argues that the term “messiahs of Aaron and Israel” refers to two messiahs, one priestly and one militaristic and Davidic. He traces the development and decline of the Levitical messianic idea from the time of Judas Maccabeus through the end of the Qumran community. He sees six stages:

- a) The Maccabean victory over Antiochus “inaugurated the period of eschatological fulfillment that would soon result in the new heaven and new earth.
- b) The legitimacy of the Levitical (Hasmonean) rule begins to be questioned. Since the Hasmonians were not in the line of Zadok, a group reacted against this and withdrew in to the desert of Qumran following a priest called the Teacher of Righteousness.
- c) The age of peace brought by the Hasmonians replaced a future eschatological apocalyptic age with the idea of an immanent messianic age or an age of realized eschatology.
- d) The Hasmonian line was then considered messianic and given messianic significance but the traditional belief in the messiah from Judah still persisted.
- e) The Hasmonians declined (67 BC). With this, the levitical messianic concept declined and the Pharisaic movement revived the traditional Davidic Messianology.
- f) At Qumran in the desert, however, the concept of the priestly/levitical messiah continued. But it developed separately from the Hasmonian idea and as such should not be seen as developing linearly from I Maccabees, Jubilees, or the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. Hence, Qumran developed the ideas not of realized eschatology with respect to the messianic age, but rather an age of righteousness that would be inaugurated by a sudden violent and cataclysmic event. This group never saw any messianic significance to the Hasmonian reign.

Other writings of Qumran depict a messiah who is a warrior and who ravages the earth with his scepter and kills the ungodly. IQ Sb (lines 20-27) states:

The Master shall bless the Prince of the Congregation. . . . May the Lord raise you up to everlasting heights, and as a fortified tower upon a wall! (May you smite the peoples) with the might of your hand and ravage the earth with your sceptre; may you bring death to the ungodly with the breath of your lips! (May He shed upon you the spirit of counsel) and everlasting might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of God; may righteousness be the girdle (of your loins) and may your reins be girdled (with faithfulness)! May He make your horns of iron and your hooves of bronze; may you toss like a young bull (and trample the peoples) like the mire of the streets! For God has established you as a sceptre.¹⁹

Florilegium (4QFl) 1:10-11 connects the future messiah with the house of David. He will also be associated with the Interpreter of the Law, will rule in Zion and save Israel. It states,

He is the Branch of David who shall arise with the Interpreter of the Law (to rule) in Zion (at the end) of time. As it is written, *I will raise up the tent of David that is fallen* (Amos ix, 11). That is to say, the fallen *tent of David* is he who shall arise to save Israel.²⁰

Patriarchal Blessings (4QPB on Genesis 49:10) depicts a Davidic messiah who will liberate Israel and give her sovereignty. The scroll reads:

The sceptre (shall not) depart from the tribe of Judah . . . Whenever Israel rules, there shall (not) fail to be a descendant of David upon the throne. For the ruler's staff is the Covenant of kingship, (and the clans) of Israel are the divisions, until the Messiah of Righteousness comes, the Branch of David. For to him and his seed is granted the Covenant of kingship over his people for everlasting generations which he is to keep . . . the Law with the men of the Community, . . .²¹

Peshier on Isaiah (4QPIs) speaks of the Branch of David receiving a throne and a crown, and ruling and judging all nations. Commenting on Isaiah 9:1-3 the scroll fragment states:

(Interpreted, this concerns the Branch) of David who shall arise at the end (of days) . . . God will uphold him with (the spirit of might, and will give him) a throne of glory and crown of (holiness) and many-coloured garments . . . (He will put a sceptre) in his hand and he shall rule over all the (nations). And Magog . . . and his sword shall judge (all) the peoples.²²

Here again we see a royal military leader as the messiah. Hence, the Dead Sea Scrolls depict a future messiah who is militant, a liberator of Israel, of the lineage of David, a ruler, a judge, and possibly priestly (or at least associated with a priest).

¹⁹Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, (New York: Penguin Press, 1977), 376. Although not specifically using the term "messiah" (the phrase "Prince of the Congregation is used here), this passage does seem to be speaking about a messianic figure according to Wcela, 344.

²⁰Geza Vermes, 494. Once again the term "messiah" is not used here but the term "Branch of David," which seems to be speaking about a messianic figure. Cf. also Wcela, 345.

²¹ Vermes, 462, Also, Wcela, 346.

²² Vermes, 467. Also, Wcela, 346.

The Sibilline Oracles 3:652-795 (dated about 140 BC), depicts a messianic king who causes gentile kings who attack the Temple and the Land of Israel to perish. The children of God then live in peace with God's help and God establishes his eternal kingdom over all the earth.²³

I Enoch (dated 80BC to 170BC) depicts a messiah who is a future deliverer, the "Anointed One" (48:10; 52:4), the "Elect One" (49:2, 4; 51:3, 5; 53:6), and the "Righteous One" (53:6). He is to be a mighty ruler. I Enoch 52:4 states, concerning the mountains of metals shown to the writer, "And he said to me, 'All these things which you have seen shall serve the dominion of his Anointed One, that he may be powerful and mighty on the earth.'"²⁴ In the day of the Anointed One the kings of the earth will suffer defeat. I Enoch 48:8-10, concerning the kings of the earth, states:

At that time downcast in countenance shall the kings of the earth become, and the strong who occupy the land, on account of the deeds of their hands; for on the day of their anguish and affliction they shall not save themselves. And I will give them over into the hands of my elect ones: As stubble in the fire so shall they burn before the face of the holy, as lead in the water shall they sink before the face of the righteous, and no trace of them shall any more be found. And on the day of their affliction there shall be rest on the earth, and before them they shall fall and not rise again: And there shall be no one to take them by his hands and raise them up: For they denied the Lord of Spirits and his Anointed One.²⁵

Somewhat interesting is the fact that nowhere in I Enoch is Davidic descent of this messiah mentioned²⁶.

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (dated 2nd century BC) seem to present two messiahs to come: a Levitical priestly king (Testament of Reuben VI: 7-12) and the traditional Davidic messiah (Testament of Judah, XVII: 5-6). The Testament of Reuben reads:

. . . God gave Levi the authority, and to Judah with him, . . . to be rulers. It is for this reason that I command you to give heed to Levi, because he will know the law of God and will give instructions concerning justice . . . Draw near to Levi in humility of your hearts in order that you may receive blessing from his mouth. For he will bless Israel and Judah, since it is through him that the Lord has chosen to reign in the presence of all the people. Prostrate yourselves before his posterity, because (his offspring) will die in your behalf in wars visible and invisible. And he shall be among you an eternal king.²⁷

The Testament of Judah reads:

²³ Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Concept of the Messiah in Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature," *Review and Expositor* 84 (1987): 238.

²⁴ Matthew Black, *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch: A New English Edition with Commentary and Textual Notes*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 52.

²⁵ Matthew Black, 50.

²⁶ On this see De Jonge's discussion (pp. 142-45) of the mighty ruler depicted here

²⁷ Charlesworth, Vol. 1, 784-85.

For at no time did I bring grief to Jacob, my father, because everything he said, I did. And Abraham, my father's father, blessed me as destined to be the King in Israel; and Jacob blessed me similarly. And so I know that through me the kingdom will be established.²⁸

Both of these depict a messiah who will be a militant ruler, a “warrior-king”,²⁹ possibly a descendant of Levi or of Judah or both. It is through the messiah of Judah that the kingdom will be established. Hence, foreign domination, if present at the coming of this messiah, would cease.

The New Testament also reveals expectations of the people of Jesus' day of the coming messiah. Matthew 2:1-6 seems to indicate that Herod equated “Christ” with one born “king of the Jews”. Herod seems to have feared this “Christ” so much that he attempted to kill him. It is also to be noted that this passage supports the idea that the Christ would be a ruler of Judah and a shepherd of the people of Israel as well as the King of the Jews.³⁰ The disciples of Jesus, especially Peter, saw Jesus as the “Christ” (Matthew 16:16) and the Son of God as well as the Son of Man (Matthew 16:13-17). The disciples seem to have assumed that the messiah would be militant as they ask Jesus after his resurrection, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6, NIV). This militant messiah concept is also seen in the depiction of Jesus in various Revelation passages at his future advent, such as chapters 18-22. The ultimate restoration of “everything” and his rule as *king* is to be, at least in part, in the future as Acts 3:20-21 states. However, he is seen as reigning *spiritually* after his death in passages such as Matthew 28:18-20 and Philippians 2:6-9. He is seen as king by Matthew and Jewish people in passages such as Matthew 21:1-11 where he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey as king in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. Jesus also preached that the Kingdom of God was near and applied messianic suffering servant passages such as Isaiah 61:1 to himself (Luke 4:14:21). This messiah of the New Testament is depicted as a son of David and of Judah, as healer of the sick and lame, a preacher of righteousness, as a prophet, as a worker of

²⁸Charlesworth, Vol. 1, 799-800

²⁹So Lourin, 44. Louran, p. 45, however, does not see two messiahs here. He says, “Levi is not a Messiah, but the superior priestly companion to the Messiah from Judah. The passage is setting forth the general expectation of a priest and Davidic Messiah in the last days.” He comes to this conclusion because of the reading of the Testament of Simeon VII:2 which reads and he quotes as, “For the Lord shall raise up from Levi as it were a high priest, and from Judah as it were a king, God and man. He shall save all the Gentiles and the race of Israel”. Indeed some ambiguity remains, however one can be certain of the presence of a messiah in these passages.

³⁰In this paper, I will consider New Testament passages at what I will call “face value” and not get into Form Critical or other higher critical debates. Matthew and the other New Testament writers wrote within a few decades of the life of Christ, and because of this I believe that if they would have written things that could not be supported historically by those living in the day that it would not have gone unchallenged. On

miracles, an interpreter of the Law, as having power over death, as a confronter of the religious/political establishment of Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, Pilate, and a predictor of future events.³¹

In summary, after reviewing the literature above, one can see several themes around the first century which can help us define the terms “messiah” and “messianic.” In connection with “messiah” we see that the messiah will be (1) a king of some sort, (2) a militant ruler, (3) he will restore control of Israel to the Jews, (4) he may have some priestly role, (5) he will restore righteousness to the land, and (6) he will probably be a descendant of David or possibly Levi. Although each of these characteristics are not common to all the surveyed literature above, they do seem to be, in my opinion, the prevalent ones. Of the above, there are two characteristics that seem to stand out as common to all the above: The messiah will be (1) a militant Jewish king or leader with supreme power who will (2) restore Jewish rule to Israel. These two characteristics seem to be the lowest common denominators of the expected Jewish messiah in and around the first century.

From these two characteristics we can go on to define “messianic movement” as a group of people following the militant Jewish king or leader who are attempting to take the rule of Israel out of foreign hands and return it to Jewish hands. “Movement” will be defined as “motion or action toward” something. Hence a “messianic movement” would be a group of people following one who is or has aspirations to be a militant Jewish king or leader with supreme power with the purpose of taking the rule of Israel out of foreign hands and returning it to Jewish hands, but which has not yet necessarily achieved its goal.³² I will, therefore, identify a true “messianic movement” as one which is attempting to take the rule of Israel out of the hands of the Romans and the Roman-friendly Jewish aristocracy and return it to non-Roman-friendly

this issue for this passage, see D. A. Carson, Matthew, in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 13.

³¹All of these characteristics of the messiah as represented by Jesus of Nazareth can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, written by a Jew to the Jews of his day (whether Christians or not), in an attempt to “demonstrate that . . . Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God, . . . that many Jews, especially the leaders sinfully failed to perceive this during his ministry . . . that the messianic kingdom has already dawned, inaugurated by the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus . . . that this messianic reign . . . is the fulfillment of OT prophetic hopes . . .” (Carson, 25).

This being the case and for this apologetic to have any force, the presentation of Jesus as the messiah, to be convincing to any Jew, must have contained some elements which they believed about the messiah and which were familiar to them in their day. Hence, we see the value of looking at the New Testament as presenting characteristics of the messiah that were prevalent among the Jewish people of that day.

Jewish people. Secondly, a bona fide “messianic movement” must be one which is led by someone who is in some way seen as, or aspiring to be, a king (either seen as king in his own eyes or acclaimed by others as such). These two criteria will thus be the determining factors in this paper for searching for and determining true “messianic movements” of the first century.

³² For similar definitions of these terms, see Schiffman, 235, Laurin, 41, and De Jong, 133.

III. MESSIANIC MOVEMENTS OF THE FIRST CENTURY

Our chief primary sources in searching for messianic movements in the first century are Josephus and the New Testament. In applying our criteria from the previous chapter to the historical writings of Josephus³³ and the New Testament, I have discovered seven movements that I believe can be considered bona fide “messianic movements”. Three of them center around 4BC³⁴, one around 30AD, and three around 70 AD.

Judas, Simon, and Athronges

The first three movements take place just after the death of Herod the Great (4BC). Herod’s reign had been very oppressive to the Jewish peasantry both economically and politically.³⁵ It was so intense that “by the end of his long reign he had virtually bled the country dry.”³⁶ As a result, people were looking for a way out of their situation. When Herod died, three movements sprang up largely from the countryside to liberate themselves and the people from foreign and tyrannical rule, in this case Herodian-Roman domination. The first movement mentioned by Josephus is that of Judas, the son of Ezekias. Josephus writes:

Then there was Judas, the son of the brigand chief Ezekias, who had been a man of great power . . . This Judas got together a large number of desperate men at Sepphoris in Galilee and there made an assault on the royal palace, and having seized all the arms that were stored there, he armed every single one of his men and made off with all the property that had been seized there. He became an object of terror to all men by plundering those he came across in his desire for great possessions and his *ambition for royal rank* (ζηλωσει βασιλειου τιμης) a prize that he expected to obtain not through the practice of virtue but through excessive ill treatment of others (*Antiquities* 17:271-272, emphasis mine).³⁷

³³Although Josephus has been distrusted as a reliable historian by many, recent discoveries at Masada have shown him to record accounts of history reliably (So David Hill, “Jesus and Josephus’ ‘messianic prophets,’” in Text and Interpretation edited by E. Best, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 143-44). Even though he undoubtedly has biases, “truth and accuracy are favorite themes with Josephus” (David M. Rhodes, Israel in Revolution 6-74 C. E.: A Political History Based on the Writings of Josephus, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976, 14). Hence, although his interpretation of the events of history may show his bias, the recorded events themselves would tend to be accurate. I will therefore, in this paper, take his accounts of events at face value. As for the New Testament, see note 30 above.

³⁴I have included the 4BC movements as part of the first century AD since they fall so near the beginning of that century even though technically they belong in the first century BC.

³⁵Richard A. Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus,” CBQ 46 (1984): 480.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷All Josephus quotations in this paper come from H. S. T. Thackeray, R. Marcus, A. Wikgren, and L. H. Feldman, eds. and trans., Josephus, 9 Vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926-1965).

In this statement, one sees that Judas³⁸ saw himself as one who should be honored as king and proceeded as if he would obtain that goal by force. In attacking the royal palace in Sepphoris, he showed his militant nature and leadership and anti-Roman bent. As Horsley has written, many of the popular messianic movements had as their goal to return property to their rightful owners and to return “social-economic” equity to the people³⁹. This is possibly what Judas was doing or beginning to do in his taking the “property that had been seized” at the palace of Sepphoris. This social-economic equity was being attempted through a kind of guerilla warfare. The resistance was carried out not only against Roman control but also against Jewish overlords who sympathized with Rome.⁴⁰ Judas, seeing himself as a king (or king to be) and leading an armed group of followers against a *Roman* stronghold in Sepphoris, would certainly seem to qualify his movement as a messianic one in accord with our definition.

The second movement was that of Simon, a slave of King Herod. Josephus writes:

There was also Simon, a slave of King Herod, but a handsome man, who took pre-eminence by size and bodily strength, and was expected to go farther. Elated by the unsettled conditions of affairs, he was bold enough to place the *diadem* (διαδημα) *on his head*, and having got together a body of men, he was himself also *proclaimed king* (βασιλευς) by them in their madness . . . After burning the royal palace in Jericho, he plundered and carried off the things that had been seized there. He also set fire to many other royal residences in many parts of the country and utterly destroyed them after permitting his fellow rebels to take as booty what ever had been left by them. (*Antiquities* 17:273-75, emphasis mine).

Simon crowned himself king and was proclaimed king by his followers. Like Judas, he attacked royal palaces and residences and returned seized property to the people. Gratus, the officer of the royal troops, eventually caught Simon and cut off his head. Here again, we see one who was acclaimed king and took military action against Rome and Roman-friendly forces. He and his followers therefore also fit into our definition of a messianic movement.

Athronges, a shepherd, led the third messianic movement. Josephus writes:

This man had the temerity to *aspire to the kingship* (βασιλεια), thinking that if he obtained it, he would enjoy freedom to act more outrageously . . . Athronges *himself put on the diadem* (διαδημα) and held a council to discuss what things were to be done, but everything depended upon his own decision. This man kept his power for a long while, for *he had the title of king and nothing to prevent him from doing what he wished*. He and his brothers also applied themselves

³⁸This Judas is not to be confused with Judas the Galilean as Harris Lenowitz (*The Jewish Messiahs: From The Galilee to Crown Heights*, New York: Oxford, 1998, 25-26) seems to do. In support of these Judas's being two separate ones, see Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements,” 485.

³⁹Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements,” 486.

⁴⁰For a good discussion of this whole sociological and political struggle between the Jewish peasantry and the Roman/Jewish overlords, see Richard A. Horsley, “Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome, AD 66-70,” *CBQ* 43 (1981): 409-432, and Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements,” 471-95.

vigorously to slaughtering the Romans and the King's men . . ." (*Antiquities* 17:278-84, emphasis mine).

Athronges and his movement are thus also shown to qualify as a "messianic movement." He was a Jewish king who attempted to take rule of Israel away from the Romans and the Roman-friendly Jewish aristocracy.

It is interesting that there were probably many "messianic movements" at this time in which a person claimed kingship and fought against the Romans. But we do not have any names from our sources to identify them. Of this, Josephus says:

And so Judea was filled with brigandage. Any one might *make himself king* (βασιλευς) as the head of a band of rebels who fell in with, and then would press on to the destruction of the community, causing trouble to few Romans and then only to a smaller degree but bringing the greatest slaughter upon their own people. (*Antiquities* 17:285).

It is important to note that the brigands⁴¹ described here were most likely from the peasant class. Rome imposed order upon the peasants and forcibly "reestablished Herodian and the Jewish sacerdotal aristocracy in power."⁴² Most of these rulers and ruling class were not associated with the peasants. Rather, the peasantry was so heavily taxed by them that they became "desperate." They longed for deliverance and as such many sought the overthrow of their Roman and Jewish oppressors. But they did not look "to the gentry for leadership, since most of the latter owed their position to Herod or were otherwise implicated in collaboration with the Herodian-Roman system".⁴³ They therefore looked to the rural brigands as servants of the peasant class for their help. Many rose up to the occasion. However, only three are personally named by Josephus as kings during this period immediately following the death of Herod. These three, Judas, Simon, and Athonges I have classified as leading messianic movements.

Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth and his followers also fit into the category of a "messianic movement." Jesus' followers saw him as the messiah or Christ. Peter confesses him as the Christ in Matthew 16:16. Jesus' apostles preach him as the messiah (Acts 2:37; 3:20; and the rest of the New Testament). Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey (fulfilling Zechariah 9:9) as the king of Israel. Herod feared him as a king of the

⁴¹On the use of the term "brigand" and the importance of the "social banditry" phenomenon in first century Palestine, see Richard A. Horsley, "Josephus and the Bandits," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10 (1979): 37-63.

⁴²Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements," 480.

⁴³Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements", 484-85.

Jews (Matt. 2:4-5). He was crucified as “The King of the Jews” (Matthew 27:37). Jesus himself claims to be a king (John 18:37). It can hardly be argued that Jesus and his followers did not see him as the promised King of Israel, the Messiah. Even Josephus claims he is the messiah:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah* (ο χριστος). When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, . . .⁴⁴ (*Antiquities* 18:63-64, emphasis mine).

Jesus of Nazareth, thus fulfills the criteria of being a king. But what about the concept of the messiah being a *militant* king who would take the rule of Israel out of foreign hands and return it to the Jews? This too can be seen to be the case as Jesus was a threat to the Jewish ruling establishment. In John 11:48 the Rulers of the Sanhedrin held a special meeting to discuss Jesus and his threat. This passage states, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (NIV). Just like the previous messiahs or kings we considered above, the Jewish rulers were threatened by the populace who were looking for a deliverer from the ruling authority of the day (whether it be the Romans or their Jewish partners). The populace was so motivated that they even intended to make Jesus “king by force” (John 6:15, NIV). Jesus (after his entry into Jerusalem as king) taught that the Jewish rulers and leaders would loose their hold on the kingdom (or rule) of God and be replaced by “a people who will produce its fruit” (Matthew 21:42, NIV). That new people seems to have been intended by Jesus to be his 12 apostles as leaders in this new kingdom.⁴⁵ Although Jesus was not militant at this stage of his kingship (Matthew 26:52-56), he did claim that a militant stage would come in the future (Matthew 24:1-51) when there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. Jesus would also deal with the Romans as is depicted in the apocalyptic book of Revelation. Babylon the Great (probably Rome) is prophesied to fall (Revelation 18:1-3) and Jesus (the Christ) is to come to “judge and

⁴⁴The accuracy of this passage is debated among scholars. Louis Feldman (*Josephus, Antiquities* 18:63, Cambridge: Harvard, 1969, p. 49, note b) lists the arguments for and against this text’s genuineness and states, “The most probable view seems to be that our text represents substantially what Josephus wrote, but that alterations have been made by a Christian interpolator”. Hence, this quotation may or may not fully represent what Josephus wrote. However, since we are taking the Josephus text at face value, and since Eusebius in 324 AD records this text, and since there is no manuscript evidence that this passage was inserted into Josephus’ text, we are considering it genuine for our purposes here.

⁴⁵This is established in my unpublished Th. M. thesis, *The Meaning of Matthew 21:43 and its Role in the Development of the Rejection Theme of Mathew’s Gospel*, Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1986.

make war” (Revelation 19:11). He will also rule “with an iron scepter” and tread “the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God” (Revelation 19:15). Then he is to establish a New Jerusalem with twelve gates representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Revelation 21) and he will reign “forever” (Revelation. 22:5). Indeed, then, Jesus of Nazareth and his followers fit both categories of a true messianic movement around 30 AD.

Menahem, John of Gischala, and Simon son of Giora

Three more messianic movements can be identified in the remainder of the first century. These are led by Menahem, John of Gischala, and Simon son of Giora. All three of these movements take place during the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 AD. Josephus says that there were five groups who were involved in the resistance against Rome at this time:⁴⁶ the Sicarri, the followers of John of Gischala, the followers of Simon son of Gioras, the Idumeans, and the Zealots. It is out of these five groups we find the three messianic movements of this period.

Menahem became the leader of the Sicarri⁴⁷. He and many of the leaders of the Sicarri were descendants of Judas of Galilee⁴⁸ who led a rebellion in 6AD. Judas of Galilee founded what Josephus calls “the Fourth Philosophy” of “no Lord but God”. Menahem himself was the son (or grandson?) of Judas.⁴⁹ Some time during the War years 66-70 Menahem and his followers march to Masada and plunder weapons from Herod’s arsenal stored there. Menahem then marches toward Jerusalem with his armed men and comes to Jerusalem “like a veritable king” and becomes “the leader of the revolution, and directed the siege of the palace” (*War* 2:434). This caused the Romans to retreat to the towers (*War* 2:427-28). Josephus states that Menahem “believed himself without rival in the conduct of affairs and became an insufferable tyrant” (*War* 2:442). Menahem’s rule, however was short lived. While “arrayed in royal robes” (*War* 444) Eleazer, the Temple Captain, and his followers attack Menahem and kill him. Menahem’s followers, the Sicarri then retreat to Masada no longer to have a part in the war until 74 AD when the Romans capture Masada. Rhoads says that Eleazar’s group killed Menahem “because of his assumption of absolute authority in affairs of state and because of the excesses of violence.”⁵⁰ This movement, while short lived,

⁴⁶*War* 7:262-70.

⁴⁷On the Sicarri and their history, see Rhoads, 111-122.

⁴⁸Rhoads, 121.

⁴⁹Rhoads, 111.

⁵⁰Rhoads, 115.

does qualify as a messianic one as Menahem is seen entering Jerusalem as a king, is dressed in royal robes, assumes absolute authority, and fights against the Romans.

The next figure that seems to be a leader of a messianic movement is John of Gischala. Josephus describes John as a revolutionary who tries to take over Josephus' command in Galilee. He was one who set his heart "on war in order to obtain supreme power" (*War* 4:85). John makes his way to Jerusalem during the war and helps with the resistance against the Romans. Josephus writes of him:

. . . aspiring to despotic power, began to disdain the position of mere equality in honours with his peers, and, gradually gathered around him a group of more depraved, broke away from the coalition. Invariably disregarding the decisions of the rest, and issuing imperious orders of his own, he was evidently laying claim to absolute sovereignty" (*War* 4:390).

Not everyone sided with John. The Zealots who believed in democratic polity did not accept John's claim to absolute sovereignty. John, however, catches the Zealots "unaware"⁵¹ and takes complete control of the Temple from them. John felt God was behind him and claims that he "could never fear capture, since the city was God's" (*War* 6:98). John resisted the Romans but was eventually captured and taken to Rome and sentenced to life in prison (*War* 6:434).

Although Rhoads says John was not a messianic figure,⁵² he does seem to fit our definition of a leader of a messianic movement. Josephus claims he "aspired to despotic power" and was "laying claim to absolute sovereignty". Thus, in his mind, he was a king. This, coupled with the fact that he was also leading a resistance movement against the Romans, qualifies his movement as a messianic one.

The last figure that can qualify as leading a messianic movement in the first century is Simon bar Giora. Simon joined the brigands (*War* 4:505) who had seized Masada and went on "their marauding expeditions and took part in their raids upon the surrounding districts" (*War* 4:506). He wanted more, however. Josephus writes:

He, on the contrary, was *aspiring to despotic power and cherishing high ambitions*; accordingly on hearing of the death of Ananus, he withdrew into the hills, where, by proclaiming liberty for slaves and rewards for the free, he gathered around him the villains from every quarter. Having now a strong force, he first overran the villages in the hills, and then through continual additions to his numbers was emboldened to descend into the low lands. And now when he was becoming a terror to the towns, many men of standing were seduced by his strength and career of unbroken success into joining him; and his was no longer an army of mere serfs or brigands, but one including numerous citizen recruits, subservient to his command *as to a king* (βασιλεια) . . . His

⁵¹Rhoads, 134.

⁵²Rhoads, 136. However, Rhoads does not seem to define the term and hence there would seem to be little basis for his statement.

object was evident: he was training his force and making all these preparations for an attack on Jerusalem (*War* 4:508-513).

Simon and his army capture Idumea and later march up to Jerusalem and capture it, also. He becomes “master of Jerusalem” (*Wars* 4:577).

That Simon assumed the role of king can be seen from two later events. First, at his surrender to the Romans, Josephus states: “Simon . . . dressed himself in white tunics and buckling over them a purple mantle arose out of the ground at the very spot where on the Temple formerly stood.” (*War* 7:29). This adornment was that of a king and would have been plainly understood as such in that day.⁵³ The second event is Simon’s execution in Rome. He was taken to Rome “paraded, scourged, and executed as the leader, perhaps explicitly as “king” of the Jews in . . . the triumphal celebration in Rome.”⁵⁴

Simon’s adorning himself with purple, his followers obeying him as a king, his aspiration to despotic power, and his becoming “master of Jerusalem” all point to him as a king. This and his resistance to the Romans couple together to qualify his movement as a “messianic movement.”

Others?⁵⁵

There are many other figures of this time that lead groups to fight against the Romans but of whom we have no record of their either aspiring to kingship or being recognized as a king. Hence, they may have led bona fide messianic movements, but we cannot classify them as such. I will mention a few briefly here.

Judas the Galilean

In AD 6 Judas the Galilean “incited his countrymen to revolt up braiding them as cowards for consenting to pay tribute to the Romans and tolerating mortal masters, after having God for their Lord. This man was a sophist who founded a sect of his own . . .” (*War* 2:118). He insisted that God shall be their Lord and not the Romans or any other foreign power. Although Judas did resist the Romans, we have no record of him claiming or being acclaimed as a king.

⁵³Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements,” 491. This is contra Rhoads, p. 143, who claims that Simon did not aspire to “royalty.” But Rhoads does not clearly define what he means by “royalty.” He seems to connect it to “ancestral origins.” However, ancestral origins do not seem to be a necessary aspect of aspiring to kingship in that day as *Antiquities* 17:285 shows.

⁵⁴Horsely, “Popular Messianic Movements,” 491.

⁵⁵I am indebted to Rhoads for these historical figures found in Josephus.

Tholomaeus

Around 44-46 AD an arch-brigand named Tholomaeus “inflicted very severe mischief upon the Idumeans” (*Antiquities* 20:5). He was executed by Procurator Fadus. We don’t know if he was politically motivated or if he was even a Jew. He may have been an ordinary robber chief that lived off of the plunder he took from caravans. Although an “arch-brigand,” we have no evidence that he was politically motivated against the Romans to restore the rule of Israel to Jewish hands.

Theudas

Acts 5:36 speaks of a Theudas who “claimed to be somebody” and led 400 men who were later captured by Fadus and killed (*Antiquities* 20:97-99). We, however, have no information that he was a king or that he actually engaged the Romans.

James and Simon, sons of Judas the Galilean

Josephus (*Antiquities* 20:102) describes James and Simon (sons of Judas the Galilean) as being tried and crucified by procurator Tiberias Alexander (46-48 AD) for arousing “the people to revolt against the Romans while Quirinius was taking the census in Judea.” Though they were evidently instigating a revolt against the Romans, we have no evidence that they were associated in any way with being acclaimed king.

Eleazar ben Dinai and Alexander

Under the procuratorship of Cumanus (48-52AD) a brigand chief named Eleazar ben Dinai and a man named Alexander were enlisted by Jews at Jerusalem to take revenge on the Samaritans in Gema who had attacked and killed a large number of Jews who were coming to one of their Jerusalem festivals. Eleazar and Alexander burn several Samaritan villages and kill their inhabitants (*War* 2:235). Procurator Cumanus responds and stops Eleazar and Alexander. This act was an act of the Jews taking the law into their own hands and was seen as rebellion against Rome. However, we do not have any evidence that these men were acting as a king in any way.

An Egyptian

Under Procurator Felix (52-60AD) an Egyptian prophet leads a group of 30,000 men around Mt. Olives in an attempt to take over Jerusalem. Felix meets him with Roman soldiers and puts down the

uprising (*War* 2:261-63). We do not have any information as to whether the Egyptian was Jewish or ever acclaimed a king even though he engaged the Romans.

Eliazar, son of Simon

During the war with Rome (66-70 AD), Eliazar, son of Simon became leader of the Zealots in Jerusalem and was given “supreme command” (*War* 2:565). His position, however does not seem to be that of a king, especially since the Zealots were more of a democratically governed group (as can be seen in their choosing of the High Priest by lot).⁵⁶ If he were to be considered a messiah, it would be more a priestly one than a Davidic one. However, I have not found any evidence that he assumed or was proclaimed or even had a desire to be a king. As a result, he and his group would not fit into the category of a “messianic movement.”

⁵⁶Rhoads, 102, 105.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have defined the term “messianic movement” by examining the various descriptions of the term “messiah” in Jewish literature in and around the first century. I concluded that, among the many characteristics put forth in this Jewish literature with respect to the messiah concept, the lowest common denominators were (1) the messiah would be a Jewish person who claims or is acclaimed or aspires to be a king who (2) leads a militant movement against a foreign occupying power (Rome and Rome-friendly Jewish aristocracy in this case) to restore the rule of Israel to Jewish hands. These criteria were then used to determine bona fide “messianic movements” in the first century.

Using these criteria, I found seven figures who led movements that can be considered “messianic” from 4BC to 100AD. These seven “messianic movements” are those of (1) Judas son of Ezekias, (2) Simon a slave of King Herod, (3) Anthronges a shepherd, (4) Jesus of Nazareth, (5) Menahem descendant of Judas the Galilean, (6) John of Gischala, and (7) Simon son of Giora. Although there may have been many other movements of the day that were “messianic”, we have no evidence from our sources of those that would satisfy our criteria.

This research will help me in my current preaching/teaching of God’s word in several ways. First, it gives me a better understanding of the political climate of Jesus’ day. It helped me better understand the fear of the Jewish aristocracy of losing their position with Rome and why they were so opposed to Jesus. As a result, I can better communicate the urgency and the need that was felt by the Jewish leadership to crucify Jesus. Secondly, the study of the Jewish literature of the day with respect to the term “messiah” has given me a broader perspective as to the ideas prevalent in Jesus’ day. This will help me communicate why, as well as how, the disciples and the Jews of Jesus’ day misunderstood Jesus. Thirdly, the aspects of realized eschatology and apocalyptic future eschatology concerning the messiah helps me to understand and communicate how Jesus is in the process of fulfilling both. Fourthly, I have a better grasp of the writings of Josephus as well as the other Jewish writings in and around the first century. This will help me immensely in teaching a New Testament History class.

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