THE MILITANT DAVIDIC MESSIAH AND VIOLENCE AGAINST ROME: THE INFLUENCE OF POMPEY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MESSIANISM

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Text Fragment

In 63 BCE the army of the Roman General Pompey the Great invaded ancient Palestine, destroyed part of the Jerusalem temple, and ended the nearly eighty-year-old Hasmonean state. The Romans thereafter ruled ancient Palestine either directly or through a series of client kings. The great Jewish War against the Romans of 66–70 CE was largely an effort to restore independent Jewish rule. The Jewish historian Josephus, who served as a general in this conflict, tells us that a messianic oracle inspired many Jews to take up arms against the Romans.1 This nearly five-year conflict ended with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Sixty-two years later, Simeon bar Kochba – presumed by many Jews to be the messiah – led Jewish rebels in a second ill-fated revolt against Roman rule. After this failed war, the Jewish community abandoned nationalism and the active hope that a messiah would violently overthrow their oppressors.
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This article explores this nearly two century period of messianic-inspired violence by focusing on its beginning, namely the 63 BCE Roman conquest of Jerusalem, to show how Jews, and then Christians, merged the Old Testament notion of a messiah with the Roman General Pompey to create a royal messianic figure that may be called the militant Davidic messiah. This violent deliverer first appears in Jewish writings that postdate Pompey’s 63 BCE intervention in the Middle East. These documents contain little that can be classified as religion, such as devotional practices or temple worship. Rather, they use the militant Davidic messiah as a political tool to prepare their followers for an impending war with Rome. During this battle, the messiah is expected to defeat the Romans, execute their leader, and kill all his Jewish partisans. These writings suggest that ancient Jews and Christians often did not distinguish between religion, politics, and war. Political revenge against Rome, not piety, was often foremost on their minds.

I. The Old Testament Notion of the Messiah

The Hebrew word messiah simply means “anointed” and is not used in the Old Testament in an eschatological sense. Several biblical kings – both Jewish and pagan – were

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2 See Bockmuehl and Paget 2007.
3 Fitzmyer 2007: 8–25.
anointed, and even referred to as the “anointed one.”

In the Bible the word messiah is used in a generic way to refer to kings, especially those descended from the monarch David. But the expectation of these rulers, whether present or future, is rather modest. Sometimes the messiah is not a king, but a priest or a prophet. Following the Babylonian removal of the last Davidic king from power in 586/587 BCE, messianism did not emerge as a major concept in Jewish literature. Many of the latest Old Testament books, such as Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ben Sira, show little interest in eschatology, and do not mention a future king. Although eschatology reemerged as a dominant theme in the second century BCE books of Daniel and 1 Enoch, there is no role in them for a messianic king. The passage in Isaiah 9, which is traditionally regarded as a messianic prediction, is actually an enthronement oracle announcing the birth of the Jewish king Hezekiah (728/7 BCE). It was written against the backdrop of the conquests of ancient Palestine by the Assyrian monarch Tiglath-Pileser and therefore cannot be used to support a Jewish expectation for a messiah in the pre-Roman era. The prophet Ezekiel denounced kings who assumed divine standing (Ezek 28:2), but did not envisage a future messianic figure. The late biblical prophets Zechariah and Malachi, moreover, rebuke the militarism of past Jewish kings and call for a return to a simpler era when petty rulers, known as judges, emerged in times of distress to deliver the Jewish people from their oppressors. None of these biblical books convey any expectation of a future messianic figure.

In 167 BCE the situation of the Jews changed dramatically when the Hellenistic Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes effectively banned Judaism. A Jewish priest named Mattathias and his sons formed a resistance movement to create an independent Jewish state. In the month of Kislev, 164 BCE, Mattathias’s son Judas captured Jerusalem and rededicated the Jerusalem temple: an event still commemorated with the celebration of Hanukkah. Yet, messianism did not emerge during this time of distress to unite the Jewish people against their Syrian oppressors.

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4 Jewish kings: Saul (1 Sam 9:16; 10:1; 15:1, 17); David (1 Sam 16:3, 12–13; 2 Sam 2:4, 7; 3:39); Solomon (1 Kgs 1:34, 39, 45); Jehu (1 Kgs 19:16; 2 Kgs 9:3, 6, 12; 2 Chr 22:7); Joash (2 Kgs 11:12; 2 Chr 23:11); Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 23:30); Zedekiah (Lam 4:20). Generic Jewish monarchs: Ps 2:2; 18:51; 20:7; 28:8; 84:10; 89:39, 52; 132:10, 17. Cyrus, king of Persia, Isa. 45:1.


6 Collins and Collins 2008: 43–46.

7 For this text, and a detailed examination of other messianic, and supposed messianic, passages in Scripture, see Collins and Collins 2008; Fitzmyer 2007.

8 Although this oracle is addressed to the king of Tyre, it presumably would have applied to any Jewish king who claimed divine status. See further Collins and Collins 2008: 46. The prophet Ezekiel prefers the word “ruler” rather than “king” for the future monarch. See Joyce 1998: 323–337. In Ezekiel 37:24–25 the prophet describes the future Davidic king, but calls him the “prince” and not the “messiah.”


10 The following five sources, with some contradictions, describe this period: 1 Macc 1; 2 Macc 3–7; Dan 7–12; Jos. BJ 1.31–35; idem, AJ 12.237–264. See Gruen 1996: 238–264.


12 The ideological foundation for the expansionist policy of the Hasmoneans, most notably their penchant for expelling foreigners, was based on biblical tradition. See Dąbrowa 2010a: 7–14. Yet, despite their appeal to Scripture, the Hasmoneans did not draw upon the Davidic messiah tradition to espouse violence against foreigners in those lands they were convinced belonged to the nation of Israel.
Judas’s family eventually won their independence from the Syrians, created a Jewish state, and became its high priests and political leaders. They are known both as the Mac-cabees and the Hasmoneans. In 105/4 BCE they assumed the kingship in defiance of the biblical law that separate individuals must hold these offices, and that only David’s descendants could rule as monarchs. The Hasmoneans ruled as kings for nearly forty-one years. All faced numerous civil wars to remove them from power. Yet, the Jews never looked to a messiah to deliver them from these indigenous Jewish rulers, whom many regarded as oppressors. Then everything changed in 63 BCE when Pompey appeared in Palestine.

Pompey’s arrival coincided with the waning days of the Hasmonean state. When his quaestor M. Aemilius Scaurus arrived in Palestine to investigate the region’s political stability, the two sons of the former Hasmonean ruler Salome Alexandra, Hyrcanus (II) and Aristobulus (II), were fighting a civil war for the throne. Aristobulus, the younger of the two, had removed his elder sibling from power before Scaurus arrived. The Romans initially backed Aristobulus, but imprisoned him when he appeared to be fomenting a revolt against them. His brother Hyrcanus joined Pompey’s legions and helped the Romans besiege the partisans of Aristobulus in Jerusalem. During the siege, part of the temple was destroyed and Pompey defiled the sanctuary when he entered its innermost room, the holy of holies, where only the high priest was permitted to visit once each year on the Day of Atonement. The Hasmonean age was over. Direct Roman rule had begun.

II. The Militant Davidic Messiah in the Psalms of Solomon

The Psalms of Solomon is a collection of eighteen pseudonymous Jewish poems that contain an eyewitness account of Pompey’s conquest of Jerusalem and its aftermath. Composed in Hebrew, the collection survives only in Greek translation. The Greek edition was later translated into Syriac. At some unknown point in time, the Syriac translation was attached to a Christian Syriac Hymnbook known as the Odes of Solomon and apparently used in the liturgy of the Syriac Church. The Psalms of Solomon contains the most detailed depiction of the Davidic messiah prior to the New Testament, which makes it among the most important texts for understanding the historical development of Davidic messianism.

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18 Atkinson 2001: 406–409. These poems are also listed in numerous Christian catalogues from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries CE. This history of transmission is cited to show that the militant Davidic messiah of the Psalms of Solomon was not merely used by Jews, but apparently by Christians in worship.