

James D. Tabor, "Are You the One? The Textual Dynamics of Messianic Self-Identity," in *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic, and their Relationships*, edited by Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), pp. 180-191.

Are You the One? The Textual Dynamics of Messianic Self-Identity

One important dimension of the rubric 'Prophetic Texts and their Ancient Contexts' is a consideration of how such materials, especially those now found in the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, were applied and appropriated within apocalyptic/messianic communities in the late 2nd Temple period. It is here that one moves beyond a primarily scribal enterprise to a live, ongoing, *peshet*-like process of textual appropriation. In other words, the community locates itself within the text, deriving not only a high level of confirmatory affirmation of its special place in the grand scheme of things, but also functioning to shape the course of unfolding events. This dynamic is particularly heated up when a charismatic 'messiah' figure, functioning as leader of the group, actually finds and forms his or her self-identity on the basis on such textual exegesis. Furthermore, it is also the case that the text itself, rather than being fixed or set, like our canonical Masoretic version of the Hebrew Prophets, becomes 'fluid' and variant, under the influence of such interpretive dynamics. In other words, texts are not only read creatively, in midrashic or *peshet*-like ways, but those texts themselves, are copied and quoted in variant readings that reflect the self-understanding of the community and its charismatic leaders. Fortunately, in the period from the Maccabees to Masada, we have a wealth of primary source materials from two apocalyptic/messianic communities—that of Qumran and the early followers of Jesus.

I use the term ‘messiah’ in this paper in a wider, generic sense, to refer to any figure thought to be divinely designated and empowered to usher in the eschatological redemption, whether priest, prophet/teacher, or king, or some combination thereof. I am interested in the ways in which such a figure finds his or her identity and mission within the prophetic corpus, and acting accordingly, seeks to usher in the eschatological consummation. My particular focus is upon Jesus of Nazareth, as he comes through to us in the New Testament Gospel materials, and to what degree we might responsibly ‘imagine’ his own appropriation of prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible, and his self-understanding as God’s pivotal ‘end time’ agent.

Running through the various layers and strata of the New Testament Gospel traditions is a complex set of messianic titles or designations against which the careers of both John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth are tagged and evaluated. In the climatic exchange at Caesarea Philippi, the Markan Jesus puts it most bluntly— ‘Who do people say that I am?’ (Mk. 8.27).¹ The possibilities subsequently enumerated appear earlier in Mark, when Herod Antipas hears of the miraculous powers of Jesus, and rumor has it that he might be John the Baptizer ‘raised from the dead,’ or Elijah, or one of the prophets of old (Mk. 6.14-17). Each of these possibilities are implicitly rejected by Mark as Peter makes his definitive, though at this point, misguided declaration: ‘You are the Messiah.’² Much later in the narrative, when Jesus is on trial before the high priest the question is put to him directly, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ to which Jesus

¹ Quotations from the Bible and Apocrypha are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² In Mk 1.1 the reader is clued into the mystery of who Jesus is: ‘Jesus Christ, the Son of God,’ though as the narrative unfolds this ‘messianic secret’ is only revealed to the inner group of disciples when it is clear that Jesus is headed for Jerusalem to be killed. At this point in the narrative, Peter, spokesperson for the Twelve, has not yet accepted the notion of a rejected and suffering messiah, and as a result, for Mark at least, his confession, though technically correct, is built on a misunderstanding, as Norman Perrin has so clearly demonstrated (see Perrin 1971).

replies, 'I am,' but adds 'and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mk. 14.62), phrases taken from Dan. 7.13-14 and Ps. 110. Earlier in Mark, when Jesus is glorified on the high mountain, just following Peter's declaration, the disciples ask, in response to their experience of the 'kingdom of God coming with power,' 'Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' (Mk. 9.1,11). Jesus implies that the recently beheaded John the Baptizer is indeed the Elijah to come, as predicted in Mal. 4.5,³ but was rejected and killed based on what was 'written of him' (Mk. 9.13). That Mark here includes the idea of John's suffering, as the Elijah figure, based on what was *written of him*, is extraordinary on several levels. First, one might expect that this image of a 'suffering servant,' that is so important to Mark's interpretation of Jesus, would be reserved for Jesus alone.⁴ Second, there is nothing about rejection or suffering in the only two prophetic contexts that are applied to John and his career in any of our Gospel materials, namely Isa. 40.3 and Mal. 3.1; 4.5. This means that Mark, at least, is willing to widen his 'Suffering Servant' Christology to include John the Baptizer as a forerunner of the same fate that awaits Jesus. In other words, we have evidence here that Isaiah 53 was applied to a figure other than Jesus, either by Jesus himself, or within the earliest stages of the Jesus movement. That Mark's community would have created such an idea, in developing its own ideas of Jesus's uniqueness as Christ and Son of God, seems improbable. Elsewhere, Mark, like the other Gospel writers, decidedly plays down John's role in the redemptive scheme of

³ Mal. 3.24 in the Hebrew text.

⁴ In Mk. 10:45 there is the climactic declaration that Jesus as 'Son of Man' came to 'give his life as a ransom for many,' which is a direct reference to Isa. 53:12, the important ending of the fourth 'Suffering Servant' song of Deutero-Isaiah. Since elsewhere in the Synoptic tradition, as well as in the Gospel of John, there is such a decided attempt to minimize the role of John in contrast to that of Jesus, Mark's inclusion of John in this context is remarkable (see Lk 7.18-35; Mk. 1:7-8; Mt. 3:13-17; Jn. 3:25-30).

things, making it clear that it is Jesus who is the redemptive agent (see Mk. 1.7-11, 14; 11.27-33). I am convinced that Mk. 9.13 is witness to an exegetical enterprise that predates Mark, and that possibly goes back to Jesus himself. What we might have here is a prime example of the ways in which prophetic texts provided a context for the understanding of a messianic figure. When John, the ‘Elijah to come,’ is brutally executed by Herod Antipas, his followers, including Jesus, had to find justification for this unexpected turn of events within the prophet texts that detail the ‘career patterns’ of these various redemptive figures. The textual terrain is a complex and rugged one, offering diverse and multiple possibilities of textual linking and creative interpretation. Fortunately, the ground had been plowed about a hundred years earlier, by the leader of the Qumran community, the Teacher of Righteousness. We find ourselves, thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, witnesses to an exegetical enterprise that we can actually trace from the 1st century bce down through the 1st Jewish Revolt.

In John’s Gospel, the Baptizer is asked by the Jerusalem religious establishment, ‘Who are you?’ with the suggested possibilities: the Messiah, Elijah, or ‘the Prophet.’ John denies all three and declares himself ‘the Voice of one crying in the desert,’ based on Isa. 40.3, a text that also played an important prophetic role in the Qumran community and its founding.⁵ Even more striking is the question in the Q source that the imprisoned Baptizer puts to Jesus shortly before his beheading—‘Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?’ (Lk. 7.20). In a closely related Q pericope John is declared to be not merely a prophet, but ‘more than a prophet,’ and indeed the Malachi ‘Messenger’ who, like Deutero-Isaiah’s ‘Voice crying in the wilderness,’ is to ‘prepare the way of Yahweh’ (Lk. 7.26-27). This singular and resolute designation, ‘the one,’ implies a cluster of

speculative Messianic interpretations of prophetic texts, echoed in strangely parallel ways within Qumran materials.⁶

What we find then, within these multi-layered Gospel traditions is a whole set of textual ‘categories,’ with potential ‘candidates,’ measured against the reported career patterns, or ‘contexts’ of a given figure—in this case the work, and particularly the deaths, of both John the Baptizer and Jesus.

For over a hundred years now these materials have presented scholars of the New Testament with a classic form of the proverbial ‘chicken or the egg’ question. Do our Gospel traditions import and impose these textual categories onto the figures of John and Jesus, long after their deaths, as a kind of exegetical or ‘scribal’ enterprise, to explain and justify the shocking and the wholly unexpected—beheading and crucifixion. Or is it remotely possible, or even probable, that figures such as John or Jesus, and for that matter the host of late 2nd Temple Jewish Palestinian ‘messiah’ figures (Qumran’s Teacher, Judas the Galilean, Athronges, Simon the Perean, ‘the Samaritan,’ Theudas, ‘the Egyptian,’ Menahem, son of Judas the Galilean, and Simon bar Giora) might have derived, not only their self-identity, but also a self-propelled ‘career pattern,’ based on some degree of appropriation of such prophetic ‘messianic’ texts. Unfortunately, beyond the Qumran Teacher, John, and Jesus, we know little of these figures, and what we do know comes almost exclusively from Josephus, however, he does provide hints that point in the direction of the importance of these textual messianic categories.⁷ For example, both Theudas (45-46 ce) and ‘the Egyptian’ (late 50s ce) appear to see themselves as

⁵ See 1 QS 8.13-15.

⁶ See Collins (1995); Wise (1999); and Evans and Flint (1997).

⁷ See Collins 1995:195-210; Wise 1999: 91, 130-131. The book of Acts mentions Theudas, Judas the Galilean, and the Egyptian (Acts 5.33-39; 21:38), and surprisingly, Tacitus mentions Simon (*Hist.* 5.9).

some sort of Moses *redivivus* (*Ant.* 20.97-98; *War.* 2.261-62; *Ant.* 20.169-71).

Athronges appears to appeal to some sort of Davidic ideology, as does Simon who ‘assumes the diadem’ (*Ant.* 17.273-76; 17.278-85). More significant than these limited sketches that Josephus offers us of these various figures is the remarkable statement he makes about the whole period leading to the 1st Jewish revolt:

‘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).⁸

Remarkably, modern interpreters have failed to identify the ‘oracle’ of which Josephus speaks.⁹ Josephus clearly has in mind the ‘Seventy Weeks’ prophecy of Dan. 9.24-27. It is the only prophetic text in the Hebrew Bible that offers a calculation as to a precise time that an ‘anointed one’ would arise, coupled with the destruction of the city and the sanctuary. This fascinating text offers a 490 year ‘window of opportunity’ for the inauguration of a redemptive countdown, with the anointed figure showing up toward the end. We know that both the

⁸ Translation by Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, *Josephus*, Vol 3, p. 467.

Qumran community and the early followers of Jesus were convinced, on the basis of this text, that the ‘time is fulfilled’ and that the ‘appointed time has grown very short.’¹⁰ This witness of Josephus is vitally important. It confirms for us that within late 2nd Temple Jewish Palestinian society, such prophetic speculations, calculations, and applications, were around, and were even promulgated by the ‘wise men’ of that culture. But further, we can also conclude that figures of that period, reading such prophetic texts, becoming convinced that indeed the ‘time was fulfilled,’ and of their individual role in the redemptive plan, might well have been actively engaged in their own version of self-fulfillment. Josephus, as a young, up-and-coming, member of the aristocratic priestly class, raised in Galilee but likely educated in Jerusalem, is our prime example. Indeed, not only does he tell the new emperor Vespasian that he is predicted to become ruler of the world in the Hebrew scriptures, but as Louis Feldman has clearly shown, he even sees himself in a prophetic role (Feldman 1990).

Most critical historians of Christian Origins, in examining the question of the so-called ‘development of Christology,’ have adopted the position, put so succinctly by Rudolf Bultmann over a generation ago, namely, that the scene of Peter’s confession is an Easter story projected backward into Jesus’ lifetime (Bultmann 1951:26). That Jesus himself ever claimed to be the Messiah is considered unlikely, and that he might have resolutely marched to an anticipated ordeal of suffering, and possible death, is

⁹ The notes to the Loeb translation have ‘authority unknown,’ and Collins (1995:200) comments ‘It is not clear what passage in the Scriptures Josephus had in mind,’ offering no suggestions whatsoever.

¹⁰ On the use of this text at Qumran see Wise 1999:226-229; and in the N.T. Mk. 1:14; 1 Cor. 7:25-31; Gal. 4.4; 1 Thess. 5.1-11; 2 Thess. 2.1-6.

categorized as theological apologetics, or perhaps worse, sensationalist romance.¹¹ In contrast Albert Schweitzer (1910:370-371) concludes his *Quest for the Historical Jesus* with the intriguing conclusion:

‘The Baptist appears and cries: “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him.’

The so-called ‘third Quest’ for the historical Jesus seems hopelessly halted between two opinions.¹² The problem is clearly one of method, as we are always working, it seems, though a double veil—that of our own psychology, trying to probe the inaccessible inner psychology of Jesus himself—and that of a complex of layered texts, all of which are to a large degree theological, tendentious, apologetic, and propagandistic. Schweitzer concludes, in his survey of ‘Life of Jesus’ research from Reimarus to Wrede that ‘There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus’ (Schweitzer 1910: 4). Despite prodigious effort and a plethora of sophisticated historical-critical studies published in the past ten years, it seems that by and large we end up with the Jesus of our individual methodological presuppositions. As Crossan puts it, ‘It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do

¹¹ Schonfield’s classic work, *The Passover Plot* would be the most obvious example of the speculative gone mad.

¹² See Witherington (1995) for a summary of this third quest. It has largely echoed the debate between Bultmann and Schweitzer, but now cast in new dress with Crossan (1991), Borg (1987), and Funk (1996) lined up against Wright (1992), Ehrman (1999), Sanders (1993) and Fredriksen (1999) to name a few. The best sustained critique of the former position, best represented in our own time by Crossan, is that of Allison (1998).

theology and call it history, and to do autobiography and call it biography' (Crossan 1991: xxviii). Indeed, one wonders, at the opening of the 21st century, whether Bultmann's cautionary assertion that we could know next to nothing about the 'Jesus of history' and everything about the 'Christ of faith' has come back to haunt us.

In my view a new avenue of fruitful inquiry has been opened with the publication of Michael Wise's, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Christ* (1999) and Israel Knohl's, *The Messiah Before Jesus* (2000). These two scholars, working independently, came up with a strikingly similar thesis. Both Wise and Knohl put forth the argument, based on their reading and evaluation of the autobiographical nature of portions of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QHodayot), and associated texts from Cave 4 (especially 4Q491 'Self-Glorification Hymn'), that the author of these materials had closely identified his mission, role, calling, and career in the light of the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah, the 'Seventy Weeks Prophecy' of Daniel 9, and various Psalms. In other words, what we have documented in the Qumran texts are the textual dynamics of what I am calling 'messianic self-identity,' by the leader of the 1st century bce Qumran community. Although Wise and Knohl have their sharp differences, with regard to the dating, as well as the identity of the author, both of them argue that the ways in which their figure self-consciously appropriates these prophetic texts puts the question of the self-understanding of Jesus in a new light. The point is not merely that once upon a time, somewhere, someone, combined the standard messianic texts regarding glorification (Isa. 11, Mic. 5, et al.), with the notion of rejection, suffering, and death (Servant Songs, Daniel, and the Psalms). Their case is actually much stronger, namely that Jesus himself, and his earliest followers, rise out of the kind of messianic, apocalyptic way of thinking

that has its closest parallels in the Qumran materials. In other words, the Jesus movement is best understood as a 1st century ce revival of at least one branch of the ‘messianic movement in Palestine,’ that flourished from the 1st century bce down through the 2nd Jewish Revolt. To quote Bultman again:

‘Of course the attempt is made to carry the idea of the suffering Son of Man into Jesus’ own outlook by assuming that Jesus regarded himself as Deutero-Isaiah’s Servant of God who suffers and dies for the sinner, and fused together the two ideas Son of Man and the Servant of God into the single figure of the suffering, dying and rising Son of Man. At the very outset, the misgivings which must be raised as to the historicity of the predictions of the passion speak against this attempt. In addition, the tradition of Jesus’ sayings reveals no trace of consciousness on his part of being the Servant of God of Isaiah 53. The messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was discovered in the Christian Church and even in it not immediately.’(Bultmann 1951: 31.).

This point, shared by the majority of scholars doing critical-historical Jesus research, bears a careful reconsideration in the light of the arguments of Wise and Knohl. It is surely possible, and maybe even probable, that Jesus himself appropriated a cluster of prophetic texts in this messianic manner, and the composite he came up with included the notions of rejection, suffering, and death, as well as the more common elements of exaltation and glorification. Wise has coined the term ‘Scripture prophet’ to designate a figure whose claims to divine inspiration are shaped and promulgated in the context of ‘extensive interaction with his culture’s sacred, written, tradition’ (Wise 1999:263).

Although Wise is primarily focused on the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness, whose first person writings we possess in the Dead Sea Scrolls, throughout his work he draws parallels with a ‘Second Messiah,’ namely Jesus of Nazareth.

My own thesis is that the unexpected arrest and brutal death of John the Baptizer must have served as a turning point for this 1st century ce messianic, apocalyptic, baptist movement, of which Jesus represents a branch. Either Jesus himself, or John’s followers, like the Qumran teacher before them, went to the texts of the Hebrew scriptures to find explanation for this tragic turn of events. What we can say with certainty, is such a view lies still imbedded in what must certainly be a pre-Markan layer of our earliest gospel, namely Mk. 9.12-13. It is remarkable that Schweitzer (1910: 330-97), in his provocative essay ‘Thoroughgoing Scepticism and Thoroughgoing Eschatology,’ without the benefit of the Dead Sea Scrolls, anticipates the main arguments of Wise and Knohl, at least in terms of the probable self-understanding of Jesus and his destined role as apocalyptic agent of the Kingdom of God.

My own study of the messianic self-identity of two contemporary Messiahs, namely David Koresh (1993 in Waco, Texas), and Moses Guibbory (1926-1943 in Jerusalem) has both reinforced and clarified the unfolding textual dynamics of such an autobiographical enterprise.¹³ The kind of prophetic, or potentially prophetic, texts that most readily lend themselves to such a personalized interpretation are those in which the autobiographical ‘first person’ style sets the stage for ‘third person,’ *peshet* like interpretation. For example, the ‘I’ of Isa. 48.16; 49.1-7; 50.4-6. 61.1-4 can be combined with the narrative pattern of texts such as Isa. 42.1-9; 52.13-53.12; Psa. 2 and 110, and Mic. 5.2-4. There is also the added factor of the version of a particular text that

might have been read within a community, or even, as at Qumran, multiple version of the same text. For example, the Messenger/Elijah figure of Malachi, who is to come before the ‘great and terrible day of Yahweh’ (Mal. 3-4), becomes not one but *two* figures in the Qumran copy of Malachi (4 QXII^a):

‘Therefore, b[e]hold, I] send [my] mes[enger, and he shall prepare] the way before me; and *they*¹⁴ will suddenly come to [his] te[m]ple, the Lor]d, whom you seek and the messenger of the co[venant, whom y]ou desire . . .¹⁵

This plural reading might have well given rise to the notion of two anointed figures at Qumran, and if the John/Jesus movement was reading a version of the text such as this, it would be easy to couple the fate of John with that of Jesus. The variant readings in 1 Qisa^a, especially in the fourth Servant Song (Isa 52.13-53.12) are significant, and Wise has shown how the Teacher at Qumran was able to take his version of these prophetic texts and apply them in ways that would not have been as compelling using the Masoretic version.¹⁶ Wise convincingly shows that the broad correspondence between the ideas of the Teacher and a particular text of the prophets, e.g., Isaiah, are startling.

There is no denying that our earliest Passion Narrative, now reflected in the Gospel of Mark, clearly builds up the career of Jesus based on a set of prophetic texts. Accordingly, the precise historicity of individual episodes remains in dispute. For example, did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a colt, or does Mark create this scene based on

¹³ Tabor and Gallagher (1995), Wise (1999:265-269), and Guibbory (1943).

¹⁴ MT read ‘he.’

¹⁵ Translation from Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich (1999: 477).

¹⁶ Wise (1999:92-95).

Zech 9.9? Or further, did Jesus actually cry out ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ or was this inserted by Mark based on Psa. 22.1? However this uncertainty should by no means lead us to conclude that the inner dynamics of messianic self-identity, based on key prophetic texts and contexts, are unlikely in the case of Jesus of Nazareth.

What really stirs this apocalyptic messianic pot’ of stew is the combination of subjective inward experience and objective, external, historical fact. In other words, the messianic candidate comes to the text to inform his or her self-understanding, as well as launch a messianic career, while at the same time external events (e.g. Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified) elucidate the ‘true’ meaning of the texts. This is the heart and core of the *peshet* method of interpretation as seen in, say, the Habakkuk Peshet (1 QpHab). The ‘chastisement of the Teacher of Righteousness’ (IV.10), and the suffering and faith of the followers (VIII. 1-3), both inform inner self-understanding and reinforce, or even ‘orchestrate,’ external events. For example, in the case of Jesus, I know of no responsible scholar who denies the historicity of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus, even though one might conceivably argue that it arose as a post-mortem creation of loyal followers based on their reading backwards from Zech 12.10 and Psa. 22.13 (5/6HevPs), both of which mention the ‘piercing’ of a righteous anointed one.

Most common in this complex of categories, candidates, and contexts is the notion of a kind of ‘realized eschatology,’ to borrow a phrase from C. H. Dodd. In other words, the hard reality of history is mediated by the imaginative projection of communal or individual self-understanding. The full confirmation of prophetic fulfillment is always ‘at hand,’ just out of reach, but the serendipitous and fortuitous nature of events,

as well as the self-conscious activities of the leader and the group, work together to construct a convincing picture. Although the texts themselves act powerfully in this mix, it is the utter conviction of the candidate, set in these historical contexts, that furnishes the apologetic power. With such dynamics at work we truly have ‘the makings of a Messiah’ in ways that can be documented down through history, even into our own time.

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