

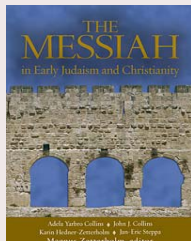


Using 'messiah' as a title

Book Title:

The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity

Book Cover:



Editor:

Magnus Zetterholm

ISBN:

9780800621087

Publisher:

Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p. 188, \$18.00*

*Book price at time of Review

Review Title:

Using 'messiah' as a title

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How to cite this book

review:

De Villiers, G., 2011, 'Using "messiah" as a title', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(3), Art. #1136, 2 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.1136>

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Christians, including Biblical scholars, almost automatically and without thinking, regard 'messiah' as a title that has a bearing upon Jesus Christ, the Saviour. Yet one should know better, for studies in Hebrew reveal that 'messiah' is derived from a Hebrew word that simply means 'anointed one'. *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity*, edited by Magnus Zetterholm, reminds the reader that 'messiah' is a term that has been appropriated throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity to various persons and in different ways.

In the first chapter on pre-Christian and Jewish messianism, John Collins explains that the roots of the concept 'messiah' can be traced back to the royal ideology of the Ancient Near East: Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt. Initially, the term was meant to indicate the close connection between a human ruler and a deity. No future or eschatological expectations were attached to such a figure. In the Hebrew Bible, King David is upheld as a perfect example of the relationship between a king and a god, to such an extent that a divine promise – albeit on the condition of obedience – ensures a Davidic descendant on the Israelite throne forever. After the catastrophe of 586 BCE, the concept of 'messiah' undergoes a drastic hermeneutical reinterpretation. Consequently, parts of the prophetic tradition grapple with a future restoration of the Davidic line. However, as the material from the Septuagint, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha and apocalyptic literature indicate, there was neither a uniform train of thought, nor a specific outcome in view. On the one hand a human king, who would re-establish a national state, was hoped for; on the other hand a supernatural character, more like an eschatological priest or prophet who would inaugurate the universal reign of God, was expected.

The second chapter focuses on the first books of the New Testament. Adela Yarbro Collins explores the 'messiah' as Son of God in the synoptic Gospels, namely Mark, Matthew and Luke. All three Gospels are eager to present Jesus as the 'Messiah' of Israel. The 'messiah' also stands in a close relationship with God, who may be his Father. However, Mark seems hesitant to use the epithet 'Son of God' directly: these words in the first verse of the book are clearly added later. Mark rather chooses subtle allusions to Jesus' divine sonship by messianic interpretation of some prophetic texts and psalms in the Old Testament, and of course, the reference to the 'son of man' in Daniel. Matthew and Luke are more direct, including the miraculous conception of the virgin by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' origins make it clear that He is not an ordinary human 'messiah' – his Father is none other than God himself.

The author, Magnus Zetterholm, moves on to 'Paul and the missing messiah' (ch. 3). The letters of Paul are the oldest New Testament witnesses, written 15–20 years before the earliest Gospel, Mark. Unlike the Gospels, Paul seems uninterested in either the historical Jesus or his earthly ministry. Rather than stressing Jesus as the true Messiah for Israel, he chooses to portray Him as the loyal Servant of God, the one who was obedient to the point of death. Zetterholm makes an interesting observation concerning Paul's reluctance to elaborate on Jesus as Messiah. The common explanation is that Paul wrote his letters to new converts from the gentile world who were unfamiliar with Jewish custom. Zetterholm points out that many gentiles were in fact acquainted with Jewish practice, even imitating the lifestyle. Paul wishes to explain to these non-Jews that they cannot be saved in the same way as the Jews, namely through the covenant and the Torah. Their salvation lies elsewhere, in Jesus, the exalted Lord of heaven and earth.

Karin Hedner-Zetterholm notices that the prophet Elijah is also associated with the 'messiah'. Her chapter focuses on the post-biblical Jewish world and bears the title 'Elijah and the messiah as spokesmen of rabbinic ideology' (ch. 4). Both the earlier Mishna (3rd century) and the later Babylonian Talmud (5th – 7th century) allude to Elijah. However, it appears that this prophet undergoes a transformation from an eschatological figure to a rabbinic sage. The rabbis found their authority continuously challenged by charismatic visionaries who claimed that they had insight in divine will and plans. However, God revealed all that was necessary to know and to observe in the Torah to the rabbis. They, the rabbis, were responsible for the interpretation and mediation of God's word. Elijah becomes incorporated into the rabbinic world view by legitimating the authority of



the rabbis and by stressing that the coming of the Messiah is dependent solely on observance of the Torah.

The last chapter by Jan-Eric Steppa deals with 'The reception of messianism and the worship of Christ in the post-apostolic church' (ch. 5). He traces the history of the early church during the first two centuries in the Roman world. In response to Roman scorn on the Christian religion that it had neither tradition nor history, Christian apologists claimed that Christianity was founded on the Hebrew Scriptures and that Jesus Christ was the 'messiah' of its prophecies. These messianic prophecies and Christian interpretation of the Old Testament aggravated the Jews and led to considerable unrest in the community. The chapter concludes with a discussion on chiliasm as it appears in both early Christian and Jewish eschatological thought. Eventually, Christianity moved towards its own distinct direction, with an emphasis on salvation, and personal growth as a result of the intimate relationship between God and the believer. Paradoxically,

with the seed being sown for mysticism and asceticism, the need for an earthly 'messiah' starts to evaporate. The Messiah is exclusively a heavenly being: Jesus, as He is revealed in Revelations – the Saviour and the Judge at the end of times.

This book does not aim to present groundbreaking theories or challenging concepts. However, it provides a thorough exploration of the term 'messiah' and its origins and development through history. The necessary guidelines are provided: abbreviations of the sources cited, a timeline of the period indicated, as well as a map of the area. It is written in a 'reader-friendly' style, however, the rather lengthy glossary and bibliography at the end attest to thorough research. *The Messiah* is to be recommended for biblical scholars to refresh their memory and to make them think twice before referring to 'the Messiah' without the necessary reflection. At the same time it is recommended to the interested layman or laywoman.

