

WISDOM *of the* MESSIAH

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Life and Teachings of Jesus

BY DENNIS COLE

MESSIAH IS COMING! was a ringing cry in the words and thoughts of the Jewish people living in Judea and Galilee in the first century A.D. Several variations on the theme of the identity and work of the Messiah and the coming kingdom of God had developed in the several centuries during which Hellenistic and Roman rulers imposed taxation and religious sanctions against the Jews. Hopes and expectations about a coming deliverance from oppression flourished under the weight of foreign domination, especially during the celebration of Passover and its remembrance of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt. We see this level of expectation echoed in the Gospels of the New Testament.

Are You the One?

In the Gospel of John, we read the account of the questions posed to John the Baptist by the priests and Levites concerning his identity during his public ministry. The questions posed to John reflect the prophetic and messianic viewpoints current in that troublesome day. They asked, "Are you Elijah? . . . Are

you the Prophet?" (1:19-22, HCSB). Perhaps John's preaching a message of repentance and nearness of the coming kingdom (Matt. 3:1-2) brought additional and unrecorded questions. John denied identity with any of the messianic individuals proposed in that day, as well as the ideas behind them. Instead he claimed identity with the voice crying in the wilderness described in the Book of Isaiah (40:3). Many people of that day expected Elijah himself to return, since Elijah had been carried up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11-12), and the prophet Malachi had spoken of his return (Mal. 3:1; Matt. 11:14).

Some time later John's disciples questioned Jesus about His messianic identity, asking, "Are you the Coming One, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus responded with a paraphrase of several passages from Isaiah's prophecy, saying "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news. And if anyone is not offended because of Me, he is blessed" (Matt. 11:3-6. HCSB; Luke 7:18-23).¹

Intense Expectations

From the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a variety of Jewish literary sources from the Hellenistic and early Roman periods (332 B.C. until Jesus' day), we know that several messianic theologies had emerged out of this tumultuous era. The promise of deliverance from bondage and oppression that echoed throughout the books of the Old Testament prophets resonated through the minds and hearts of the pious in that day. These promises gave rise to a flurry of speculation as to the nature of the kingdom and the types of leaders God would raise up to bring them to freedom and prosperity.

Several passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls provide evidence of this eager anticipation of the times. The content of these texts has led many interpreters to suggest that the Gospel writers may have been familiar with the terms, phrases, and traditions within the writings of a community established in the mid-second century B.C. for the stated purpose of preparing the way in the wilderness for the coming of the messianic kingdom. The text commonly called "The Community Rule" reads:

When such men as these (the community) come to be in Israel, conforming to these doctrines, they shall separate from the session of the perverse men to go to the wilderness, there to prepare for the way of truth, as it is written, "in the Wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3). This means the expounding of the Law, decreed by God through Moses for obedience, that being defined by what has

LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Luke 7:1-50

ARE YOU THE ONE?

John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus asking, “Are you the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?” Jesus replied by showing that He was fulfilling the complete expectations for the coming Messiah—expectations given in both the Old Testament and the current wisdom writing of His day. “At that time Jesus healed many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and He granted sight to many blind people. He replied to them, ‘Go and report to John the things you have seen and heard; The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with skin diseases are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who is not offended because of me’” (see Luke 7:20-23, HCSB).

Luke 7:21-22 (= Matt. 11:4-5)	Isa. 35:5-6	Isa. 61:1-2	4Q521 (Dead Sea Scroll)
1. Jesus cured many of diseases, plagues, evil spirits			1. Heal the wounded
2. The blind receive sight	2. Eyes of the blind opened		2. Open the eyes of the blind
3. The lame walk	3. The lame shall leap		
4. The lepers are cleansed			
5. The deaf hear	5. Ears of the deaf unstopped		
6. The dead are raised			6. Raise the dead
7. The poor have good news brought to them		7. Bring good news to the poor	7. Bring good news to the poor

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revealed for each age, and by what the prophets have revealed by His holy spirit (1QS 8:12-16).²

The writer, perhaps the community’s founding leader, known only as the “Righteous Teacher,” quoted from Isaiah 40:3, the same passage John the Baptist quoted in John 1:23, and Matthew used to describe John (Matt. 3:1-4). The Qumran founders took quite literally the instruction from Isaiah and established an out-of-the-way settlement overlooking the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, about eight miles south of Jericho. Through the precise keeping of the law in the desert’s austere conditions, they believed they would be tried and proved faithful by their diligence

for a role in the coming messianic kingdom, thus preparing the way.

Though some scholars still debate the number of messianic figures represented in the language of the Dead Sea Scrolls, at least two distinct roles were in view. The first was a priestly messiah, called the “Messiah of Aaron” and styled somewhat after the tradition of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. A second figure was a royal leader, called variously the “Messiah of Israel” or the “Branch of David.” Exactly how these figures would emerge in the kingdom remains unclear, but several of the sectarian texts shed light on the character of the messianic leadership.

A text called “Redemption and Resurrection” applies the words of

Isaiah to the awaited Messiah, whom God will use to bring deliverance, healing, and redemption. There we read the following:

[For the hea]vens and the earth shall listen to His Messiah [and all w]hich is in them shall not turn away from the commandments of the holy ones. . . . Will you not find the Lord in this, all those who hope in their heart? For the Lord seeks the pious and calls the righteous by name. Over the humble His spirit hovers, and He renews the faithful in His strength. For He will honor the pious upon the th[ro]ne of His eternal kingdom, setting prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, raising up

those who are bo[wed down]. . . and the Lord shall do glorious things which have not been done, just as He said. For He shall heal the critically wounded, He shall revive the dead, He shall send good news to the afflicted . . .³

When the Messiah comes, they believed, God would use Him to vindicate the poor and pious and elevate them to a place of honor. He would heal the sick, the blind, and the lame, and He would deliver those who had been unjustly imprisoned. Jesus would use the same Old Testament passages in answering the questions of John's disciples, providing conclusive evidence that He was the expected Messiah. A simple affirmative answer would have been less convincing in a day when several people were falsely claiming to be the messiah who would deliver the people from Roman oppression.

Another passage, entitled "The Blessings of the Wise," echoes the words and thoughts reminiscent of the Beatitudes of Matthew 5–7. The scroll's authors paraphrased a number of Scriptures in composing this and other sectarian documents. In 4Q525, the writer contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked, much in the manner of the Book of Proverbs and several wisdom psalms.⁴ The extant text is fragmented and begins with a general introductory statement in the manner of Proverbs 1:1–6, "[. . . which He spok]e in the wisdom which God gave to him [. . .] [. . . to kn]ow wisdom and disc[ipline,] to understand . . ."⁵ Hence the author of the document sets the tenor of the text in that of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, designed to give instruction for living rightly before and with God. Fragment 2 continues the wisdom theme with a series of wisdom beatitudes, each beginning with the word "Blessed" in the manner of Psalm 1:1 and Matthew 5–7:

[Blessed is the one who . . .] with a clean heart and does not slander with his tongue. Blessed are those who hold fast to its statutes and do not hold fast to the ways of injustice. Ble[ssed] are those who rejoice in it, and do not burst forth on the pasts of folly. Blessed are those who seek it with pure hands, and do not search for it with a deceitful hea[rt]. Blessed is the man who attains wisdom, and walks in the law of the Most High: establishes his heart in its ways, restrains himself by its corrections, is continually satisfied with its punishments, does not forsake it . . . But he meditates on it continually, and in his trial he reflects [on the law, and with al]l his being.⁶

Implications

These quotations and other Qumran literature affirm that the foundation to wisdom and life was the law. Jesus confirmed the law in Matthew 5:17–20, but He called the people to an even higher form of righteousness and personal spirituality than the Pharisee teachers of the law practiced in His day. Jesus was very much at home in the genre of Jewish wisdom, and in the Sermon on the Mount He elevated wisdom to a higher plane.⁷

These parallels also argue against the belief held by some participants in the group known as the Jesus Seminar who believe that Jesus' teaching is best interpreted against

Cistern at Qumran. The community at Qumran dates from the late Hellenistic to the early Roman periods.

the setting of cynicism in Greco-Roman philosophy. Members of the group have also tried to make value judgments concerning whether statements ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels were really made by Him. The sayings of Jesus and, in fact, most of the material in the four Gospels should be viewed in the setting of first-century Jewish life, literature, and philosophy. From the Dead Sea Scrolls we know this setting was a much broader and richer environment than was known by many before the discovery of these important documents. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exemplified for all ages the True Wise Man. The Wise Messiah has come and shall return! **B**

1. Compare Isaiah 29:18–21; 35:4–6; 61:1.

2. The abbreviation 1QS stands for Cave 1, Qumran area, and S for the Hebrew word *sefer*, meaning "order," hence the order or rules of the community; see also 9:17–21 for a second quotation from Isaiah 40:3. See *The Dead Sea Scrolls A New Translation*, trans. by Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 138–140.

3. In 4Q521.1–12 the writer paraphrases the Isaiah passages noted above in footnote 1. Quotation from *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 421, Frag.2 and Frag. 4.

4. Compare such passages as Proverbs 10:2–3, 6–7; 12:3; 14:11; 25:5; Psalms 1:1–6.

5. *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 423, Frag. 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 423–424, Frag. 2.

7. C. Evans, "Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran Cave 4" in *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, C. Evans and P. Flint, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 91–100. For a broader overview of the subject, see B. Witherington, III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

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