

## ***A Second Look at the Dead Sea Scrolls: Messianic Expectations at Qumran***

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Among the many fascinating aspects of the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls few, if any, are so important as the lines of prophetic interpretation accepted by the Jewish community to which these manuscripts belonged. And among the various aspects of their prophetic interpretation none has been the subject of more debate (and, it must be added, more confusion) than their messianic expectation.

The community, let us remind ourselves, had its headquarters at Khirbet Qumran, north-west of the Dead Sea, from about 100 B.C. to A.D. 68 or thereby. The approach of a Roman army in the latter year made it necessary for them to vacate their headquarters, but first they stored their library for safety in the caves with which the neighboring rocky slopes were honeycombed. They were never able to return and recover their library, which accordingly remained in the caves for centuries, slowly moldering away, until it came to light again in 1947 and succeeding years—in a sadly fragmentary condition—to introduce an unexpected and revolutionary element into biblical studies.

The venerated leader of the community, called the Teacher of Righteousness, flourished in the first half of the last pre-Christian century. It was under his direction that his followers withdrew to the wilderness of Judea, there to play the part of the righteous remnant of Israel in accordance with the words of Isaiah 40:3 (as they understood them): In the wilderness prepare ye the way of Jehovah; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The Teacher of Righteousness was not regarded as a Messiah in any sense (so far as evidence shows). He was (as his title indicates) a teacher, but a teacher who, in the eyes of his disciples, was endowed with a special degree of divine illumination. He certainly was an original student and expositor of Hebrew Scripture, and his interpretations controlled not only the beliefs but also the actions of the community of Qumran.

It was acknowledged that God had revealed the events of the future to His servants the prophets, but one thing He had not revealed to them, and that was the precise time at which these events would take place. This further revelation, however, was granted to the Teacher of Righteousness, who made it known to his followers. The prophets, as Peter was to express it in later days, inquired and searched diligently in order to discover what person or time was indicated by the Spirit under whose control they uttered their predictions, but what was hidden from them was unfolded to the Teacher of Righteousness and his school. So, at least, they held.

The basic feature of the Teacher's interpretation was his conviction that the days of which all the prophets spoke were close at hand. If Balaam spoke of the emergence of "a star out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17), if Moses spoke of a prophet like himself whom God would raise up (Deut. 18:15), if Isaiah spoke of the Assyrian who was to fall "with the sword, not of man" (Isa. 31:8), if Habakkuk spoke of the invasion of Judah by "the Chaldaeans, that bitter and hasty nation" (Hab. 1:6), if Ezekiel spoke of the downfall of "Gog, of the land of Magog"

(Ezek. 38:2), the Teacher understood that these persons and events belonged not to the days in which the prophets themselves lived but to the days which were immediately to follow his own day. The prophets had spoken by divine inspiration, but divine inspiration was necessary also to interpret their words aright, and this latter form of divine inspiration had (it was believed) been bestowed upon the Teacher of Righteousness, who himself turned out to be the subject of many of the prophetic oracles. Habakkuk, for example, had been told that his vision Of the final vindication of divine righteousness would be realized at "the appointed time" (Hab. 2:3), but he was not told when the appointed time would come. This additional information, however, was given to the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom Habakkuk had pointed forward in the words "that he may run who reads it."

But of all the Old Testament prophecies, none was so keenly studied by the Teacher and his followers as the Book of Daniel. This is not surprising if, as is highly probable, they belonged to the school of students and instructors whom Daniel calls the *maskilim*—"they that are wise among the people" (Dan. 11:33), ARV) or "the teachers of the people" (ARV margin). In Daniel 11:33 the sufferings of these *maskilim* in the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes are described; but the Dead Sea Scrolls make it plain that they survived that persecution and made it their aim, in the following generations, to fulfil the charge laid upon the *maskilim* in Daniel 12:3, the turning of many to righteousness.

But the turling of many to righteousness is elsewhere in the Old Testament made the task of another prophetic figure. In Isaiah 53:11 similar words are used of the obedient and suffering-Servant of the Lord: "by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many (literally, 'make the many righteous'): and he shall bear their iniquities." The men of Qumran put these two passages together, and regarded it as their duty to fulfill them. They believed that their community was the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah

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52:13-53:12, and also that it was the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13. Their teacher told them that by enduring affliction for righteousness' sake and by devoting themselves to the taking study and practice of the law in their wilderness retreat they would not only secure acceptance for themselves in the sight of God but would also achieve propitiation for the errors of their fellow-Israelites and procure their justification.

This was indeed a noble ideal, and it rested in part on a remarkable degree of insight into a truth that is gradually winning recognition in our own day—that Daniel's "one like unto a son of man" was front the first intended to be identified with the Isaianic Servant of the Lord. This identification, too, is bound up with our Lord's whole conception of His messianic work: when He calls Himself the Son of Man He does not designate Himself only as the One to whom judgment and dominion have been given, but also as the One who must suffer many things and be set at naught (Mark 9:12).

It is a matter of history and experience (to- put it no higher, as we very well might) that the aim which the men of Qumran failed to achieve in their way was triumphantly accomplished by our Lord in His way—the way of the cross. For even today more men and women than we can count are prepared to tell gladly how His passion has brought to them the assurance of forgiveness and peace with God.

But while we recognize the Qumran community's failure, and may even think ourselves competent to say why they failed, we cannot withhold our admiration for their wholehearted pursuit of vicarious righteousness on their people's behalf.

With their task of expiation, however, they associated another which they would have to discharge at the end-time. If their community embodied the figure of the Son of Man, they would one day be called upon to execute judgment, both upon the ungodly leaders in Israel who willfully led the nation astray and upon the heathen oppressors of Israel too.

It has often been felt that the distinct and verifiable picture of Antiochus Epiphanes given to us in Daniel 11:21-35 is dissolved in the following verses into something much more difficult to identify with any historical course of events. The Qumran community felt this in their day, and believed that the closing part of Daniel 11 together with chapter 12 remained to be fulfilled in the near future. The abomination of desolation had been removed, the dominion of Antiochus and his dynasty over Judea had been broken, and in their place the priest-kings of the Hasmonean family ruled. But although the Hasmoneans were an honorable Jewish family, their accession to power could not be equated with the bringing in of everlasting righteousness. Their assumption of the high-priesthood was criticized, because (although they were priests) they did not belong to the house of Zadok, which had held that supremely sacred office for eight hundred years, from Solomon to Antiochus. Moreover, they persecuted godly men who (like the Teacher of Righteousness) opposed their policies on religious grounds.

Therefore, when the Roman occupation of Judea began in 63 B.C., the men of Qumran felt that the diminution of Hasmonean power which followed was a divine judgment. But the Romans, though they were the executors of this divine judgment, were not guiltless themselves. They too oppressed the godly, and the men of Qumran had no difficulty in seeing in them the Assyrians of Isaiah and the Chaldeans of Habakkuk and so forth. The events foretold from Daniel 11:36 onwards were about to be unfolded. The unprecedented time of trouble described in Daniel 12:1 was in process of developing. The eschatological warfare against Gog would soon be waged. But in this warfare, they believed, they must play their part.

Accordingly, they set themselves to study the principles of the ancient institution of the holy war in the early books of the Old Testament, and at the same time they studied the principles of contemporary strategy, tactics and weapons in the latest Roman military manuals. The result of their study of these two disparate bodies of literature may be read in the remarkable treatise called the *Rule of War* (also referred to as *The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*). When the hour struck, they would march to the help of the Lord against the mighty. The first target of their attack would be the Roman armies, which would be expelled from Syria and Egypt within six years. The sons of light would then occupy Jerusalem and restore a pure sacrificial worship in the temple under a worthy priesthood. The seventh year would be observed as a sabbatical year, and after that, for thirty-three years, they would wage war against the other ancestral enemies of Israel round about. They would win three battles and lose three, but in the seventh and last battle Michael would stand up for their defense, as was foretold in Daniel 12:1, and final victory would be assured for the righteous cause.

Then would follow the judgment, the resurrection and the Messianic Age.

When the Teacher of Righteousness died before the inauguration of this new order, the belief arose among his followers that he would be raised from the dead in advance of the resurrection of the just in general, to resume and complete his ministry as the forerunner of the Messianic Age. He would, in fact, fill the role which in commoner Jewish expectation was reserved for Elijah. It does not appear, however, that he was identified with Elijah in the way that John the Baptist was. Nor was he identified with another eschatological prophet—the second Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15 ff. This eschatological prophet was one of three figures whose rise, in Qumran expectation, would mark the beginning of the Messianic Age. The other two were a priest

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(the Aaronic Messiah) and a military leader (the Davidic Messiah). Among these three the priestly Messiah would take precedence. Thus the new commonwealth outlined by Ezekiel centuries before would be established; the God of heaven would set up His kingdom, as previously announced by Daniel, which would never be destroyed but would endure forever.

When we read in the Gospels of Simeon, who was “looking for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), of Anna, who was one of those “that were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38), of Joseph of Arimathea, “who was looking for the kingdom of God” (Luke 23:51), we can set these phrases against a richer background than was formerly possible. When John the Baptist, and after him our Lord, called upon their hearers to repent because the kingdom of God had drawn near, they rang an even louder bell in the hearts of the people than we realized at one time.

Several speakers and writers have recently been emphasizing the points of comparison between the messianic beliefs which came to fulfillment in the New Testament and those which found expression in the minds and writings of the Qumran community. Sometimes points of comparison have been exaggerated or even invented. Thus there is no evidence that the Teacher of Righteousness was regarded as a Messiah by himself or by his followers; there is no evidence that he was crucified, or that any atoning significance was attached to his death. Although he was expected to rise from the dead, there is no evidence that he did so rise, or that anyone ever thought he had done so. Again, the Qumran community distinguished

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the figures of the eschatological prophet, priest, and king, whereas Christians have always viewed these three offices as combined and fulfilled in our Lord.

Yet the points of comparison are of the greatest interest. A proper appraisal of them will enable us to appreciate all the more the essential uniqueness of our Lord's person and work. The aching aspirations and hopes of the godly in Israel were not satisfied by the well-intentioned efforts of the Teacher of Righteousness and his disciples. These were doomed to frustration in the disaster of A.D. 70. But the promises of God, in which the godly had trusted, were not involved in that or in any other disaster; for One had appeared who proved Himself to be God's Amen to all His promises and to all His people's hopes. The expectations of the Qumran community, as of all their fellow-Israelites, found their true answer in Jesus of Nazareth.

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A detailed defense of this viewpoint is given in my book, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*,<sup>1</sup> which is about to be published by Eerdmans in the United States and by the Paternoster Press in England.

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