

**RESEARCH PAPER**

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A famous 20<sup>th</sup> century secular author was quoted saying the following about Jesus: “No life in the whole history of man has been so misinterpreted, so woefully misunderstood as Christ's.”<sup>1</sup> Because Jesus is misunderstood, many people have failed to see that he is the messiah, a humble savior who sacrificed his life for the sins of the world. The word messiah means “anointed one” in Hebrew and was the anticipated savior of the Jewish faith that would restore the kingdom of Israel.<sup>2</sup> While different faith communities understood this definition, they still failed to understand who the messiah would eventually be. In the years before Jesus, various historical texts describe the anticipation of a messianic figure who will overthrow the established powers that be. Many expected a warrior king who would usher in a new kingdom by force and might. Instead, the messianic figure came in a way people did not expect. Rather than saving the world through brute force, he saved the world through letting the people he loved crucify him on a cross.<sup>3</sup> The irony of the true messianic figure, as told in the testimony accounts of Scripture, is that he didn't come to condemn the world, but to save it.<sup>4</sup>

Back then and today, people want their own version of the messiah. They want someone who will take down their enemies, but not call them to attention for their own evil deeds. Since Jesus was the messiah no one was expecting, what were people's alternate expectations of a messianic figure throughout history? In this paper, we will describe the true biblical representation of the messiah by looking at different gospel accounts.<sup>5</sup> Then, we will look at one religious community who had a differing view of the messianic figure - the Dead Sea Scroll

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<sup>1</sup> Manolis Papathanassiou, “Quotes by Henry Miller,” Best Quotations, 2022, <https://best-quotations.com/authquotes.php?auth=265>.

<sup>2</sup> T Desmond Alexander; Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 760.

<sup>3</sup> (John 1:11, NIV)

<sup>4</sup> (John 3:17, NIV)

<sup>5</sup> This paper is working under the assumption that the biblical account of the messiah is the true portrayal of the messianic figure.

community in modern day Qumran. Afterwards, we will conclude with a summary of the research discussed in this paper.

How does the Bible's description of the messiah differ from other representations of the messiah, including in the Dead Sea Scroll community? Let's dive in beginning with the biblical account of the messiah.

### **The Unexpected Messiah – The Biblical Interpretation**

Under the assumption that the biblical account is the true depiction of the messianic figure, it is surprising to many that even in the account of the Bible, Jesus is misunderstood. The prophetic and historical books of the Old Testament speak about the messiah in many different ways. While some texts describe the coming messiah as a humble servant<sup>6</sup>, many texts refer to the messianic figure in a manner that paints him to be mighty and domineering.<sup>7</sup> Because of these seemingly differing views combined with the cultural expectations of a king-like figure ruling over the nation, the Jewish people of the time we're likely anticipating something different than they got – a humble servant who was led by his Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit.

Let's see how the messiah was described in the biblical accounts found in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 19:16-22, Jesus has a difficult conversation with a wealthy young man. The young man wants to know what it takes to receive eternal life. To this question Jesus first points to the basic laws of the Hebrew Scripture, which the man confirms that he is following. But then Jesus takes it a step further, "Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'"<sup>8</sup> The young man is devastated because he is not able to give up his substantial amount of wealth in order to follow Jesus.

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<sup>6</sup> (Isaiah 53:3, NIV)

<sup>7</sup> (2 Samuel 7:12-13, Psalm 40:9, Isaiah 8:14, Daniel 7:13-14, NIV)

<sup>8</sup> (Matthew 19:21, NIV)

This passage reveals two things about the messiah. First, this text shows us that the messiah is ushering in a new kingdom that is radically different than the one we live in today. During the time of Jesus, it was commonplace for people to ask Jewish teachers how they could receive eternal life. When the wealthy young man was asking about eternal life, he was referring to “the life of the coming age, thus of the kingdom.”<sup>9</sup> Little did the young man know that this new kingdom he was asking about was not of this world. In the Kingdom of God, material things like wealth, possessions, and status aren’t important. Instead, this new kingdom is founded in storing treasures in heaven<sup>10</sup> and taking part in the redemptive work of God in and through his creation.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond ushering in a new kingdom, this passage also reveals that the messiah fulfills the law for us. When Jesus is commanding the young man to give up everything to follow him, it reveals the length we must go to fulfill the law and live righteously. Like the wealthy young man, none of us can live up to the standard of the law. However, the messianic figure, Jesus Christ, was able to do just that. He fulfilled the law for us so that he could become a sufficient sacrifice for our own sin. In the Oxford Bible Commentary, John Barton and John Muddiman reinforce this idea of Jesus fulfilling the law that we could not. It is through Christ’s righteousness that we receive our salvation, not through our own efforts towards it. They state, “Regarding salvation only God has strength— just as, with regard to goodness, God and human beings belong to different categories.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, we need Jesus in order to attain his righteousness for salvation. As messiah, Jesus fulfilled the law for us.

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener, *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> (Matthew 6:20, NIV)

<sup>11</sup> (2 Corinthians 5:18, NIV)

<sup>12</sup> John Barton; John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Accessed April 19, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central, 870.

This biblical account in Matthew 19 between Jesus and the wealthy young man tells us that the messianic figure of the Bible was not what people were expecting. Instead of a domineering, king-like figure, Jesus was a humble servant who laid down his life so that all people would be saved. The unexpected messiah ushered in a new kingdom that was rooted in reconciliation with God. In addition to ushering in a new kingdom, the misunderstood messiah fulfilled the law for us. Jesus lived a perfect life without sin, and in doing so became sin for us by laying down his life on the cross.

By studying the biblical account of the messiah, we can clearly see that Jesus was not what the Jewish people were expecting. The young wealthy man is just one of many examples of people who encounter the messiah and leave with their limited worldview shattered. If the very ancient text that supports Jesus as the messiah describes how people misunderstood Jesus, then that means that other texts and faith communities also misunderstood the messianic figure they were praying for. For people looking to encounter the true messiah today, it is important to acknowledge that there are many misinterpretations of Jesus. In this next section, we will look at one such example of a misinterpretation – the Dead Sea Scroll community’s prophetic view of the messianic figure.

### **Misrepresenting the Messiah – The Dead Sea Scrolls Interpretation**

If Jesus is the one true messiah, this means that all other interpretations of the messiah are false. While the biblical account of Jesus included an unexpected savior, the Dead Sea Scrolls depiction of the messiah is rooted in a separate set of beliefs that mirror the conservative Jewish sect called the Essenes. In this next section we will look at different documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls to uncover who they believed the messiah would be. We will then compare and contrast their interpretation of the messiah with the biblical interpretation of the messiah.

*1QSa (The Rule of the Congregation)*

The 1QSa was originally a part of the same scroll of the Community Rule and published by D. Barthelemy in 1955. He named the work ‘The Rule of the Congregation’, but the author of *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* has renamed it ‘The Messianic Rule’ because it each commandment is linked to the faith community’s interpretation of the messiah. For example, “it was intended for ‘all the congregation in the *last days*’; (2) it is a Rule for a Community adapted to the requirements of the messianic war against the nations; (3) it refers to the presence of the Priest and the Messiah of Israel at the Council, and at the Meal.”<sup>13</sup> So what does the Rule of the Congregation/Messianic Rule have to say about the sectarian faith community’s view on the messiah?

Within the scroll text the author discusses rules for all people in the last days. The implication here is that the ‘last days’ are when the messiah has come into the world. The text includes a list of community beliefs, organizational structures, and practices for the community to adhere to.<sup>14</sup> The Rule of the Congregation concludes with an overview of how to respond when the messiah arrives in the world. The author states that when the messiah comes, each member of the congregation, “shall sit [before him, each man] in the order of his dignity.”<sup>15</sup> These meals were very significant. Author Jodi Magness documented the textual and archeological evidence for these ritual meals in her book *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. She points out that these meals were eschatological in nature and were meant to be led by “priestly messiah and a messiah of Israel.”<sup>16</sup> To summarize, in this text the

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<sup>13</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 7th ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), 159.

<sup>14</sup> Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Vermes, 161.

<sup>16</sup> Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 218.

community is essentially preparing for how they will present themselves before the messiah at the end times.

*4Q521 (The Messianic Apocalypse)*

The Messianic Apocalypse was discovered with the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran in Cave 4 and was dated back to 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. The writings mirror the biblical text in their description of a savior who will heal and restore his people, including raising the dead back to life.<sup>17</sup> What does this document have to say about the community's interpretation of the messiah?

This text expresses the joy that comes from relying on a salvific figure. The poems are filled with worshipful phrases like, "Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service!"<sup>18</sup> Even though humanity is marked by the evil force of sin, the messiah will help restore those who live in poverty, poor health, or without hope. In the Greco-Roman world around the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, non-Roman elites had good reason to hold onto the messianic promises found in this poem. To use Rome as an example, over a third of the population lived in severe poverty, many of whom were enslaved and lived to cover their immediate needs.<sup>19</sup> With similar social classes in place throughout the Roman Empire, this worshipful poetry would be an encouragement for the Qumran faith community who was awaiting a messiah. Their faith in this savior would give them the gift of hope in their difficulties.

Both the Messianic Rule and the Messianic Apocalypse may not be considered a misrepresentation of the messiah at first read, but after further investigation it is clear that the biblical and Dead Sea Scroll accounts have some significant differences. In this final section of

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<sup>17</sup> Vermes, 412.

<sup>18</sup> Vermes, 412.

<sup>19</sup> James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 118.

the research paper, we will look at the similarities and differences between the biblical and Dead Sea Scroll interpretations of the messiah.

### **Comparing and Contrasting the Christian and Dead Sea Scroll Messianic Beliefs**

The biblical understanding of the true messiah, Jesus Christ, came from encountering an unexpected savior. Rather than a domineering figure who used brute force to usher in a new kingdom, Christ laid down his life for all sinners. How does this messiah compare and contrast with the messianic figure spoken about in the Dead Sea Scrolls? Let's begin by looking at the similarities between the interpretations.

#### *Messianic Similarities*

There is one key similarity between both the biblical and Dead Sea Scroll interpretations of the messiah: both speak of a savior ushering in a new kingdom. Both are expecting a messiah who will deliver Israel from oppression and restore a messianic kingdom forever. For the Christian faith, the Bible tells of prophetic visions of a kingdom that will reign forever through a messianic source. In the Davidic covenant, the prophet Nathan foretells of a second king who will replace David and rule over the nation of Israel and beyond forever.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of a new kingdom that the messiah will bring about when he comes into the world. As it states in the Messianic Apocalypse, "And He will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom. He who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the bent."<sup>21</sup>

While there is a similar theme of the messiah ushering in a new eternal kingdom, the similarities tend to end there. Let's look at the differences between both messianic interpretations.

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<sup>20</sup> (2 Samuel 7:8-29)

<sup>21</sup> Vermes, 412.

### *Messianic Differences*

The differences between the biblical and Dead Sea Scroll interpretations hinge around two topics: eschatology and salvation. First let's talk about the messiah's role in the end times and how both belief systems diverge.

The Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls each have a different interpretation of the messiah's role in the end times. The Dead Sea Scrolls interpretation is more apocalyptic than the biblical interpretation of the messiah. Based on the Messianic Rule, the sectarian community believes that when the messiah comes into the world it will officially mark the end times. Meanwhile, the biblical interpretation of the end times occurs when the messiah returns for a second time. The first entry of the messiah, Jesus Christ, into the world is meant to accomplish the atonement and restoration of believers to God. After Jesus lives, dies, is resurrected, and ascends to heaven, the world then awaits his return to usher in the end times. This is a significant difference in the role of the messiah in eschatology. One believes the messiah will come once, the other believes that the messiah has come and will return.

The Christian community and the Dead Sea Scroll Community also have opposing views on the scope of the messiah's salvific reach. The Dead Sea Scroll community held the belief that the messiah would restore the nation of Israel, limiting the reach of the restoration to the nation of Israel. For example, in the Messianic Rule, the messiah is described multiple times as the "Messiah of Israel"<sup>22</sup> rather than the messiah of the world. While this is a promise that will reach beyond the sectarian sect in Qumran to other Jews in the world, the gentiles remain without a messianic figure.

Meanwhile, the messianic person of Jesus in the New Testament narrative makes a sacrifice that is available to all people. In a letter addressed to the Hebrews, the author writes the

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<sup>22</sup> Vermes, 161.

following universal offering from the messiah: “But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”<sup>23</sup> This grace is not just for the Israelites, but instead for everyone. Another passage in Galatians says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>24</sup> While both camps believe in a messiah coming to save humanity, the Dead Sea Scroll community believes that the saving is only for the Israelites. Thankfully the true messiah, Jesus Christ, extended his saving grace to all people, so that Jew and Gentile are one in Christ Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

The messiah was a beacon of hope for a world tarnished by sin and death. Today, that same hope in a salvific figure can be found in Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament to bring restoration and reconciliation to the world. Jesus is still one of the most misunderstood figures in all of history. The Dead Sea sect is one example of a faith community that had an interpretation of the messiah that failed to anticipate who Jesus actually was. The Christian church today is called to bring clarity and witness to the messiah who has already completed his finished work for all who are willing and able to turn to him in faith. A lot can be learned from researching the Dead Sea Scroll community. They are a reflection of all of us who are longing for hope in a broken world. Let us pray that every community will come to know the true messiah, Jesus Christ, who is our living hope.

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<sup>23</sup> (Hebrews 2:9, NIV)

<sup>24</sup> (Galatians 3:28, NIV)

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