

## Book Review

John J. Collins, *The Scepter, and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Eerdmans, 2010. Pp 298. ISBN: 9780802832238

John J. Collins is a renowned scholar of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism, who has made invaluable contributions to the fields of prophecy, apocalypse, and messianism. One of his most influential works is “The Scepter and the Star” which examines the messianic concepts and expectations of the Qumran community, which shaped the development of Jewish thought in the centuries surrounding the birth of Christianity. The book “The Scepter and the Star” is based on Collins’ analysis of a large corpus of Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the mid-twentieth century in the Judean desert caves near the ancient settlement of Qumran. The Scrolls offer a wealth of information about the religious, social, and political context of Second Temple Judaism, including the emergence of messianic ideas. Collins’ central thesis is that the Qumran community believed in two distinct messiahs: a kingly messiah of the tribe Judah, often referred to as the “Branch of David,” and a priestly messiah of the tribe of Levi, sometimes called the “Teacher of Righteousness.” These two messiahs were seen as complementary figures, each endowed with divine wisdom and power, who would restore the true worship of God and bring about the final redemption of Israel.

Collins born in Ireland in 1946, studied at University College in Dublin before moving to Harvard University for his Ph.D. He has since held positions at several universities, including the University of Chicago and Yale Divinity School, where he retired in 2017 as the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation. Collins has made significant contributions to the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of Jewish texts dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. He is known for his nuanced understanding of the scrolls’ historical context and their potential relevance to both Jewish and Christian traditions. He has authored numerous books and articles on the subject, including *The Apocalyptic Imagination and Beyond the Qumran Community*.

Chapter 1 Messianism and the Scrolls provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of Messianism and its significance within the Dead Sea Scrolls. Collins provides a historical context to help readers understand the importance of Messianism in Jewish thought, and then describes how this concept was interpreted and expanded upon by the writers of scrolls. Collins

describes Messianism as an umbrella term that refers to a variety of Jewish beliefs that revolve around the idea that a chosen leader or figure will one day emerge to lead the Jewish people to salvation. This belief was prevalent in the period that is known as Second Temple Judaism, which Collins explains was marked by political turmoil, foreign occupiers, and the absence of centralized Jewish religious authority. The idea of a Messianic figure became increasingly important as Jews searched for a means of restoring their independence and religious identity. However, Messianism as presented in the Dead Sea Scrolls often went beyond traditional Jewish ideas about a chosen leader. Collins notes that the idea of a Messianic figure in the scrolls was linked to the larger contexts of eschatology and apocalypticism. Eschatology refers to beliefs about the end of the world and the coming of a new era, while apocalypticism describes a genre of literature that imagines the divine intervention that will bring about the end of the world. The authors of the scrolls combined these ideas to create a unique vision of a Messianic figure that was deeply connected to the end of time and coming judgement of God.

In Chapter 4, Collins focuses on the messianic tradition in the Priestly source, which emphasizes the role of Aaron and his descendants in the coming of the messiah. Collins argues that this tradition reflects a tension between two competing messianic visions: one that emphasizes the role of political leadership and another that emphasizes the role of religious purity. According to this tradition, the messiah will be a descendant of Aaron who will restore the priesthood to its rightful position of authority and rule Israel in a just and righteous manner. Collins notes that this messianic vision is closely tied to the concept of the “anointed one” or “mashiach” in Hebrew, which refers to the ritual anointing of a priest or king as a symbol of their divine election. However, Collins also notes that the Priestly source’s messianic vision is not solely focused on political leadership. Rather, the messiah is also seen as a figure who will restore purity and holiness to the temple and the priesthood. This is reflected in the Priestly source’s emphasis on ritual purity and the importance of following the laws of sacrifice and purification. According to Collins, this messianic vision represents a response to the challenges faced by the priesthood in the post-exilic period, when the Temple had been destroyed and the priesthood had lost their traditional role as political leaders.

Collins goes on to examine how these messianic visions are reflected in the figure of the high priest. In the Priestly source, the high priest is both a political and religious leader who is responsible for ensuring the purity of the Temple and the priesthood, as well as leading Israel in matters of governance. However, Collins notes that the Priestly source also emphasizes the importance of the high priest’s belief that messianic leadership is tied to the purity of the priesthood and its ancestral lineage. He also explores the messianic tradition in the Priestly source influenced later Jewish thinking about messiahship. He notes that messianic tradition in the Priestly source was eventually overshadowed by other messianic traditions, such as those found in the Book of Daniel and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Chapter 6, The idea of a throne in the heavens is not unique to Jewish and Christian traditions but predates both by many centuries. Collin points out that the ancient Mesopotamian religion had a pantheon of gods who were believed to reside in heaven and who were thought to have a throne. The concept of a divine throne in heaven was carried on into the Jewish and Christian traditions, where it has played a crucial role in shaping the religious beliefs and practices. The throne in heaven is not only a physical entity but also a symbol of divine authority and power. It represents the place where God sits and rules over the universe, and it is the ultimate source of all power and judgement. The idea of a divine throne in heaven is crucial to the Jewish and Christian beliefs because it is the place where God communicates with his people and where all prayers and supplications are directed. According to Collin, the throne in heaven is also a source of comfort for believers because it represents the place where God's mercy and compassion can be accessed. This especially true in times of trouble when people turn to God for help and guidance. This throne in heaven is seen as a place of refuge, where the faithful can find solace and comfort in the arms of a loving God.

Collins work disputes the widely accepted idea that the Dead Sea Scrolls reflect a definitive rejection of contemporary Jewish leadership. Some scholars have proposed that the Essene sect was a retreating group that considered the current Jewish leadership and temple cult corrupt and unclean. But Collins argues instead that the messianic expectations among the sectaries do not necessarily reflect an outright rejection of worldly authority. Instead, he suggests that the Scrolls show a more nuanced view of contemporary authority, with some sectarians viewing the contemporary priesthood as unworthy while others remain loyal to the Jerusalem temple and its leaders. Collins highlights how the Scrolls reflect the influence of foreign ideas on Jewish messianic thought. He points out that the scrolls contain numerous foreign elements that include, for instance, some ideas from the Persian and Greco Roman mythological traditions.

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