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The Essenes at Qumran: The Concept of a Suffering Messiah

The Essene community of Qumran has been of great interest to many people since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since people have been able to dissect and examine the writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the public has received a more detailed portrayal of the Essene community. This particular community is unique for the fact of their living conditions and beliefs, especially their belief of the messiah that is to come. Instead of the regular singular messiah that Christians celebrate, the Essene community at Qumran believed that there were two messiahs that will come and bring them through the end times. This essay will inform the reader of how the Essene community functioned and give insight to their belief of the two messiahs to come.

The community at Qumran was unique to say the least. They were a smaller “part of the larger Essene movement in Palestine.”¹ According to James Vanderkam’s article on the topic, he estimates there were only 300 at most living in this community. The people believed that the coming of the Messiah would bring atonement for their sins. The leader of this community was someone called the Teacher of Righteousness. This leader as stated in the commentary of Psalm 37, was a priest and his main opponent was the Wicked Priest.² It is thought that the Teacher of Righteousness was occupying the position of high priest in the Temple during 159-152BC. During this time period there was no functioning high priest. It

¹ VanderKam, James C. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994. 99. Print.

² VanderKam, James C. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994. 101-102. Print.

could be very likely that the Teacher of Righteousness took over the Temple for this time period and was ousted when Jonathan Maccabee was appointed high priest. In this case, Jonathan may be the Wicked Priest mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

From this community came the thought of a double messiah. One messiah would be of the priestly variety while the other was a king messiah. Together, these two messiahs would usher in the Day of Judgment. The people of Qumran were waiting for the age where the Law would be fulfilled completely. Both the Law and teaching were of great importance for the Qumran community.³ The people believed that the coming of the Messiah would bring atonement for their sins.⁴ “Then a duly appointed high priest and Davidic prince would discharge their respective functions properly. There are mentions of these dual messiahs in the Damascus document. While this document was first found in Cairo, its roots are established in Qumran.⁵ It was created at Qumran and fragments of it were found to be in caves four and five in addition to being found in Cairo.⁶ The Damascus Document can be frustrating at times just because it covers so many different topics, rambles and digresses on different subjects. This document contains information about the lifestyles of the people of Qumran as well as their beliefs and practices.

³ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 122. Print.

⁴ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 8. Print.

⁵ VanderKam, James C. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994. 117. Print.

⁶ Wise, Michael Owen, Martin G. Abegg, and Edward M. Cook. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: a New Translation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. 49. Print.

In 1QS9:11, “the anointed one of Aaron’ figures beside the anointed one of Israel” demonstrates the idea of the two messiahs.⁷

“The Messiah (or, when the Messiah has been revealed among them: [the Priest,] as head of the entire congregation of Israel, shall enter first trailed by all [his] brot[hers, the Sons of] Aaron, those priests [appointed] to the banquet of the men of reputation. They are to sit be[fore him] by rank. Then the [mess]iah of Israel may en[ter], and the heads of the th[ousands of Israel] are to sit before him by rank, as determined by [each man’s comm]ission in their camps and campaigns.”⁸

This quote from the Dead Sea scrolls clearly states the community’s belief in two separate messiahs. As stated in the Anchor Dictionary Bible, “As expected from a priestly community, the future high priest is by far the most important figure, particularly as teacher of the law and mediator of god’s will.”⁹ This is evident from the fact that the priestly messiah emerges into this feast first, before the messiah of Israel which can be assumed to be the kingly messiah.

The concept of a suffering messiah is very popular in most messianic studies. This concept has developed from Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In this book of the bible, it states

⁷ Herion, Gary A., Astrid B. Beck, and David Noel. Freedman. The Anchor Bible Dictionary. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 783. Print.

⁸ Wise, Michael Owen, Martin G. Abegg, and Edward M. Cook. The Dead Sea Scrolls: a New Translation. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. 147. Print.

⁹ Herion, Gary A., Astrid B. Beck, and David Noel. Freedman. The Anchor Bible Dictionary. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 783. Print.

“Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear. Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; And he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.”¹⁰

Through this bible verse, there has been great discussion on whether the messiah will suffer or not. This debate has been ongoing and new ideas and thoughts keep occurring on the subject.

There are varying opinions by commentators on the Dead Sea Scrolls on whether the Qumran community believed in the concept of a suffering servant for their messiah. There are only a few places where the concept of a suffering messiah in the Qumran community can be expressed. These places occur in 4Q541, in particular fragments 9 and 24. Collins states that the alleged allusions to a suffering messiah in the Scrolls disappear under examination.¹¹ He does not believe that the community believed in a suffering servant. He argues that it is difficult to demonstrate the idea of “the suffering servant in Judaism or the influence of Isaiah 52-53 in the New Testament.”¹²

¹⁰ Senior, Donald, and John J. Collins, eds. *The Catholic Study Bible*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. 989-990. Print.

¹¹ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 126. Print.

¹² Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 123. Print.

Collins uses multiple points to enforce his belief in a non-suffering servant. First, he specifies that the term servant has a different meaning. In this context, he believes that servant is actually a synonym for the word king, either historical or future.¹³ In all the places he turns to for credibility, there is no mention of the word suffering anywhere. Second, Collins claims there are four different servant songs in the book of Isaiah and that only the one including Isaiah 52-53 includes references to a suffering servant. He emphasizes that Isaiah 52-53 is an isolated writing in the servant songs. Here, he attaches to the phrase “the light of the nations” as seen in the Similitudes of Enoch referring to the Son of Man. This phrase is also used in Isaiah 42 and 49 in reference to the servant of the Lord.¹⁴ Collins stresses the fact that the Son of Man was hidden like the servant but did not endure suffering.¹⁵ Third, in the texts of Ezra and Baruch, the messiah dies. In these texts however, there is no relation of suffering to the death of the messiah. Neither of these texts have any sort of relation to Isaiah 53.¹⁶ Finally, some of the servant passages are constructed

¹³ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 123. Print.

¹⁴ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

¹⁵ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

¹⁶ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

messianically in the Targum.¹⁷ This translation of the Hebrew Bible undermines the references to the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53.¹⁸ Collins states that this occurred because of the Christian interpretations of this passage. In order to bring the readers to a more Judaic understanding, the translators might have taken out some of the suffering parts to give themselves distance from the Christian religion. Collins emphasizes that there is no “Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53 in terms of a suffering messiah.”¹⁹

Collins argues that there are only a few places where a suffering messiah can be argued in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These are contained in 4Q541 in fragments 9 and 24. It is stated in fragment 9 that the figure will atone for the children of his generation.²⁰ Instead, he claims that the suffering endured by the servant was of mental pain, not physical as stated in Isaiah. The suffering here looks to be more related to the suffering of the Righteous Teacher rather than the idea of a suffering messiah.²¹ During the messianic age, it seems that some of the people at Qumran believed that after his earthy career and reign, he would be elevated up to an

¹⁷ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

¹⁸ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

¹⁹ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 124. Print

²⁰ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 125. Print

²¹ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 125. Print

eschatological level. This is known from the Habakkuk commentary.²² Since the Righteous Teacher was held in such high esteem while in power at the community of Qumran, it makes sense that the community would correlate his life and teachings into their writings.

Collins does accept the fact that there is such a thing as a suffering messiah in Judaism, just not in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls. He states that this concept came well after the creation of these scrolls and is different in the sense of the suffering messiah in Christianity.²³

On the other hand, Israel Knohl does believe in the Essenes had the concept of a suffering servant. One thing that is different about Knohl is that he takes a somewhat Christian look on the concept of the suffering messiah. He relates that the Qumran messiah was a predecessor for Jesus; the Qumran messiah being the first and Jesus being the second of the two messiahs. Here, Knohl identifies that the Qumran messiah was a man named Menahem. Knohl stresses the fact that Jesus did see himself as the messiah and that “Jesus really was another Paraclete’ – a second Menahem.”²⁴ He drives the point that Jesus was a suffering Messiah just as Menahem

²² Dupont-Sommer, André. *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and the Essenes: New Studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: Macmillan, 1955. 51. Print.

²³ Collins, John J. *The Scepter and the Star: the Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 126. Print

²⁴ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 71. Print.

was and that Jesus resigned himself “to following in the footsteps of his predecessor, the suffering servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”²⁵

In the first chapter of his book, Knohl gives a breakdown of the day in the life of the Qumran messiah.²⁶ In this display, it seems that the Messiah had to keep his identity a secret in his life at the court of Herod. This introduces the concept of the Messianic Secret. He relates the concept of the suffering messiah to the thanksgiving scroll. The only problem with this is that the thanksgiving scroll has been a cause for debate. When it was found, the scroll was in a peculiar condition. Some parts were rolled up individually while others were crumpled and torn. This could mean that someone in the community at Qumran disagreed with the teachings in the scroll. No one knows for sure why these writings were disfigured in such a way.²⁷

Knohl states that in the Thanksgiving Scroll, there is a passage of the suffering servant. He uses both the thanksgiving scroll and the self-glorification hymn in his relation to the suffering servant. He sees connections between the two writings. He relates the messiah mentioned in the thanksgiving hymn to be the same as the speaker of the self-glorification hymn. It can be viewed that the speaker of the self-glorification hymn saw himself in the light of being the suffering servant in Isaiah. He

²⁵ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 50. Print.

²⁶ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 5-11. Print.

²⁷ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 13. Print.

was also regarded as someone whose sufferings had atoned for the sins of the community.²⁸ Here he goes on to discuss the event of Jesus' birth a little after the death of King Herod. He claims that Jesus did in fact see himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah. Knohl also goes into the view that the idea of the suffering servant appeared before the creation of Christianity. He claims it was active in the community at Qumran. He claims that Jesus saw himself this way because he had a predecessor in the messiah of Qumran.²⁹ He believes that although they may not have lived at the same time, the Qumranic Messiah did have some influence over Jesus.

Looking at these two different views on the subject of a suffering messiah at Qumran, I would have to agree with Knohl. Since I am a Christian, it is easier to see Knohl's point of view. Also, I believe his link of the Qumran Messiah and Jesus to be valid. Since the community existed during the period where Jesus was alive, Jesus could have easily been influenced by them due to the fact that he lived in the same region.

The concept of two messiahs was widely accepted in the Jewish faith as well as the community at Qumran. It is through this belief that the people at Qumran developed the idea of a suffering messiah. This suffering messiah was to be their savior and usher in a new messianic age that would bring atonement for their sins. It

²⁸ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 23-24. Print.

²⁹ Knohl, Israel. *The Messiah before Jesus: the Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. 25-26. Print.

would also bring about a new age of law and teaching. This suffering that the messiah was to endure would atone for the sins of the community.