Sherman Lectures 2012
"The Messianic Idea in Judaism Revisited"

A TENTATIVE TAXONOMY OF JEWISH MESSIANISMS

Philip S. Alexander

A. The **methodology** of this taxonomy is similar to that of the Manchester-Durham Typology of Anonymous and Pseudepigraphic Literature of Antiquity. Like it the Inventory of Significant Messianic Motifs (below) has been derived from a corpus of messianic texts. Unlike it, however, the features extracted are not literary, but topoi, motifs, and ideas. In this respect it could be compared with Stith Thompson's, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (rev. and enlarged edn; Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1955-58). Messianisms are presented in a wide variety of literary forms, and do not appear as an identifiable literary genre in the TAPJLA Database. See, e.g., the entry under 2 Baruch.

B. The **Messianic Idea** is defined by 4 interlocking propositions: (1) God not only made the world, but continues actively to govern it, and to work out his purposes within it. (2) Human history is teleological: it is not going round in circles but moving forward to a grand climax when the purposes of God will be realised. (3) God will bring human history to an end. (4) The end ("the Age to Come"/"Days of the Messiah") will be marked by perfection and will put right what is wrong with the present world.

C. **Jewish Messianisms** (i.e. outworkings of the Messianic Idea) can be classified according to: (1) **TIME** – *when* the redemption will take place. (2) **SCENE** – *where* redemptive action takes place. (3) **AGENCY** – *who* performs redemptive acts; and (4) **SCOPE** – *what* will be redeemed.

D. There are three main **Ideal Types** of Jewish Messianism: (1) **Premillennialism**. A classic profile of this would include the following Inventory points: 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1.1, 3.1.2, 3.3.1-2, 4.2. (2) **Postmillennialism**. A classic profile of this would include the following Inventory points: 1.1, 1.3, 2.1.2, 3.3.3, 4.3. (3) **Amillennialism**. A classic profile of this would include the following Inventory points: 1.1, 1.7, 2.2 and/or 2.3, 3.1.1, 4.5. Other Inventory points may be compatible with the basic profiles. E.g. 3.3.1 is compatible with Postmillennialism, provided the work of the Messiah comes to cap and consummate the collective work of others. Some profile points are mutually exclusive, either because they are logically contradictory (e.g. 1.4 *v.* 1.5), or the tension between them is so extreme as to create confusion (e.g. 1.2 *v.* 1.3). Where a given Messianism combines elements from two or more of the Ideal Types, particularly when the combination creates tension or even outright contradiction, it can be classified as **Hybrid**. Many actual Messianisms are marked by greater or lesser degrees of hybridity.

E. **Inventory of Significant Messianic Motifs**

1. **TIME**

1.1 The end is foreordained/fixed
- 1.1.1 The end, though fixed, is not calculable and calculation is forbidden
- 1.1.2 The end, though fixed, is calculable and calculations are made
  - 1.1.2.1 The calculations are precise and mathematical
  - 1.1.2.2 The calculations are presented more vaguely as schemas of history

(e.g., the Four Empires)

1.2 The end will come suddenly and unexpectedly

1.2.1 Though sudden and unexpected there will be signs and portents just before it arrives ("the footsteps of the Messiah")

1.2.1.1 The end will be brought in by catastrophes ("the messianic woes", the "birth-pangs of the messiah")

1.3 The end will come gradually ("like the dawning of the day")

1.4 The end is imminent

1.5 The end is not imminent

1.6 The duration of the end is finite (the millennium)

1.7 The duration of the end is not finite (eternity)

2. **SCENE**

2.1 The locus of redemption will be the present heavens and the present earth

2.1.1 The redemption is effected on earth as a series of events within human history

2.1.1.1 Those events include one or more of the following, though not necessarily in this order (those marked * are already clearly in Tanakh):

2.1.1.1.1 The coming of a Forerunner (Elijah)*

2.1.1.1.2 The Messiah of Ephraim

2.1.1.1.3 The Messiah ben David*

2.1.1.1.4 Antichrist (Armilus)

2.1.1.1.5 Gog and Magog*

2.1.1.1.6 Armageddon*

2.1.1.1.7 The New Jerusalem (including a new Temple)*

2.1.1.1.8 The Ingathering of the Exiles*

2.1.1.1.9 The return of prophecy*

2.1.1.1.9 The Messianic Banquet

2.1.1.1.10 A New Torah*

2.1.1.1.11 The Resurrection of the Dead*

2.1.1.1.11.1 There will a general resurrection

2.1.1.1.11.2 Only the righteous will be resurrected

2.1.1.1.11.3 All Israel will be resurrected

2.1.1.1.11.4 Only righteous Israel will be resurrected

2.1.1.1.12 The Day of Judgement*

2.1.2 The redemption is effected in heaven/the spiritual world as a series of actions and events unseen to human eyes

2.1.2.1 It involves defeat of Satan and demonic forces

2.1.2.2 It involves atonement in the Celestial Temple

2.1.2.3 It involves the reunification of God (the divine marriage)

2.2 The redemption occurs post-mortem (after separation of soul and body) (see 4.1 below)

2.2.1 The soul will undergo a judgement of the grave (*din ha-qever*)

2.2.2 On the basis of this judgement the wicked will be assigned to Gehenna

2.2.2.1 Their punishment in Gehenna will be without end

2.2.2.1 They will suffer for a limited time and then be annihilated

2.2.3 The intermediate will be assigned to purgatory and then, after a limited period of suffering, be transferred to Gan ᶜEden

2.2.4 The righteous will be assigned to Gan ᶜEden and there enjoy a state of bliss

2.2.5 The post-mortem state is the final state: it will not be altered by the end of history

2.2.6 The post-mortem state is an interim/intermediate state, pending the end of history.

2.2.7 At the end of history (i.e. when the treasury of souls has been emptied) the earth will be destroyed

2.3 The locus of redemption will be a new heavens and a new earth: "the world to come" (see 4.1 below)

2.3.1 There will be a general resurrection of the dead

2.3.1.1 This will be "the second resurrection"

2.3.2 The Last Judgement will take place

2.3.3 The wicked will be punished

2.3.3.1 They will be annihilated

2.3.3.2 They will suffer punishment for a limited period and then be annihilated

2.3.3.3 They will suffer punishment eternally (Gehenna, Hell)

2.3.4 The righteous will be eternally rewarded

2.3.4.1 They will enjoy the reward in an embodied state

2.3.4.1.1 Their bodies will be transformed into spiritual bodies suitable for the conditions of eternity

2.3.4.2 Only their souls will enjoy the reward (immortality of the soul)

2.3.5 The old heavens and the old earth will be destroyed and replaced by a new heavens and a new earth, which will last forever

3. **AGENCY**

3.1 God is the agent of redemption

3.1.1 God intervenes directly in the messianic process through miracles (*deus ex machina*)

3.1.2 God uses angels and humans as his agents to effect redemption

3.2 Semi-divine beings/angels act as agents of redemption

3.2.1 There are several angelic agents of redemption

3.2.2 There is one principal angel of redemption (Michael, Mechizedek)

3.2.3 The angel(s) act unseen in heaven/the spiritual world

3.2.4 The angel(s) act visibly on earth within history

3.3 Humans act as agents of redemption

3.3.1 There is one principal human agent of redemption (the Messiah)

3.3.2 There is more than one Messiah (the Messiah son of David, the Messiah of Ephraim, the Aaronic Messiah)

3.3.3 There are multiple human agents of redemption (collective redemption)

3.3.4 The human agent(s) operate(s) in the unseen spiritual world and perform(s) spiritual acts

3.3.5 The human agent(s) operate(s) in the visible world and perform(s) physical acts on the stage of history

4. **SCOPE**

4.1 The scope of redemption will be the individual (see 2.2 and 2.3 above)

4.1.1 The redemption will include both body and soul

4.1.2 The redemption will be only of the soul (the immortality of the soul)

4.2 The scope of redemption will be the Nation of Israel

4.2.1 The redemption will involve the restoration of the Davidic State (the Davidic Model)

4.2.2 The redemption will involve finally the full implementation of the promises to Israel contained in the Sinai Covenant (the Sinai Model)

4.2.3 The redemption will transcend both the Davidic and the Sinai Models (the

Utopian Model)

4.3 The scope of redemption will be humanity at large

4.3.1 The redemption will involve the establishment of a world-order marked by universal justice and peace, and worship of the one true God

4.3.1.1 Israel and the Land of Israel will continue to have a distinct (priestly) role to play in that new world-order

4.3.1.2 Israel will be merged with the other nations and cease to have a distinctive role

4.3.2 The redemption will involve a restoration of the Edenic State (the Paradise Regained/Golden Age/Endzeit-Urzeit Model)

4.3.3 The redemption will transcend the Edenic State (the Utopian Model)

4.4 The scope of redemption will be the natural world (Paradise Regained Model)

4.4.1 It will involve the animal kingdom: animals will once again obey humans (as in Adam's day), and loose their killer instincts ("the lion lying down with the lamb")

4.4.2 It will involve the crops: the earth will be super-fecund and reverse the curse place on Adam that he would work it "in the sweat of his brow."

4.5 The scope of redemption will be the cosmos

4.5.1 The present heavens and earth will be rectified ("cleansed")

4.5.2 The present heavens and earth will be destroyed and replaced by a new heavens and a new earth (see 2.3 above).