

Did Any Pre-Christian Jews Expect a Dying-and-Rising Messiah?

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Abstract

An oft-repeated dogma that ancient Jews could never have imagined a suffering or dying messiah before Christianity should be abandoned. This can be demonstrated by surveying the views of several dozen specialists who have questioned or criticized this dogma from the mid-twentieth century to the present. They all call attention to a considerable amount of evidence that triangulates to the idea of a suffering and dying messiah probably predating Christianity in some circles of Jewish thought. At best, this evidence establishes this conclusion as a fact, but even at worst, it establishes its plausibility as a hypothesis, removing all justification for maintaining any dogma against it. Christianity can then more clearly be seen as a natural emergence from prior Jewish expectations and understanding of Scripture, rather than a radical break from it.

The opinion of a great majority of experts in ancient Judaism has long been that Judaism included (at least on its counter-cultural fringes) a belief that an eschatological messiah would suffer and die before ushering in the end of the world. They agree this belief was extant both before and after Christianity adapted it, and that the evidence for this is extensive even if not always direct. It is therefore difficult to explain why a minority of scholars still adamantly insist that no experts have concluded so, and that there is no evidence of it. This would appear to be a dogma that is eliding the actual state of the literature, and it warrants correction.

The contrary dogma is that “the Jews” would never conceive of a suffering or dying messiah, that they could only countenance a messiah who would be an invincible conquering hero, and therefore the Jewish-Christian innovation of a humiliated and slain messiah is unprecedented, never before comprehended from Scripture. This dogma is entangled in various ancillary dogmas, such as that before the Christians no Jews ever imagined—or even could have imagined—that the so-called “Servant Song” of Isaiah 52–53 was prophetic of the messiah;

likewise, the dying righteous hero of Wisdom 2 and 5, and other passages similar, such as the pierced messiah of Zechariah 12:10. Even Daniel 9, which appears to prophesy a dying “messiah,” will be dismissed as never imagined to be about the messiah until Christianity.

The most ardent example of this dogmatic position comes from Bart Ehrman, who declares that “no Jews would have expected a crucified messiah,” and “no Jew that we know of” would “make up the idea,” nor could they “derive the idea of” a messiah’s “death from Jewish legend and myth” because “Jews had no conception” of it.¹ Yet Ehrman presents no substantial defense of these assertions. First, he appeals to his opinion that it is “crazy” [*sic*] and “blasphemous,” presenting no evidence for either, other than an anachronistic and inapplicable analogy to David Koresh.² Second, he denies that any Jews read Isaiah 53 or Daniel 9 as messianic, insisting “we do not have a single Jewish text prior to” Christianity saying so, indeed “there were” no Jews “who expected” even “a humiliated messiah” of any kind—citing no scholarship on the point (as might have corrected him).³ Ehrman thus concludes “we do not have a shred of evidence” of a prior Jewish belief in a messiah who would suffer and be killed. And third, Ehrman says Paul’s declaring this a “stumbling block” for Jews proves none could countenance it (even though in the very same place, Paul says some did).⁴

A less ardent (but more substantive) defense of this dogma comes from John J. Collins, who declares that “attempts to find precedents in the [Dead Sea] Scrolls for a suffering or dying messiah have, I believe, been misguided” and “the notion of a suffering and dying messiah eventually found a place in Judaism” but “clearly much later.”⁵ Collins addresses very few of the scholars to be surveyed here (only Starcky, Puech, and Wise), is refuted by the remainder, and argues mainly from subjective opinion (and only regarding Isaiah 53 and 4Q541). Nevertheless, his treatment is important enough that anyone wishing to evaluate the state of the question should consult his entire excursus, as it is the only substantial case in print for the dogma that no pre-Christian Jews expected a dying messiah.⁶

Otherwise, this dogma against a pre-Christian dying-messiah tradition appears

1 Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 292, 163, 240.

2 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 163–64.

3 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 165–70 (esp. 165, 168, 170).

4 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 170; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22–24.

5 John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2010), 19 and 147–48. For the corresponding view that Christians must therefore have invented it: John J. Collins and Adela Yarbro Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 80–82, 130–33.

6 Collins, *Scepter and Star*, 140–48.

to be barely more than an assumption.⁷ And even Collins does not present so as to rebut any of the best arguments for it advanced throughout the literature, which leaves his conclusion inadequately justified, and arguably overwhelmed by the actual cases for it that have been made. How or why the overwhelming majority of studies on this question have been ignored or gainsaid may be beyond explanation. But this oversight requires an organized correction, bringing together a complete survey of the numerous studies against this dogma and their findings and reasoning—which will only be briefed here, but future scholars can use this survey to locate and explore further the details of their arguments.

Navigating Definitions

Definitions must first be clarified.

First, we must distinguish the factual from the modal form of the argument. The factual argument would be something like, “some Jews *did* expect a suffering and dying messiah.” One would then argue for this being at least more probable than not (as certainty is never possible, especially on subjects for which records are scarce and problematic). Every scholar arguing this way indicates they also mean *some* Jews thought this, not all or even a majority of them, from whom the Christians may have taken up the notion. On this view, Christians did not invent the idea, but most successfully employed it.

The modal argument, by contrast, does not purport to prove this as a fact, but as a distinct possibility. This would be something like, “some Jews *could have* expected a suffering and dying messiah.” This does not require proving that any did, but rather only that it would be plausible they did, and therefore any *hypothesis* that the Christians did not invent the idea but inherited it (from some forgotten fringe of Jewish interpreters) cannot be said to be impossible or too improbable to credit. This form of the argument seeks only to establish that the conclusion is contextually plausible enough to entertain, and thus cannot be *ruled out*. This is a logically different position than the factual argument. To say we cannot rule out a hypothesis is not the same thing as saying the hypothesis is true, or that it is false. A middle possibility remains: *that we do not know*. So, we cannot shut the door on either conclusion.

Therefore, even if you are not convinced the evidence makes the conclusion *probable*, you might still be convinced by that same evidence to concede that this conclusion is at least *plausible*. That would suffice to justify rejecting all dogmatic claims to the effect of “that is impossible,” and therefore that no Jews,

7 For example, Géza Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet: Positive Eschatological Protagonists of the Qumran Library* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 66, 114–15, 143; Albert Hogeterp, *Expectations of the End: A Comparative Traditio-Historical Study of Eschatological, Apocalyptic and Messianic Ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 427.

not even a fringe minority of them, “could possibly” have thought this (a position Collins appears receptive to, but that Ehrman definitely is not). One is then left to admit that this could have happened, even if one believes insufficient evidence survives to be sure.

Second, we must also avoid hyper-defining our words to avoid a conclusion. Dogmas might be defended by defining a word so narrowly as to eliminate the subject altogether, and then pretending broader definitions do not exist or cannot be applicable. For example, if one defines “messiah” so narrowly as to *only* mean “a supernaturally invincible military hero,” then you have simply constructed a circular argument, defining out of existence all other possible conceptions of a messiah. In truth, before Christianity, Jewish messianism was very diverse and subject to continuous innovation. As Dietmar Neufeld puts it, “contrary to traditional assumptions of a ubiquitous and consistent messianism in early Judaism,” many “studies have pointed out that messianism was a fluid and diverse phenomenon.”⁸ In the words of Matthew Novenson, the very term “messiah” is “notable primarily for its indeterminacy,” because “the diverse strands of messianism in ancient Judaism” arise by interpreting the same “scriptural source texts in a number of different ways.”⁹ The messiah could be a priestly figure, a kingly figure, a messenger or prophet, or any combination; they could be an actual celestial being (as in the *Melchizedek Scroll*), or an ordinary man elected by God; there could even be two messiahs working in succession; and either could be a great warrior, or an agent of peace who will conquer the world with words and not weapons (as depicted in the *Psalms of Solomon* 17.21–40).¹⁰ What an “anointed” figure may represent to interpreters of prophecy could vary even in extant writings, and we can expect it would vary even more among interpreters whose views have not chanced to survive in the record, particularly as very little has survived at all. Even Bart Ehrman asks “how would we know” a belief was not held by “every” ancient person when so little survives to tell us.¹¹ Hence the difference between arguing “they did” and arguing “they could have.”

8 In Craig Evans and Peter Flint, eds., *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120–21. Among concurring studies: Matthew Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Magnus Zetterholm, ed., *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); James Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerbern Oegema, eds., *Qumran-Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); James Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green, Ernest Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

9 Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*, 41, 177, 61.

10 Each of these is discussed in Charlesworth et al., *Qumran-Messianism*, esp. 63–66, 88–90, and 183; as well as across the studies cited here in n. 8 (including the two-messiah tradition, to be discussed more shortly).

11 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 193.

The Jewish term “messiah” means “anointed” (*mashiah* / *christos*) and could refer to many kinds of figures, from priests and kings to mere prophets. The only thing that distinguishes a “messiah” relevant to the origins of Christianity is whether they were substantively connected to the *eschaton*, the “end of the world,” however conceived. “The” messiah is then any “anointed one” (whether priest, king, prophet, servant, or elect) who plays an essential part in bringing about this new revolutionary end-state. On the more supernatural end of this field of imagination were Jewish sects expecting this end-state to be accompanied by the overthrow of all ungodly powers and the resurrection of the dead. Christianity emerged from this line of thought.

Therefore, here we should understand “messiah” to mean any man who is believed to have been chosen (hence “anointed”) by the Hebrew God to play an essential part in God’s plan to liberate his Chosen People from their oppressors and restore or institute God’s true religion. This means: persons “anointed” in any sense then understood (literally, figuratively, cosmically, or symbolically); “liberate” in any sense genuinely believed (whether physically or spiritually); “oppressors” in any sense then identified (whoever or whatever they may be); “religion” in its fullest sense (cult, mores, sacred knowledge, and the resulting social order); and “play a part” only as such, not necessarily meaning “bring to fruition.” As mentioned, there is evidence of a double-messiah tradition within Judaism, whereby there are *two* eschatological messiahs, not just one, and both play crucial roles in bringing about the final outcome. We should not discount either messiah in such systems of thought; both are “the” messiah in the relevant sense here.

Third, one can distinguish the concepts of “dying” and “suffering.” There can be a suffering but not dying messiah (who perhaps suffers a palpable fear or risk of death but does not die). And there could be a dying but not suffering messiah (who perhaps dies in his sleep or gloriously on the battlefield, rather than suffering some worse end). We do know the “righteous suffering hero” was a common Jewish trope,¹² into which a messiah could easily be cast, just like the “atoning” death-by-crucifixion of the Maccabean martyrs.¹³ But this study will forefront the aspect of *dying*.

12 George Nickelsburg, “The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (January–April 1980): 153–84; John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (vol. 1; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 167–71; Thomas Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 191–93.

13 Jarvis Williams, *Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul’s Theology of Atonement: Did Martyr Theology Shape Paul’s Conception of Jesus’s Death?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), esp. 53–63, 72–84; and Daniel Stökl ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

Finally, since “the resurrection of all God’s chosen” was inherent to the system of Jewish thought that Christianity arose from, we need not prove a belief that the messiah, so defined, would be *resurrected* if slain. If any resurrectionist sect of Jews (like the Christians) believed the messiah would die (or indeed had to die, to effect God’s plans), they would have also believed God would resurrect him. This was also supported by the same scriptures that could inspire an expectation of his dying (for example, Dan 9:25–26 in light of Dan 12:1–3, and Isa 53:4–10 in light of Isa 53:11–12). So, it is not the resurrection of a messiah that any resurrectionist Jews would doubt, but his dying.

Common Themes

Before surveying specific scholars’ arguments, some underlying themes common to many or all of them should be understood. Supporting argumentation, along with a contextualization of passages in their respective periods, and other matters essential that space is lacking to detail here, can be found in the studies surveyed. The following is meant only as a summary.

First, there is actually no evidence of any universal Jewish hostility toward a suffering or dying messiah. That claim has been largely conjectural or hypothetical, not directly factual. The existence of Jewish factions expecting the messiah to be a straightforward military victor is beyond doubt. But as just noted (citing Neufeld, Novenson, Charlesworth, Evans, and others), there was a considerable diversity of Jewish messianic expectations, such that the presence of one model cannot evince the absence of others.

Second, it is commonly thought that the authors of Daniel 9:24–27 assigned the death of the “messiah” (the beloved high priest) Onias III as a sign of the looming apocalypse—to be followed, according to Daniel 12, by a triumphant messianic figure, the Archangel Michael.¹⁴ This arguably established a precedent for intercalating dying hero-messiahs into prophetic-apocalyptic timetables that could have inspired Christians, reinterpreting the same material to refer to their man rather than Onias. Because the “end” did not come according to the originally intended timetable matching Onias, requiring later Jewish interpreters to ascertain what *future* figure must have been intended. As I will show, many scholars find hints of this in the Dead Sea Scrolls, establishing multiple precedents

14 Though it is not an element of the present analysis, that an equation of Michael with Jesus (as well as with a Melchizedek figure, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, with whom Jesus was also associated in Hebrews 5–7) could date back to the earliest Christian interpreters has been argued by Darrell Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Tradition and Angel Christology in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011); and a pre-Christian connection between Michael and Melchizedek has been argued by Michael Flowers, “The Two Messiahs and Melchizedek in 11QMelchizedek,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 7 (2016): 194–227; and Rick Van de Water, “Michael or Yhwh? Toward Identifying Melchizedek in 11Q13,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16.1 (2006): 75–86, among others.

for later Christians to draw upon. Because “all pesharim” found there “deal with prophetic biblical texts” but “interpret them as referring to their author’s own time or to the eschaton,” thus not following their originally intended sense.¹⁵

For example, some scholars see this happening to Daniel 9 in the fragmentary text of 11Q13 (the Melchizedek Scroll). In the second column of this text, lines 17–18, we are told the “messenger” who brings the good news in Isaiah 52:7 is the “Anointed One of the spirit, concerning whom Daniel said...” at which point the text is damaged, but it must continue with some part of either Daniel 9:25 or 9:26—most likely 9:25 (“until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens’ and sixty-two ‘sevens’...” NIV), but possibly implicating 9:26 (“After the sixty-two ‘sevens,’ the Anointed One will be put to death...” NIV).¹⁶

Those who argue this note that the preceding material in 11Q13 establish that this is a discussion of the last years of the apocalypse in the timetable of Daniel 9, so this can no longer have been understood by these authors as meaning Onias III (much less *anyone* centuries earlier), but some other figure in the future or more recent past, who will appear just a few years before the end of the world. Many of the scholars we will examine argue that the author(s) of 11Q13 can therefore only have understood the “anointed” in Daniel 9:25 to be the same person as the “anointed” killed in Daniel 9:26, and thus did indeed mean that the “messiah” who brings “the good news” will be killed, and thereby signal that the end times have begun.¹⁷ This might even have been explicitly discussed in lost sections of this text, which would establish the precedent Christians later co-opted. For example, in accord with Daniel 9, in earliest Christian imagination (1 Cor 15:20–25), Jesus was regarded as “the firstfruits” of the resurrection of all, and therefore his death-and-resurrection was originally regarded, and marketed, as a sign of the apocalypse (originally the intended function of the death of Onias).¹⁸

15 Aharon Shemesh, “Biblical Exegesis and Interpretations from Qumran to the Rabbis,” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans 2012), 467–89 (468). Concurring, and in particular with respect to Daniel 9: Paul Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1981) 21, 49–50, 98; Dean Ulrich, “How Early Judaism Read Daniel 9:24–27,” *Old Testament Essays* 27.3 (January 2014): 1062–83; and other scholars to be examined here.

16 I will survey the scholars who make this argument shortly, but for general background on this manuscript and its textual issues, see: Alex Jassen, *Mediating the Divine: Prophecy and Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 90–95; John Sietze Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 277–91; Géza Vermès, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (7th ed.; New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 532–33; and Christian Metzenthin, *Jesaja-Auslegung in Qumran* (Zurich: TVZ, 2010), 314–23.

17 Experts here surveyed also argue the authors of 11Q13 saw the messenger of Isaiah 52:7 to be the Suffering Servant of 52:13ff.

18 By contrast, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, early post-Christian texts sometimes cited as attesting a Jewish belief in a dying messiah (e.g. Collins, *Scepter*, 147), are rarely used as evidence owing to their uncertain scale of Christian editing. I will therefore not consider them. See Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 142–44.

Third, the Suffering Servant prophecy of Isaiah 52–53 can have had many interpretations, varying from its original intent as a poetic-figurative description of Israel's liberation by Cyrus the Great, to a moral outline for suffering righteous heroes generally, to an actual prophecy of a future hero or even messiah.¹⁹ Scholars present evidence that each of these interpretations existed in different corners of Jewish thought even before the talmudic era. The same can be said for other passages, such as the suffering righteous hero in Wisdom 2 and 5. Many scholars find intertextual relationships among all three texts (Isa 52–53; Dan 9–12; and Wisdom 2 and 5), suggesting even the authors of Daniel and Wisdom were aware of, and using, these alternative interpretations of the Fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13–53:12).²⁰

Fourth, in the Talmud, there is no resistance at all to the idea of a suffering or dying messiah, or a messianic interpretation of the Fourth Servant Song, but ready acceptance. Despite hundreds of disputes recorded across the Talmud, none are on this. References to it are instead made as if it were so widely accepted that no explanation was even required.²¹ Many of the scholars soon to be cited conclude that in *b. Sanhedrin* 98b, it is said the messiah will be “burdened” with “afflictions like millstones,” attesting an uncontested assumption of his suffering. Likewise, in *b. Sanhedrin* 93b, it is said the messiah will be called “the leper” because, quoting Isaiah 53:4, “Indeed, our illnesses he did bear and our pains he endured; yet we did esteem him injured, stricken by God, and afflicted.” This passage is cited to adduce one of the messiah’s “names,” but the fact that it was assumed the Fourth Servant Song could provide such information entails it was assumed the Fourth Servant Song was about the messiah.

19 For example, there are Qumran manuscripts of Isaiah that say the suffering “servant” in Isaiah 53 shall be “anointed” by God and then “pierced through for our transgressions” as discussed in Martin Hengel (with Daniel Bailey), “The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 75–146 (103–05). Hengel notes the text of Isaiah 53:10 in 1QIsa^a reads “pierced” rather than “bruised,” the text of Isaiah 53:5 reads that he is “pierced through for our transgressions” rather than merely “wounded” for them, and the text of Isaiah 52:14 describes God having “anointed” his appearance “beyond that of any man.” See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Sacrificial Life and Death of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12),” *Vetus Testamentum* 66.1 (2016): 1–14.

20 That Wisdom 2 and 5 interpret Isaiah 52–53 is a common view now: Michael Stone and George Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism: Texts and Documents on Faith and Piety* (Minneapolis: Fortress, rev. ed., 2009), 133–37; Daniel Bailey, “Suffering Servant,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1257; and John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 1998), 186, who cites many scholars concurring; likewise, the intertextual relationship between Daniel 9–12 and Isaiah 52–53: Matthias Henze, “The Use of Scripture in the Book of Daniel,” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 298.

21 I shall employ translations from the Online Sefaria Project at <https://www.sefaria.org>. The scholars cited later provide translations that do not relevantly differ.

The Talmud also describes a dying messiah without contest: *b. Sukkah* 52a records a dispute over the subject of a certain eulogy, and one possibility offered is that it is for the “Messiah ben Joseph” who will be “killed in the war of Gog from the land of Magog prior to the ultimate redemption with the coming of Messiah ben David,” describing a two-messiah model of the apocalypse, whereby the death of one sets the stage for the coming of the other, marking the end of the world.²² There it is declared “this would be the meaning of that which is written in that context: ‘And they shall look unto Me because they have thrust him through; and they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for his only son,’” quoting Zechariah 12:10, used by early Christians to the same point.²³ Hints of this two-messiah tradition appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls (explicitly in IQS 9:11 and 1Q28a 2:11–21, and implicitly elsewhere), suggesting it was an old and evolving concept.²⁴ And in the Talmud, it is clear one of them will be killed.

It might be noticed that both messiahs have appellations shared by Jesus: Son of David and Son of Joseph. If an interpreter reimagined these as the same person, one the resurrected form of the other, we would have the Christian belief. It is less probable that Rabbinical Jews elaborately split the Christian messiah into two rather than Christians merging an already existing pair, suggesting these beliefs predated Christianity. The Talmud certainly evinces no evidence that any of this was derived from Christianity (whether the appellations, the expected death, or messianic understandings of Zech 12 and Isa 52–53). That can only be conjectured; and conjectures should not be confused for facts. As we shall see, many scholars argue the evidence more supports the Talmud preserving ancient ideas that separately influenced both Christianity and talmudic discourse, instead of radical post-Christian changes to Jewish messianism borrowing from (or even lending unwanted support to) a disapproved heresy against Judaism, and without this ever raising dispute or comment.

22 See: John Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 40–66; and Marshall Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 120–38.

23 See: Christopher Tuckett, “Zechariah 12:10 and the New Testament,” in *The Book of Zechariah and Its Influence* (ed. Christopher Tuckett; London: Routledge, 2013), 111–22.

24 Several scholars assessing this evidence see in it a possible exegesis of Zechariah 6:9–13. Besides the discussion in Johnson, *Purpose*, Flowers, “Two Messiahs,” and Evans and Flint, *Eschatology*, 121–22, see also: Peter Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale Allison, Jr and John Dominic Crossan; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 110–31; Evans and Flint, *Eschatology*, 5–6; Florentino García Martínez and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds., *Qumranica minora*, Vol. II (Boston: Brill, 2007), 13–32; J. Liver, “The Doctrine of the Two Messiahs in Sectarian Literature in the Time of the Second Commonwealth,” *Harvard Theological Review* 52.3 (1959):149–85; K.G. Kuhn, “The Two Messiahs of Aaron and Israel,” *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; New York: Harper, 1957), 54–64. Although doubts are raised in L.D. Hurst, “Did Qumran Expect Two Messiahs?,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9 (1999): 157–80, they depend on an over-specific definition of “messiah.”

And finally, the fact that talmudic compilers so easily developed a dying-messiah concept of their own (independently or not) demonstrates there was no Jewish hostility to the idea. Indeed, the Talmud evinces none at all, not even in any remembered discourse from the Tannaitic period or earlier. So, however one might react to scholars concluding that the evidence establishes such ideas *probably* predate Christianity, it remains hard to deny that the talmudic readiness to adopt them demonstrates how easily this *could* have been the case that far back. If it were plausible for Talmudic Jews, it would have been so for pre-Christian Jews. As the transformation of the Maccabean martyrs into atoning heroic deaths already evinces, the two historical contexts did not relevantly differ in their effect on such thinking. Hence, many scholars see this mindset emerging already in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Survey of Scholars Questioning the Dogma

I will now survey the scholars challenging this dogma and succinctly brief their arguments. In each case, I will break convention by listing their credentials, because it is a mode of argument often employed in defense of a popular dogma to dismiss scholars challenging it on the grounds of their supposed “incompetence” in the relevant languages, materials, or methodologies, or even their inadequate “prestige,” even though that should not matter.²⁵

The most important studies are either the most recent (as they update, survey, and integrate prior results) or the most cited (thus being the studies others have most built upon). So, I will begin with those. I will then move back in time to all known studies concurring to illustrate the length of time these views have been held and the number of experts agreeing, which further demonstrates this is not some new radical revisionism. It has been defended and maintained for decades, without relent, by a large and diverse scholarship.

Baseline Examples

I will start with a representative example: David Mitchell, who has a PhD in the Hebrew Bible from New College, Edinburgh. Mitchell produced an extensive

25 For accounts of such tactics: Philip Davies, “Did Jesus Exist?” *The Bible and Interpretation* (August 2012) at <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/dav368029>; Justin Meggitt, “‘More ingenious than Learned’? Examining the Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus,” *New Testament Studies* 65.4 (2019): 443–60; Tom Dykstra, “Ehrman and Brodie on Whether Jesus Existed: A Cautionary Tale about the State of Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 8.1 (2015): 1–32; Lester Grabbe, “The Case of the Corrupting Consensus,” in *Between Evidence and Ideology: Essays on the History of Ancient Israel Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and the Oud Testamentisch Werkgezelschap Lincoln, July 2009* (Bob Becking and Lester Grabbe, Leiden: Brill, 2010), 83–92.

study, *Messiah ben Joseph*, to considerable expert praise.²⁶ His endorsers include: the author of its foreword, Robert Gordon, emeritus professor of Hebrew at Cambridge; Alan Avery-Peck, professor of Judaic studies at Holy Cross and editor of the *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*; Mart-Jan Paul, professor of Old Testament at ETF Leuven; Michael Heiser, a PhD in Hebrew and Semitic studies having held many related appointments and professorships; Evangelical scholars L. Michael Morales, with a PhD in Old Testament from Trinity College, UK, who has held seminary professorships in biblical studies, and Michael L. Brown, a PhD in Near Eastern languages and literature from NYU, also with seminary professorships; and Lester Grabbe, retired professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism from the University of Hull with a PhD in religion from Claremont Graduate University and an extensive publication record in the subject of early Judaism.

Mitchell argues that the modern belief that this messianic concept derived later (such as from the disappointing experience of Bar Kochba) is not based on evidence but only conjecture,²⁷ whereas a preponderance of evidence indicates the idea long predates that. Mitchell triangulates to this conclusion from a wide range of evidence, persuading many professors of Jewish studies to concur that this is plausible or probable. Mitchell's evidence ranges beyond the talmudic passages to include material from the Dead Sea Scrolls and their (and others') uses and interpretations of Isaiah 53, and argues that the Melchizedek Scroll "may not be the only Qumran text to feature a dying messianic figure."²⁸ His point of reference is the two-messiah tradition, the one (Son of Joseph) who dies harbingering the one (Son of David) who comes to resurrect him.²⁹

More often cited is Daniel Boyarin, professor of talmudic culture at UC Berkeley with a PhD in talmudic studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who wrote that the "commonplace view" that dying-messiah interpretations of Isaiah 53 were a Christian innovation unprecedented in Judaism "has to be rejected completely," because "the notion of the humiliated and suffering messiah was not at all alien within Judaism before Jesus," and even "remained current among Jews" well after, proving "Jews, it seems, had no difficulty whatever with understanding a Messiah who would vicariously suffer to redeem the world."³⁰

26 David Mitchell, *Messiah ben Joseph* (Glasgow, Scotland: Campbell Publishers, 2016). For the reviewing scholars named see <https://brightmorningstar.org/publications/messiah-ben-joseph>.

27 For example: Collins, *Scepter*, 147–48. Derivation from bar Kochba makes little sense given that he was deemed a false messiah (*b. Sanh.* 93b) and thus not a model for one: Richard Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

28 Mitchell, *Messiah*, 100–01.

29 Some of Mitchell's findings were previously published in David Mitchell, "Rabbi Dosa and the Rabbis Differ: Messiah ben Joseph in the Babylonian Talmud," *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 8.4 (January 2005): 77–90.

30 Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 132–33.

Boyarin adds that “there is no evidence at all that any late ancient Jews read Isaiah 52–53 as referring to anyone but the messiah,” whereas there are “several attestations” of their reading it messianically.³¹

Mitchell and Boyarin are talmudic specialists. But they note that experts in the Dead Sea Scrolls have reached similar conclusions. One often cited is Timothy Lim, professor of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism at the University of Edinburgh, a noted expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Lim concurs that 11Q13 refers to a dying messiah who would presage the end of the world, and who cannot there be understood anymore as Onias, a conclusion that has the support of Geza Vermès.³² Lim concludes that “what 11QMelch does is to link the dying prince/messiah of Dan 9 to the herald of Isa 52:7” in a final apocalyptic timetable. He concedes this is debatable, and lists reasons for its uncertainty, but he affirms, nevertheless, that “what is unassailable is that in Dan 9:25ff. there is a figure who is described as ‘an anointed one’ and ‘a priest,’ whose appearance is connected with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and who after sixty-two weeks of years is cut off or killed (cf. Dan 11:22),” thus heralding the imminent end of the world. Mitchell cites Lim on this point, and Craig Evans concurs, concluding that in 11Q13 it “seems that the anointed one who comes proclaiming the year of the YHWH’s (or Melchizedek’s) favor will be killed.”³³

Perhaps most cited is Martin Hengel, a professor of New Testament studies at the Universities of Erlanger and Tübingen, of which the latter had previously awarded him the PhD in Judaic studies. Hengel’s conclusion came with the assistance of Daniel Bailey, a PhD in New Testament studies from the University of Cambridge.³⁴ Hengel and Bailey argue that “the demonstrated uses and echoes” of Isaiah 52–53 in early Judaism “are enough to suggest that traditions of suffering and atoning eschatological messianic figures were current in Palestinian Judaism, and that Jesus and the earliest Church *could* have known and appealed to them” [*sic*]. They conclude “this would explain” how the Christian conception “would be comprehensible to their Jewish contemporaries.”³⁵ These earlier concepts could even have included “a Messiah ben Joseph or Messiah from Ephraim who

31 Boyarin, *Jewish Gospels*, 152–53.

32 Vermès elected Lim to add the appendix to Geza Vermès, “The Oxford Forum for Qumran Research Seminar on the Rule of War from Cave 4 (4Q285),” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992): 90–92, entitled “11QMelch, Luke 4 and the Dying Messiah.” Vermès also approvingly mentions the dying “Messiah ben Joseph” in the Talmud.

33 Craig Evans, “From Gospel to Gospel: The Function of Isaiah in the New Testament,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* (ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1997), vol. 2, 651–91 (659–60).

34 Hengel, “Effective History.”

35 Hengel, “Effective History,” 75, 146.

ultimately dies.”³⁶ Others convinced of this overall point include Craig Blomberg and Etienne Nodet.³⁷

Hengel and Bailey agree these ideas “might” post-date one of the Jewish Wars, but they “could also be significantly older,” as Mitchell also argues. More assuredly, they find interconnections between Isaiah 53 and Wisdom 2 and 5.³⁸ They note both are pre-Christian texts depicting a heroic “chosen one” dying but being exalted and effecting God’s ultimate messianic plans in some way. They also agree that Daniel 9 already set up a model for a dying-messiah eschatology.³⁹ And across their entire study, they locate a range of other evidence for early Jewish thinking along these lines, concluding:

The expectation of an eschatological suffering savior figure connected with Isaiah 53 cannot therefore be proven to exist with absolute certainty and in a clearly outlined form in pre-Christian Judaism. Nevertheless, a lot of indices that must be taken seriously in texts of very different provenance suggest that these types of expectations could also have existed at the margins, next to many others. This would then explain how a suffering or dying Messiah surfaces in various forms with the Tannaim of the second century C.E., and why Isaiah 53 is clearly interpreted messianically in the Targum and rabbinic texts.⁴⁰

A different approach to the same conclusion is taken by George Brooke, a renowned scrolls specialist, member of the Israel Antiquities Authority’s international team of editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, founding editor of *Dead Sea Discoveries*, and a past president of the British Association for Jewish Studies, with a PhD in religion from Claremont Graduate School and a DDiv from Oxford, as well as being a professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester. Brooke argues that we cannot be certain the reference to Daniel 9:25 in 11Q13 meant to implicate as well the following verse, 9:26, but “it is possible” it does, and so 11Q13 “should be viewed as providing much of the exegetical background ... allowing for the early Christian development of the motif of a dying messiah.”⁴¹

Brooke also cites Lim on this point. But he goes further. In his chapter on “The Use of Isaiah in 4Q541,” the *Apocryphon on Levi* in which Brooke is a leading expert, he argues “it may be possible to construe” even that text as “speaking of

36 Hengel, “Effective History,” 77, 139.

37 Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 79; Etienne Nodet, *Le fils de dieu: procès de Jésus et évangiles* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 167, 199–202.

38 Hengel, “Effective History,” 101, 130.

39 Hengel, “Effective History,” 137.

40 Hengel, “Effective History,” 140.

41 George Brooke, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 160–61.

the death” of an “eschatological figure as Isaiah 53 could itself be construed” to do, “possibly even a death by crucifixion.”⁴² When we link this with 11Q13, he notes, the atoning role of that death can also be inferred. Hence Brooke concludes regarding 4Q541 that “it now seems that there is a Jewish text whose author used the Servant passages of Isaiah to support the understanding that there was to be an eschatological priest who would suffer, possibly even that the suffering involved death, death that would lead to joyous benefits for others,” proving an early messianic reading of Isaiah 52–53 even more affirmatively, he says, than Hengel argued.⁴³ Thus Brooke thinks the first Christians co-opted (not invented) “already existing traditions about the suffering of the eschatological Servant priest (-Messiah) to explain” the fate of Jesus.⁴⁴

Recent Experts Concurring

Those authors are representative of the expert literature. But a complete list must include many more, some stating their concurrence and others arguing for it. I shall survey known examples from the most recent publications to the oldest, beginning with the present century.

Gabriele Boccaccini, founding director of the Enoch Seminar and once professor of Second Temple Judaism and Christian Origins at the University of Michigan, with a PhD in Judaic studies from the University of Turin, wrote that “the idea that the messiah could suffer and die was not foreign to the Jewish tradition,” citing Boyarin.⁴⁵

John Goldingay, once a professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, with a PhD in Old Testament studies from the University of Nottingham and a DDiv from the Church of England, in one of the most recent commentaries on Daniel, writes that whatever the original (evidently failed) prophetic intent of the author(s) of Daniel 9 had been, in subsequent transmission and reinterpretation, given the received “punctuation of v. 25a in the ancient versions” it is “probably the same ‘anointed’ as in v. 26, one who appears after seven plus sixty-two sevens” who was understood to be killed; and he explains why grammatical arguments to

42 Brooke, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 150–51. 4Q541 is cited by many other scholars here briefed; but it must be distinguished from another text argued as attesting a dying messiah, 4Q285, which is widely agreed to be too ambiguous: see Martin Abegg, “Messianic Hope and 4Q285: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (Spring 1994): 81–91; Vermès, “Oxford Forum”; and Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet*, 64–68.

43 Brooke, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 152–54.

44 Brooke, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 155–57. Brooke concludes Bruce Chilton also “posit[ed] (now apparently with some vindication) that there was a pre-Christian messianic Servant” in Isa 52–53 (Brooke, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 152 n. 24). Chilton will be discussed shortly.

45 Gabriele Boccaccini, *Paul’s Three Paths to Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 101.

the contrary do not carry weight.⁴⁶ He thus considers early dying-messiah interpretations of the text plausible, if uncertain.

Joseph Angel, professor of Bible and Jewish history at Yeshiva University, an expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish Apocrypha, with a PhD in Hebrew and Judaic studies from NYU, argues, like Brooke, that 4Q541 suggests a pre-Christian dying-messiah concept was already constructed from Isaiah 52–53, because “the trajectory of this figure’s experience,” including “his universal significance, the association of his mission with the removal of darkness, ridicule and abuse, perhaps violent suffering, even death, and positive results for others,” all “appears to be modeled on that of Isaiah’s servant” and “this is corroborated by extensive linguistic and thematic links with the Servant Songs” as well as this figure’s declared “atoning function” (e.g., 4Q541:2: “And he will atone for all the children of his generation”). In consequence, “several scholars have thus seen evidence in 4Q541 for the notion of a suffering messiah in pre-Christian Judaism,” citing Brooke (among others).⁴⁷

Anathea Portier-Young, a professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, with a PhD in religion from Duke University (majoring in Hebrew), argues that Daniel 9 was deliberately written to articulate such an interpretation of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52–53, and thus its authors already understood these passages to reflect messianic expectations—albeit, she argues, collectively in the body of the “enlighteners” (the elect): the one who suffers and dies being a model for the end-time fate of these righteous few as a whole, possibly even with an apocalyptic atoning function similar to the Maccabean martyrs tradition, which of course would be rewarded with resurrection.⁴⁸ Hence, a pre-Christian package of apocalyptic atoning-death heroism based on these texts was already in place to adapt to any specific messiah later interpreters (like the Christians) may have wanted.

Dean Ulrich, with two PhDs—in theology from Westminster Theological

46 John Goldingay, *Daniel* (World Biblical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 261–62. That the “messiahs” of verses 25 and 26 of Dan 9 later came to be seen as the same person is agreed by others here mentioned, since at least the time of Joseph Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Missoula: SBL, 1974), vol. 1, 138 (see also 119–20 and 251–58).

47 Joseph Angel, “Enoch, Jesus, and the Priestly Tradition,” in *Enoch and the Synoptic Gospels: Reminiscences, Allusions, Intertextuality* (ed. L.T. Stuckenbruck and G. Boccaccini; Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 285–316 (299). Besides 4Q541, Angel also finds allusions to Isaiah 53:3 in the “Self-Glorification Hymn” (4Q491). And he finds the critique of such positions in Collins, *Scepter and Star*, to be undermined by the findings in Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “Fasting with Jews, Thinking with Scapegoats: Some Remarks on Yom Kippur in Early Judaism and Christianity, in Particular 4Q541, Barnabas 7, Matthew 27 and Acts 27,” in *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretations in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. Thomas Hieke and Tobias Nicklas; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 163–87.

48 Anathea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 272–76.

Seminary and in biblical studies from North-West University—concludes that regardless of which verse is cited in 11Q13, “the anointed one of Daniel 9:26 seems to be in view,” the one that verse says will be “cut off,” and although this part of Daniel originally referred to people in the past, the author of 11Q13 “evidently expects a recapitulation of messianic suffering in the near future,” hence expecting another dying messiah to come.⁴⁹

Sook-Young Kim, an expert on ancient Hebrew and messianism with a PhD in New Testament from Andrews University Theological Seminary, and professor of theology at Avondale College, agrees that 11Q13 refers to “the Messiah who would be cut off in Dan 9:25–26,” citing Lim as attesting to the possibility there of “a reference to the dying Messiah.”⁵⁰ She also finds (as other scholars have) that Daniel 9 is based on (and represents an interpretation of) Isaiah 53, and that Isaiah 53 was thus by some taken as a messianic text delineating an apocalyptic model whereby, “contrary to the customary way” of imagining a messiah as “conducting war with military weapons,” this messiah “takes a different way of achieving supremacy, namely through suffering, humiliation, and death,” locating similar themes in the book of Enoch as well.⁵¹

John Bergsma, professor of theology at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, with a PhD in theology from the University of Notre Dame, a noted specialist in the Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls, makes the point (like several others here surveyed) that 11Q13 purveys an end-times prophecy entailing an understanding that Daniel 9:25 must be referring to the same messiah who dies in Daniel 9:26, regardless of whether it quoted verse 25 or not (and regardless of what the original author(s) of Daniel intended).⁵² Bergsma then argues that this must be the ultimate messiah, Melchizedek himself.⁵³ He also cites Lim concluding that 11Q13 links “the dying prince/messiah of Dan 9 to the herald of Isa 52:7.”⁵⁴

Rick Van de Water, a Catholic priest and widely published expert in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism, concludes that 11Q13 indeed means to indicate that the messiah referenced in Daniel 9 verses 25 and 26 is supposed to be understood as the same man. He then notes “that he is said to be the Anointed One ‘cut off’ (Dan 9.26), moreover, implies his death,” and “since the ‘cutting off’ of Daniel’s Messiah is associated with ‘atonement for sin,’” it “is not

49 Ulrich, “How Early Judaism,” 1071.

50 Sook-Young Kim, *The Warrior Messiah in Scripture and Intertestamental Writings* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010), 263 (cf. 226) and 146 n. 244 (a republication of her Andrews dissertation).

51 Kim, *Warrior Messiah*, 80–82 (cf. 263).

52 Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 282–83, 288–89.

53 Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 289–90.

54 Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 283 n. 80.

inconceivable that the death of Melchizedek,” the messianic figure described by 11Q13, “was taken to be the act of expiation delivering ‘those of his lot’ from” an ill end and therefore “the elaborate collage of biblical images in 11 QMelch argues that its full text presented Melchizedek, not only as a heavenly priestly Messiah, but also as a human suffering Messiah.”⁵⁵ Of course, we needn’t assume this dying messiah had to be Melchizedek himself, given the availability of a two-messiah model (one dying, one triumphant); but several of the scholars here cited do believe these particular figures were already being regarded as the same.

Marshall Johnson, with a PhD in biblical studies from Union Seminary in New York and a former director of Fortress Press and lecturer at the University of Bergen, agrees that the two-messiah tradition that evolved into later Medieval traditions of a dying “Messiah ben Joseph” followed by a resurrecting “Messiah ben David” (as per Mitchell) could be evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵⁶ And Brant Pitre, professor of Scripture at the Augustine Institute with a PhD in theology from the University of Notre Dame and specializing in ancient Judaism, finds the dying messiah element to be obvious already in Daniel 9. After a detailed analysis of that text, he concludes “it is inexplicable” why anyone disagrees with this observation.⁵⁷

Israel Knohl, professor of biblical studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he also received his PhD, observes that “one could also find confirmation of the killing of the messiah in Daniel,” as well as in the Talmud.⁵⁸ Knohl approvingly cites as an example “the Messiah, son of Joseph, who was” to be “killed in the war of redemption and was” then “destined to be resurrected.”⁵⁹ He also notes that Jerome reports in his *Commentary on Daniel* that some Jews indeed regarded Daniel 9:26 as messianic.⁶⁰ And he adduces evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls that “the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was not discovered in the Christian Church” but “was already developed” at Qumran, where “a catastrophic model of messianism based on verses of the Bible” was developed by members who “believed that the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah were a necessary basis for the process of redemption,” and all through a messianic reading of Isaiah 53.⁶¹ Knohl suspects the sectarians at Qumran might already have applied this to a revered member of their own community; of course a century

55 Rick Van de Water, “Michael or Yhwh?,” 83.

56 Johnson, *Purpose*, 129–38.

57 Brant James Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 402.

58 Israel Knohl, *The Messiah Before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 120 n. 61.

59 Knohl, *Messiah*, 74.

60 Knohl, *Messiah*, 74. One could say the same of Josephus (see Beckwith, below).

61 Knohl, *Messiah*, 26, 48, and *passim*.

later, with the end not having come, such a conclusion would need to have been abandoned, and a new subject sought, opening an opportunity to the Christians.

Experts from the Last Century

In the nineties, Michael Wise, professor of the Hebrew Bible and ancient languages at the University of Northwestern St. Paul, an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, with two PhDs—in Jewish studies from the University of Chicago, and in classics from the University of Minnesota—made a case for a historical pre-Christian dying messiah similar to Knohl's, showing strong links between the "Thanksgiving Hymns" at Qumran and Isaiah's Servant Songs, and arguing for a messianic understanding of both (links that several other scholars here cited also make).⁶² Wise argues 11Q13 must be referencing the messiah of Daniel 9:26, perhaps by abbreviation (whether the lemma quoted is verse 9:25 or not), because the "Anointed One" it refers to can only be someone in the last days, not someone hundreds of years before.⁶³ Hence, Wise concludes "they found predicted in Daniel 9:24–27 the death of an Anointed One, a messiah."⁶⁴ The same point has been made by Roger Beckwith and others (below).

Owing to Daniel 9's original scheme implicating a dying "priestly" messiah (to fit Onias), many scholars connect that idea with an anticipation of a priestly messiah who must die as part of God's final plan. Florentino García Martínez, a professor of religion and literature of early Judaism and director of the Qumran Institute at the University of Groningen, previous professor of literature of early Judaism at the University of Leuven, editorial secretary of the *Revue de Qumran*, and editor in chief of the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, argues similarly to Brooke and others that the Qumran text 4Q541 "shows us that the portrayal of [a] 'Messiah-priest' with the features of the 'Suffering Servant' of Deutero-Isaiah

62 Michael Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999).

63 Wise, *First Messiah*, 227–29. The idea that a pesher like 11Q13 could cite one verse and intend to implicate adjacent verses is sometimes denied, but this is actually a well known procedure in the pesharim. Shani Berrin, *The Pesher Nahum Scroll from Qumran: An Exegetical Study of 4Q169* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 28, says "atomization" is just "one possible approach to the biblical context" that pesharim employ, whereas another is "contextual correspondence," where the "impact of the content of the base-text upon the pesher" is evident. Maurya P. Horgan, *Pesharim: Qumran Interpretations of Biblical Books* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1979), 245–46, gives several examples of a pesher citing one verse but intending preceding or following verses to be understood as well, concluding that in general pesharim are often "referring back to an earlier lemma or anticipating a following lemma," and sometimes a "pesher refers not to the immediately preceding lemma but to an earlier citation," and "there are places where part of the pesher seems to be based on a following lemma" or "anticipating" material "in the next lemma." See also Timothy Lim, *Holy Scripture in the Qumran Commentaries and Pauline Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 49.

64 Wise, *First Messiah*, 232, and in 223–24, Wise finds intertextual links and messianic intent in 1QH 26:2–10 and 1QH 12:25 (referencing Isa 53:2–3), the so-called "Hymn of the Exalted One" (also known as the "Thanksgiving Hymns").

is not an innovation of” the Christians “but the result of previous developments,” and “it cannot be excluded that the Aramaic text even contained the idea of the violent death of this ‘Messiah-priest.’”⁶⁵ A few years before this, Émile Puech, a Dead Sea Scrolls scholar with a PhD in biblical studies from the Catholic University of Paris at the School of Ancient Oriental Languages, argued something like the thesis of García Martínez, and is also cited approvingly by Brooke.⁶⁶

In the eighties, Roy Rosenberg, a rabbi and graduate of Hebrew Union College with a considerable publication record, agreed “a slain Messiah is spelled out very clearly in Dan 9:26” which “says that the ‘Messiah will be cut off and will be no more,’” and that post-Danielic Jews saw the “messiah” in Daniel 9, verses 25 and 26, to be the same person.⁶⁷ He also avers that “a ritualistic mourning for a slain Messiah is referred to in Zach. 12,10–11,” and he notes “there are some rabbinic texts that speak of a ‘Messiah ben Joseph’ who will perish in the War of Gog and Magog,” citing not only *b. Sukkah* 52, but also a Targum of Zechariah 12. He argues that a concurrence of vocabulary across these and other messianic passages would have made it “quite simple for [Jewish] exegetes to identify” that figure as the messiah and conclude “it was the destiny of the Davidic Messiah to flourish for a time, and then be cut down,” a view he thinks later transferred to the Josephite messiah.⁶⁸ He concludes that such a “sectarian exegesis of scripture brought forth the doctrine of a slain Messiah” before the Christian sect took it up.

Likewise, Sydney Page, a Professor of New Testament at Taylor Seminary, surveyed the evidence for a pre-Christian notion of a suffering or even dying messiah and concluded that while it cannot be conclusively proved, “the denial of the possibility of such a conception having been entertained before the time of Christ is unwarranted.”⁶⁹

Likewise Bruce Chilton, professor of Religion at Bard College and formerly professor of New Testament at Yale, with a PhD in New Testament from Cambridge University, and an expert in Aramaic, argued against simply assuming that a dying-messiah interpretation of Isaiah 53 “cannot” be a pre-Christian

65 Florentino García Martínez, “Messianic Hopes in the Qumran Writings,” in *The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Florentino García Martínez and Julio Barrera; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 159–90 (170–72). See Chilton, below.

66 Émile Puech, “Fragments d’un apocryphe de Levi et le personnage christologique. 4QTestLevi^{a-d(?)} et 4QAJ,” *The Madrid Qumran Congress*, ed. Julio Treballe Barrera and Luis Vegas Montaner (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 449–501.

67 Roy Rosenberg, “The Slain Messiah in the Old Testament,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987) 259–61.

68 It could also be the other way around. The dispute as to which messiah dies (and whether they were switched at any point) is a subject of Boyarin’s *Jewish Gospels*.

69 Sydney Page, “The Suffering Servant between the Testaments,” *New Testament Studies* 31.4 (1985): 481–497 (493).

development in Judaism.⁷⁰ He derives this from the Targum on Isaiah 53 by the early-first-century CE Jonathan ben Uzziel (traditionally a student of Hillel and a contemporary of Shammai, both contemporaneous with Jesus), also cited by Hengel, which explicitly identifies its “suffering servant” as the messiah, while otherwise transforming the narrative to suppress or downplay the element of his dying.⁷¹ But even this indicates a messianic understanding of the passage was current, which means other interpreters could well have read the original Hebrew text that way, too. Hence Chilton clarifies that he isn’t saying, for example, that the Targumic re-phrasing of the prophecy in Isaiah 53 “unequivocally means the messiah did die, but merely that it is susceptible of the interpretation that he did so.” Therefore such a pre-Christian development is plausible, and thus its denial cannot be used to date developments in the interpretation of Isaiah. Of course, Brooke and Mitchell and others think the case for this is even stronger now than Chilton did, moving the ball from “possibly” to “probably.”

Then we have Roger Beckwith, an Oxford librarian with an impressive publication record and a DDiv from Oxford University, who made a similar point regarding the interpreters of Daniel 9 in 11Q13 (which relies on the timetable described in Daniel 9), and elsewhere. Beckwith says, “since they are looking to the future, they concentrate their attention on the concluding part of the 70-week period, and expect ‘the anointed one, the prince’ of verse 25 not after the 7 weeks” there listed “but after the 7 weeks and 62 weeks (i.e., 69 weeks)” there listed, and “as a consequence, they usually identify ‘the anointed one, the prince’ with ‘the anointed one’ who is cut off after the 62 weeks in verse 26,” therefore formulating a dying-messiah eschatology well before Christianity came along.⁷²

In the sixties, Jean Starcky, another Dead Sea Scrolls specialist with advanced degrees from the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Rome and the École Biblique

70 Bruce Chilton, *The Glory of Israel: The Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1982), 94.

71 Chilton acknowledges there are many issues regarding the transmission history of this text, but he is not alone in concluding this reading is early: concurring is Jintae Kim, “Targum Isaiah 53 and the New Testament Concept of Atonement,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 5 (2008): 81–98, with Jintae Kim, “The Concept of Atonement in the Fourth Servant Song in the LXX,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 8 (2011–2012): 21–33. Likewise, Jostein Ådna, in “The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah,” in Janowski and Stuhlmacher, *Suffering Servant*, 189–224 (191 and 219–220), notes the possibility that an earlier version preserved the original text’s ‘death’ and it was edited later in hostile response to Christianity (transferring that fate to “the wicked”; while the extant text’s description of the messiah, as receiving rewards “because he handed over his soul to death,” was then ‘reinterpreted’ as only his facing a *risk* of death).

72 Roger Beckwith, “Daniel 9 and the Date of the Messiah’s Coming in Essene, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Zealot, and Early Christian Computation,” *Revue de Qumrân* 10.4 (December 1981): 521–42.

in Jerusalem, also argued a similar thesis to García Martínez, and is also cited approvingly by Brooke.⁷³

In the fifties, William Brownlee, a Dead Sea Scrolls scholar and professor of religion at Claremont Graduate School and Director of their Dead Sea Scrolls Project, with a PhD in religion from Duke University, argued that Daniel 9:24–27 was a reinterpretation of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, linking its dying messiah with the Suffering Servant and the murdered hero of Zechariah 12:10, particularly in light of variant readings in Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which, he argues, set the entire stage for later Christian readings of these texts.⁷⁴

Finally, Harold Luis Ginsberg, once a professor of biblical literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, with a PhD in biblical literature from the University of London, argued an early form of the thesis developed by Portier-Young, establishing the plausibility of the Christian model already being a going idea circulating in Jewish thought, whereby anyone who models “the Servant” can be expected to be killed but resurrected and exalted, possibly thereby having atoned “for the many” by their willing deaths—a model then easily applied to any hero, like an eschatological messiah.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Other scholars influenced by this literature could be added to the list. I myself, with a PhD in ancient history from Columbia University, and Raphael Lataster, with a PhD in religious studies from the University of Sydney, have both argued to the same conclusion.⁷⁶ Likewise Jason Staples, a professor of religious studies at NC State with a PhD from UNC-Chapel Hill, who affirmed the same conclusion in a dissertation approved by Bart Ehrman, then published as a monograph.⁷⁷ There, Staples declares that “the oft-repeated dictum that there is no evidence for the concept of a suffering and dying ‘anointed one’ or of a messianic interpretation of the Suffering Servant in pre-Christian Judaism is therefore mistaken,” citing Brownlee, Ginsburg, and Goldingay.⁷⁸ This is a more forceful conclusion than that

73 Jean Starcky, “Les quatre étapes du messianisme à Qumrân,” *Revue Biblique* 70 (1963): 492.

74 William Brownlee, “The Servant of the Lord in the Qumran Scrolls,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 132 (December 1953): 8–15.

75 Harold Luis Ginsberg, “The Oldest Interpretation of the Suffering Servant,” *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (October 1953): 25–28.

76 Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield-Phoenix 2014), 73–87; Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 94–99.

77 Jason Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Israelite Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

78 Staples, *Idea of Israel*, 163 n. 79.

of, for example, Otto Betz thirty years before, who already then admitted to this being *possible*.⁷⁹

That makes now Mitchell, Boyarin, Lim, Hengel, Bailey, Brooke, Boccaccini, Goldingay, Angel, Portier-Young, Ulrich, Sook-Young Kim, Bergsma, Van de Water, Johnson, Pitre, Knohl, Wise, García Martínez, Puech, Rosenberg, Page, Chilton, Beckwith, Starcky, Brownlee, Ginsberg, Carrier, Lataster, and Staples all affirming the dogma should be abandoned, either factually or modally. Together, they present a significant body of evidence for that conclusion. And concurring that this conclusion is at least plausible (or even probable) includes, as well, Gordon, Avery-Peck, Paul, Heiser, Morales, Brown, Bailey, Grabbe, Betz, Evans, Ådna, Jintae Kim, and Blomberg, Nodet, and Vermès. That totals almost four dozen scholars, nearly all experts in Hebrew studies generally or the Dead Sea Scrolls specifically. If we include the peer-reviewers who must have approved these arguments for publication, then we must add dozens more to the number of scholars agreeing it is at least *plausible* that the dogma Staples denounced is indeed as false as he avers. How many do we need before we conclude that that dogma should be abandoned?

If we add to all this that none of these dozens of studies (not even from those dissenting, such as Ehrman and Collins) ever locate any evidence of universal opposition to a dying-messiah schema (that is always simply presumed), then we are left with no basis on which to even assert that dogma. Why, then, should we continue to? We should instead conclude that in this detail, as in so many others, Christianity began as a sect of Judaism that evolved out of pre-existing Jewish thought; it was not a radical break from it.

79 Otto Betz, "The Servant Tradition of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Journal for Semitics* 7.1 (January 1995): 40–56.