



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2013.01.01

Shirley Lucas, *The Concept of Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity*. Library of Second Temple Studies 78. London: T&T Clark, 2011. \$110. ISBN: 978-0567583840.

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The perceived disjunction between Judaism's hope for a political, liberating messiah and Christianity's belief in an incarnate, atoning deity has throughout history provided a convenient reference point for gauging theological difference between these historically related religions. To this contrast in belief corresponds a divergence in hermeneutics: each religious community has, at least prior to our ecumenical era, accused the other of misreading (what Christians call) the Old Testament. Since the Epistle of Barnabas, if not the Letter to the Hebrews, Christian theology has inspired Christological interpretations, in turn provoking the allegation that Jews misunderstand their own sacred texts. But their dogmatically-shaped reading left Christians open to the same charge: it is they who have misinterpreted the Scriptures they claim to own.

Common to both sides is the supposition—sometimes implicit, sometimes not—that Jesus did not fulfill the messianic expectations of his contemporaries. They expected one kind of messiah; Jesus was something different. Because anticipation and perceived fulfillment do not match, a true interpretation of Scripture can legitimate only one. Therefore either Judaism or Christianity must fail to read correctly the messianic promises.

Shirley Lucass wants to breakthrough this deadlock with an ambitious proposition: the presentation of Christ set forth by the New Testament, including its incipient theology of incarnation, has roots in the earliest traditions of Israel. Far from being an alien imposition on Jewish tradition, Christological dogma originated in the royal-messianic ideology promulgated already during the united monarchy. She presents this thesis over the course of nine chapters.

In the opening two chapters (“The Question, the State of the Question, and the Approach” and “Jewish Writers in Dialogue”), Lucass lays out the issue and selects her conversation partners. She poses the question, Is it possible to claim that Jesus was a plausible Messiah in such a way that the integrity of both Christianity and Judaism remain intact? Several Jewish scholars say no. Those selected for dialogue are Samuel Sandmel, Joseph Klausner, Hyman Maycoby, and Geza Vermes, with occasional participation from Jacob Neusner and David Novak. According to these writers, Jesus was not the Messiah because he did not match any of the properly understood

criteria concerning the messiah's identity (a strictly human military and political figure) or role (the liberation of Jews from foreign oppression and the institution of national autonomy). Lucass sets out to counter these conclusions with the claim that the sacral (atoning) and divine elements that Christianity credits to Jesus as the Christ were derived not from a Hellenistic environment but from the earliest Jewish tradition itself.

Chapter three, "Kingship in the Ancient Near East," explores the ideology of kingship as expressed in the mythology of several cultures surrounding ancient Israel. In it, Lucass establishes the existence of a royal ideology throughout the ANE which celebrates the king as a nearly divine figure procuring the blessings for his people. To establish this, Lucass relies heavily on the "myth and ritual" school. Scholars associated with this approach argue that ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies were enacted in a ritual enthronement ceremony carried out as part of an annual New Year festival. If this practice was widespread (and Lucass finds it in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Palestinian societies), it provides *prima facie* support for the existence of similar rituals in ancient Israel.

Turning to the psalms in chapter four, "Kingship in the Hebrew Scriptures: The Psalms," Lucass uses this ANE background to correlate mythic poetry describing Yahweh's triumph over chaos with the New Year enthronement festival alleged to have occurred in the Jerusalem Temple. At this sacred event, the king acts as Yahweh's representative who vicariously creates the world, defeats chaos, and establishes order. He thereby makes effective Yahweh's presence and ensures wellbeing for the coming year. Integral aspects of this ceremony are a ritualized humiliation and enthronement. Lucass invests a great deal of her argument in a twofold identification which some readers might wish to contest. First, in cultic action the king's person is absorbed into that of the divinity whose creative acts he re-presents and makes effective, and second, the king's ordeal is expressed through the psalms of lament whose humiliated and vindicated "I" he dramatizes.

Next, in "Kingship in the Hebrew Scriptures: The Prophets," Lucass traces how this royal ideology developed once the monarchy ended. On the one hand, the king's role was democratized and carried on by the prophets and the people. Through Torah observance they secured the blessings he previously offered. On the other hand, the mediating role he played fell to alternative figures. Two in particular assumed this function: the high priest and the Suffering Servant. Both made atonement for the people through vicarious self-sacrifice. In the case of the High Priest, Lucass claims, this occurs on the Day of Atonement through his simultaneous identification with Yahweh on the one hand and the scapegoat on the other, a further set of controversial associations.

The discussion of the High Priest continues in chapter six, "The Anointed in the Second Temple Period: The High Priest." This mediator not only represents God but achieves divine status in his performance of the cult. Particularly important for Lucass is the role he plays in the Day of Atonement and the Passover, especially before the latter was historicized by its late association with the Exodus. In these festivals the god Yahweh is symbolically ingested in communal meals / apotropaic rituals which insure fertility and peace, the same blessings once provided by the king.

Lucass surveys the rise of messianic expectation in chapter seven, “The Anointed in the Second Temple Period: The Son of Man.” Here she argues that the Similitudes of Enoch and the book of Daniel develop the notion that the ruler of Yahweh’s people is a heavenly being closely identified with Yahweh himself. Lucass grants that, unlike the figure of the Suffering Servant or the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, the Son of Man endures no suffering equivalent to the humiliation of the king in New Year festival. However, he does embody the kingship in its more positive aspects: judgment, order, dominion, and abundance.

Lucass turns in chapter 8, “The Messiah in the New Testament,” to the New Testament and its presentation of Jesus. Her intention here is not only to survey how the canonical Christian writings claim that Jesus was the expected Messiah but also to relate the content of these claims to the specific royal theology explored in the previous chapters. As the king and priest were in various ways both identified with and distinguished from the deity, so too is Jesus. As the royal mythology provided the template for the roles or figures of the Suffering Servant, the Passover lamb, and the High Priest, so too Jesus as Messiah fills these various interrelated typologies. The point of this exercise is not a mere apologetic representation of early Christian claims (a possible reading to which Lucass is sensitive) but the demonstration that a cross-section of first century Jews believed that Jesus had fulfilled the criteria they themselves held to be sufficient qualifications for messianic status.

Lucass’s goal in these chapters is not to break new ground but to provide the foundation for her central issue: if the Christian doctrine of incarnation has its origin in the messianic ideology of ancient Israel, what results obtain for Jewish-Christian dialogue? If the single most divisive issue between the two religions actually has roots in their shared heritage, what implications arise for mutual understanding? This is the topic of the final chapter, “Implications for Dialogue.” Lucass argues here that the results of her study require Jews to recognize Christianity as an authentic development of Jewish messianic expectations, while Christians must acknowledge that Jews in their worship of Yahweh are actually venerating the one revealed as Jesus in the New Testament. Lest this latter point be perceived as a subtle form of theological hegemony, Lucass is quick to assert the practical results: no proselytizing. Here, as throughout, she shows sensitivity towards the problematic history of Jewish-Christian relations, something she knows cannot be erased by gestures of goodwill.

The study closes by contravening Jacob Neusner’s statement that either Judaism or Christianity must fall if Jesus is—or is not—the Messiah. To the contrary, Lucass argues, Jesus is the Messiah and the truth of this claim sustains rather than threatens the integrity of Judaism. Her conclusions suggest that Christianity is less a distinct Abrahamic faith than a permutation of Judaism existing alongside Reform, Conservative, and especially Orthodox manifestations. This is the most daring though unstated implication of her argument: not only early Christianity but orthodox, creedal Christianity needs to be reincorporated into the pluriform tradition known as Judaism.

If Lucass is right, early—and later!—beliefs formulated about Jesus by his followers were not alien seeds blown over from a Hellenistic field but organic developments from the rich soil of ancient Judaism. She therefore joins a dialogue being carried out, in diverse ways, by Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, Charles Gieschen, and others. These scholars find incarnational antecedents in

speculation concerning exalted mediators common among early Jewish mystical and apocalyptic groups, concluding that early worship of Jesus reflects a modification but not a subversion of Jewish monotheism.

Although these projects share clear formal similarities, Lucass advances the discussion with a twofold contribution. First, she locates the divine antecedent in the very concept of the messiah rather than in a divinized high priest, a hypostasized wisdom, or an enthroned angel. Second, Lucass moves beyond historical investigation to explicit interfaith dialogue. She wants to meet Jewish objections against the claim of Jesus' messianic status, pushing the question, Are scholars taking seriously the diversity of Second Temple Judaism for interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews, particularly as this diversity affects the relation between early Judaism's messianic expectations (plural) and Christianity's doctrines about Christ? For my own part, this was the most fascinating aspect of Lucass's study. She places theological and confessional issues in the center of dialogue and recognizes that a Christianity (and, presumably, a Judaism) whose content has been evacuated by a prior commitment to religious relativism is a Christianity not worth dialoguing with or about.

The intriguing thesis and provocative conclusions presented in this monograph ensure that readers will profit from a careful reading. There are, however, criticisms that need to be raised. I will organize mine according to material and methodological categories.

First, Lucass advances an argument on the theological as well as the historical level, and it is therefore appropriate to voice theological concerns. There is in my estimation a significant lacuna in her strategy to make the messiahship of Jesus plausible. She argues that the claims asserted on his behalf by himself and / or by early Jewish followers fit the pattern of divine royalty celebrated in the ancient New Year festival. The natural objection arises, But how can Jesus be the messiah if the messianic age has not dawned? This is a frequent theme voiced by the Jewish interlocutors Lucass identified in ch. 2. In response, she appeals to the two-stage eschatology of early Christianity and its focus on the consummation of Jesus' mission in the Second Coming: what remains lacking in his messianic office will be fulfilled in the eschaton.

What does not figure in her answer is the resurrection. The possibility that early followers of Jesus pioneered a new messianic awareness precisely because they experienced the risen Christ in their presence is not considered. By ignoring this significant source of early Christian beliefs about Jesus' status and role, Lucass must resort to an ancient enthronement festival whose gravitational pull is so strong that it draws to itself every major religious and literary tradition of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus steps forth as the point of singularity, already in his ministry the locus where these traditions are concentrated most intensely. If Lucass allowed the resurrection to play a generative role in forming belief in Jesus' messiahship, she might be relieved of the need to load so much weight on a single religious element.

This leads to my second criticism: methodological overreach. In her attempt to discover the roots of developed Christology in the rites of ancient Israel, Lucass argues that the royal mythology and its cultic enactment provide the fountainhead for patterns, motifs, and even stories percolating throughout the Hebrew Bible. The Day of Atonement, the mediatory role of the prophets, the Suffering Servant, the psalms of lament, the Spring and Fall festivals, and even the

narratives of the Exodus and of Jonah were all influenced and in some cases directly shaped by the enthronement festival and its mythic drama. The lines of connection are sometimes drawn too thin to be persuasive (see, e.g., pp. 90, 112). When Lucass connects the bronze sea in the Temple courtyard, the overwhelming waters which submerge the afflicted psalmist, the Red Sea crossed during the Exodus, and the primordial chaos threatening creation, she is not merely drawing attention to intersecting literary and religious motifs. She is arguing, rather, that all of these elements share a common origin in an alleged ritual immersion undergone by the king during the New Year ceremony. Another series of posited connections: the king, Isaiah's Servant, and Jonah all suffer as a sacrifice accompanied by lots (a common feature emphasized by Lucass), a sacrifice which, as a kind of humiliation imposed by Yahweh, provides the pattern for prophetic sign acts like Ezekiel's divinely mandated repose on his left side (pp. 108-12). Or again, the Day of Atonement originally involved the symbolic eating of divine flesh, flesh equated in the minds of the participants with the body of the high priest, in turn represented by the eaten carcass of the goat; hence, Lucass proposes, the high priest may have said something like, "Take, eat; this is my body" (pp. 135-36; a similar argument is made for the Passover).

One example illustrates particularly well this tendency to grasp at vague parallels as evidence of substantive influence. Lucass, observing that Christian writers have frequently applied cosmic imagery (rising sun, shining stars) to Jesus, refers to "later [i.e., post-canonical] tradition" that applies Mal 4:2 to Jesus. This later tradition consists of Melito of Sardis's Baptismal Fragment (c. AD 170) and "a traditional Christmas hymn by Charles Wesley dated to 1739" (Lucass is referring to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"). The appearance of Mal 4:2 in these two sources "suggests this allusion had been passed down through tradition" (p. 170) At this point the argument begins to undercut rather than advance the thesis. Lucass could better sustain her claims, I think, with less speculation.

A further area in need of greater methodological precision is the author's explicit recourse to a canonical interpretation in her chapter on the New Testament. With this hermeneutical turn, Lucass attempts to validate a synthetic approach in which diverse claims about Christ are homogenized so that the final Christological presentation is recognizably confessional. She justifies this method by pointing to the fact that this is how Christianity has read its Bible, and she is interested in a dialogue between two religions, not a critically-reconstructed history behind one of them. This strategy can perhaps be sustained, and I certainly am not opposed to it in principle. Yet it sits uncomfortably among the other chapters. In these, Lucass's method though somewhat inclusive was not at all canonical. In fact, given her repeated claim that the Bible's final editor's pushed out the royal ideology present at an earlier period of Israel's history (e.g., p. 66), the operating suppositions would seem to be anti-canonical. This transition to a very different approach requires a significant reorientation on the part of the reader.

These criticisms do not by any means call into question the value of this book. It is provocative, ambitious, and impassioned. In it, Lucass raises a profound question for Jews and Christians seeking to understand a difficult past and hope for a shared future: at what point should the recent "re-Judaization" of early Christianity be extended to later manifestations and perhaps even contemporary forms? This issue deserves a place on the agenda of future Jewish-Christian dialogue.