

The Messiah Son of Joseph

“Gabriel’s Revelation” and the birth of a new messianic model

By Israel Knohl

Sidebar: “Gabriel’s Revelation” in English Translation by Israel Knohl



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A DEAD SEA SCROLL IN STONE. The text is written in two columns of ink and dates to the late first century B.C.E. or the first century C.E. much like the Dead Sea Scrolls. The stone itself measures 3 feet long. Although some of the words are difficult to read, the text, known as “Gabriel’s Revelation,” is clearly apocalyptic in nature. As author Israel Knohl discusses, references in the text reflect the Jewish roots of early Christian messianism.

A new inscription, recently published in **BAR** for the first time in English,^a may hold the key to unlocking a new understanding of some of the history of Christian and Jewish messianism.

Written on a stone 3 feet tall, the new text has many of the characteristics of a fragmentary Dead Sea Scroll, including being poorly preserved. Based on the stance and form of the letters, the distinguished decipherers of the inscription (Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elizur) date it to the late first century B.C.E. or early first century C.E.

Yardeni describes the text as “a literary composition similar to Biblical prophecies.” From a word or a phrase here and there, she notes that the text is apocalyptic in character and comes from a group that believes in a Davidic Messiah. She calls the text “Gabriel’s Revelation,” or *Hazon Gabriel* in Hebrew.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have, in general, revealed that many of the same religious concepts and beliefs found in Christianity are also found in the scrolls, often appearing first in the scrolls and thereafter surfacing in early Christianity. I believe this is also true of the messianism of “Gabriel’s Revelation.”

As we shall see, “Gabriel’s Revelation” has a great deal to tell us about a different kind of messiah—a Messiah son of Joseph, who is different from the Biblical concept of a Davidic Messiah.

The tradition of the “Messiah son of Joseph” and his death first appears in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sukkah* 52a).

The rabbis taught: The Messiah ben David, who (as we hope) will appear in the near future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to him: Ask something of me and I will give it to thee, as it is written [Psalm 2:7–8]: “I will announce the decree ... Ask it of me, and I will give,” etc. But as the Messiah ben David will have seen that the Messiah ben Joseph who preceded him was killed, he will say before the Lord: “Lord of the Universe, I will ask nothing of Thee but life.” And the Lord will answer: “This was prophesied already for thee by thy father David [Psalm 21:5]: ‘Life hath he asked of thee, thou gavest it to him.’ ”

According to the seventh-century apocalyptic text known as *Sefer Zerubabel*, the “Messiah son of Joseph” was killed by the wicked “Armilus” and was further resurrected by the Messiah son of David and the Prophet Elijah.¹

These traditions are clearly post-Christian and most scholars regard this Jewish tradition as an impact of Christianity on Judaism. Some evidence, however, indicates that the figure of “Messiah son of Joseph” is much older. In some texts from around the turn of the era, we encounter Joseph as a son of God who atones for the sins of others with his suffering. For example, in *Joseph and Aseneth*, written between 100 B.C.E. and 115 C.E. Joseph is described as “son of God” (6:3, 5, 13:13). Joseph is also called “God’s firstborn son” (18:11, 21:4, 23:10).

In another book from the Second Temple period, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the Testament of Benjamin connects Joseph and the figure of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52–53. In this testament, Jacob says to Joseph:

“ ‘In you will be fulfilled the heavenly prophecy, which says that the spotless one will be defiled by lawless men and *the sinless one will die for the sake of impious men*’ ”² (emphasis supplied).

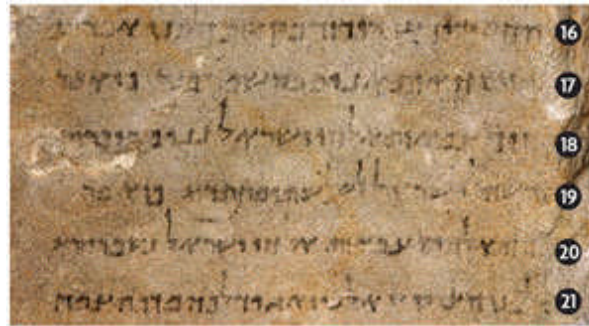
These citations suggest that the designation of the suffering Messiah as the “son of Joseph” goes back to sources from the Second Temple period.³

In another late Midrash, *Pesikta Rabbati*, the Messiah Ephraim (a son of Joseph) is created. As to him, the sins of others “will bend you down under a yoke of iron.” The Holy One, blessed be he, asks him if he is willing to endure this suffering. Messiah Ephraim, son of Joseph, asks how long his suffering will last. Seven years, the Holy One replies. After more dialogue, the Messiah Ephraim says: “Master of the Universe, with joy in my soul and gladness in my heart I take this suffering upon myself, provided not one person in Israel perish; that not only those who are alive be saved in my days, but also those who are dead ...”⁴

In this passage from the *Pesikta Rabbati*, the son of Joseph (here Ephraim) also appears as the Messiah identified as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah.

Several scholars have argued that these late passages should be traced to Christian circles.⁵ A leading rabbinic scholar, Saul Lieberman, has argued otherwise.⁶ I have agreed with Lieberman.⁷ I believe “Gabriel’s Revelation,” now published in **BAR**, supports the view that the tradition of the Messiah son of Joseph who is killed goes back to the late first century B.C.E. or the early first century C.E. Although much of the text of “Gabriel’s Revelation” has not been

preserved or is difficult to read, enough is there to make these points.



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TRUMPING THE TRIUMPHAL MESSIAH? In lines 16–17 the Lord asks David to request that Ephraim (the son of Joseph) “place the sign.” The exact nature of this sign is not specified, but it seems to be a sign of salvation. The fact that David is a messenger to Ephraim suggests that David ranked below Ephraim. The passage reads in English, “My servant David, ask of Ephraim [that he p]lace the sign; (this) I ask of you.”

As Yardeni notes in her **BAR** article, despite the difficulty in reading the text, it involves “messianic groups.” The characters it mentions are “clearly apocalyptic figures.” Among them are two we have already encountered in this article: David and Ephraim. In “Gabriel’s Revelation,” the Lord addresses David, asking him to request of Ephraim that he place a sign: “My servant David, ask of Ephraim [that he p]lace the sign ...” (Line 16–17). Unfortunately, the nature of the sign is not specified, but it seems to be the sign of salvation. However, the fact that David is sent by God to request Ephraim to place the sign may attest that Ephraim has superior rank. He, and not David, is the key person who is asked to place the sign; David is only the messenger!

The expression “My servant David” of course appears often in the Bible as a term of an eschatological leader (see Ezekiel 34:23, 24, 37:24, 25). And, as we have noted, in the Bible, Ephraim is the son of Joseph. The names “my servant David” and “Ephraim” mentioned in “Gabriel’s Revelation” are apparently parallel, respectively, to the titles “Messiah son of David” and “Messiah son of Joseph” in the Talmud, to which I have already called attention. And “Ephraim” is the name of the Messiah in *Pesikta Rabbati*, when he is said to suffer in order to atone for Israel. Thus, in this new text on stone, we have the earliest reference to Ephraim as a messianic figure (although in Jeremiah 31:20, the Lord tells Ephraim: “Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to me” [see also Hosea 11:1–8]).

It is also interesting that this new text seems to predict that in three days the evil will be defeated by the righteous. They read as follows: “By three days you shall know that thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the evil has been broken by righteousness” (Lines 19–21).

There is more: Line 80 begins with the phrase “In three days.” This is followed by another word that the editors could not read. Then comes the phrase “I, Gabriel.” I believe that this “illegible” word is actually legible. It is the word *hayeh*, “live” (חַיֶּה). Gabriel the archangel is giving orders to someone to “live”: “In three days, you shall live.” In other words, in three days, you shall return to life (be resurrected).

There follow two additional words that are also difficult to read. The letters are not easy to make out, but I believe the first word begins with a ג (*gimel*) and a ו (*vav*). The next word is equally difficult. The letter ל (*lamed*) is quite legible, and the letter before it seems to be an א (*ayin*). I believe the sentence can be reconstructed as follows: “In three days,

live, I, Gabriel, command you.” (*Leshloshet yamin hayeh, ani Gavriel, gozer alekha.*) Ada Yardeni has since agreed with this reading of *hayeh* and with the translation “In three days, live, I, Gabriel ...”



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“In three days, [live,] I Gabriel command you.” Although the scholars who first published this text considered parts of line 80 to be illegible, Knohl believes he can read the word *hayeh* (“live”) and has reconstructed the line to depict the archangel ordering someone to live, or rise from the dead, in three days. Another portion of the text (lines 19–21; see photo) refers to evil being conquered by good “in three days.”

The archangel is ordering someone to rise from the dead within three days.

Gabriel is of course well known from the Book of Daniel, as well as the Gospel of Luke. In Daniel, Gabriel appears to the prophet in an apocalyptic vision (Daniel 8:13–19). In the famous annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son who will be called Son of the Most High:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31–33).

According to the genealogical lists in Matthew 1:1–16 and Luke 3:23–38, Jesus is a descendant of David. It is said explicitly about Joseph, Jesus’ father, that he was “of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4; see also 1:27, 32; Matthew 1:20).

Jesus is also referred to as the “Son of David” several times elsewhere in the Gospels (Mark 10:46, 11:10; Matthew 9:27, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30, 21:9; Luke 18:38), and subsequently elsewhere in the New Testament (Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8; Revelation 5:5, 22:16). And the entire Nativity story (Matthew 2:1–18; Luke 2:1–29) is designed to emphasize Jesus as a “Son of David.” According to the Nativity accounts, Jesus, like King David, was born in Bethlehem. However, Jesus himself never refers to the Messiah as the “Son of David,” and he does not mention having any link with the Davidic line.

In “Gabriel’s Revelation,” we see that another messiah—Ephraim, or the “Messiah son of Joseph”—was known already in the late first century B.C.E. The “Ephraim” of “Gabriel’s Revelation” was probably based on Biblical verses depicting him as the suffering Son of God (see Jeremiah 31:17–20; Hosea 11:1–8). And the setting of “Gabriel’s Revelation” reflects elements of death and bloodshed.

The messianic figure of David is traditionally represented as involving bravery, military skill and triumph. The figure of Ephraim, or the Messiah son of Joseph, symbolizes a very different and new kind of messianism. Ephraim is a messiah of suffering and death.

This may shed new light on what has been a puzzling Gospel tradition. In parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels^b

(Mark 12:35–37; Matthew 22:41–46; Luke 20:41–44), Jesus is teaching on the Temple Mount. Surprisingly, he rejects the idea that the Messiah is the son of David: “How can the scribes say,” Jesus asks, “that Christ is the son of David?” (Mark 12:35).

To demonstrate that the Messiah is not the son of David, Jesus quotes Psalm 110, attributed in the Hebrew Bible to David himself. As the text of Mark (12:36) recites, David speaks in the psalm: “David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared ...” Jesus then recites a passage from the psalm:

“The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit at my right hand,

till I put thy enemies under thy feet.”

Jesus then uses this passage to prove his point: “David himself calls him [the Messiah] ‘Lord,’ so how is he his son?” That is, David speaks of the Messiah as “my Lord,” rather than as “my son.” The Messiah therefore cannot be a son of David. Using Psalm 110 as his proof text, Jesus here refutes the scribes’ view that Christ, the Messiah, should be a son or descendant of David.

This seems strange in light of the fact that, as I noted earlier, in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ lineage is specifically traced to David. I am inclined to regard the passage in which Jesus quotes Psalm 110 as a historically reliable passage in which Jesus rejects the view that the Messiah will be a descendant of David. Not only do versions of this incident appear in all three Synoptic Gospels, but the very fact that it runs counter to the genealogies of Jesus suggests that this contradictory version must be authentic. Otherwise, the authors of the Gospels would not have included something that so blatantly clashes with their frequent reference to Jesus as the Son of David.⁸

Some scholars have suggested that Jesus wished to claim that the Messiah is not merely a son of David but rather has a superior status—possibly that of the Son of God. However, if this were the case, we would have expected Jesus to anchor his claim in Psalm 2:7, “You are my son, today I have begotten you,” rather than on the first verse of Psalm 110, which makes no explicit reference to the Messiah as the Son of God.

In citing Psalm 110, Jesus may well be seeking to dispel the prevalent expectation of a triumphal messiah, the traditional “son of David.”

His ideal messianic model is different. As with the Messiah Ephraim, son of Joseph, Jesus’ Messiah involves suffering and death.

The new inscription, “Gabriel’s Revelation,” suggests that this different kind of Messiah was evolving at the turn of the era—different from the Messiah son of David. Instead of a militant Messiah, it envisions a Messiah who suffered, died and rose. Jesus also understood the Messiah to be a Son of Joseph.

Like in “Gabriel’s Revelation,” also in the saying of Jesus, David is secondary to the other Messiah. In Nazareth, Jesus was known as the “son of Joseph” (Luke 4:22; John 6:42). Thus it is quite possible that Jesus identified himself as the Messiah “Ephraim,” the son of Joseph who is mentioned in “Gabriel’s Revelation.”⁹

“Gabriel’s Revelation” in English Translation by Israel Knohl

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Sidebar to: *The Messiah Son of Joseph*

Column 1

1. []
2. [] Lord
3. [] · [] .
4. [f]or th[us sa]id the Lo[r]d I have betr[oth]ed you to me, garden
5. []... ..[
6. and I will talk [
7. [] children of Israel [?].... [] ... []
8. son of David [?][
9. [] the word of the Lor[d]
10. [] you have asked ... [?]
11. [?] Lord you have asked me, so said the God of Hosts
12. [] .. from my house Israel and I will talk about the greatness of Jerusalem
13. [Thus] said the Lord, God of Israel, now all the nations
14. ... enc[amp] on Jerusalem and from it are exi[led]
15. one two three forty Prophets and the elders
16. and the Hasidim. My servant David, ask of Ephraim
17. [that he] place the sign; (this) I ask of you. For thus said
18. the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, my gardens are ripe,

19. My holy thing for Israel. By three days you shall know, for thus said

20. the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the evil has been broken

21. before righteousness. Ask me, and I shall tell you, what is this

22. wicked branch, plastered white. You are standing, the angel

23. is supporting you. Do not fear. Blessed is the glory of the Lord God from

24. his seat. In a little while, I will shake

25. .. the heavens and the earth. Here is the glory of the Lord God

26. of Hosts, the God of Israel, These are the seven chariots

27. at the gate of Jerusalem and the gates of Judea they will re[st] for

28. my three angels, Michael and all the others, look for

29. your power. So said of the Lord God of Hosts, the God

30. of Israel. One two three four five six

31. [se]ven for my angels..... what is this? He said, the frontlet

32. [] and the second chief

33. watches on.. Jerusalem three in the greatness

34. three []

35. [] that he saw a man ... works [

36. that he [] that a sign from Jerusalem

37. I on ...[] ashes and a sign of exile ..

38. [s]ign of exile God sin ... and see

39. [] Jerusalem said the Lord

40. That his mist will fill most of the moon

41. [] blood that the northerner would become maggoty

42. [] abhorrence the diseased spot . in all

43. [] . God [

44. [] . [?]

Column 2

(There are no legible words before line 51)

51 with you (or: your nation)

52. .. the angels [] from ... on [] ..

53. ... and tomorrow to ... they will rest ... big

54. [by] three days this is what [I have] said He

55. these are [

56. please see the north[erner] enca[mps] [

57. Seal up the blood of the slaughtered of Jerusalem. For thus said the Lord of Hos[ts]

58. the God of Israel, So said the Lord of Hosts the God of

59. Israel [

60. ... He will have pity .. His mercy are ne[ar]

61. [] blessed ? ...

62. daughter ? ...

63. ...

64. [] ... [] beloved ?

65. Three holy ones of the world from.... []

66. [] shalom he said, in you we trust ... [?]

67. Announce him of blood, this is their chariot.

68. Many are those who love the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel

69. Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel[?]
70. prophets. I sent to my people my three shepherds. I will say (?)
71. that I have seen bless[ing]... Go say(?)
72. The place for David the servant of the Lord []...[] .. []
73. The heaven and the earth, blessed []
74. men. Showing steadfast love to thousands steadfast love. []
75. Three shepherds went out for Israel ... []...
76. If there is a priest, if there are sons of holy ones[]
77. Who am I? I am Gabriel []
78. You will rescue them..... for two [] ...[]
79. from before of you the three si[g]ns three .. []
80. In three days, live, I Gabriel com[mand] yo[u],
81. prince of the princes, the dung of the rocky crevices []... ..[]
82. to the visions (?) ... their tongue (?) [] ... those who love me
83. to me, from the three, the small one that I took, I Gabriel
84. Lord of Hosts God of Is[rael] []
85. then you will stand ...
86. ... /
87. ... world ?

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Footnotes:

a. Ada Yardeni, "A New Dead Sea Scroll in Stone," **BAR** 34:01.

b. The Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—tell a generally parallel account, frequently in *haec verba*, of Jesus' life.

Endnotes:

- 1.** See Martha Himmelfarb, "Sefer Zerubbabel," in David Stern and M.J. Mirsky, eds., *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 67–90.
- 2.** Howard Clark Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 826.
- 3.** The possible connection between the Testament of Benjamin and the Messiah son of Joseph was already noted by G.H. Dix, "The Messiah Ben Joseph," *Journal of Theologic Studies* 27 (1926), pp. 135–136, and by J. Jeremias, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 5, pp. 685–686.
- 4.** *Pesikta Rabbati* 36, translated from the Hebrew by W.G. Braude, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 678–679.
- 5.** See Azaria dei Rossi, *Meor Eynayim*, ed. David Cassel (Vilna: Romm, 1864–1866), p. 230; I. Levi, *Revue des études juives* 24, pp. 283–285, Cf. R. Abraham b. Azriel, Arugat Habosem, ed. E.E. Urbach, Jerusalem 1939, p. 265. More recently, see Magnus Zetterholm's introduction to Magnus Zetterholm, ed., *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), when he argues that the Jesus movement added a new element to the Jewish concept of messianism: a messiah of Israel who will suffer and die. This is now refuted by "Gabriel's Revelation," which had not yet been known when Zetterholm wrote.
- 6.** S. Liebermann, *Shkiin* (Jerusalem: Wharman Books, 1970), p. 58.
- 7.** See Israel Knohl, "On 'the Son of God,' Armilus and Messiah Son of Joseph," *Tarbiz* 68 (1998), pp. 13–38 (Hebrew with English abstract).
- 8.** Rudolf Bultmann, (*History of the Synoptic Traditions* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1968], pp. 66, 136–137) has argued that the account is not historical but reflects the denial of Jesus' Davidic ancestry in a limited circle within the early church. However, as was rightly noted by Bruce Chilton ("Jesus ben David: Reflections on the Davidsohnfrage," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 14 [1982], p. 102), in light of the broad consensus in the New Testament that Jesus was the son of the David, it is difficult to accept that such a circle ever existed within the early church. See further the objection of W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew, ICC*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 250.
- 9.** For further details, see Israel Knohl, "'By Three Days Live': Messiahs, Resurrection and Ascent to Heaven in Hazon Gabriel," *The Journal of Religion* 88, no. 19 (2008), p. 152, and Israel Knohl, *The Messiah Before Jesus*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 17–50.