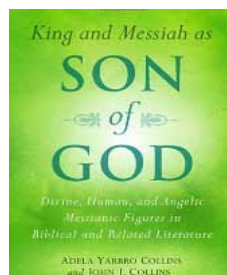


# MESSIANIC FIGURES IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature

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This investigation deals with a very important topic, namely, the question of the divinity of the messiah. The authors argue that the divinity of Jesus was not some later development and something unique to Christianity, but had its roots in the changing and fluid Jewish conceptions of the messiah around the turn of the era. Specifically, the idea had its roots in Judaism in the royal ideology of ancient Judah. Ideas about the king or messiah being God's son were variously repudiated (the Deuteronomist and prophets) or developed in the Hellenistic period where hopes for deliverance often focused on heavenly and supernatural mediator figures.

John J. Collins is the author of chapters 1–4 that investigate various Israelite texts. Chapter 1, 'The King as Son of God', investigates evidence for the divinity of the Israelite king in the royal psalms. The king is called 'son of God' in Psalms 2 and 89 and Psalms 110 and 45 appear to attribute divinity to the king, as he is called *elohim* or is 'begotten'. Collins suggests that the possibility exists that Egyptian conceptions, via Canaan, as well as Assyrian notions of monarchy influenced Israel. This is qualified by the fact that there is no evidence for cultic veneration and the king is not divine as in the same sense as God. The king is empowered to act as God's surrogate on earth and the language used refers to the nature and status conferred on him.

Chapter 2, 'The Kingship in Deuteronomistic and Prophetic Literature', traces how the royal ideology was tempered somewhat by Deuteronomist theologians in the late 7th century BCE, extending to the exilic and restoration periods. The king is variously made subject to the law (Dt 17), or is subject to punishment (2 Sm 7; Ps 89), or the Davidic covenant is made conditional (Ps 132; 1 Ki 8). Apart from Isaiah 9, prophetic books make modest claims for the future king and repudiate royal pretensions and claims of divinity.

Chapter 3, 'Messiah and Son of God in the Hellenistic Period', looks at Hellenistic ruler cults and messianism in the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). In the Septuagint the royal psalms are faithfully rendered in Greek and were probably not seen as problematic due to the association of divinity with kingship in the Hellenistic world. A few passages, however, also attribute pre-existence to the messiah or refer to him as an angel (Ps 110:3 = LXX109; possibly Ps 72:17 = LXX 71:17; Is 9). The DSS freely draws on biblical language, such as the *Florilegium* (4Q174; Nathan's oracle in 2 Sm 7:14) and the *Messianic Rule* and 4Q246 (Ps 2). In the latter case the Davidic or royal messiah is given the honorific title as 'son of God' and perhaps evinces the willingness to entertain language of divinity with reference to a future king.

Chapter 4, 'Messiah and Son of Man' investigates Daniel 7, the *Melchizedek Scroll*, the *Similitudes of Enoch* and 4 *Ezra* 13. Collins argues that 'one like a son of man' in Daniel refers to the archangel Michael (p. 78) not to a corporate symbol or the messiah, but the 'son of man' tradition was adapted and later identified as the messiah in 1 *Enoch* 37–71 and 4 *Ezra* 13. Here there is a growing tendency to see saviour figures or the messiah as pre-existent and of heavenly origin.

Overall there was no orthodoxy when it came to the messiah,

*[b]ut there were clear biblical precedents for speaking of the messiah as God or son of God, and there was plenty of speculation about heavenly deliverers ... In the context of first-century-CE Judaism, it is not surprising or anomalous that divine status should be attributed to someone who was believed by his followers to be the messiah.*

(p. 100)

The Son of Man, king or messiah was not the object of worship however. The exception is 1 *Enoch* 48:5 where the people perform *proskynesis* before the Son of Man, although this is not worship in its fullest sense.

Adela Yarbro Collins authored chapters 5–8 that focus on the New Testament. It is unfortunate that absent here is detailed treatments of James, Hebrews, as well as the Deutero-Pauline, Petrine and Johannine epistles, as her attention is limited to Paul's ('authentic') letters, the gospels, and the Book of Revelation. Nevertheless, she builds on and remains in conversation with the work of chapters 1–4 creating continuity for the reader.

Chapter 5, 'Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in the Letters of Paul' investigates the close relation between Jesus as Son of God and his status as messiah. Weaving her way through the Pauline corpus she also argues that the epithet 'Christ' was a well established tradition before Paul joined the movement, and the messianic tradition was reinterpreted in light of Jesus' crucifixion. She also suggests that at least one passage points to the pre-existence of Jesus (Phlm 2:6–11). Possibly several others do the same (Rm 1:3; 1 Cor 8:5–6; 2 Cor 4:3–4), which, if being the case, Jesus is also identified as personified wisdom.

Chapter 6, 'Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in the Synoptic Gospels' conclude that none of these gospels portray Jesus as pre-existent, although scenes such as his transfiguration (Mk 9:2–3), and the virginal conception in Matthew and Luke imply that he is divine. Like Paul, the Synoptics place emphasis on the exaltation of Jesus to his messianic office at the time of his resurrection.

Chapter 7, 'Jesus as Son of Man' investigates the origin of the Son of Man sayings and their relationship to traditions of Jesus' divinity and pre-existence. Collins gives an overview of its function in the

Synoptics and based on her overview of secondary sources explain that there is still disagreement on whether they allude to Daniel 7, function as a Semitic idiom for '(a) man' or as a circumlocution for 'I'. There is also disagreement as to the extent to which they originate from Jesus. She also identifies the 'son of man' in Daniel as an angelic being, but the *Similitudes of Enoch* and *4 Ezra* understand him as the messiah. Collins then follows the interpretation that Jesus 'understood himself and was understood in an apocalyptic or restoration-eschatological context' (p. 170). The oldest Son of Man sayings she argues are allusions to and interpretations of Daniel 7:13–14. Jesus predicted that after his proclamation of the kingdom a heavenly messiah ('Son of Man') would be revealed (Mk 13:26–27; cf. 1 Th 4:16–17), and subsequently his disciples identified him with that figure in his exalted state. Thus, Jesus did not necessarily identify himself as this figure, at least, nothing in her argument points to this. For Collins the cultural environment led to speculations of his pre-existence and divine status. Given the exalted status of Jesus as king over Israel and the world, and given the existence of the imperial cults, 'it is not surprising that Jesus was viewed as a god [note: not "God"] and that worship of him became an alternative to the worship of the emperor' (p. 174). The reader, however, is left in the dark as to exactly what it meant for Jesus to be 'worshipped' as 'a god'. This needs to be explained and is a problem we also encounter in the next chapter.

Chapter 8, 'Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man in the Gospel and Revelation of John', argues that the Gospel of John and Revelation represent Jesus as pre-existent and divine. In both he is a messiah of the heavenly type, is linked to the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and identified with the 'word of God' and wisdom. In both he is also God's first creature, but is something communicated in different ways. As the son of God in a unique way Collins prefers the reading 'the only-begotten god' over 'only-begotten son' (Jn 1:18). The Gospel therefore represents him as an emanation of God or being 'a god' (note again: not 'God'). Revelation appears to portray the risen Jesus, as 'one like a son of man' or the 'word of God', as the principal angel or in angelomorphic terms (Rv 1:12–16; 14:14–20; 19:13).

On pages 204–213 quite a comprehensive conclusion of the work is offered and is well worth reading it for a quick overview. The strengths of the Collins' investigation are their strong textual analysis, giving each passage detailed attention, complimented by extensive interaction with Ancient Near Eastern, Greco-Roman and secondary sources. Their conclusions are restrained and generally well argued with their main thesis convincingly demonstrated. Their identification of the Son of Man in Daniel as the archangel Michael will perhaps not be accepted by all. At the same time their overall conclusion as to the nature of Jesus' divinity is far from an endorsement of traditional Trinitarian theology. Yes, Jesus was in various ways for his earliest followers a pre-existent and/or divine being, but the authors argue against early notions of binitarianism. 'Worship' of Jesus and his 'divinity' was understood in different terms. In view of 1 *Enoch* 48:5, Revelations 5:14; 3:9 *proskynesis* (worship; bowing down; self-prostration) does not imply worship in its fullest sense and the primary 'connotation is submission to embodied power and authority' (p. 212). Likewise they appear to prefer a 'functional', not 'ontological' divinity for Jesus, based on the need to ask *how* and *to what degree* Jesus participates in God's sovereignty and activity of creation (p. 213).

This is perhaps where we begin to walk on shaky ground, as an important opportunity was missed to explore the socio-cultural world of the first followers of Jesus in further detail. For example, binitarianism is an anachronistic and ethnocentric (theological) category. And did the ancients distinguish between 'functional' and 'ontological' notions of divinity? What needs to be established is what was the nature of, as well as the similarities or differences between Israelite and Roman-Hellenistic notions of 'divinity' and 'worship' in their first-century context? What can the primary ancient Mediterranean value of honour inform us in this regard, or the institution of patronage and clientage? Was the honour ranking of Jesus equal to that of God, or not? Was he viewed primarily as a patron or a broker? Looking at the issues from fresh perspectives may endorse, qualify, or contradict existing answers. It is time that textual analysis be complimented by, or even better, be governed by the insights of the social-sciences. ■