MESSIAH IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

The Expectations Behind the New Testament

A 30-Minute Teaching Study

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Understanding the World Behind the Word

When the writers of the New Testament called Jesus the Messiah, they used a word already surrounded by centuries of biblical promise, Jewish interpretation, national longing, and diverse expectation. This study enters that world so that the New Testament's claims about Jesus can be heard with greater clarity.

Teaching Purpose

To help adult learners understand the major streams of messianic expectation in Second Temple Judaism and to see how that historical setting sharpens the New Testament presentation of Jesus as Messiah.

Learning Objectives

- Explain what the Hebrew term mashiach ('anointed one') meant before and during the Second Temple period.
- Recognize that ancient Jewish messianic expectation was diverse rather than a single standardized portrait.
- Identify royal/Davidic, priestly, prophetic, apocalyptic, and restoration expectations.
- Trace the biblical texts that supplied the vocabulary and imagery for those expectations.
- Explain how the New Testament presents Jesus in relation to, and beyond, those expectations.

Suggested 30-Minute Plan

Time	Focus
0–4 min.	Opening question and definition of Messiah
4–9 min.	Historical world of the Second Temple period
9–20 min.	Five streams of messianic expectation
20–27 min.	Jesus and the expectations of His world
27–30 min.	Summary and discussion

Opening Question

Ask the class: When a first-century Jew heard the word "Messiah," what picture came to mind? A king? A priest? A prophet? A military deliverer? A heavenly figure?

The answer is important because the New Testament did not introduce the word Messiah into an empty room. It entered a long conversation shaped by Israel's Scriptures, exile, foreign domination, the Temple, apocalyptic hope, and competing interpretations of how God would restore His people.

1. What Did “Messiah” Mean?

The Hebrew word mashiach means “anointed one.” In Israel's Scriptures, anointing could identify a person set apart for a God-given office, especially a king or priest. The term therefore did not originally function only as the fixed title of one future eschatological figure. During the centuries leading to the New Testament, however, biblical promises concerning kingship, restoration, priesthood, prophecy, judgment, and God's kingdom were increasingly read in relation to Israel's future.

> *2 Samuel 7:12–13 — "I will raise up your descendant after you … and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."*

The Davidic covenant supplied one of the most durable foundations for later messianic hope: God had attached His promise to David's house and throne.

2. The World of Second Temple Judaism

The Second Temple period is conventionally framed from the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple in the late sixth century B.C. to its destruction by Rome in A.D. 70. Jewish life during these centuries unfolded under Persian, Greek, Hasmonean, and Roman power. The Maccabean crisis, Hasmonean rule, Roman intervention, and the Herodian dynasty all intensified questions of legitimate kingship, priesthood, covenant faithfulness, and deliverance.

This setting matters because messianic expectation developed within lived history. Israel possessed promises, but the nation also experienced foreign rule, disputed priestly leadership, political violence, and the continuing hope that God would act decisively.

A Necessary Caution

We should not speak of "the Jewish expectation of the Messiah" as though every Jewish group expected the same figure in the same way. The surviving literature points instead to a family of expectations. Some texts emphasize a Davidic ruler; others a priestly figure, a prophet, an apocalyptic deliverer, or the restoration of Israel itself. At Qumran, some texts even preserve language interpreted as expectation of both priestly and royal messianic figures.

3. Five Streams of Messianic Expectation

A. The Royal / Davidic Messiah

This was the most recognizable stream: a ruler from David's line through whom God would restore righteous rule. The hope grew from the Davidic covenant and royal psalms and was reinforced by prophetic promises of a coming Davidic ruler.

> *Isaiah 11:1–2 — "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse … The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him."*

- 2 Samuel 7:12–16
- Psalm 2
- Isaiah 9:6–7
- Isaiah 11:1–10
- Micah 5:2
- Zechariah 9:9

B. The Priestly Messiah

Priestly expectation was especially significant in communities concerned with the purity and legitimacy of the Temple priesthood. The Dead Sea Scrolls preserve traditions in which priestly and royal expectations can stand alongside one another. The Community Rule famously speaks of the coming of a prophet and the messiahs of Aaron and Israel, a text central to scholarly discussion of Qumran messianism.

This background is especially illuminating when the New Testament later presents Jesus not merely as Davidic king but also in priestly categories, most fully in Hebrews.

C. The Prophet Like Moses

> *Deuteronomy 18:15 — "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you … you shall listen to him."*

Some Jewish expectation looked toward an eschatological prophet. The precise form was not standardized, but the promise of a prophet like Moses supplied an important biblical pattern. This helps explain why the Gospels record people asking whether John the Baptist or Jesus was "the Prophet" (John 1:21; 6:14; 7:40).

D. The Apocalyptic / Heavenly Deliverer

> *Daniel 7:13–14 — "One like a Son of Man was coming … And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom."*

Daniel's visions contributed another dimension to Jewish hope: God's final victory over oppressive kingdoms and the establishment of an everlasting dominion. Second Temple apocalyptic literature developed themes of judgment, resurrection, angelic conflict, vindication, and the age to come. The Dead Sea Scrolls likewise preserve intense eschatological and apocalyptic expectation.

E. National Restoration and the Kingdom of God

Not every restoration hope centered on a single individual. Israel's Scriptures promised return, renewed covenant faithfulness, righteous rule, defeat of enemies, and the restoration of God's people. Under Roman occupation these themes could carry unavoidable political force. Expectations of Messiah and expectations of Israel's restoration therefore frequently overlapped without being identical.

4. Representative Second Temple Witnesses

These writings are not Scripture, but they are valuable historical witnesses to the world in which the New Testament was heard. They should be used to illuminate context, not to control the interpretation of the biblical text.

Witness	Approx. Period	Contribution to the Discussion
Psalms of Solomon 17–18	mid-1st c. B.C.	Strong royal/Davidic hope: a righteous ruler who purges and restores.
1 Enoch traditions	3rd c. B.C.–1st c. A.D.	Apocalyptic judgment, heavenly realities, and developed Son-of-Man traditions in portions of the corpus.
Community Rule (1QS)	copies from late 2nd–1st c. B.C.	Prophetic and priestly/royal expectation; key evidence for diversity at Qumran.
Rule of the Congregation / Blessings	late Second Temple period	Eschatological community, priestly leadership, and future-rule expectations.
Dead Sea Scrolls broadly	3rd c. B.C.–1st c. A.D.	Show the diversity of Jewish belief, interpretation, apocalyptic expectation, and sectarian hope.

5. Jesus in This Messianic World

The New Testament does not merely announce that Jesus fits one preexisting Jewish checklist. It presents Him through multiple biblical trajectories at once. That is one reason the confession “Jesus is the Christ” carries far more content than the English word Christ can suggest to a modern reader.

- Davidic King — Jesus is repeatedly identified as Son of David and heir to David's throne (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:32–33).
- Prophet — His ministry evokes the prophetic tradition and the expectation of the prophet like Moses (Acts 3:20–23).
- Priest — Hebrews presents Him as the definitive high priest, drawing especially on Psalm 110 and Melchizedek.
- Son of Man — Jesus repeatedly uses the title in ways that culminate in Daniel 7 imagery of authority, suffering, vindication, and glory.
- Kingdom Bearer — His proclamation that the kingdom of God has drawn near announces God's reign in and through His own mission.

The Crucial New Testament Surprise

The scandal was not simply that Jesus claimed messianic significance. The surprise was the manner in which the messianic mission was fulfilled. Many could imagine victory; the cross looked like defeat. The Gospels

therefore reeducate messianic expectation around suffering, death, resurrection, exaltation, and the future consummation of the kingdom.

> *Luke 24:26 — "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?"*

The Emmaus road becomes a model for Christian reading: Jesus does not discard Israel's Scriptures; He opens them and shows how their patterns converge upon His suffering and glory.

6. Four Conclusions for the Class

- Messiah was a biblical idea before it was a Christian title.
- Second Temple Jewish messianism was diverse; there was no single universally accepted messianic blueprint.
- The New Testament's presentation of Jesus draws together royal, prophetic, priestly, apocalyptic, and restoration themes.
- Jesus fulfills Israel's hope, but He also reshapes expectations around the cross, resurrection, exaltation, and the final kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does it matter that first-century Jewish messianic expectations were diverse?

2. Which Old Testament passage seems most important for understanding the Davidic expectation? Why?

3. How does Daniel 7 deepen the idea of Messiah beyond an ordinary political king?

4. Why would a crucified Messiah have challenged many contemporary expectations?

5. How does the resurrection change the meaning of messianic victory?

Teacher's Closing Summary

Suggested closing statement: To understand the New Testament confession that Jesus is the Messiah, we must hear it against the centuries of Scripture and expectation that preceded Him. Second Temple Judaism did not hand Jesus a single messianic job description. It handed the first century a collection of hopes—king, priest, prophet, deliverer, restoration, kingdom. The New Testament's claim is extraordinary because it gathers those hopes around one person and then reveals that God's Messiah conquers not merely by taking a throne, but through suffering, resurrection, exaltation, and ultimately the restoration of all things.

Key Biblical Texts

Genesis 49:10	2 Samuel 7:12–16	Psalm 2	Psalm 110	Isaiah 9:6–7
Isaiah 11:1–10	Daniel 7:13–14	Micah 5:2	Zechariah 9:9	Deuteronomy 18:15–19
Luke 24:25–27	John 1:19–21	Acts 3:20–23		

Selected Background Resources

For further study: the Dead Sea Scrolls (especially the Community Rule and related eschatological texts); Psalms of Solomon 17–18; selected traditions in 1 Enoch; and modern scholarship on Second Temple Jewish messianism. These materials are historical witnesses and should be distinguished from the authority of the biblical canon.

Research Note

The Dead Sea Scrolls are particularly useful because they preserve a wide range of Second Temple Jewish religious texts. Modern scholarship cautions against treating the entire corpus as the voice of one uniform

community. Likewise, references to multiple messianic figures at Qumran remain subjects of scholarly interpretation. The safest historical conclusion for classroom purposes is that the evidence demonstrates genuine diversity in Jewish eschatological and messianic expectation.

Truth That Transforms. Hope That Endures.