

THE SIGNS OF THE MESSIAH (‘OTOT HAMASHIACH) AND JEWISH APOCALYPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

During the Second Temple period several Jewish writings refer to the oral tradition of the *‘otot hamashiach*, the signs that would accompany the coming of the Messiah. The subject is utilized by the author of the Gospel of John in his deliberate and calculated references to ‘signs’ as a way of authorizing Jesus as the expected and promised Messiah. The signs enumerated in Near Eastern apocalypses range from natural disasters and cataclysms, to social and political upheavals and preternatural occurrences. The *‘Otot Hamashiach* is a Jewish apocalypse of uncertain date, from around the third to the sixth centuries C.E., describing ten signs or portents that would transpire before the end comes. The Apocalypse opens important perspectives on Jewish medieval expectations of the Messiah and the end of times, as well as the enemy of Israel, Armilus.

Keywords: *‘Otot Hamaschiach*; apocalypse; messiah; Armilus; end of times

1 INTRODUCTION

In this article the important Jewish concept of the *‘otot hamashiach* is discussed, that is, the description of signs that accompany the coming of the Messiah. In other Near Eastern apocalypses the signs are indicated in terms of natural disasters and cataclysms, social and political upheavals, and preternatural occurrences. The Gospel of John also refers to these signs and it plays an important role in the structuring of the Gospel where the ‘signs of the Messiah’ are utilized in a calculated way to authorize Jesus as the expected and promised Christ (Messiah). The relation between the Christian utilization of the concept and Jewish expectation of the coming of the Messiah is described. The

use of the Jewish concept of signs is continued in early medieval Jewish apocalypses, with the *'Otot Hamashiach* as culmination. This apocalypse is of uncertain date, from around the third to the sixth centuries C.E., describing ten signs or portents that would transpire before the end comes. The apocalypse opens important perspectives on Jewish medieval expectations of the Messiah and the end of times, as well as the enemy of Israel, Armilus.

2 SIGNS OF THE MESSIAH IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus chose the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, the Feast of the Dedication, to announce that he was the Son of God (John 10:22). HaKohain is of the opinion that the choice of date was not entirely arbitrary because Hanukkah always fell on the 25th of Kislev in the Hebrew calendar, and the tradition is deeply embedded in Jewish thinking that it is associated with the 25th word of Genesis in the Masoretic text, *oyer* or light (Gen. 1:3).¹ Hanukkah commemorates the miracle that took place when the Jerusalem temple was rededicated after the Syrian Antiochus' desecration in the second century B.C.E. On the day of rededication a small jar of oil was found that was not profaned with only enough oil to keep the light burning in the sanctuary for one day. The miracle was that it lasted eight days, burning night and day as Exodus 27:20 determines ('...pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to keep the lamps burning continually'), and in this way providing enough time for new oil to be produced. The symbolism of the author of the Gospel's words that the Messiah had come to extinguish the darkness (John 1:5) could not escape his listeners. And this event set the stage for Lazarus' death and resurrection that is described in John 11:1–12:50.

At the grave of the brother of Mary and Martha Jesus declares that he is the resurrection, implying that anyone who believes in him would not die but live eternally (John 11:25–26). And as if to underwrite his words, he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:43–44).

All three synoptic Gospels record how the Sadducees challenge Jesus to take a stand on the issue of the resurrection (Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 10:27), with the Pharisees subscribing to the doctrine of a resurrection and the Sadducees allowing only instruction of the Torah and not assenting to the doctrine. Jesus' answer would have determined his political stance, with the Pharisees or Sadducees, and he evaded a definite answer in order not to be pinned down.² His answer, 'God is God, not of the dead but of the living,' begs the question. Only after the announcement that he is the

1 Y. L. HaKohain, 'To Die for the People: A Kabbalistic Reinterpretation of the Crucifixion of Jesus,' n.p. [cited 15 January 2012]. Online: <http://www.donmeh-west.com/ToDie.shtml>.

2 S. M. Ngewa, 'John,' in *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume* (ed. T. Adeyemo; Nairobi: Word Alive, 2006), 1276.

Messiah, the Son of God (John 5:17), does he take a stand on the issue, by declaring that he is the living embodiment of the resurrection, as proven by raising Lazarus from the grave (John 8:56–58; 11:25–26, 41–43).

As a result of this 'sign' (*semeion*) of which the Pharisees were informed (John 11:47), they called a meeting.³ Jesus' vindication of the doctrine of the resurrection had condoned their teaching. It is noteworthy that the informants told the Pharisees and not the Sadducees, and that the party of the Pharisees called a meeting to discuss future relations with Jesus. Presumably the chief priests were invited to the meeting as Caiaphas contributed to the meeting; the chief priests were Sadducees themselves.⁴

3 The significance of the author of John choosing seven signs and relating it to the declaration of his intention in writing the book according to John 20:30–31 has been noted by exegetes (e.g., M. C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 28; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 38–39; D. A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2004), 406, 420. 'Now Jesus did other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah), the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:30). The signs (σημεῖα), the characteristic Johannine word for miracle, is used alongside wonder (τέρας) and power (δύναμις) to indicate that the deed described is an indication of some power or meaning behind it, to which it is secondary in importance. The author does not present the miracles merely as supernatural deeds nor as manifestations of supernatural power, but definitely as material witnesses to underlying spiritual truth. The teaching attached to each miracle is designed to bring out its spiritual significance and the sign is the concrete demonstration of the power discussed in the teaching, cf. Tenney, 'John,' 28–29. By changing water into wine Jesus revealed himself as the master of quality by effecting instantaneously the change that the vine produces over a period of months (John 2:1–11; *4 Ezra* 40:3). In healing the nobleman's son he showed himself the master of distance or space (John 4:46–54). By healing the impotent man he showed himself the master of time by curing an affliction that had lasted 38 years (John 5:1–9), and by feeding the 5 000 he showed himself the master of quantity (John 6:1–14). By walking on the water he demonstrated his mastery over natural laws (John 6:16–21), by healing the man born blind he showed himself as the master of misfortune (John 9:1–12), and by raising Lazarus he demonstrated that he was the master of death (John 11:1–46). By these signs the author wants to demonstrate Jesus' transcendent control over the factors of life with which man is unable to cope – quality, space, time, quantity, natural law, misfortune, and death circumscribe human's experience of the world.

4 Caiaphas was the ruler of the high council from 18–36 C.E., working for ten years alongside Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea from 26–36 C.E. Between Caiaphas and Pilate the peace with Rome was kept successfully (J. R. McRay, 'Archaeology and the New Testament,' *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 95).

The purpose of the meeting was to decide the fate of Jesus because if he continued with performing these signs more and more people would follow him and eventually the Roman oppressors would destroy the temple and the Jewish nation because of their following a messiah (John 11:48).⁵ The Romans viewed Jewish messiahs with suspicion, and the movement around Jesus might inspire them to invade Jerusalem and destroy the temple if the movement received enough momentum.⁶

The meeting agreed that Jesus should rather be killed by his own people, and this is motivated by Caiaphas, that it is better that one man should die for the whole people rather than the whole nation be destroyed (John 11:49–50). It is better that the revolutionary die prematurely than to have the Romans come and crush the entire Jewish nation. The remark, ‘that Jesus would die for the entire nation’, is interpreted by the author as a prophecy to bring together and unite all the children of God scattered around the world (John 11:51–52; cf. also John 10:16; 12:32).

Jesus was indicated as the One who worked all these signs (John 11:47), indicating the miracles that the author of the Gospel calls ‘signs’. The signs are interpreted as ‘the signs of the Messiah’ or ‘*otot hamashiach*, a theme from the Jewish oral scripture or tradition,⁷ as found in *Zohar* 5.218a: ‘When God desires to give healing to the world he smites one righteous man among them...and through him gives healing to all...A righteous man is never afflicted save to bring healing to his generation and to make atonement for it.’ The smiting or slaying of the righteous one is for the healing of the many but there is also a tradition that the righteous man is resurrected from the dead, and in some instances after three days, anticipating the Christian doctrine that Jesus rose from the dead after three days (cf. Dan. 12:2–3)⁸.

The second part of Caiaphas’ ‘prophecy,’ that Jesus would die not for the (Jewish) nation only but to gather the scattered children of God refers to another Jewish oral tradition found in *Zohar* 5.45a: ‘And then the community of Israel communes with the Holy One, blessed be he, and that hour is a time of grace for all, and the king holds out to [Israel], and all who are with her, his sceptre of grace so that they all may be wholly united to the holy k(K)ing.’ The implication is that the scattered are united before God’s throne. And Maimonides⁹ states, ‘If a king will arise from the house of David who... gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Messiah.’

5 P. W. Comfort and W. A. Elwell, eds., ‘Tyndale Bible Dictionary,’ 888.

6 F. F. Bruce, ‘Messiah,’ *NBD*, 818; G. M. Burge, ‘The Gospel according to John,’ in *NLT Study Bible* (ed. S. A. Harrison; Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 1795.

7 HaKohain, ‘To Die for the People,’ 7.

8 DeSilva, ‘Introduction to the New Testament,’ 47.

9 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Melachim U’Milchamoteihem* 4:11.

The author of the Gospel is alluding to two commonly held doctrines that Caiaphas expressed, that Jesus had fulfilled the 'signs of the Messiah' and qualified to enter the next stage according to Jewish oral tradition, to die for the people, in order to atone for his people and unite the scattered people of God.¹⁰

John 12:10–11 relates how Jesus attended a dinner given in his honor at the home of Lazarus and his sisters where one of the sisters, Mary, anointed Jesus' feet with a jar of expensive perfume and wiped it with her hair. The next passage (John 11:12–19) describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with a large crowd of Passover visitors waving palm branches and shouting God's praises for sending the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus was riding a donkey in an allusion to Zechariah 9:9. The reason why so many went to see Jesus entering Jerusalem is given in John 12:18, because of the signs he performed. Then Jesus predicted his own death and a voice from heaven affirmed that glory would be given to God through Jesus' death (Jn. 12:20–36) amidst the unbelief of a lot of people, despite all the signs that Jesus had done, as described in John 12:37–50.¹¹

3 SIGNS OF THE MESSIAH IN JEWISH TRADITION

Enumeration of signs or portents signalling the messianic birth pangs and the imminent approach of the End is a popular feature of Near Eastern apocalypses, and these signs range from natural disruptions and cataclysms, through social upheavals and political disturbances, to ominous preternatural occurrences.¹² These signs are shaped by scriptural passages that allegedly refer to the events surrounding the End, while others can be linked to traditional lore or oral 'scripture'. Muslims, Christians and Jews refer over a millennium to these signs to draw up a roster of the *eschaton*, but the references to events are so vague, indistinct and sketchy that it is impossible to determine the precise period when the apocalypse that employs the list was composed.

Lists of such signs are sometimes called 'footprints (steps) of the Messiah,' based on the phrase in Psalm 89:51 and developed more fully in *Mishnah Sotah* 9.15, or the 'agony of the Messiah,' and indicate the imagery of the birth that leads to the emergence

10 D. C. Allison, 'The Eschatology of Jesus,' in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (ed. B. McGinn, J. J. Collins and S. J. Stein; 2003), 149.

11 John 13 begins with the Passover meal and Judas' betrayal is predicted.

12 Cf. J. C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 106. The signs accompanying Jesus' death play the same role, to indicate the imminent End. The signs include the tearing of the curtain of the temple, an earthquake, and the opening of tombs leading to the centurion standing next to the cross declaring that Jesus is the son of God (Matt. 27:51–54; Mark 15:38–39; Luke 24:45–47).

of the novel order that arrives at the advent of the messianic era of judgment and the peace that would require several adjustments by the inhabitants of the earth.¹³

The traditional Jewish worldview did not allow for the degeneration of the world leading to an ending of the known world order, but in time around the sixth to the second centuries B.C.E. a change was instituted so that a part of Jewish expectation centered on the concept of a novel world order. This is demonstrated by the second century B.C.E. images in Daniel 2 and 7 of different kingdoms and beasts, each with decreasing value and ending in the establishment of a new order.¹⁴

Apocalypses written during Hellenistic and Roman times contain a rich treasury of signs and occurrences which accompany the Messiah and mark the end of the present world order.¹⁵ Sometimes the lists of signs show little logical connection between the components, and in some instances variant lists of signs are provided within the same apocalypse.¹⁶ In many instances the list is provided to answer a query to the seer about the signs of the coming of the anointed and the end of the age (cf. Matt. 24:3 as an example).

Later apocalypses tend to adopt a numerical scheme that patterns the portents in accordance with numbers that have symbolic meaning for the readers. Favourite numbers are seven indicating the number of planets, the number of days in a week, or the positioning of the Sabbath at the end of creation week; ten, based on the number of Egyptian plagues, or the expected number of world empires; or twelve, based on the number of months in a year, the number of signs in the zodiac, or the number of Jacob's sons.¹⁷

13 D. A. DeSilva, 'Introduction to the New Testament,' 38; Cf. also G. W. E. Nickelsburg and M. E. Stone, 'The Agents of Divine Deliverance,' in *Early Judaism: Texts and Documents on Faith and Piety* (G. W. E. Nickelsburg and M. E. Stone; rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 159–199.

14 E. C. Lucas, 'Daniel,' (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 79. References in the Gospels to the *eschaton* is in the same category (Matt. 24:3–44; Mark 13:3–36), as are *1 En.* 93:1–10; *Jub.* 23:11–25; *Sib. Or.* 2.154–213; 3.796–808; *4 Ezra* 4:52–5:13; 6:20–24; 8:63–9:6; *2 Bar.* 24:3–30:5; 48:30–41; 70:1–71:2; *Apoc. Ab.* 29:15–30:8). Cf. D. S. Russell, 'The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 BC–AD 100' (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 271–276 and Reeves, 'Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic,' 116–127 for a discussion of these texts.

15 J. J. Collins, 'The Expectation of the End in the Dead Sea Scrolls,' in *Eschatology, Messianism and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. C. E. Evans and P. W. Flint; Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 87.

16 This is the case in *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* quoted in the previous footnote.

17 R. J. Clifford, 'The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth,' in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (ed. B. McGinn, J. J. Collins and S. J. Stein; New York: Continuum, 2003), 17.

4 THE JEWISH APOCALYPSE, 'OTOT HAMASHIACH

This Jewish apocalypse cannot be dated, apart from the vague analytical generality of setting it in a Byzantine context. The numerical scheme of ten portents is chosen, perhaps indicating the fullness of the description of everything that will transpire before the end is come, or the ten plagues that will be sent on creation before the end of the world is at hand.¹⁸

The apocalypse is a response to the challenges posed by Byzantine aggression. It is written as a Jewish apocalypse of the historical type and it uses literary genres such as prophetic proclamation and symbolic visions. The author remains obscure.¹⁹

There are different ways to explain the compositional history of the book. The first model is the source-critical approach that was popularized during the nineteenth century, that explains the composition of the apocalypse through a long process of conglomeration where a redactor joined a number of smaller and originally independent text units together. Later, the source-critical method was exchanged for the idea that one author was responsible for the apocalypse, and he/she used variant eschatological traditions, without spending much time in harmonizing them. When the book is studied another idea of its composition forms, that one author who knew the (oral) Jewish traditions of the 'otot hamashiach wrote a unified work incorporating some of these traditions but synthesizing it in a new way.²⁰

18 The *Apocalypse of Abraham* also speaks of ten plagues as the judgment of creation's sinfulness before its Creator, and once they have passed a trumpet will sound out of the air, and the chosen one of God will be sent, having in him the measure of all the power of God. He will summon God's people who were humiliated by the heathen (*Apoc. Ab.* 31:1). The judgment of the world and its entire people then follows this scene, cf. J. C. VanderKam, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism,' in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (ed. B. McGinn, J. J. Collins and S. J. Stein; New York: Continuum, 2003), 127. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* uses the symbol of ten weeks to describe the course of history and the eventual judgment, cf. VanderKam, 'Messianism and apocalypticism,' 116. The reference to ten plagues refers to the exodus story (Exod. 7:14–11:10).

19 G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Expanded ed.; Harvard Theological Studies 56; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 283–285.

20 J. M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature: Folkloristics Series; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 12–23; *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 72; M. S. Jaffee, 'Writing and Rabbinic Oral Tradition: On Mishnaic Narratives, Lists and Mnemonics,' *Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Thought* 4 (1994): 139; *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127; M. Henze, '4 Ezra and 2 Baruch: Literary Composition and Oral Performance in First-Century Apocalyptic Literature,' *JBL* 131/1 (2012): 182–183.

5 SUMMARY OF 'OTOT HAMASHIACH²¹

Ten signs are described in *The Signs of the Messiah*. The **first sign** consists of three kings who are apostates from their religion that will arise and, behaving deceptively, will make themselves appear to people as if they serve Israel's God. In this way they will mislead many Jews, and influence all the nations to become apostates. At the same time some Jews who have given up hope for their redemption will commit apostasy against God, as Isaiah 59:15 predicted. The apostasy will be so great that the faithful ones will cease to exist and everything will appear different. Jews will have no faithful leader and shepherds as well as no pious ones, and heaven will appear to be locked.

At this time the Messiah will be revealed, with the three kings decreeing that all people, including Jews, should commit apostasy against three institutions – the Jerusalem temple, the Lord, and the Torah. The evil empire will rule sovereignly for nine months (a clear reference to Mic. 5:2). Their rule will consist of harsh decrees and severe tax assessments on Israel.

Then extremely ugly people from the end of the earth will appear, and people who see them will die due to the terror evoked by the sight. They will not need to wage war, for they kill everyone by fear of their sight alone. Each one of them has two heads and seven eyes, and they glow like fire and are as swift as deer. Jews will also be frightened, and children will cry for help, with their parents ensuring them that they must rely on the redemption of Israel promised by God.

The **second sign** appears when God will introduce heat, along with consumption and fever, many terrible diseases, plague, and pestilence. Every day one million people will die among the gentile²² nations and all the wicked Israelites will also perish. Eventually people will cry out, 'Woe to us! Where can we go and to where shall we flee?' They will dig their own grave and wish for death while they conceal themselves in order to cool themselves. The righteous will be delivered from the heat of the sun because God will render that heat as medicinal value for them (as Mal. 3:20 promises).

21 This section is a summary of the translation from the text published by A. Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur* (6 vols.; Leipzig, 1853–77; repr., Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938), 2:58–63, who took it in turn from R. Makhir, *Sefer 'avqat rokhel* (Amsterdam: Nehemiah ben Abraham, 1716), 2b–5b. This edition reprints the Rimini imprint of 1526 (see 2b–4a), which is apparently the first printed edition. See M. Steinschneider, *Catalogus librorum hebraeorum in bibliotheca Bodleiana* (Berlin: Friedlaender, 1852–1860), 1638–40. A variant version of this apocalypse appears in Oxford Ms. Heb. d. 11 (2797), the *Sefer ha-Zikronot* or the so-called Chronicles of YeradMe'el; see E. Yassif, ed., *Sefer ha-Zikronot hu' Divrey ha-Yamim le-Yerahme'el* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001), 436–442. Another edition is supplied by Y. Even-Shmuel, *Midreshey Ge'ullah* (2d ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), 318–323; cf. his textual notes on pp. 425–426.

22 'Gentile' is used to refer to the uncircumcised in the apocalypse, and it is utilized here to reflect the apocalypse's use of the word.

The **third sign** occurs when God will cause a dew of blood to fall that appears like water to the gentiles and the wicked Jews. When they drink this water they will die but the righteous will suffer no harm at all, as promised by Daniel 12:3.

The **fourth sign** consists of God causing a dew of healing to fall in order to counteract the blood, and those who are wavering will drink of it and be healed of their illnesses (Hos. 14:6).

In the **fifth sign** God will turn the sun to darkness for thirty days (Joel 3:4). After thirty days gentiles will feel fear and shame, for they will realize that it is on account of Israel that all these signs are occurring, and many of them will secretly become Jews (John 2:9).

The **sixth sign** appears when God will grant Edom sovereignty over the entire world, while at the same time a final king will arise in Rome who will rule the entire world for nine months and bring about the destruction of many regions. He will punish Jews and burden them with a heavy tax. At that time Jews will experience great distress due to the multitude of restrictive edicts as well as political and social disturbances, and Israel will undergo decline and be subject to annihilation at that time. There will be no one to help Israel, as Isaiah prophesied (Isa. 59:16).

When the nine months are completed, the Messiah of the lineage of Joseph – his name is Nehemiah ben Hushiel – will appear accompanied by the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, and some of the tribe of Gad. Israelites dwelling in every region will hear that the Lord's Messiah has come, and a small number from every region and every city will assemble around him to fulfill Jeremiah's words (Jer. 3:14).

The Messiah will fight against the ruler of Edom, killing him and many of his adherents and devastating the province of Rome. He will recover some of the temple vessels that are held in Caesar's palace. The ruler of Egypt will make a peace treaty with him and he will slay all the people around Jerusalem.²³ The world will hear about this, and they will fear him.

In the **seventh sign** God will affect a miracle in the world when worthless fellows will sexually abuse a marble statue in Rome, in the likeness of a beautiful maiden, fashioned by God. God will preserve their seminal emissions within the statue and He will make a creature with it, a human being with the name Armilus the Satan, the adversary, the one called by the gentiles 'Antichristo(s)'. He is twelve cubits tall and two cubits wide, and the distance between his two eyes is a span's length, and his eyes are deep-set and bloodshot. The hair on his head is like the colour of gold, the soles of his feet are green, and he has two heads.

23 D. C. Mitchell, 'Messiah bar Ephraim in the Targums,' *Aramaic Studies* 4/2 (2006): 37 discusses other texts that refer to the Messiah at the gates of Jerusalem, with some having the Messiah dying at the hand of Armilus before the gates. Cf. Zech. 12:2; 14:1–2; 4 Bar. 1:5; T. Lev. 10:5; T. Zeb. 9:8; Pss. Sol. 9:9; 3 Macc. 2:9.

He will convince the Edomites that he is the Messiah, their god. The descendants of Esau will join forces with him and they will subdue all the regions. He will order the descendants of Esau to bring before him his revelation, and they will bring him their 'frivolity'. The nations of the world will put their trust in him as their Messiah.

Then Armilus will send for Israel's Messiah and challenge him to bring the Torah and to acknowledge him as their God. The Messiah will answer the challenge by leading thirty thousand warriors from Ephraim along with a Torah scroll, and he will read from Exodus 20:2–3: 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt where you lived as slaves. You shall have no other gods to rival me.' Armilus will respond that there is nothing like that in the Torah, and claim that he is God, but the Messiah will oppose him. A battle will ensue with the Messiah's army killing two hundred thousand of Armilus' men.

Armilus' anger will enflame and he will assemble all the forces of the nations in 'the Valley of Decision' (cf. Joel 4:14) where they will battle with Israel, and Israel will slay many of them, but the Messiah will be killed. The ministering angels will come, take him, and conceal him among the ancestors. The courage of Israel will then fail. Armilus will not know that the Messiah is dead, but all the nations of the world will expel the Israelites from their territories. Israel will experience trouble unlike anything that has ever happened before.

At that time the archangel Michael will purge the wicked from Israel (Dan. 12:1). The true Israel will flee into the deserts, whereas the doubters amongst them will turn to the gentile nations. This is a test for Israel to refine them like silver and gold (Zech. 13:9; Ezek. 20:38; Dan. 12:10).

The remnant of Israel will remain in the desert of Judah for 45 days (cf. Jub. 30:4; Hos. 2:16; the difference between the two figures provided in Dan. 12:11 and 12:12 is 45 days). At that time all the wicked Jews will perish, for they are unworthy of experiencing redemption. Armilus will come and do battle with Egypt and capture it, before coming to Jerusalem in order to destroy it a second time (Dan. 11:45).

The **eighth sign** is when Michael will arise and blow three blasts on the shofar (Isa. 27:13; Zech. 9:14). At the first blast, the Messiah of the lineage of David and Elijah the prophet will be revealed to the righteous ones who had fled into the desert of Judah, at the end of the 45 days. They will be invigorated and strengthened and realize that God has remembered them and that complete redemption has arrived. They will gather together and come to Jerusalem (Isa. 27:13), while the nations fear and tremble before them, and terrible diseases afflict them. Israel led by the Messiah of the lineage of David and Elijah the prophet will enter Jerusalem and climb the steps of the temple ruins.

Armilus will hear that a king has arisen for Israel, and he will muster all his forces and come to do battle, but God will interfere and wage Israel's war (Ps. 110:1; Exod. 14:13; Zech. 14:3; Ezek. 38:22). Armilus and his army will be destroyed along with Edom who destroyed the temple during the Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem (Obad. 1:18).

The **ninth sign** will start when Michael will blow on the shofar, and the graves will open in Jerusalem, and God will resurrect the dead. The Messiah of the lineage of David and Elijah the prophet will then come and resurrect the Messiah of the lineage of Joseph. The Messiah of the lineage of David will be sent to the remnant of Israel scattered among all the nations whose rulers will agree to allow them to go back to the Lord (cf. Isa. 49:22).²⁴

The **last sign** occurs when Michael will again blow on the shofar, and God will lead all the tribes (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:6) to come together with the 'people of Moses' (cf. Joel 2:3; Ezek. 36:35), and clouds of glory will encompass them, and God will march before them (Mic. 2:13). God will open springs connected with the Tree of Life in order to supply these people with water on the way (Isa. 41:18; 49:10).

The tract ends with the prayer that God may grant his people the merit to witness the redemption and the rebuilding of the temple as he fulfils the prophecies contained in Jeremiah 30:18 and Zephaniah 3:20.

6 IMPORTANT THEMES AND ELEMENTS IN THE JEWISH TRADITION OF THE SIGNS OF THE MESSIAH

The medieval tradition of the signs of the Messiah opens many perspectives of which three will be discussed in this article: on Jewish expectations of the coming of the Messiah, of the way that his coming will introduce the end of times, and on the archenemy of Israel, called Armilus or the Antichrist.

6.1 Messiah

The first element to be defined is *hamaschiach*, a word referring to a person who has been anointed with oil.²⁵ In the Hebrew Bible the term is used to refer to the patriarchs (Ps. 105:15; 1 Chr. 16:22); the kings of Israel who have oil applied to their head as a way of marking divine designation of them for the role; high priests of Israel, called by the Priestly writer 'the anointed priest' (Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 6:15); Cyrus of Persia, who was set apart for the purpose of carrying out the will of Israel's God (Isa. 45:1); and a future prince (Dan. 9:25–26).²⁶ Only thirty-eight references to 'anointed one' are found in the

24 Cf. G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* (Expanded ed; HTS 56; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 294.

25 J. A. Soggin, 'King, to Anoint,' *TLOT*, 696.

26 C. A. Evans, 'Messianism,' *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 703–704; VanderKam, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism,' 112–113. Mitchell, 'Messiah bar Ephraim,' 45 quotes the commentary of Redak on Isa. 42:1 who sees in the text a reference to the King Messiah: *zehu melech hamashiach*. Redak (Radak) is an acronym for Rabbi David Kimchi (1160–1235), a French Bible commentator and grammarian, who sought the plain meaning of the text (*peshat*).

Hebrew Bible but a variety of prophetic texts refer to a royal leader of the future without calling him the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 11:1–16; Jer. 23:5–6; 2 Sam. 7:12–16). Messianism is a mode of thought centering on such a leader who plays the decisive role in creating a new order of things.

No Jewish text before the second century B.C.E. refers to a messianic leader although the Hebrew Bible suggests such a figure with words and images in later texts (Isa. 9:1–6; Hag. 2:20–23).²⁷ Some also interpret the suffering servant in Deutero-Isaiah and Daniel's son of man as referring to a messiah.²⁸

Images used demonstrate a varied picture of who the Messiah was, and he is described as the righteous one, chosen one, son of man, son of God, God's servant, prince of the congregation, branch of David, and interpreter of the law.²⁹ The Messiah would be from the lineage of David,³⁰ engage the nations in warfare that would establish Israel as the ruler of the world, and judge the wicked.³¹ His justice would establish God's kingdom on earth; in *4 Ezra* his rule would be temporary and the Messiah would die, probably by analogy with Bar Kochba.³² The idea of two messiahs, a Davidic and priestly messiah, is found in *Jubilees* and in some Dead Sea Scrolls.³³ A prophet will usher in their appearance and it will mark the end of the present age and introduce a new order.³⁴ The Davidic Messiah will rule and judge, and the priestly Messiah will instruct and bless the faithful.³⁵ The Messiah will also, in some strands of the tradition, atone for the sins of the chosen.³⁶

27 J. C. VanderKam, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism,' 134.

28 Bruce, 'Messiah,' 815.

29 M. Idel, 'Jewish Apocalypticism,' 670–1670,' in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (ed. B. McGinn, J. J. Collins and S. J. Stein; New York: Continuum, 2003), 376. Cf. Bruce, 'Messiah,' 812–818; VanderKam, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism,' 135–136 for a list of references in apocalypses.

30 Evans, 'Messianism,' 702.

31 Bruce, 'Messiah,' 818; S. Kirkpatrick, *Competing for honor: A Social-scientific Reading of Daniel 1–6* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 159.

32 G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973), 139–140; J. Heinemann, 'The Messiah of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim,' *HTR* 68 (1975): 1–15.

33 M. G. Abegg, 'War Scroll (1QM) and Related Texts,' *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 1262.

34 Abegg, 'War Scroll,' 1261.

35 P. W. Comfort and W. A. Elwell, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* 888.

36 P. W. Flint, 'The Daniel Tradition at Qumran,' in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* (ed. J. J. Collins and P. W. Flint; Boston: Brill, 2002), 341.

6.2 End of times

Eschatology is the doctrine of 'ultimate' things rather than of 'last things'.³⁷ In present times it is used to refer to beliefs and conceptions about the end of history and the known order and the total transformation of the world.³⁸ This eschatology is cosmic in character and extent and the central foci are the judgment of sinners and the salvation of the righteous. The emphasis is on the future series of events that are linked in some way to the present.³⁹ But to understand eschatology it is important to realize that the author understood that he and his addressees were already living in the end-times.⁴⁰ Their present experiences of salvation are part of the end-time reality because eschatology is not merely futurology but a mindset for understanding the present within the climaxing context of redemptive history.⁴¹

6.3 Armilus

Armilus is first mentioned in Saadiah Gaon's *Emunot ve-De'ot*,⁴² probably in response to *Sefer Zerubbabel's* apocalypse.⁴³ This implies that the tradition existed at least in the ninth century C.E. although its basis is the Talmudic legend concerning *Maschiach ben-David*.⁴⁴ The Talmud refers to the Evil Inclination whose influence is at first like the thread of a spider, but ultimately becomes like cart ropes.⁴⁵ He has seven names, Evil, Uncircumcised, Unclean, Enemy, Stumbling Block, Stone, and Hidden One. *Pirkei ha-Mashi'ah* calls him Satan Armilus, whom the *goyim* call Antichrist. Armilus is the head

37 G. J. Thomas, 'A Holy God among a Holy People in a Holy Place: The Enduring Eschatological Hope,' in *Eschatology in Bible & Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 53–60.

38 D. E. Aune, 'Early Christian Eschatology,' *ABD* 2: 594.

39 Aune, 'Early Christian Eschatology,' 2: 594.

40 F. J. van Rensburg, 'The Eschatology of 1 Peter: Hope and Vindication for Visiting and Resident Strangers,' in *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents* (ed. J. G. van der Watt; Tübingen: Mohr, 2011), 472.

41 G. K. Beale, 'The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology,' in *Eschatology in Bible & Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 17–18.

42 *Ma'amar* 8.

43 'Armilus,' n.p. [cited 4 August 2012]. Online: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1789-armilus>. Other references include the eighth-century Midrash, *Pirkei-Ha-Maschiach*, the tenth-century *Ma'ase Dani'el* and twelfth-century haggadic-rabbinic work, *T'fillat Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai* *BhM* 4:124–126.

44 *m. Sukkah* 52a.

45 'Jewish Lord Voldemort,' n.p. [Cited 6 August 2012]. Online: <http://ejmmm2007.blogspot.com/2007/07/qrmilius-jewish-lord-voldemort.htm>.

of Edom, the king of Rome, and the ultimate enemy of Israel, although he presumes to be the true Messiah of Israel.⁴⁶

The name Armilus is probably derived from Romulus, the founder of Rome with Remus, or as a corruption from Angra-Mainyu, the Persian god of evil, or the Greek version Arimanoi (Ahriman).⁴⁷ The legend that he was born of a beautiful virgin also connects it with Rome.⁴⁸

The legend originates due to the suffering of Jews at the hand of Christians and it led to Rome being viewed as the kingdom of *haSatan*, the antithesis of the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁹ Armilus is the diabolic power that has gained a temporary, global victory. Edom (or Esau) also refers to Rome; Edom is Jacob's twin brother and sworn enemy Esau.⁵⁰ The *Midrashim* describe Armilus as the least of the kings, the son of a bondwoman, and monstrous in appearance.⁵¹ He is the 'son of the stone,' referring to the legend of a marble statue of a beautiful virgin in Rome, fashioned not by human hand but by the Holy One who created it in his might.⁵² The wicked of the nations, the sons of Belial (a reference to Gen. 6:1–4), lie with her and God preserves their seed within the stone from which He creates a being. The statue splits open and there issues from it a man, Armilus, who is twelve cubits tall and two cubits broad, with a span's length between his eyes that are crooked and red, with golden hair and green soles to his feet, and with two heads.⁵³ Armilus will deceive the whole world into thinking that he is god and will reign over the earth. He will display all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and every sort of evil that will deceive people into thinking that he is their salvation.⁵⁴ He will

46 M. Idel, 'Jewish apocalypticism,' 360; L. DiTomasso, *The Book of Daniel and the Apocryphal Daniel Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 185.

47 Cf. A. E. Smart. 'Angra Mainyu,' n.p. [cited 4 August 2012]. Online: http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/anra_mainyu.html.

48 'Armilus Son of Stone,' n.p. [cited 6 August 2012]. Online: <http://beyondthegolem.wordpress.com/2010/12/19/armilus-son-of-stone>.

49 This is stated explicitly in Midrash *Azeret HaSh'vatim*: 'And after all this, Satan will descend and go to Rome...give birth to Armilus, and he will issue decrees against Israel, and men of good deeds will cease while men of plunder will multiply. If Israel is worthy, Messiah ben David will sprout up in Upper Galilee and will go to Jerusalem.' Cf. R. Patai, 'Midrash *Azeret HaSh'vatim*,' in *Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel* (ed. R. Patai; New York: Herzl, 1979), 157.

50 P. W. Comfort and W. A. Elwell, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, 401; Idel, 'Jewish Apocalypticism,' 368, 370.

51 Midreshei *Ge'ullah*, *Sefer Eliyahu*, 42; *Yemot ha-Mashi'ah*, 96–97; *Nistaror shel R. Shimon b. Yohai*, 4.195.

52 Idel, 'Jewish Apocalypticism,' 362; A. M. Sivertsev, 'Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity' (Chicago: DePaul University, 2011), 88.

53 *Pirkei ha-Mashi'ah Ge'ullah*, 320.

54 Evans, 'Messianism,' 1136.

make the stone from which he was born the chief of all idolatry, and the *goyim* will bow down before the statue, burn incense and pour out libations to it.⁵⁵

Then he will come to fight against Jerusalem and will banish all Jews to the wilderness. In the end times God will war against Armilus and his armies and all the enemies of the Jews will perish in the valley of Arbel. Nehemiah and Elijah will lead the Jewish forces of five hundred soldiers who will triumph against Armilus' half a million soldiers, and the kingdom of heaven will come for Israel.⁵⁶

The conception of Armilus in *Sefer Zerubbabel*, '*Otot Hamashiach* and *Tefillat R. Shimon b. Yohai* differs in some aspects, where priests and Armilus sire the son that will meet his end at the hands of Messiah ben David.⁵⁷ The impression is created that the reference might be to the Christian church as the epitome of the enemy of the Jews', with the Virgin Mary as the statue of stone and Messiah ben Joseph being killed by Romulus-Rome that would precede the Messianic age.⁵⁸ The rise of Armilus might then refer to the second coming of Christ, and Jesus Christ would be none other than the anti-messiah of Jewish expectations.⁵⁹

7 SYNTHESIS

In this article the Jewish tradition of the signs of the Messiah is discussed, a tradition that is found in the written sediment of oral lore dating back to the period between the ending of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and that plays a role within the gospel tradition. A medieval apocalypse of uncertain date is discussed in order to open some perspectives on Jewish expectations during the period from the third to the sixth centuries C.E. of the coming of their Messiah that will end their oppression at the hand of gentile enemies and introduce a new order of things.

55 'Apocalypse of Zerubbabel,' n.p. [Cited 5 January 2012]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocalypse-of-Zerubbabel>.

56 Idel, 'Jewish apocalypticism,' 375.

57 'Smaller Midrashim,' n.p. [cited 5 January 2012]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smaller-midrashim>.

58 Idel, 'Jewish Apocalypticism,' 364. Cf. also 'Sefer Zerubbabel,' 68–69 [cited 4 August 2012]. Online: <http://messiahsjewishliterature.wikispaces.com/file/view/SeferZerubbabel.pdf/189210423/maa.1.eh>.

59 This theory is argued extensively in 'Armilus,' n.p. [cited 4 August 2012]. Online: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1789-armilus> and in 'Armilus Son of Stone,' n.p. [cited 4 August 2012]. Online: <http://beyondthegolem.wordpress.com/2010/12/19/armilus-son-of-stone>.

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