

Messiahs and Their Messengers

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In his early twelfth-century *Book of Sects and Creeds*, the Persian Muslim historian Muhammad al-Shahrastānī gives an account of the Issiyim (or in Arabic, Isawiyya), a sect of eighth-century Persian Jews who followed one Abu Isa Ishaq ibn Yacov of Isfahan.¹ Abu Isa performed signs and wonders and taught an ascetic halakhah. Some Issiyim evidently acclaimed him as the messiah, but according to Shahrastānī, his self-designation was “emissary of the messiah.”² (On this slippage between roles, we will have more to say later.) Shahrastānī writes, “Abu Isa claimed that he was the emissary and prophet of the expected messiah, and he believed that the messiah had five emissaries who preceded him one after another.”³ Shahrastānī writes in Arabic, but Abu Isa’s preferred title “emissary of the messiah” is well known to

This article is a revision of my Religious Roots of Europe Annual Lecture for 2018 at Lund University. It retains something of the style of that public lecture format. While in Lund, I received invaluable feedback on my argument from my respondent, Göran Larsson, and from Karin Zetterholm and Magnus Zetterholm. An earlier draft of the piece benefited from critical input from Ryan Schellenberg, Matthew Sharp, and Heidi Wendt. Whatever is good in the article is due in large part to the wisdom of these fine scholars.

1. See Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*, Princeton 1995, 47–92; Aaron W. Hughes, *Shared Identities: Medieval and Modern Imaginings of Judeo-Islam*, Oxford 2017, 62–81.

2. See Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*, Oxford 1998, 61–80.

3. English translation as per Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 74.

us in Greek: ἀπόστολος χριστοῦ (*apostolos christou*), a phrase whose earliest occurrence is in 1 Thessalonians (2:7, where, as in Abu Isa's system, it is in the plural: χριστοῦ ἀπόστολοι, *christou apostoloi*).⁴ Thereafter we find it in most of the authentic letters of Paul, most of the pseudonymous letters of Paul, and eventually all over the corpus of late antique ecclesiastical literature.⁵ Paul himself, however, was innocent of this later Christian usage, and it is worth our enquiring into what he, like Abu Isa after him, was doing by styling himself an ἀπόστολος χριστοῦ.

In many (though certainly not all) cases, it seems to me, the decision to transliterate ancient (especially biblical) words over into English is an abdication of the task of redescription. It is a choice not to try to understand the relevant terms in comparative perspective.⁶ Paul's phrase ἀπόστολος χριστοῦ is a parade example. In standard English versions of the Bible, it is rendered "apostle of Christ" (also compare equivalents in other European languages, for example the Luther Bibel's *Apostel Christi*),⁷ which has come to sound altogether natural to us but is in fact not a translation at all. This rendering makes both terms sound unique (since neither "apostle" nor "Christ" is used in standard English versions of older biblical or classical texts), when in fact both terms are ancient Greek common nouns: an ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*) is a messenger or emissary (from as far back as Herodotus), and a χριστός (*christos*) is either an ointment or a smeared thing or person (from as far back as Euripides).⁸ Paul is, so far as I know, the first writer to join these two words up in just this way, but it is an altogether conventional move that he makes. In Jewish Greek of the early Roman period, an ἀπόστολος χριστοῦ, "messenger of a messiah," is an easily intelligible idea. What is more, I will show, while the title itself is not current prior to Paul nor (outside Christian circles) widely current after Paul, it signifies a social role that is exceedingly well attested in the history of Judaism.

In making this case, I will be thinking with some categories developed by Heidi Wendt in her excellent recent book *At the Temple Gates*.⁹ Wendt

4. 1 Thess. 2:7: δυνάμενοι ἐν βάρει εἶναι ὡς Χριστοῦ ἀπόστολοι. ἀλλὰ ἐγενήθημεν νήπιοι ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν, "We could have been severe, as emissaries of the messiah; but we became babes in your midst."

5. See 1 Thess. 2:7; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; 11:13; Col. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 17. Cf. Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 8:23; Rom. 1:1; 16:7.

6. On this intellectual task, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago 1982, 19–35.

7. See Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., Chicago 2000, s.v. ἀπόστολος and χριστός.

8. See Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed., Oxford 1996, s.v. ἀπόστολος and χριστός.

9. Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*, Oxford 2016.

herself raises the issue of the prevailing non-comparative approach to Paul's title ἀπόστολος. She writes:

Most scholars take up the language of “apostle” uncritically, neglecting to reconcile it with the assorted titles that self-authorized experts adopted in order to lend an air of exceptionality to their respective roles and services. Therefore, that Paul and other figures mentioned in his epistles were apostles, and not magicians or false prophets, exempts them from the comparative enterprise.¹⁰

As Wendt shows, we can and should make sense of Paul as a self-authorized religious specialist alongside other Roman-period magicians, prophets, exorcists, and so on. But in addition, I propose, we owe an account of the particular Jewish myths, institutions, offices, and so on, to which Paul appeals by way of justifying his religious expertise. There are, to borrow a phrase from Wendt, numerous “varieties of Judean expertise in the Roman world,” some of which Paul claims for himself and others of which he does not. Of those varieties of Judean expertise that Paul does claim, foremost is the prerogative to speak for and to interpret a superhuman being prominent in some strands of Jewish mythology, namely the messiah.

Like other Jewish prophets and magicians, Paul invokes, appeals to, and delivers oracles from the god whose temple is in Jerusalem.¹¹ But unlike (most) other Jewish prophets and magicians, Paul also invokes, appeals to, and delivers oracles from a second, lower deity, the son of that god, who is also the recently deceased and deified man Jesus. This second deity Paul (following a venerable Jewish tradition) calls the messiah, or in Greek: Christ.¹² And while Paul appeals, here and there, to a number of exotic credentials that might win him favour with his audience – for example, he is Hebrew-born, not a proselyte (Phil. 3:5), he is trained in the prestigious school of the Pharisees (Phil. 3:5), he performs thaumaturgy (Rom. 15:18–19) – far and away his most frequent and most earnest claim to expertise is that he has been specially deputized by this second deity, Christ, as his messenger to mortals

10. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, 187.

11. See Matthew Sharp, *Divination in the Letters of Paul*, University of Edinburgh PhD thesis, 2019; Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul*, Oxford 2019.

12. On “Christ” in Paul, see Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism*, Oxford 2012.

not from the tribe of the Jews. Paul's hallmark expertise, the reason he insists that gentiles heed him rather than his competitors, is that he alone has this imprimatur of the deified Christ.¹³

"The good message announced by me is not from a mortal; for I neither received it from a mortal nor was taught it, but [I received it] through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11–12). "This is how one should regard us: as assistants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of god" (1 Cor. 4:1). "We bring an embassy on Christ's behalf, as if the god were appealing through us; we beg you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to the god" (2 Cor. 5:20). "We are the aroma of Christ to the god among those who are being delivered and among those who are perishing" (2 Cor. 2:15). As Christ's assistant, ambassador, and cultic aroma among gentiles, Paul speaks for, or is spoken through by, the heavenly Christ. Paul channels Christ for his gentile auditors, so that his words are Christ's words. "Christ speaks in me" (2 Cor. 13:3). "In the presence of god we speak in Christ" (2 Cor. 12:19). "I speak truth in Christ; I do not lie" (Rom. 9:1). "I Paul urge you through the gentleness and patience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:1). By what mechanism can Paul deliver these oracles of Christ? Elsewhere he explains, "I indeed have the *pneuma* of god" (1 Cor. 7:40). "I no longer live; rather, Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). And once, citing a prophecy of Isaiah: "*Who has known the mind of the Lord, who will instruct him* [Isa. 40:13]? We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16).

As Christ's messenger to non-Jewish mortals, Paul wants to win and to maintain their obedience to his patron deity, which they prove by declaring their trust (for example, with a cult cry of κύριος Ἰησοῦς [*kyrios Iesous*, 1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9]) and undergoing ritual immersion in water (Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 1:13–17; 12:13; Rom. 6:3–4). To this end, a large part of Paul's religious work is explaining, especially by means of inspired interpretation of sacred writings, the unsavory circumstances surrounding Jesus' death before his apotheosis.¹⁴ For instance, in broad strokes, here: "Christ died for our sins according to the writings; he was buried; and he was raised on the third day according to the writings" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). And, in a demonstration of specialist expertise, here: "Christ bought us out of the curse of the law by becoming a curse for our sake, as it is written: *Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree* [Deut. 21:23], so that the blessing of Abraham might come, in Christ Jesus, to the gentiles" (Gal. 3:13–14). By such expert interpretation, Paul makes the messiah's state execution not (as it might seem, *prima*

13. On Paul's vocation, see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*, New Haven, CT 2017.

14. See Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in Early Christianity*, Philadelphia, PA 1988; Heidi Wendt, "Galatians 3:1 as an Allusion to Textual Prophecy", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135 (2016), 369–389.

facie) a liability but in fact an asset, as here: “Being found in the form of a mortal, he [Christ] humiliated himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, the death of a cross. Therefore the god supremely exalted him and granted him the name above every name” (Phil. 2:7–9). By doing this kind of intellectual work for his gentile audience, Paul performs the social role of a messenger for a messiah. He hitches his wagon to the figure of the deified Christ. His religious expertise is freelance in the sense that he is not on the payroll of any temple or college of priests, but it depends on the notional sponsorship of his patron deity.

While the title “messenger of the messiah” is relatively rare in the history of Judaism, the social role signified by it is very common, indeed. In fact, it turns out, Jewish messiahs are usually accompanied by messengers (often, though not always, styled prophets) who presume to interpret their respective messiahs for their followers.¹⁵ The space for such a social role is opened up by the normal experience of messianic movements. As I have argued elsewhere, the empirical circumstances of the lives of actual historical messiahs almost always go off-script and thus raise (sometimes glaring) problems of cognitive dissonance for their partisans.¹⁶ How can the messiah be a legal scholar? How can the messiah be a Persian? How can the messiah die an ignominious death? How can the messiah convert to Islam? How can the messiah not know that he is the messiah? How can the messiah come and yet the kingdom of God not come? And so on. When this happens, as it inevitably does, the prophet or messenger of the messiah is there to resolve the cognitive dissonance, to put the faithful at ease, to show (usually by means of specialist exegesis of Jewish sacred writings) that whatever the problem is is in fact the will of the god, that it had to be thus, that nothing can separate the faithful from the messiah. This is a type of freelance religious expertise, but crucially, its performance depends on the presence of a second figure. It is freelance, but not solo. The role of messenger of a messiah is parasitic on the role of messiah. No Christ, no apostle.

We can usefully think of this phenomenon as a subset of prophecy. A prophet speaks on behalf of a god. A messenger for a messiah rationalizes

15. See Yonina Talmon, “Pursuit of the Millennium: The Relation between Religious and Social Change”, *European Journal of Sociology* 3 (1962), 125–148; John G. Gager, “Messiahs and Their Followers”, in Peter Schäfer & Mark R. Cohen (eds), *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, Leiden 1998, 37–46.

16. Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users*, Oxford 2017, 187–216.

the career of his messiah with reference to the will of the god. Now, to put the matter in this way is to register a disagreement with certain interpreters who have wanted to drive a wedge between the roles of prophet and apostle, as Giorgio Agamben, for instance, does here:

Each time the prophets announce the coming of the Messiah, the message is always about a time to come, a time not yet present. This is what marks the difference between the prophet and the apostle. The apostle speaks forth from the arrival of the Messiah. At this point prophecy must keep silent, for now prophecy is truly fulfilled. [...] The word passes on to the apostle, to the emissary of the Messiah, whose time is no longer the future, but the present. This is why Paul's technical term for the messianic event is *ho nyn kairos*, "the time of the now"; this is why Paul is an apostle and not a prophet.¹⁷

There is a grain of truth in Agamben's distinction here, but in the end the distinction does not hold. For one thing, prophets, in fact, frequently (even usually) utter oracles about their respective presents, and for another thing, messianic apostles such as Paul, no matter how present their messiahs, inevitably defer some messianic prerogatives to the future, as Paul does, for instance, with the *parousia* of Jesus. It is right, therefore, to think of the messenger for a messiah as a certain kind of prophet.

The phenomenon I am describing, wherein a messenger for a messiah rationalizes the career of his messiah with reference to the will of the god, is richly attested in Jewish sources from the Hebrew Bible onward. We find it already in 1 Samuel when the narrator has the god repent of making Saul king (1 Sam. 15:11) and send the prophet Samuel to anoint David in his place (1 Sam. 16). The narrator, through the character of the prophet, deposes Saul from the office of messiah (despite Saul's having been chosen by the god) and crowns David in his place (despite David's being a usurper).¹⁸ When Second Isaiah does likewise by uttering a divine endorsement of the Achaemenid Persian king Cyrus II, it seems more shocking on account of the latter's being a gentile, but it is the same kind of literary divination: "Thus says Yhwh to his anointed [*messiah*], to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed" (Isa. 45:1). And when, in due course, the Persian imperial administration appointed Zerubbabel

17. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Stanford, CA 2005, 61.

18. See Novenson, *Grammar of Messianism*, 104–113.

ben Shealtiel as governor of the province of Yehud, the prophet Zechariah did likewise for him:

Thus says Yhwh of hosts: Behold, the man whose name is Tzemah [branch, or scion]: for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of Yhwh. It is he who shall build the temple of Yhwh, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne. (Zech. 6:12–13)

All of these biblical prophets rationalize the careers of their respective messiahs with reference to the will of the god.¹⁹

And as with biblical prophets and messiahs, so with their later counterparts. Consider several examples from the Roman period. Herod the Great, whom the Gospel of Matthew portrays as a false messiah (ψευδόχριστος, *pseudochristos*) and the Slavonic Josephus as a plausible messiah, very probably had court prophets of his own, but according to Josephus, his chief ἀπόστολος was the historian Nicolaus of Damascus, who, for instance, rationalized Herod's displacement of the Hasmoneans by claiming (falsely but unfalsifiably) that he was descended from Judean royals exiled to Babylon centuries before.²⁰ (According to the third-century chronographer Julius Africanus, Herod helped Nicolaus's claim along by preemptively burning the Judean archives, thus depriving his critics of access to counterevidence.)²¹

The case of Shimon bar Kosiba, also known as Bar Kokhba, the leader of the Jewish revolt under Hadrian, is complicated by the fact that most of the literary record comes from the hands of the rabbis centuries later. In that record, however, Bar Kosiba is portrayed as having for his apostle no less a personage than Rabbi Akiba. Thus in the famous scene in Yerushalmi Taanit: "R. Akiba used to expound, *A star [kokav] goes forth from Jacob* [Num. 24:17], 'Koziba goes forth from Jacob.' When R. Akiba saw Bar Koziba, he said, 'This is the king messiah.'²² In the rabbinic story (though not in historical fact, in my view), R. Akiba stands by to interpret Bar Kosiba's messianic vocation to the people of Israel.²³ Also in connection with

19. On the examples of Cyrus and Zerubbabel, see Joachim Schaper, "The Persian Period", in Markus Bockmuehl & James Carleton Paget (eds), *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, London 2007, 3–14.

20. Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, 14.9.

21. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.7.13. See further Sean Freyne, "The Herodian Period", in Markus Bockmuehl & James Carleton Paget (eds), *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, London 2007, 29–43.

22. Yerushalmi Taanit 4:8/27.

23. See Peter Schäfer, *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums*, Leiden 1978, 65–121; Matthew V. Novenson, "Why Does R. Akiba Acclaim Bar Kokhba as

Bar Kosiba, there is a speculative but plausible argument that whoever came up with the rabbinic doctrine of the dying messiah ben Joseph did so as a *post hoc* prophetic interpretation of Bar Kosiba's messianic career.²⁴

Meanwhile, in a more prosaic strand of rabbinic messiah legend, there are stories in which the tanna Rabbi Hiyya stands by to interpret the messianic vocation of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, codifier of the Mishnah and head of the Jewish community in Palestine under the Antonines and Severans. In one account in Yerushalmi Shabbat, R. Judah suffers an injury and blames himself on account of a sin of omission, citing Ps. 32:10: *Many are the sufferings of the wicked*. Against this interpretation, however, "R. Hiyya said to him, 'These things happened to you on our account, for so it is written: *The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was caught for their corrupt deeds* [Lam. 4:20]'.²⁵ R. Hiyya interprets the travails of R. Judah (who, significantly, according to the Talmud, is a descendant of David) as evidence of his fitting the scriptural profile of the messiah.²⁶

By far the most famous of these Jewish apostles, excepting or perhaps even including Paul, is Nathan of Gaza, the Palestinian prophet who staked his vocation on the messianic career of Sabbatai Zvi, the messiah from Izmir who achieved *tikkun olam* by committing apostasy.²⁷ When in 1666 the messiah Sabbatai Zvi, imprisoned by sultan Mehmed IV in Adrianople, converted to Islam on pain of death, his followers had a crisis thrust upon them. Some concluded, reasonably enough, that Zvi must not have been the messiah after all, but others persevered in the faith through the magic of hermeneutics. In the early days after Zvi's conversion there were several interpretations on offer, as a contemporary account by Rabbi Yakov Sasportas explains:

One school holds that Shabtai Zvi did not change his religion [but] has been libelled. [They say that] this is what actually happened: Shabtai Zvi went to the king singing hymns and without a sword, as was

Messiah?", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 (2009), 551–572.

24. See especially Joseph Heinemann, "The Messiah of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim", *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (1975), 1–15.

25. Yerushalmi Shabbat 16:1 (15c).

26. See Novenson, *Grammar of Messianism*, 96–104. On the social and political context for such stories about the patriarch and exilarch, see David Goodblatt, *The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self-Government in Antiquity*, Tübingen 1994.

27. The definitive treatment is Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, Princeton, NJ 1973.

prophesied. When the kind beheld him, he embraced him and kissed him. He set the crown of the kingdom upon his head, as was prophesied, and wound a green scarf about it. One who caught a glimpse of this thought he had converted to Islam. [...] A second school holds that if he converted, there is a deep purpose in it: that he wished to explore all the treasures of the king of Turkey and his ancestors, so that when his kingdom came to be, he would be expert in all the ways of kingship. A third school has it that there are numberless secrets [involved] in his conversion. God has ordered it. Shabtai Zvi must go into the world of the shards [*qelippot*] to subdue them. Therefore he has dressed himself in them. A fourth school says simply that if he converted, it was not he himself, but a shadow. He himself rose into the sky and has disappeared.²⁸

Nathan of Gaza, who had acclaimed Sabbatai Zvi as messiah and accompanied him in the years before his apostasy, adopted the third, kabbalistic interpretation, which subsequently carried the day and became the official Sabbatean position: Zvi did indeed commit apostasy, because in the wisdom of God it was necessary that he should do so. By committing apostasy, the messiah descended into hell, into the realm of the *qelippot* (the shards or husks in kabbalistic cosmology), because otherwise there could be no harrowing of hell, no *tikkun olam*, no deliverance from evil. If this interpretation seems strained, well, it did so to some of Zvi's own followers, too. But Nathan of Gaza wrote letters, epistles, encouraging and exhorting them to stand firm and await Zvi's final vindication, as, for instance, here:

The reason for all this cannot be revealed, and certainly cannot be written except for those who have entered the Field [of the Shekinah] and ascended and returned, and soon everything will be revealed, with God's help, nor is the time spoken of at all distant but a near time, with God's help, and he who is patient will attain it. Therefore, my brother and all who are companions in the full faith of Israel, who await and expect and tremble at these words, be strong and of good courage.²⁹

Like Paul before him, Nathan of Gaza was not a messiah, but he attached himself to a messiah, even (nay, especially) after that messiah's apparent failure, and by ingenious specialist interpretation of scripture (and, in Nathan's

28. As cited in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 161.

29. As cited in Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 161.

case, of kabbalah) enabled the movement to survive catastrophe.³⁰ Also like Paul before him, Nathan of Gaza received his gospel through a revelation of the messiah. In a letter from circa 1673, he recounts:

Having locked myself in holiness and purity in a separate room and completed the morning prayer under many tears, the spirit came over me, my hair stood on end, my knees shook, and I saw the Merkabah, and I saw visions of God all day and all night, and I was vouchsafed true prophecy like any other prophet, as the voice spoke to me and began with the words: *Thus says the Lord*. And with utmost clarity my heart perceived towards whom my prophecy was directed [viz. Sabbatai Zvi], and until this day I have never yet had so great a vision, but it remained hidden in my heart until the redeemer revealed himself in Gaza and proclaimed himself the messiah; only then did the angel permit me to proclaim what I had seen.³¹

In the wake of his revelation, as we have noted above, Nathan of Gaza became *the* preeminent apostle of Sabbatai Zvi, but like Paul with Jesus, he was occupying an established social role, and consequently had counterparts and competitors (other apostles, super-apostles, false apostles, and so on).³² As Leib ben Ozer, a mainstream, non-Sabbatean rabbi from Amsterdam wrote in a contemporary account:

Wherever you went you heard nothing but that Mr. So-and-so had become a prophet and that Miss So-and-so had become a prophetess; and here there was a company of prophets, some prophesying in one way and others in another way, but the sum of the matter was always that Shabtai Zvi was the messiah and our righteous redeemer.³³

This is an apt summary of my point in this essay: Where there is a messiah, there will always be a Mr. or Ms. So-and-so to be his apostle.

30. On the parallels, see W. D. Davies, "From Schweitzer to Scholem: Reflections on Sabbatai Svi", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976), 529–558; Joel Marcus, "The Once and Future Messiah in Early Christianity and Chabad", *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001), 381–401.

31. As cited in Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 204–205.

32. See Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 9:5; 2 Cor. 11:5, 13; 12:11.

33. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 157.

I have argued that this social role is a type of Jewish religious expertise. Now, this is in the nature of the case, inasmuch as “messiah” or “anointed” is a specifically Jewish idiom for divinely sanctioned authority.³⁴ But there is of course other, wider comparative evidence from the ancient Mediterranean: other instances of freelance religious expertise attached not just to the power of an ancient god but to the reputation of an exceptionally great (even divine) man. In the case of ideologues or propagandists writing in support of sitting rulers – Second Isaiah for Cyrus of Persia, Zechariah for Zerubbabel, Nicolaus of Damascus for Herod the Great – we might usefully compare the great Augustan poets, for instance, Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* or Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare*, or, from Christian late antiquity, Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*. The case of Paul and Jesus is of course different inasmuch as Jesus never was a sitting ruler, and in any case, by the time Paul became a messenger for him, he (Jesus) was already dead and deified. Hence, unlike Nathan of Gaza with Sabbatai Zvi, Paul did not steer the messianic career of Jesus in real time; he only interpreted it *ex post facto*.³⁵ By virtue of his having died and been deified, Jesus, as the messiah, effectively functions as a god in Paul’s freelance religious enterprise: He is invoked, channeled, praised in song, celebrated in ritual meals, and so on. And yet the name god, θεός (*theos*), Paul himself reserves for the god resident in Jerusalem, the father of the messiah Jesus.³⁶

In comparative perspective, Christ is for Paul something like a cult manifestation of or proxy for the god of Abraham. Christ is, Paul says, the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ (*eikon tou theou*), the image of the god (2 Cor. 4:4), a claim with parallels elsewhere in ancient Jewish messianism and merkabah mysticism.³⁷ Here, by way of comparison, we might recall another famous freelance religious expert, Alexander of Abonoteichus, about whom most of what we know comes from the satirical portrait of Lucian of Samosata.³⁸ Alexander

34. See Novenson, *Grammar of Messianism*, 263–276.

35. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1941, 295–296: “Nathan represents a most unusual collection of character traits. If the expression be permitted, he was at once the John the Baptist and the Paul of the new Messiah, surely a very remarkable figure. He had all the qualities which one misses in Sabbatai Zvi: tireless activity, originality of theological thought, and abundant productive power and literary ability. He proclaims the Messiah and blazes the trail for him, and at the same time he is by far the most influential theologian of the movement.”

36. See Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids, MI 2003, 79–153.

37. See Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, “Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ”, *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983), 269–288; Markus Bockmuehl, “The Form of God (Phil. 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1997), 1–23.

38. See Andreas Bendlin, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of Divination: Oracles and Their Literary Representations in the Time of the Second Sophistic”, in John A. North &

operated an oracle of Asclepius in his native Paphlagonia, but his was not a conventional Asclepeion. Alexander mediated messages from the snake god Glycon, who he said was an εἰκών (*eikon*) or a cult manifestation of Asclepius. Lucian writes:

[The god] was called Glycon in consequence of a divine behest in metre; for Alexander proclaimed, “Glycon am I, the grandson of Zeus, bright beacon to mortals [Εἶμι Γλύκων, τρίτον αἶμα Διός, φάος ἀνθρώποισιν]!” When it was time to carry out the purpose for which the whole scheme had been concocted [...] Alexander announced to all comers that the god would make prophecies, and named a date for it in advance.³⁹

While one could visit an Asclepeion at Athens, Epidaurus, Kos, Pharos, Pergamon, Rome, and elsewhere, one could only receive an oracle from Glycon at Alexander’s shrine in Paphlagonia. He had a monopoly on access to this cult deity. He was the apostle of Glycon, so to speak. Glycon, however, was not a human being of recent memory, so at this point the analogy with Paul’s Christ breaks down. (Closer in this respect is, for instance, the cult of the deified philosopher Apollonius established at Tyana by the emperor Caracalla, but then priests of that cult were not freelancers.)

Closest of all (because they practice the same variety of Judean expertise) are the cases of R. Akiba with Bar Kokhba, or R. Hiyya with R. Judah the Patriarch, or Nathan of Gaza with Sabbatai Zvi. In a brilliant essay on this theme, Jacob Taubes wrote:

The only movements to continue are those where the life of the Messiah is interpreted, where outrage upon normal Messianic expectation – death or apostasy – is “interpreted” for the community of “believers.” It is the interpretation that makes the messianic music. The Messiah is merely the theme of a symphony written by bold spirits like Paul of Tarsus and Nathan of Gaza.⁴⁰

Simon R.F. Price (eds), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Oxford 2011, 175–250, especially 232–241.

39. Lucian, *Alexander*, 18–19. Translation by Austin Morris Harmon in *Lucian*, vol. 4, Cambridge 1925.

40. Jacob Taubes, “The Price of Messianism”, in Marc Saperstein (ed.), *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History*, New York 1992, 554. See also his virtuoso interpretation of the apostle in Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Stanford, CA 2004.

Taubes thought that the cases of Paul and Nathan of Gaza were exceptions, that Jewish messiahs normally go uninterpreted. I would say that Paul and Nathan of Gaza are perhaps the cleverest, most persistent, best attested examples, but that the social role of messenger for a messiah is actually commonplace, indeed, that we find it virtually everywhere we find a messiah. And that is because messiahs become messiahs *in interpretation*; that is where “the messianic music,” to borrow Taubes’s phrase, happens.

And this, in turn, helps to explain (although we would need more time to consider it properly) why, as I noted at the beginning of this lecture with reference to Abu Isa, we find in the historical record a number of messiahs who apparently *started out as* or *were also* messengers for the messiah. As Harris Lenowitz puts it, “it is often the case [...] that those who prophesy the coming of messiahs turn out to be the messiahs they have prophesied.”⁴¹ Abu Isa said that he was the fifth and final emissary of the messiah, but his followers concluded that he himself was the messiah. There is a well known and analogous puzzle in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, who in the logia attributed to him prophesies the coming of the son of man (in the third person) but whose followers identified him as that son of man.⁴² Hence he is *both* prophet *and* messiah, or perhaps *first* prophet *then* messiah, in keeping with the powerful social logic we have sketched here. (Indeed, in a strange, modern twist, there is good archival evidence that Gershom Scholem, the greatest twentieth-century scholar of Jewish messianism and especially Sabateanism, at one point thought that he himself might be the messiah.)⁴³ Because messiahs become messiahs in interpretation, sometimes the interpreter, the prophet or apostle, finds himself sliding into the role of messiah, or having that role thrust upon him by the zealous faithful. But even in the more numerous cases where the roles remain distinct, apostles need their messiahs and, no less so, messiahs their apostles. ▲

SUMMARY

Paul’s frequent self-designation *apostolos christou lesou* is one of those phrases we take for granted by transliterating, “apostle of Christ Jesus.” But *christos*, of course, means messiah, and *apostolos* is an old Greek political term meaning envoy or emissary. Paul styles himself an emissary for the messiah, which is in fact a kind of social type in the history of Judaism:

41. Lenowitz, *Jewish Messiahs*, 20.

42. The literature on this puzzle is vast. See now the essays collected in Benjamin E. Reynolds (ed.), *The Son of Man Problem: Critical Readings*, London 2018.

43. See Michael Brenner, “From Self-Declared Messiah to Scholar of Messianism”, *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1996), 177–182, and Scholem’s papers published in Anthony David Skinner (ed.), *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, Cambridge 2007.

the contemporary partisan of a messiah who interprets and propagandizes for him in literary form. Like Zechariah with Zerubbabel, Nicolaus of Damascus with Herod the Great, R. Akiba (according to legend) with Shimon bar Kosiba, and Nathan of Gaza with Sabbetai Zevi, Paul made his mark as a literary surrogate for a man whom he regarded as the messiah. This article examines the social role of the emissary for a messiah in the history of Judaism from antiquity to the early modern period.