

## Was Jesus Qualified to be a Jewish Priest?

Prophets promised that someone would come to rescue the people of Israel from their troubles. Who is this Messiah going to be? What will he be like and what will he do? Different groups within first century Judaism had very strong opinions. Many expected the Messiah to show up at any time, and there were a number of folks who claimed they were sent to do the job.

### Who were people waiting for?

From the prophets there could have been as many as four separate individuals identified with the Messianic age. These were the king of the house of David, the priest of the house of Aaron, the war leader of the house of Joseph, and the prophet representing Elijah who is the announcer of the events as they unfold. Probably the only thing the expectations agreed on is that the Messiah or messiahs are going to be paragons of righteousness. They are extraordinary in their respect for God and their conformance with the Torah.

David is most often mentioned in the descriptions of the Messiah. This is not surprising, considering his achievements and his character. It is said that the heir of David will have an eternal kingdom which he will rule with justice and righteousness.

The role of the heir to David is usually political, and his task is to reestablish the kingdom of the people of Israel on their own land. His kingdom will be a place of endless peace, and he will have many virtues—wisdom, understanding, counsel and might, knowledge, sanctification, fear of the Lord, truth, uprightness.

Where a priestly messiah of the house of Aaron is mentioned, he is also described as perfect in righteousness. He is the Interpreter of the Law, the one through whom the words of the Lord will be revealed, and sometimes also the one who will judge the earth.

He is represented by a star and called the Sun of Righteousness who walks with the children of men in gentleness. He and the heir of David are the ones through whom the Lord can be seen since they are living examples of righteousness. We know that Jesus was a descendant of David through his father Joseph, but could he handle the priestly role as well?

### What did folks know about the priestly messiah?

What we know about the predictions at the beginning of the first century comes from two sources, the Dead Sea Scrolls and contemporary writings in the Pseudepigrapha. Both sources base their concepts on interpretation of scripture.

The ideas about the priestly messiah, the Messiah of Aaron, are based on interpretation of an oracle in the Book of Numbers and a vision of the prophet Zechariah. These interpretations were circulated among groups within Judaism during the Roman occupation.

The first of the prophecies is the oracle of Balaam in the book of Numbers. It was most likely originally intended to refer to David himself, since it speaks of a leader about to come. After the time of David, this oracle is read back to become a prophecy of the future for later readers. Balaam's fourth oracle predicts the defeat of the enemies of the people of Israel, and it mentions the one who is coming.

*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17)*

Later readers use the mention of the star and scepter to separate the one who is coming into two different messianic roles. One role is political, the person who will defeat the enemies and rule the people. The other role is spiritual, the person who will lead the people in righteousness and faithfulness to the Lord. The first is referred to as the Messiah of Israel, the king, and the second as the Messiah of Aaron, the priest.

The second prophecy comes in the first years of the rebuilding of the temple. The prophets Zechariah and Haggai were active at that time. The messianic hopes expressed in their prophecies fit into a time close at hand. The two main players on the scene were Joshua, the high priest of the house of Aaron, and Zerubbabel, the king descended from David.

In the prophecy of Haggai the people were commanded to rebuild the temple, and the king, high priest, and people proceeded to work on the rebuilding. Within a few months, Zechariah also had a series of visions. In one of Zechariah's visions, an angel speaks to the high priest Joshua,

*Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. ... I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. (Zechariah 3:8–9)*

The angel explains one part of Zechariah's vision by saying,

*These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth. (Zechariah 4:14)*

In the vision, Zechariah crowns the two, priest and king, who are to rule together.

*Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.' (Zechariah 6:12–13)*

This is the beginning of the understanding of the separate roles of two anointed ones, one a priest and one a king. The same idea is found later in the documents of Qumran. Since Zerubbabel didn't fulfill the prophecies in his time, Zechariah's predictions stayed open for following generations.

### **How did the people of Qumran see the prophecy?**

There is a clear mention of the expectation of two messiahs in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's found in the Rule of the Community (1QS) which was the primary guide to life within the Qumran community. This document describes the organization of the community, including the process for joining it, the behavioral expectations of members, and the disciplinary processes for infractions of community policies.

Two messiahs are mentioned in connection with the term of effectiveness of the Rule of the Community. The Rule shall be in effect until their coming.

*They should not depart from any counsel of the law in order to walk in complete stubbornness of their heart, but instead shall be ruled by the first directives which the men of the Community began to be taught until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel. (1QS 9:9–11)*

This community expected two messiahs, one priestly and one kingly, to come; and the organization and discipline of the community continue to be in force until their arrival.

The Damascus Covenant (CD) is an alternate and perhaps earlier form of the Rule of the Community. It was found first in the Genizah in Cairo but then also in copies in the Qumran caves. While the Rule of the Community clearly expects two messiahs, the Damascus Covenant uses a singular word for both kinds of messiah in some places.

These passages may indicate a single person who will represent both Aaron and Israel.

*Those who are faithful to him are the poor ones of the flock. These shall escape in the age of the visitation; but those that remain shall be delivered up to the sword when there comes the messiah of Aaron and Israel. (CD-A 19.9–11)*

All of the rules and behavior patterns specified in the covenant are in effect until the arrival of one or both messiahs.

*this is the exact interpretation of the regulations by which [they shall be ruled] [until there arises the messiah] of Aaron and Israel. (CD-A 14.17–19)*

*this is the rule of the assembly [of the ca]mps. Those who walk in them, in the time of wickedness until there arises the messiah of Aaron and Israel, they shall be ten in number as a minimum ... (CD-A 12:22–13:1)*

The Damascus Covenant uses interpretation of the passage from Numbers to describe the two messiahs who are expected.

*the Star is the Interpreter of the law, who will come to Damascus, as it is written: Num 24:13 “A star moves out of Jacob, and a scepter arises out of Israel” The scepter is the prince of the whole congregation and when he arises he will destroy all the sons of Seth. These escaped at the time of the first one’s visitation. (CD-A 7.17–21)*

The interpretation of this passage refers specifically to two separate people. The star is the priestly messiah whose role is the interpretation of the law, while the scepter is the kingly messiah whose role is the destruction of sinners.

The Damascus Covenant also includes the interpretation of a passage from Numbers 21. The modern form of the passage is,

*Then Israel sang this song: “Spring up, O well! Sing about it, about the well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people sank—the nobles with scepters and staffs.” Then they went from the desert to Mattanah, (Numbers 21:17–18)*

The interpretation of the passage in the scroll is,

*The well is the law. And those who dug it are the converts of Israel ... and the staff is the interpreter of the law ... the nobles of the people are those who have arrived to dig the well with the staves that the scepter decreed, to walk them throughout the whole age of wickedness, and without which they will not obtain it, until there arises he who teaches justice at the end of days. (CD-A 6:8–11)*

In this passage, the people who are ruled by “the scepter” are waiting for the appearance of the priestly messiah, the one who teaches justice and righteousness at the end of days.

### **Where does the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs fit in?**

This book is a collection of the testaments of the twelve sons of Jacob, with one testament for each of the twelve sons presented in order of age from the oldest to the youngest. It was

written between 137 and 107 BCE. The testaments contain personal stories, good advice, and sometimes prophetic predictions for posterity about the messianic figures to come. This material would have been available and in general circulation at the beginning of the Roman occupation.

Although Ruben is the oldest son, the first born son of Jacob and Leah, the patriarch recommends that his posterity be subject to the children of Levi. He says,

*Draw near to Levi in humility of your hearts in order that you may receive a blessing from his mouth. For he will bless Israel and Judah, since it is through him that the Lord has chosen to reign in the presence of all the people. (T. Reu. 6:10–11)*

The sons of Levi are the Levitical priesthood, spiritual leaders of the people, but in this passage the offspring of Levi is also expected to reign as king.

The Testament of Levi refers to the vision of the star and scepter in Numbers 24:17.

*And his star shall rise in heaven like a king; kindling the light of knowledge as day is illumined by the sun. (T. Levi 18:3)*

Levi identifies star as the priest who provides knowledge and understanding of the law, but who is also like a king in the heavens. In this allusion, he may be combining the kingly and priestly messianic roles into a single person.

Levi describes the work of the priestly figure to come.

*he shall give the majesty of the Lord to those who are his sons in truth forever. And there shall be no successor for him from generation to generation forever. And in his priesthood the nations shall be multiplied in knowledge on the earth and they shall be illumined by the grace of the Lord, but Israel shall be diminished by her ignorance and darkened by her grief, (T. Levi 18:8–9)*

A fragment of the Testament of Levi found among the Dead Sea Scrolls shows that the one who is expected will be a teacher.

*His word is like the word of the heavens, and his teaching according to the will of God. His eternal sun will shine and his fire will burn in all the ends of the earth; above the darkness his sun will shine. (4Q541 Testament of Levi, frag. 9.1.3–4)*

The Testament of Judah, ancestor of David, warns his children to stay close to the house of Levi.

*And now, children, love Levi so you may endure. Do not be arrogant toward him or you will be wholly destroyed. To me God has given the kingship and to him, the priesthood; and he has subjected the kingship to the priesthood. (T. Jud. 21:1–2)*

Judah describes the Messiah to come as one who is completely righteous.

*there shall arise for you a Star from Jacob in peace: and a man shall arise from my posterity like the Sun of Righteousness, walking with the sons of men in gentleness and righteousness, and in him will be found no sin. (T. Jud. 24:1)*

In this one person, the kingly power is combined with spiritual power.

The Testament of Benjamin also talks about dual roles for the Messiah.

*in later times there shall rise up the beloved of the Lord, from the lineage of Judah and Levi, one who does his good pleasure by his mouth, enlightening all the nations with new knowledge. (T. Benj. 11:2)*

This passage specifically calls for one person to fulfill both messianic roles, the priestly role of Levi and the kingly role of Judah. The person here is acting as a teacher, and this is a person who combines both hereditary family functions.

### **Does Jesus have the required priestly ancestry?**

Is Jesus a descendant of Aaron as required for a priest? To know whether Jesus is a candidate for the role of priestly Messiah, we need to establish his ancestry. Just as the Messiah of Israel must be a descendant of David, the Messiah of Aaron must come from a priestly family and be a lineal descendant of Aaron.

There are two genealogies given in the gospels for Jesus, and they agree in the line of male descent from Abraham through David. The line in Matthew's gospel then leads from David through his son Nathan in a male line through to Joseph, husband of Mary. The other in Luke's gospel leads from David through his son Solomon in a male line through to Joseph.

There are a number of problems with these genealogies, including inconsistencies in the time periods covered and possible omissions. Some have suggested that, since the two genealogies lead to Joseph by different paths, the Lukan genealogy might have been originally intended to refer to the ancestors of Mary. This would justify Jesus' descent from David as coming from both parents.

There are several problems with this, not the least of which is that the descent in the royal house of David can only pass through the male line, from father to son. According to David Flusser, the writings of the priest Jesus Ben Sirach are the oldest discussion of the relationship between the descendants of David and those of Aaron. Ben Sirach says,

*Just as a covenant was established with David son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah, that the king's heritage passes only from son to son, so the heritage of Aaron is for his descendants alone (Sir 45:25).*

From a genealogical perspective, even if Mary were of the house of David, the royal line could not pass through her to her son.

### **What do we know about Mary's ancestry?**

The beginning of Luke's gospel provides some information about Mary's family background. Mary's relative Elizabeth is married to the Levitical priest Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. Zechariah served his normal rotation in the temple with his section and was occasionally assigned to perform service in the sanctuary (Luke 1:5). Elizabeth herself is identified as a daughter of Aaron (Luke 1:5), so this couple is a Levitical family.

Mary's relationship to Elizabeth is specified by the angel Gabriel in the annunciation to Mary:

*Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. (Luke 1:36)*

The phrase in Greek which is translated as your relative implies one who is of the same kin, related by blood or, in a wider sense, of the same race. It is a compound word, with a preposition implying some kind of sharing and a root implying race or blood relationship.

Common usage at the time included descendants of a common ancestor, relatives in the same family, or members of the same race or people. This word is the root of the words genus

and genetic in English. Mary is not simply a distant cousin or a relative by marriage of Elizabeth, but a blood relative, a member of the same family with the same ancestry.

Since Mary is identified as Elizabeth's blood relative, Mary must also be a descendant of Aaron. What makes this blood relationship important, particularly for Mary as a woman, is that descent is treated differently in the house of Aaron from the house of David.

In the quotation from Sirach, it's clear that the inheritance of David passes from son to son, but the inheritance of the children of Aaron is different. The passage says simply that inheritance of Aaron goes to his seed, but the distinction actually made in this verse is that this inheritance goes to all of his descendants. Mary is what is sometimes referred to in the Mishnah as a "priest girl."

As a result, since succession of the priestly family passes through all descendants, including women, Mary's son can receive the priestly heritage which belongs to her as a child of Aaron. This puts Jesus at his birth directly eligible for the role of priestly Messiah through his mother's family.

### **Conclusion—yes, he is qualified**

We can only speculate about how much Jesus may have been aware of the expectations for the priestly role of the Messiah. We also have little information about his own education and studies. Where John the Baptist was raised and educated "in the wilderness" with a prophetic heritage, we have only a single incident from the childhood of Jesus to show his seeking out teachers in the temple.

Jesus demonstrated a deep understanding and ability to interpret scripture which could easily have been developed by education in priestly circles. Mary would have had the family connections, through Elizabeth and Zechariah, to arrange for education within the temple system for her son, once he showed the interest and inclination.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews was not aware that Jesus was a descendant of Aaron and a recipient of the priestly inheritance. Using only the information available to him, he identified the work of Jesus as priestly work, but he did not have Luke's family information that linked Jesus to the line of Aaron. He said,

*He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (Hebrews 7:13–14)*

The possibility of a dual descent, descent from the female side, did not occur to this writer, so he connected Jesus to the priesthood through the messianic prophecy about Melchizedek.

*And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. (Hebrews 7:15–16)*

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is a witness to the priestly work of Jesus, even though he does not have enough information to know that Jesus could claim the priesthood through the ordinary line of descent as well.

Jesus avoided any opportunity to make a messianic statement implying that he sought political power. Instead, he claimed only the power to teach—to tell the truth about God, humankind, and what it meant to live a life of righteousness.

The work Jesus did in his teaching ministry was a work of interpretation—a reprioritizing and refocusing of the law. This moved it from the culturally dependent way of following the God who belonged to a particular people to becoming a guide for living righteously for the people of all nations. This work was the priestly work of the Messiah of Aaron, the work of the righteous Interpreter of the Law.

I expect that Jesus would have been aware of his own family heritage and of the dual roles of the Messiah of Aaron and the Messiah of Israel. While those around him were looking for political liberation, he himself made a priority of his priestly role as Interpreter of the Law. It was a role for which he had the traditional qualification required as a descendant of Aaron.

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