
In this volume John and Adela Collins incisively interpret ancient Jewish and Christian texts that are pivotal for understanding an important topic—messianism, from its roots in the royal ideology of the ancient Near East to the presentation of Jesus as a messiah in the New Testament. They show a solid command of the relevant texts of the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament. This volume is distinctive among the many studies on messianism in its focus on the divinity of the messiah, which relates to topics such as kingship and the messiah's status in relation to God (pp. x-xi). The book is based on a series of lectures that the Collinses delivered in May 2006 at Oxford University (p. vi). John wrote the first half of the book (chapters 1-4), which concentrates on the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Adela the volume’s second half (chapters 5-8), which is devoted to the New Testament.

In the first chapter John Collins examines the royal ideology of the kingdom of Judah. The Hebrew word מֶשְׁכָּס simply means “anointed” and is used “in a generic way” in the Hebrew Bible to signify kings, in particular those of the Davidic line (p. 1). The king is called “son of God” in biblical texts such as Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7. Collins argues that there was an enthronement ritual in ancient Jerusalem, as suggested by texts such as Psalm 2, and that this tradition was influenced to some extent by Egyptian conceptions of kingship (p. 15). In ancient Egypt the divinity of the king was expressed through sonship language such as “son of Re” (an Egyptian deity), which was an important monarchic title (p. 7). Collins suggests that in ancient Israel the affirmation that the king was the son of God implied that he was “empowered to act as God’s surrogate” and thus was “sovereign of the whole world by right” (p. 22). Chapter 2 concerns kingship in the historical and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. Collins examines a range of texts, including Isaiah 6-9. He contends that during the monarchy the king was understood in a mythological sense as the son of God but that in the seventh century BCE this view was modified, in part because of the Deuteronomistic movement (p. 47). In this tradition the divinity of the king is not stressed but rather that he is subject to law. Chapter 3 examines traditions of sacred kingship in the Hellenistic period. Rulers in this era commonly took epithets that imply some form of divinity, such as σώτηρ (“savior”) (p. 50). This chapter also examines the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls from Qumran attest numerous forms of messianic expectation. 4Q246 is a well-known example of messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This text refers to a figure who is called both “son of God” and “son of the Most High.” These expressions are used to describe Jesus in Luke 1. Collins argues that the enigmatic figure of 4Q246 should be understood as similar to depictions of Davidic or royal messiahs elsewhere in the scrolls and that his eschatological function is “to subdue the Gentiles” (p. 73). Ancient Jewish conceptions of the messiah as a “son of man” are the topic of Chapter 4. Collins argues that “the one like a son of man” in Daniel 7 should be identified as the archangel Michael and that this figure was not originally intended to
be thought of as the messiah (pp. 78-79). Early in the interpretation of this chapter, however, the image was understood in a messianic sense. 4 Ezra 13, for example, reconfigures the Danielic Son of Man into a Davidic messiah (p. 97).

Paul’s depictions of Jesus as messiah and Son of God are the topic of Chapter 5. His earliest extant letter, 1 Thessalonians, uses the word “Christ” with reference to Jesus ten times, without ever explaining what the term means (p. 101). Such use of the epithet, Adela Collins aptly argues, suggests that “the messiahship of Jesus was a well-established tradition before Paul joined the movement” (p. 122). In Philippians 2 Paul asserts the preexistence of Jesus in a prose hymn (cf. 1 Cor 8:5-6). The Pauline epistles often relate the view that Jesus was the son of God to his status as messiah. In Chapter 6 Collins addresses the different portrayals of Jesus as messiah and Son of God in the synoptic gospels. For example, Mark begins with the claim that Jesus is the son of God, whereas Matthew opens by asserting that he is a son of David (pp. 126, 134). She reasonably understands the latter phrase as implying that in Matthew the term “Christ” signifies that Jesus is “messiah of Israel” (p. 135). In this chapter she also engages the question of the preexistence of Jesus (pp. 147-48). The portrayal of Jesus as the Son of Man, a foundational issue for understanding his presentation in the New Testament, is the topic of Chapter 7. In Mark the Son of Man sayings are related to the question of secrecy surrounding Jesus’ true identity as messiah (p. 150). The Son of Man sayings in Matthew emphasize that Jesus is an eschatological judge and that he has a kingdom (p. 152). Matt 19:27-28, for example, states that the Son of Man will sit on a throne of glory and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. This text reflects extensive appropriation of older Jewish messianic traditions, as do many other passages of the New Testament. Jesus probably proclaimed the kingdom of God and associated this kingdom with the figure who descends from heaven in Daniel 7 (p. 173). It is reasonable to argue, Collins submits, that Jesus preached about the Danielic son of man as a heavenly messiah. After his crucifixion, he was himself identified as the son of man figure whom he proclaimed. The final chapter of the book is devoted to conceptions of Jesus as messiah in the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation. The Gospel of John inherits the synoptic Son of Man tradition and adapts it to emphasize that Jesus is a “preexistent, heavenly messiah” (p. 186). The centrality of the term logos in John 1 suggests some philosophical conception of Jesus’ sonship as an emanation of God or as Jesus being a type of god himself (pp. 177, 202). In Revelation Jesus as the Son of Man is associated with judgment, as in the synoptic gospels. This book also places emphasis on the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death by construing him as a slaughtered lamb (e.g., 5:6).

The main conclusions of this volume constitute a useful overview of leading scholarly opinions regarding the origins and development of the messianic tradition. They include the following points (pp. 204-7). The view that the king was to some extent divine has roots in ancient Near Eastern tradition. After the monarchy of Judah collapsed in the 6th century BCE, it became easier to envision kingship in ideal terms. The messianic tradition flourished in the Judaism between the Old and New Testaments and the messianic texts from this era are often exegetical in character. A key development in this period is the reconfiguration of the Danielic Son of Man as a messianic figure. The numerous depic-