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A Pre-Christian "Son of God" Among the Dead Sea Scrolls

By John J. Collins

[Sidebar: The 'Son of God' Text in Translation](#)

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The 'Son of God' text, one of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments found in Qumran Cave 4, consists of two columns of nine lines each in the Aramaic language. We lack the beginnings of the lines in the first column, which has been damaged on the right (Aramaic, like Hebrew, is read from right to left). The second column ends in mid-sentence, so the document originally must have possessed at least a third column. This text, dated to the late first century B.C.E., has extraordinary parallels to the annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:31-35), including use of the titles "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High," the earliest known references to these terms in a messianic context. These parallels strongly suggest a relationship between this Qumran text and the later Gospel text, if not a direct dependence, then a dependence on a common tradition.

The Dead Sea Scroll Son of God text from Qumran Cave 4 has attracted attention both in scholarly publications and in the press because it contains remarkable parallels to the annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke. The Aramaic text has been known for 20 years, since J. T. Milik presented it orally in a lecture at Harvard in December 1972. Milik, however, failed to publish it. Part of the text, based on Milik's lecture, was published by Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., in 1974.¹ Fitzmyer also set out the parallels between this text and Luke in his monumental commentary on that Gospel in 1981.² The fact that Fitzmyer, a Jesuit priest, risked the disapproval of his colleagues by his unauthorized publication of the text is significant. It shows that any suggestion that this text has been withheld for religious reasons is utter nonsense. The text was discussed in the March/April 1990 *Biblical Archaeology Review* in "An Unpublished Dead Sea Scroll Text Parallels Luke's Infancy Narrative," sidebar to "Dead Sea Scroll Variation on 'Show and Tell'—It's Called 'Tell, But No Show,'" *BAR* 16:02. Not until 1992, however, was it published in full, by Emile Puech, who had succeeded Milik as the officially designated editor.³

Puech, however, failed to resolve the most intriguing question in this document: the interpretation of the figure who is called "Son of God." Puech allowed that two interpretations are possible: (1) The Son of God may be viewed negatively in the text, in which case he is a Syrian king; or (2) he may be viewed positively, in which case he is a Jewish messiah.

I believe that Puech's hesitation is unnecessary. The Son of God may be identified with confidence as a messianic figure.⁴ The text then raises some intriguing questions about the relationship between Jewish and Christian ideas of the Messiah.

The text is known technically as 4Q246, which simply indicates that it is from Qumran Cave 4 and was given the arbitrary number 246 among those documents. As can be seen in the photo (above), the fragment includes two columns, but the first one (on the right) has been torn vertically, roughly in half, so that the first part of each line is missing. (Remember that Aramaic, like Hebrew, is read from right to left.) Column 2 ends with an incomplete sentence, so there was at least a third column. Each of the preserved columns contains nine lines. The complete text, in the original Aramaic and in English translation, is printed in the sidebar to this article.

The text contains some remarkable parallels to a prediction about Jesus at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. When the angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary, to

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be called Son of the Most High" (column 2, line 1) and "he will be called Son of God" (column 2, line 1).

Luke also speaks of an unending reign; the Dead Sea Scroll fragment speaks of an "everlasting kingdom" (column 2, line 5).

If the Gospel of Luke showed such exact parallels to an Old Testament text, all would agree that this was a case of literary dependence. It is hard to deny that there must be some relationship between this Gospel text and the long-lost text from Qumran, even if it is only dependence on a common tradition. (The manuscript is dated to the late first century B.C.E. by Puech on the basis of the writing style [paleography]. Even if we allow a generous margin of error, it is clearly older than the Gospels.)

In the Gospel of Luke, the one who is called Son of God is explicitly identified as the heir to the Davidic throne: "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:32). Puech allows that the phrase "Son of God" may have the same reference in the Qumran text, that is, that this Son of God is a descendant of David. But he also allows for another interpretation. If you look at column 2 in the photograph, you will see that there is a blank space (*vacat*, in scholarly jargon) in the middle of the column, before the phrase "until the people of God arises." Several scholars have taken this break as an indication of the turning point of the text. Everything before the break, then, would pertain to the rule of the nations, and would be viewed negatively from a Jewish point of view. So Milik, in his lecture at Harvard, argued that the one who would be called "Son of God" was a Syrian king, Alexander Balas, son of the notorious Antiochus IV Epiphanes who had persecuted the Jews in the time of the Maccabees (167–164 B.C.E.). Balas is called *theopator* (god-begot-ten) and *Deo patre natus* (born of a divine father) on coins. Puech, in his publication of our Dead Sea Scroll text, also allowed as one possibility that the reference might be to a Syrian king, although he preferred the better-known Epiphanes.

It was not uncommon in antiquity for pagan kings to be regarded as gods or sons of gods. In a Jewish context, however, "Son of God" is a highly honorific title. If this reference was to a Syrian king, we would expect to find some indication in this Jewish text that the title was inappropriate. If the Son of God was viewed negatively, we would expect the text to tell of his eventual downfall. In fact, however, there is no indication in the extant text that the Son of God was regarded with disapproval.⁵

True, the blank space in the second column of the Son of God text marks the transition to the final stage of the drama, the rise of the people of God. It does not follow, however, that everything before this is negative. This text belongs to the category of apocalyptic literature, broadly defined; that is, literature that reports visions about the end of days. It is very closely related to the Book of Daniel, which is itself a classic apocalyptic text. It is typical of apocalyptic literature that it does not tell its story in simple sequential order, but often goes over the same ground again and again to make its point. For example, Daniel 7 recounts a famous vision in which "one like a son of man" comes on the clouds of heaven (verse 13) and is given a kingdom. An interpretation follows, which says that "the holy ones of the Most High" receive the kingdom (verse 18). Finally, there is an elaboration of this interpretation, according to which the kingdom is given to "the people of the holy ones of the Most High" (verse 27). The giving of the kingdom, then, is narrated three times, but these are not three separate events.

The "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7 represents the "people of the holy ones," and receives the kingdom on their behalf. The Son of God text should be read in a similar way. The figure who is called the Son of God is the representative, or agent, of the people of God. That is why he is not mentioned again after the rise of the people of God in column 2. His career and the rise of the people of God are simply two aspects of the same event.

Fitzmyer made a number of important points about the interpretation of this text when he published part of it in 1974. He saw the text as apocalyptic rather than historical, which is to say that it refers to some climactic event of the future and not to the present or past. This is shown by phrases drawn from Daniel 7:14: "his kingdom is an ever-lasting kingdom," "his dominion is [an] everlasting dominion." Fitzmyer also saw that the figure must be "someone on the Jewish side" and suggested that he is "possibly an heir to the throne of David."⁶ He adamantly refused, however, to use the word "messiah" with reference to this figure, since that word does not appear in the text.

It may be well at this point to pause for a moment to comment on the word "messiah." As is well known, the Hebrew word for messiah, *mashiach*, means simply "anointed." Kings were anointed in ancient Israel, and so were some other figures, notably high priests. Originally, the word had no special reference to the future. When the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 2:2 that the kings of the earth take counsel "against the Lord and his anointed," he was speaking of the king of the day, not of someone who was expected in the future. In later times, however, when there was no longer a Davidic king in Jerusalem and when the Jewish people looked increasingly to the future, the word "messiah" took on a new meaning. It now referred to the one who would restore the kingdom of Israel, and who was often conceived in a highly idealized way. The Dead Sea Scrolls do not restrict the word "messiah" to the one who would restore the Davidic kingship; they also speak of a priestly "messiah of Aaron" and use the word "messiahs" with reference to prophets. But they also attest the use of "messiah" with reference to the "branch of David." Eventually the word "messiah" came to mean primarily the Davidic messiah in both Jewish and Christian traditions: Passages in the Psalms and in the Prophets that spoke of a messiah or of a Davidic king were commonly interpreted as referring to this figure who would come in the future. At the turn of the era, an heir to the Davidic throne, in an apocalyptic context, cannot be distinguished from the Davidic messiah, and we are fully justified in speaking of a messiah here, even though the word does not appear in the text.

The Hebrew Bible provides a clear basis for referring to the Davidic messiah as Son of God. Psalm 2, which uses the word "messiah," or "anointed," with reference to the king, goes on to say "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: he said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'" (Psalm 2:7). In Psalm 89:27, God says of the king "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." In 2 Samuel 7:14, the Lord promises that he will establish the kingdom of David's offspring: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." This latter passage is cited in the document known as 4Q174, or the Florilegium, from Qumran (this document consists of biblical citations followed by explanations; the citation commented on is from 2 Samuel 7:11–14):

"'The Lord declares to you that He will build you a house. I will raise up your seed after you. I will establish the throne of his kingdom (for ever). I (will be) his father and he shall be my son.' He is the branch of David who shall arise with the Interpreter of the Law (to rule) in Zion (at the end) of time."

This passage from the Florilegium is a good illustration of how Scripture was read at Qumran. A text that originally referred to Solomon and the historical Davidic line now refers to the end of days. The son in question is now the branch of David who will appear in the future, or, in common parlance, the Davidic messiah.

In view of this background, it is not surprising that the Davidic messiah should be called "Son of God" or "Son of the Most High." Indeed the Davidic association of these phrases is explicit in the verses previously quoted from the Gospel of Luke: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." Our scroll text from Qumran (4Q246) is probably the oldest extant text that explicitly uses the title "Son of God" with reference to a future messianic king.

If we grant then that the Son of God here is the Davidic messiah, what significance does this have for our understanding of Jewish and Christian messianism?

The title "Son of God" is of considerable importance in the New Testament and early Christianity. Traditionally, scholarship has been divided between those who see the attribution or divine titles to Jesus as a result of Hellenistic influence and those who understand them against a Semitic, Jewish background. Fitzmyer, a prominent champion of Jewish backgrounds, has nonetheless claimed that "There is nothing in the Old Testament or Palestinian Jewish tradition that we know of to show that 'Son of God' had a messianic nuance."⁷ Even from the brief sketch we have presented here, it should be clear that this claim cannot be maintained.

There was a clear basis for giving "Son of God" a messianic nuance in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2, given the propensity of Jews of this period to interpret Scripture as prophecy of the future. The Florilegium text from Qumran provides concrete evidence that Jewish interpreters of Scripture had made the connection between the Son of God and the messiah before the rise of Christianity. The newly published Son of God text from Qumran is a major corroboration of this connection.

The Jewish background has implications for the meaning of the expression “Son of God.” In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (but not in Mark, the oldest Gospel), Jesus is the son of God in the literal sense, insofar as he is born of a virgin who was impregnated by the power of Holy Spirit. In Israelite and Jewish tradition, however, a king was the son of God by adoption, with no suggestion that he did not have a human father. In the Hellenistic world, rulers were sometimes said to have been begotten by divine beings. There was such a legend about Alexander the Great. In a Jewish context, however, “Son of God” was a title that expressed a spiritual rather than a biological relationship to God. (The phrase could also be used for people other than the king, for example, the people of Israel as a whole in Hosea 11:1 or the righteous man in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 2:13.) It is likely that Jesus, too, was first called “Son of God” because he was accepted as messiah, and that the stories about his birth were formulated later.⁸

Jesus, in the Gospels, is often designated by Jewish messianic titles. (Christ simply means “messiah.”) Nonetheless, the way he is portrayed does not fit easily with Jewish messianic expectations. The Son of God in the text from Qumran is rather typical of these messianic expectations: He will establish an everlasting kingdom and make war cease from the earth; God will cast the nations down before him; he will be a warrior who relies on the power of God. Jesus of Nazareth was no warrior, and some of his followers may have been disappointed in this respect. His death by crucifixion was not part of the common Jewish script for a successful messiah. Nonetheless, his followers persisted in their belief that he was indeed the Messiah.

One of the ways in which they justified this belief was by reinterpreting the vision of Daniel about the “one like a son of man” who would come on the clouds of heaven. As we have seen, the Son of God text from Qumran is closely related to Daniel’s vision. It is possible that the Son of God was identified with Daniel’s “one like a son of man,” but we cannot be sure because of the gaps in column 1 of the text. The Gospel writers, however, placed more emphasis on the heavenly setting of Daniel’s vision. The “one like the son of man” would not achieve his victory on earth, but on the clouds of heaven. Jesus did not judge the nations in his earthly life, but he would come back from heaven after his death to do so (see Mark 13; Matthew 24; Luke 21). The Book of Revelation, written at the end of the first century, envisages Jesus as a rider on a white horse who would strike the nations with the sword of his mouth (Revelation 19:11–16: “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron” [19:15]). The early Christians recognized that Jesus had not fulfilled the common Jewish expectations of the messiah. Some of them, at least, held that he would conform more closely to those expectations at the Second Coming.

The relevance of the Son of God text, and of the Dead Sea Scrolls in general, to early Christianity is complex. The scrolls illuminate in many ways the conceptual world in which Christianity developed and the language on which the Gospel writers drew. Yet there were also factors that led the Christian movement to diverge from its Jewish matrix. Not least among these factors was the acceptance of a messiah who did not conform to the expectations of many Jews of the time.

The ‘Son of God’ Text in Translation

Sidebar to: A Pre-Christian “Son of God” Among the Dead Sea Scrolls

Column 1	Column 1
aysrk µdq lpn trv yhl[[... ¹	¹ ... up]on him rested. He fell before the throne
ûwnvw zygr hta aml[[l]l] akl[m ... ²	² ... k]ing, [for]ever you are angry, and [your features] are changed
aml[d[hta alkw ûwzj a ... ³	³ ... your vision and you forever
a[ra l[att hl[÷ybrb[r ... ⁴	⁴ ... the m]ighty. Affliction will come on earth
atnydmb br ÷wryvjnw ... ⁵	⁵ ... and great carnage among countries
÷yrx[mw] rwta ûlm ... ⁶	⁶ ... the king of Assyria [and Eg]ypt
a[ra l[hw]hl br ... ⁷	⁷ ... will be great on earth
÷wvmvy alkw ÷wdb[... ⁸	⁸ ... will serve, and all will minister
hnkty hmvbw arqty ab[r ... ⁹	⁹ ... will be called [gr]eat, and by his name will be called
Column 2	Column 2
ayqyzk hnwrqy ÷wyl[rbw rmaty la yd hrb ¹	¹ Son of God he will be called and Son of the Most High they will name him. Like the flashes
l[÷wklmy [÷y]nv ÷htwklm ÷k atyzj yd ²	² that you saw, so will their kingdom be. They will rule for year[s] on
hnydml hnydmw vw]dy µ[l µ[÷wvdy alkw a[ra ³	³ earth, and they will trample all. People will trample people and province, province
brj ÷m jyny alkw la µ[µwqy d[vacat ⁴	⁴ [vacat] until the people of God arises and all rests from the sword.
[÷]ydy fwwqb htjra lkw µ[twklm htwklm ⁵	⁵ His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all his ways in truth. He will jud[ge]
¹ sy a[ra ÷m brj µlv]l db[y alkw fwwqb a[ra ⁶	⁶ the earth in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth
hlyab abr la ÷y]dgsy hl atnydm lkw ⁷	⁷ and all provinces will worship him. The great God will be his patron.
÷h]kw hdyb ÷tny ÷ytt[brq hl db[y awh ⁸	⁸ He will make war for him. He will give peoples into his hand and all of them
...ymwht lkw µ[÷flv hnflv yhwmdq hmry ⁹	⁹ he will cast down before him. His sovereignty is everlasting sovereignty, and all deeps ...

Endnotes:

1. Joseph A Fitzmyer, "The Contribution of Qumran Aramaic to the Study of the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973–1974), pp. 382–407, reprinted in his *A Wandering Aramean. Collected Aramaic Essays* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 85–113.
2. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 205–206, 347–348.
3. Emile Puech, "Fragment d'une Apocalypse en Araméen (4Q246 = pseudo-Dan^d) et le 'Royanume de Dieu,'" *Revue biblique* 99 (1992), pp. 98–131.
4. The messianic interpretation was first proposed by Frank Moore Cross. I am grateful to Professor Cross for sharing with me the notes that he compiled after Milik's lecture in 1972.
5. David Flusser ("The Hubris of the Antichrist in a Fragment from Qumran," *Immanuel* 10 [1980], pp. 31–37) argued that the Son of God figure was the Antichrist or anti-Messiah. But the Antichrist, conceived as a mirror-image of Christ, is a Christian idea and unattested in pre-Christian Judaism.
6. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean*, pp. 92–93.
7. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, p. 206. Fitzmyer adds that "the title 'Son of God' was as much at home in Palestinian Judaism as in the contemporary Hellenistic world."
8. For an excellent, full treatment of this complicated issue, see Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

Reference for this article

Collins, John J. "A Pre-Christian "Son of God" Among the Dead Sea Scrolls." *Bible Review*, Jun 1993, 34-38, 57. <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=9&Issue=3&ArticleID=12> (accessed 11/21/2014)

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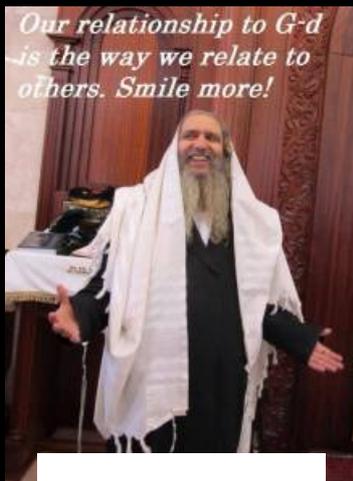
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–The Rebbe (*Igrot Kodesh*, vol 2)

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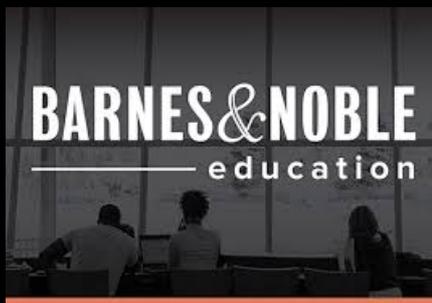
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began as a sect of Judaism, the scrolls are very important for understanding the earliest Christians and their writings—the New Testament. In the March/April 2015 issue of BAR, James C. VanderKam, the John A. O'Brien Professor of Hebrew Scriptures in the theology department at the University of Notre Dame, examines the overlap between these two bodies of texts in his article "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament." Dr. VanderKam w

This combination of son of man and servant of God, here brought about for the first time, was of decisive importance for Jesus's understanding of his mission. (p. 60). Since Jeremias's publication in 1957 scholarship has agreed to refer to chapters 37 to 71 (Jeremias's "Visionary Discourses") as the Parables of Enoch. Key to his argument was the observation that the Parables of Enoch are missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls and this point is best explained by looking for much later date than is represented by the DSS. But scholars generally have since come to reject Malik's late date and placed the Parables back prior to the end of the first century CE. The Dead Sea Scrolls predate the Jesus and writers of the New Testament. Having said that, they're of immeasurable relevance for understanding Christian origins. It seems ridiculous to even need to remind ourselves of this, but Jesus, his disciples, Paul, and most of the cast of characters that cluttered around them in the first century CE were Jews. In a text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, known simply as Aramaic Apocalypse (sounds fun, right?), we find a scribe's theological reflection on the identity of the messiah in light of selections of verses from the Hebrew Scriptures. The relevant portion of this text for our topic is as follows