Torleif Elgvin's *Warrior, King, Servant, Savior*: A Review Article

Jesper Høgenhaven
University of Copenhagen | jh@teol.ku.dk
JJMJS No. 11 (2024): 117–124

Torleif Elgvin has written an ambitious book[1] on a complex, intensely disputed, and deeply fascinating topic, the rise and development of Israelite and early Jewish royal ideology and messianic expectations. The book covers the entire span of time from before the emergence of biblical literature into the rabbinic period, in accordance with Elgvin's firm recognition that messianism in the Hebrew Bible must be understood in a continuum with the textual evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other examples of the wider phenomenon of Jewish literature from the Second Temple period. The development of messianic ideas has been treated in the past in a number of influential works—names like Sigmund Mowinckel and John J. Collins immediately come to mind.[2] Definitions of "messiah" and what constitutes a messianic notion have been the subject of much scholarly debate, often intertwined with different positions on the history of Israelite and Jewish religion, the growth of biblical literature, and the relations between ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Attempting a comprehensive take on this huge and variegated material requires not only courage, but a solid command of several fields.

---

[1] Torleif Elgvin, *Warrior, King, Servant, Savior: Messianism in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

[2] Sigmund Mowinckel, *Han som kommer. Messiasforventningen i det gamle testament og på Jesu tid* (København: G.E.C. Gad, 1951); English edition: *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956); John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Several Scandinavian scholars have contributed to the discussion of messianism; see Aage Bentzen, *Messias. Moses redivivus. Menschensohn. Skizzen zum Thema Weissagung und Erfüllung* (ATANT 17; Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1948); Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (ConBOT 8; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1976). See also, more recently, Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Elgvin's primary interest is not in discussing definitions. His perspective is fundamentally empirical and historical, as he regards the gradual—and sometimes abrupt—emergence and evolution of different notions of kingship and future kings as savior figures as a continuum, unfolding in tandem with the development of ancient Israelite and Jewish written traditions. He begins in Chapter 1 ("Son of David," 1–54) by sketching the historical and archeological evidence for the existence of an early Israelite monarchy associated with the royal figures of David and Solomon. The notion of a political unity in the Iron Age, corresponding to the biblical traditions of Saul, David, and Solomon, is contested, given the scarcity of extra-biblical sources available. Elgvin, however, points to the archaeological remains that can be interpreted as reflecting a monarchic state in the tenth century, and he cites the references to the "house of David" in the Tel Dan inscription and, arguably, in the text of the Mesha stele (duly noting the challenges to the authenticity of the former).[3] These sources lend additional credibility to the historicity of David, and establish the existence of a "house of David" as a plausible designation for the Judean Kingdom. Regardless of the implications and relevance one assigns to the (possible) historical beginnings of the Israelite and Judaean monarchies for the development of royal ideology, Elgvin provides a highly useful and concise treatment of the evidence.

Moreover, Elgvin deals briefly but comprehensively with royal ideologies in Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources, and then turns to the Hebrew Bible texts. He dates "the source behind 2 Sam 7" (Nathan's promise to David of an eternal house) to the tenth century, the cores of Psalms 2, 110, and 21 to the late tenth or ninth century, and Psalm 72 to the late eighth or seventh century. In these texts, Elgvin traces elements of royal ideology, such as the king's divine sonship, that in his view were taken over and adapted to Yahwism by early Israelite scribes.

Elgvin then turns to the Northern Kingdom in Chapter 2 ("Royal Ideology in the Northern Kingdom," 55–75), arguing that the royal passage of the Balaam oracle (Num 24:15–19) preserves a Northern Israelite version of royal ideology that likely goes back to the era of the ninth century Omride dynasty. He notes how the prediction of a "star rising from Jacob" (דרך כוכב מיעקב, Num 24:17) in a much later time became foundational for the Bar Kokhba

[3] Regarding the mention of a "house of David" restored in the Mesha Inscription, see André Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *BAR* 20.3 (1994): 30–37.

revolt, as documented in rabbinic texts. A reflection of this Northern tradition is also visible in Jacob's blessing of Joseph in Gen 49. However, after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, these traditions were transferred to Judah, and incorporated into larger tradition complexes, where the main emphasis was on the Davidic Kingdom. Elgvin briefly explains the historical framework as an influx of Israelite refugees into Judean territory following the Assyrian conquest of Samaria, resulting in a considerable expansion of Jerusalem, as archaeological findings have demonstrated.[4] The tumultuous final decades of the Northern Kingdom and the subsequent fall of its last remains sparked hopes for a future restoration of a united kingdom, as echoed in Ps 80 and the Book of Hosea.

In Chapter 3 ("From Isaiah to Josiah," 76–103), Elgvin goes on to show how the last century of the Judean Kingdom saw first a rise, and then a shattering of expectations surrounding the Davidic dynasty. This, according to Elgvin, can be seen in the famous, and intensely debated, "royal" passages in the Book of Isaiah, Isa 7:14–17 and 8:23b–9:6. Elgvin regards Isa 7:14–17 as an eighth century oracle, proclaiming the birth of a new Davidic king, who would replace King Ahaz. At the same time, the oracle predicts war and destruction for both Israel and Judah. No distant messianic future is envisaged here. Isaiah 8:23b–9:6 is discussed in some detail, and alternative suggestions for the date of the passage, wholly or partly, to either the time of Isaiah, or the time of King Josiah in the late seventh century, are considered. Ultimately, Elgvin opts for the latter possibility. The triumphant celebration of a new future for the Northern provinces under a Davidic ruler seems to fit the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Assyrian power in the region under Josiah better than an eighth century scenario. Furthermore, Isa 8:23b–9:6 represents a reworking of the Davidic promise theme. The reign of Josiah is likely to have sparked hopes of a Davidic restoration, including a reunification of Judah and Israel. However, his premature death meant that this attempted restoration failed. Echoes of these hopes can be found in biblical texts, particularly, in Jeremiah, while later texts develop the theme of Josiah as a righteous king favored by Yahweh, who fell by the sword (Zech 12:10–13:9). Micah 5:1–8 is an exilic *relecture* of the Isaianic oracles, postponing the birth and reign of a Davidide into the future.

Chapter 4 ("The End of the Kingdom," 104–142) deals with the fall of the Judean Kingdom and the deportation of the Judean elite to Mesopotamia. These catastrophic events challenged prevailing notions of kingdom, and led to

[4] Cf., in particular, Magen Broshi, "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *IEJ* 24 (1974): 21–26.

significant and variegated transformations of royal ideology. Elgvin points to the Davidic covenant theology introduced in Psalm 89 as a new element, inspired by Deuteronomistic theology. Following the experience of exile, evolutions of royal ideology went in different directions: Hopes for a restoration of the Davidic Kingdom can be traced in the continuous reworking and expansion of prophetic literature. Here, Elgvin points to texts like Jer 23:5–6 LXX; 37:18–21 LXX; Amos 9:11–15, and, notably, Isa 11:1–5 as evidence of this trend. Moreover, he suggests that the garden of Eden narrative in Gen 2–3 could also be read as a reflection on the trauma of the exile. The story symbolically captures the disobedience that led Judah and Israel into exile, but also points to the continued care of God. On the other hand, a very different perspective on the expected, future restoration of God's people is evidenced in the earliest stratum of the Book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel had no place for a future Davidic king, but in subsequent redactions of the book scribes chose to insert the Davidic motif. Something similar can be said of Deutero-Isaiah with respect to various redactions and stages of literary growth: in the earliest layers of Isa 40–55, which in Elgvin's view derive from an anonymous prophet from the time of the rise of Cyrus, before the fall of Babylon, the Persian king is the anointed instrument of Yahweh, and Davidic motifs are transferred to him as the liberator of Yahweh's people and the agent of justice on earth. Elgvin provides a concise but incisive discussion of the "servant songs" (Isa 42:1–7; 49:1–9a; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12), highlighting the potential for different readings of the servant figure, individual or collective, and explores the various ways the suffering servant has likely been understood in subsequent contextualizations, where the servant was seen as a reflection of figures such as Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel, Jeremiah, and Moses. These texts resonate with royal, prophetic, and cultic images, and lend themselves to collective as well as individual interpretations.

He places special weight on the interpretation evidenced by the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1QIsa[a], ca. 100 BCE), which reflects a messianic reading of Isa 52:13–53:12, reading משחתי ("I anointed") in 52:13 (rather than MT: משחת, "marred").

The period immediately following the return of a small group of Judeans from Babylonia was crucial for the postponement of hopes for a new Davidic king into a distant future. The development of this period is treated in Chapter 5 ("The Return to Judah and Messianic Hopes," 143–180). Again, Elgvin provides a sketch of the historical background: Judah seems to have been sparsely populated during the centuries following the exile, and Jerusalem was at this time no more than a small "temple village." Only a small contingent of

exiled Judeans chose to return to the land. An important testimony from this period is Zech 4, which inaugurated the notion of two anointed leader figures, a king and a priest, working side by side, termed the "two sons of oil" (שני בני היצהר, Zech 4:14). The passage may have consciously avoided the term "anointed one" for political reasons. This dual image—a "landmark in the development of messianism," according to Elgvin—would prove highly influential over the subsequent centuries, with some scribes emphasizing the expectation of an anointed priest, others that of an anointed king. There were also messianic concepts reiterating the dual messianism, like those of the Qumran community. While the expectations voiced in Zech 4 originated in a situation where the Davidide Zerubbabel briefly held the office of governor in Persian Yehud, alongside Joshua the priest, Zerubbabel was probably removed from office by the Persians exactly because of the potentially "dangerous" restoration hopes associated with his royal ancestry.

Expectations of a future restoration on a greater and more glorious scale than the realities of Persian period and early Hellenistic period Judah were developed in different directions. Some texts describe the role of a future Davidic king in rather vague terms (Jer 33:17–22), while others are reminiscent of the suffering servant figure of Isaiah 53 (Zech 9). Elgvin demonstrates how the redactional growth of the Psalms collection reflects an ongoing elaboration of the image of King David as a warrior, a songster, and a founder of the cult, a development documented in the Septuagint as well as the Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPs[a]).

The second century BCE is a new turning-point in the development of messianic expectations. In Chapter 6 ("The Upheavals of the Second Century BCE," 181–227), Elgvin traces these new trends against the background of the incorporation of Judaea into the Seleucid empire, and, subsequently, the revolt and the rise of a new independent Hasmonean state. Again, tendencies run in different directions: There are strains within Judaism that envisage a future glorious restoration of the temple and the priesthood without any place for a Davidic king. This is the perspective of Ben Sira and the Aramaic Levi texts. On the other hand, the second century also witnessed the emergence of eschatological expectations involving a messianic figure with close ties to the heavenly realm. In Elgvin's understanding of Dan 7, the "son of man" (בר אנש, Dan 7:13) is such a messianic figure, "an end-time, earthly Davidic king being 'online' with heaven while he still rules on earth." Elgvin defends this interpretation in a discussion with Collins's view of the "son of man" as a

heavenly being,[5] pointing to the messianic understanding as supported by early interpretations of the passage found in the Enochic Similitudes (1 En. 37–71) and in the Qumran composition 4QMessianic Apocalypse (4Q521).

Chapter 7 ("The Messiahs of the Scrolls," 228–262) gives an overview of messianic ideas in the manuscripts from Qumran. Elgvin dates the origins of the Qumran community (the *Yahad*) to the mid-second century BCE, and regards the Hasmonean Simon as the most plausible candidate for the role of the "Wicked Priest" in the *Yahad* compositions. As Elgvin states, no homogeneity should be expected in the Qumran scrolls with regard to eschatology or messianic expectations. In some of the core texts of the *Yahad*, The Community Rule (1QS), The Rule of the Congregation (1QSa), and 4QTestimonia (4Q175), the end time scenario includes a priestly and a royal messiah, the messiahs of Aaron and of Israel, as well as an eschatological prophet. However, in other sectarian texts—notably some of the *pesher* commentaries—a royal messiah, a "shoot of David," is the expected figure leading Israel at the end of times. Several of these passages make an effort to associate the Davidic messiah with observance of the Torah and deference to the priesthood. The collection of manuscripts also contains texts that envisage a priestly end time figure, painted in the colors of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, with no reference to a royal messiah. This is the case in the Aramaic composition 4Q541 (4QApocryphon of Levi^{b}?), which describes a Levitical priest making atonement for all of his generation through his sufferings, and similar ideas can be detected in the Self-Glorification Hymns and other hymns included in the Hodayot, which may have been read in association with the Teacher of Righteousness. A "collective messianism," where God's people are the primary agent on God's behalf in the end time scenario, seems to be evidenced in the Qumran War Scroll (1QM).

In Chapter 8 ("Jewish Messianisms after the Turn of the Era," 263–315), Elgvin traces the continued developments of, and reflections on, messianism in Jewish literature from the late first to the seventh centuries CE. The decisive historical event of this period was the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 CE). The evidence from literary sources as well as coinage clearly suggests that Simon Bar Kokhba was regarded by his adherents as a messianic figure, inaugurating the "freedom of Israel." These messianic pretentions are reflected in rabbinic texts, as is the brutal suppression of the revolt by the Romans.

---

[5] John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), 304–310.

Through a sampling of passages, Elgvin shows how messianic expectations and motifs continued to be voiced in Talmudic texts of the following centuries, often associated with mysterious or ambiguous notions, sometimes in critical or polemical dialogue with early Christian ideas. At some point during the first five centuries CE the notion of two messiahs emerged, a messiah, son of Joseph, as the forerunner of the Messiah, son of David. The notion of a suffering messiah, painted in the colors of Isa 53, in the late collection Pesiqta Rabbati is an exception.

The strength of Elgvin's book lies in its comprehensive nature. Having this wide range of sources treated in one place is extremely useful, and Elgvin should be credited for stating his arguments in a concise manner, without engaging in lengthy polemics or discussions. It goes almost without saying that there are areas not covered in the book—the most obvious case being the New Testament and early Christian literature, which is only touched upon briefly, in particular in Chapter 8. This field has of course been covered extensively in numerous other contributions. Without a particular set of definitions, decisions about what is relevant will sometimes be somewhat arbitrary. For instance, the ambivalent attitude of the Deuteronomistic History towards kingship (witnessed in the narratives of the origins of Israelite kingship in 1 Sam 8–10 and in the law of kings in Deut 17:14–20) is not assessed in relation to Nathan's promise to David in 2 Sam 7. This is not, however, a criticism of Elgvin's selection of a rich variety of important passages. The structure of the book is, as the chapter headings show, basically chronological. Elgvin's emphasis on the centrality of the earliest available material witnesses to the Hebrew Bible literature, namely, the Qumran scrolls, is in itself an important and encouraging sign of a growing recognition, within the field of biblical studies, of the significance of these sources.

Inevitably, some will disagree with particular suggested dates and interpretations. In some cases, Elgvin exhibits a greater confidence in the possibility of discerning the redactional history of biblical passages, and assigning plausible dates to their various strata, than some interpreters, including the present writer, would embrace. To mention but one example, when he follows William Schniedewind in regarding 1 Kgs 8:12–13 as the oldest stratum of the temple dedication account,[6] I wonder if there is an underlying assumption at play dictating that the more "materially" oriented idea of Yahweh

---

[6] William Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Sam 7:1–17* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40–46.

dwelling in the darkness of the temple must be older or more original than the more “spiritual” assertions that Yahweh’s name dwells in the temple while Yahweh himself is in the heavens. This raises questions, for example, concerning the age of the Priestly texts with their perception of the glory (*kābôd*) of Yahweh residing in the sanctuary vis-à-vis the Deuteronomistic notion of Yahweh’s name.

Because of the chronological framework, biblical texts are treated in their (possible) order of composition and redaction rather than any canonical sequence. The index of passages, however, makes it easy for the reader to locate any given source in the book. Elgvin writes in a concise and clear style and with an attractive flow. He notes in the preface that the book was written during the Covid-19 pandemic when access to scholarly literature in libraries was limited. This may in the end have been to the advantage of the book, which strikes a good balance between providing the necessary references and information, and overburdening the reader with research history. While messianism has probably been both over- and under-estimated by scholars past and present, struggling to reconstruct the complex phenomena of ancient Judaism and early Christianity, Elgvin’s book is an important contribution to ongoing discussions, and provides immediate access, for scholars and students alike, to the central sources.