

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

32

Messiah and Christos



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herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Peter Schäfer

32



Prof. David Fleusser

Messiah and Christos

Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity

Presented to David Flusser

on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday

Edited by

Ithamar Gruenwald, Shaul Shaked
and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa



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Foreword

The present volume is intended as a tribute to an unusual man and an uncommon scholar. Great erudition is not rare in scholars; indeed, it is a prerequisite for the best in this profession. But the kind of natural familiarity with the major issues in world literature of practically all ages and many cultures that Flusser possesses is not common. That a scholar should conduct a living dialogue with literatures and personalities of the past in a manner that is not different from debating with contemporaries is again something quite extraordinary. That this dialogue should be conducted in the languages of most of these people is almost unique. That this interest in the past should be exercised not as an antiquarian fascination with dead objects, but that it should all be part of an urgent and pressing intellectual concern, accompanied by certain religious undertones, is again something peculiar to the mode of scholarly enquiry that marks Flusser.

Professor Flusser's approach is always fresh. He constantly discovers new and startling angles where other people, no less familiar with the material, have seen only the well-observed old features. These new aspects do not always prove to be the universally accepted truths of the future. Sometimes they are, and remain to most people, bold ventures that need to be taken with some caution. But they are never dull. They are governed by an ability to see connections that may sometimes be bizarre, evidence of Flusser's wonderful sense of humour. For Flusser, as he likes to observe, comes from the land that gave the world the Good Soldier Schweik, that combination of cunning and naïveté, of light-heartedness and despair, of sensuousness and spirituality of a particular kind. At the same time, however, these are very serious exercises in the pursuit of deeper intellectual truths.

Among the pioneers of Qumran research, Flusser has relentlessly sought to understand the deeper roots of what became Christianity and how it emerged and differentiated itself from Judaism. Flusser has also been one of the foremost to detect various foreign traits, especially Persian and even Indian, in Jewish writings of the Second Temple period.

Those who know Flusser will appreciate the warmth and admiration, often mixed with exasperation, frustration and a sense of envy felt towards him by his students, friends and colleagues. The editors of this book have

belonged at various stages of their lives to all three categories, and their feelings are representative of that special brew of emotions that people have experienced in the company of Flusser.

While we hope that this book contains some studies worthy of Flusser's attention, and that it contributes to a better understanding of the theme around which they have focused, we also hope that it will serve as a token of respect for that remarkable scholar, David Flusser.

Sadly, Shlomo Pines' article in this volume is his last scholarly contribution to be published. He passed away, leaving us so much the poorer.

A bibliography of David Flusser's works will be found in *The New Testament and Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, a special issue of *Emmanuel* (P. O. B. 249, Jerusalem 91002), vol. 24/25 (1990), dedicated to Flusser.

THE EDITORS

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Jewish Messianism in Comparative Perspective*

R. J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY

To speak of Jewish messianism in comparative perspective is to enter a vicious circle substantively and to tie oneself in knots semantically. The notion of Jewish messianism is in itself far from simple or monolithic. In fact, it is a motley coat of many colours, and its historical evolution is complex. Its specific *Stellenwert* on the diachronic scale of Jewish history – ancient, mediaeval and pre-modern, as well as modern and secularised – is partly the result of immanent dynamisms and pressures. It is also partly the result of the messianic (i.e., “christological”) character of a dominant daughter-religion that succeeded in creating a situation in which Judaism, exposed to new pressures of humiliation, persecution, polemics and self-definition, was forced to focus unduly on messianic themes. Among these themes were: Who is the promised Son of David, Messiah and Saviour? Has he come? How are the relevant scriptural passages and prooftexts to be read and interpreted?

The difficulty of the undertaking is, moreover, compounded by a further array of semantic considerations, all of them, to be sure, the result of historical factors. It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves that the word “messiah”, derived from the Hebrew *mashah* (“anoint”) denotes a person with a special mission from God. Not infrequently it is a person initiated into this mission either actually or metaphorically through anointment by a priest or prophet who may himself, in other circumstances, require anointing. (The anointment is of necessity metaphorical if done by God himself, unless it takes place in a dream, as in the case of Sabbatai Sevi.) Hence in a broader and metaphorical sense, the term “messiah” can signify any man or office-bearer charged with a special task or function. And because the “Lord’s Anointed” came, in due course, to mean the *mashiah par excellence*, the ultimate redeemer, the expected king of the Davidic line who would deliver Israel from foreign bondage and restore the glories of its golden age, the term also gradually acquired an eschatological connotation, unlike, e.g., the pre-Davidic and pre-messianic *ad hoc* saviours in times of

* Lecture delivered at Columbia University, New York, on April 13, 1981.

need known as *moshi'a*. Hence messianism has been, and is, used in a broad and at times very loose sense to refer to beliefs or theories regarding an eschatological or at least very radical and decisive improvement of the state of man, society and the world (or the cosmos as a whole), or even a final consummation of history.

Whilst the terms “messiah” and “messianic” have been applied to a variety of redeemer figures and “charismatics”, and many movements with a markedly eschatological or utopian-revolutionary character (with or without a personal messianic figure at the centre) have had the adjective “messianic” applied to them, the original Jewish-Christian background could never be completely exorcised. Not only the word “messiah”, but also other terms relating to messianic type phenomena or expectations, are derived from the history of biblical and post-biblical, Jewish and Christian beliefs, e.g., “prophetic”, “millenarian” and “chiliastic” movements. Let us not forget that the idea of the 1000-year reign of Christ and his saints before the final end of history was still sufficiently alive for the Independents in 17th century England to think of ushering in the Kingdom of God, and for others to call themselves Fifth Monarchy Men, believing themselves called upon to prepare the way for the reign of Christ and his saints by revolution. In fact, it was only the sober commonsense of Oliver Cromwell (himself a revolutionary!) and his dissolution of the Parliament of Saints which prevented apocalyptic messianism from dominating the Commonwealth.

Moreover, the scientific study of messianic beliefs and movements – originating as it did in the Western theological and academic tradition – was mainly directed at phenomena occurring either in Christian history or in cultures exposed to Western colonial, missionary and modernising influences. Even the non-colonialist and non-missionary anthropologist usually did his field work in an “acculturative” situation subject to colonial and missionary pressures, or at least permeated by their “osmotic” influences. These Western origins of messianic terminology gave discussions of the subject an almost unavoidable Judeo-Christian slant. Hence many present-day social scientists have attempted to develop a more “neutral” terminology – e.g., nativistic movements, revitalisation movements, religious movements of liberty and salvation, renewal movements, crisis cults – but these terminologies are unsatisfactory in many respects, quite apart from often emphasising incidental and adventitious aspects of the phenomena examined whilst missing their essential features. There seems, *prima facie*, no getting away from the fact that although “messianic” type movements or ideologies have occurred throughout the world, they

seem to be especially characteristic of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and of acculturative situations in which these traditions play a direct or indirect role. Although we may, in due course, have to qualify this somewhat sweeping generalisation, there is little doubt that it holds true for both the so-called “primitive religions” and, on the other end of the scale, for the most secularised “modern” forms of utopianism.

Instead of providing additional illustrations of this statement, let us simply note the fact, attested to by the bulging shelves in all anthropological libraries, that messianic movements have occurred in many primitive societies all over the world. But most of the societies that produced such movements had come into contact with the white, viz., Western man. This contact frequently had traumatic and disintegrating effects on many levels (economic, cultural, religious), creating new tensions, pressures, deprivations and frustrations. The factors contributing to this situation were not only the political and economic aspects of Western colonisation, but also the disintegration of traditional cultural values and religious symbols under the influence of the Christian missionaries who formed, as it were, part of the colonial “establishment” (even if they did not always see eye-to-eye with the administration). Hence many primitive messianic movements – even when anti-white and anti-colonialist – exhibit markedly Christian features, both in the details of their symbolism and in their overall messianic ideology. Some messianic movements in fact appeared outwardly to be Christian revivalist sects with an eschatological character. Examples are Simon Kimbangu’s movement, which began in 1921 in what was the Belgian Congo, Isaiah Shembe’s movement, which started in 1911 among the South African Bantu, and several movements in Brazil. Some movements go through the cycle of rebelliousness, domestication and final respectability. The movement (now “Church”) of Simon Kimbangu was admitted a number of years ago to full membership in the World Council of Churches. The last vestige of the Belgian colonial past (and for our present purpose Belgium = Roman Catholicism) is the fact that the present head of the Church bears the title “His Eminence”.

As has been mentioned before, a variety of names has been applied to these movements, indicating the diverse emphases in their ideologies. “Nativistic” movements expect salvation from a revival of native values and customs, and a rejection of everything alien. Well-known examples are the North American Indian movements from the 17th century on, including the Pueblo Indian revolt led by Popé in 1680; the anonymous Delaware prophet (1762) and Pontiac; the religious revival and military-political revolt led by Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh in 1807; and the Ghost Dance

outbreaks of 1870 and subsequent years among Southwestern and Plains Indians. The many messianic movements in Melanesia focussing on the arrival – in ships or airplanes – of “cargo” (i.e., the coveted wealth and riches of the white man that symbolise power, well-being and “salvation”) are generally referred to as “cargo-cults”. Many tribes, including christianised African ones, even found an explanation for the superior, power-giving wisdom of the whites that had enabled them to appropriate the “goods” and the power that had originally belonged to the natives’ ancestors: they had possessed themselves of the Holy Book, and the missionaries who were now converting the native tribes had carefully removed the first page from the Bibles, i.e., from the power-conferring Holy Book which they distributed among their converts. Some anthropologists speak of “revitalisation movements”, whereas others emphasise the connection between acculturation and primitive messianic movements. Since it is not acculturation as such that produces messianism, but the crises and dislocations caused by certain forms of culture contact, many scholars prefer the allegedly more neutral and objective term “crisis cults”. People undergoing such crises may become forward-looking (as e.g., in the cargo-cults), and this may imply a ritual rejection of the symbols of the past. Students of Jewish messianism inevitably think of the symbolic antinomian acts (*ma’ asim zarim*) of Sabbatai Sevi. To the student of comparative religion this is but one more illustration of a general rule, exemplified even more dramatically by the Indian Ojibwa tribes’ throwing away their sacred medicine-bundles on the shores of Lake Superior, or by the Melanesians’ destroying their cult-objects realistically or symbolically (e.g., by breaking the paramount taboo and showing the sacred bull-roarers to the womenfolk). Since many movements are initiated or propagated by the activity and preaching of prophet-like charismatics, they are also spoken of as “prophetic movements”. These prophetic types oscillate between John the Baptist-like precursors and radical reformers. The 16th-century radical reformer Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau prophets considered themselves apostles and prophets only; the leader of the Münster prophets, John of Leiden, considered himself a messianic king; the English Quaker James Nayler rode into Bristol in 1656 to the shouts of “Hosannah to the Son of David” from a crowd of enthusiastic followers, thereby turning the history of Quakerism into one more example of two-way traffic in the history of religion: from mystical enthusiasm to messianism, and from messianism to institutionalised sect or even quietistic mysticism (the “retreat from eschatology” as Raymond Hammer has aptly called it).

On the secular-modern end of the scale we might point to the 18th- and

19th-century Enlightenment, as well as the Romantic versions of the idea of progress to an ideal state of peace and harmony, ideas which never concealed their descent from messianic-millenarian beliefs. Kant described his notion of the ideal state of eternal peace as a “philosophical chiliasm”. The indebtedness of pre-socialist utopian thinkers such as Saint-Simon, Robert Owen or Charles Fourier to Christian millenarianism was recognised by Marx and Engels, who in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) contemptuously referred to the utopias of these writers as “duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem”. The markedly messianic structure of Marxism, almost a mirror-image of Christian chiliasm, has been humourously and somewhat ironically described by Bertrand Russell, who contended that Marx adapted the Jewish messianic pattern of history to socialism in the same way as St. Augustine had adapted it to Christianity: the materialistic dialectic that governs the historical process corresponds to God, the proletariat to the elect, the Communist Party to the Church, the revolution to the Second Coming, etc. There is no call here to extend this line from the Karl Marxes of the 19th century to the Ernst Blochs of the 20th.

My present purpose, however, is not to give a bird’s eye view of non-Jewish messianism, but rather to look at Jewish messianism in a comparative perspective. But to clear the ground for such a comparative approach, a few general considerations had better be advanced at the outset rather than stated at the conclusion.

Basic to messianism is a certain relationship to the time dimension. The time process is expected to lead to a major change, or even to a final consummation, as a result of which a happier, better or perfect state of things will take the place of the imperfect present. Intrinsic to messianism is the negative evaluation of the present. If the present is satisfactory and right, it need not be fulfilled and transcended, but rather perpetuated or renewed and rejuvenated in accordance with a pattern set by myth and ritual. Because, however, the present is viewed as unsatisfactory and blighted by suffering, oppression, exile, illness, death, sin, *angst*, *la nausée*, alienation or other evils, it has to be changed and superseded by a new age or dispensation. We shall not go here into the question how this negative quality of things, or even of existence as such, came about and is explained. Suffice it to say (limiting ourselves to the “messianic” possibilities and ignoring other options such as nirvana, moksha, and the like) that the new age may be conceived as something utterly new, or as a return to a past golden age (the Paradise Lost – Paradise Regained syndrome). Students of Jewish history have been familiarised by Prof. Scholem’s work with the

comparative religionist's commonplace distinction between restorative and utopian ideologies. In Hebrew I would describe the one as the *ḥaddesh yameynu ke-qedem* type, the other as the *'ayin lo ra'atha* type. Messianism thus tends to develop in situations of stress, suffering and frustration – and the Jewish people has known plenty of these. It is also most conspicuous in cultures whose time-concept permits an historic orientation: instead of a constant pattern of cyclical returns, and a repetition as in natural rhythms, there is a linear time-process leading to a fulfilment and to an end that may possibly even be conceived as predestined and predetermined. I do not wish to be misunderstood here as arguing for a distinction between cyclical *and* linear. Perhaps the distinction belongs to certain chapters in the history of philosophy and theology rather than to an analysis of cultures. The problem is complicated when it discloses itself not only as a matter of the factual description of mental structures, but also as a matter of (explicit or implicit) evaluations, as any reader of e.g., Mircea Eliade can discover for himself. Let us therefore be content with the simple statement that some kind of historical dimension is clearly an essential feature of the fully-developed messianic complex. In any case it should be noted, at least in passing, that the expectation of a radical material and/or spiritual improvement of things, either in the course of development and in the foreseeable future, or in more cataclysmic fashion and on the eschatological horizon, is not a cultural necessity. There are examples of societies “giving up” or “copping out”, proving that the messianic option is but one of many open to man.

There is something very impressive about this messianic option. For although messianic movements are, almost by definition as it were, doomed to failure, not all of them dissolve and disappear completely. Societies may shamefacedly acknowledge failure and brace themselves to wait till next time, when the “real thing” will come along. This has been, by and large, the Jewish reaction to “false messiahs”. Alternatively, reinterpretation or spiritualisation of the original message often enables a movement to survive what appears to non-believers to be failure. Studies of messianic movements therefore have to pay attention not only to the causal factors of their origins and the dynamics of their development, but also to their capacity for transformation and survival. From a sociological point of view it has been argued that messianic movements, even when they appear to have failed, have had an integrative function in situations of social stress and cultural change. Thus many primitive messianisms have been interpreted as forging links between pre-political and political action, i.e., as mechanisms of transition from pre-modern religious revolt to modern

revolutionary movement. But we should not allow functionalist enthusiasm to run away with us. Whether messianic movements play an integrative or, on the contrary, a dysfunctional, impairing and non-adaptive role in society depends on a variety of factors, as well as on a variety of criteria of interpretation, and not necessarily on the nature of the messianic message as such. But the fact that messianic doctrines and beliefs exist, that messianic movements arise, and that the messianic hope is projected on individual messiah-figures, seems to testify to some basic human predisposition. Among the most important of these are orientation to the time process, capacity to negate the present without being crushed by this negation, ability to "hope" (i.e., to envisage a future that is congruous with the ideals and values that the human mind can project to the point of transcending itself), and the faculty of projecting these orientations, hopes, values and self-transcendence in mythical symbols on the screen of the future.

Messianism should be, and in fact has been, studied from two perspectives: that of the historian of ideas, and that of the social historian. In other words, a distinction must be made between messianism as a complex of ideas, doctrines, hopes and expectations on the one hand, and messianic movements on the other. Messianism is the potentiality of messianic movements; messianic movements are messianism in action. Even the "facts" of suffering and frustration require ideas and social symbolism before they can assume cultural shape and historical reality (i.e., before they can manifest themselves, be expressed, and function as such in a particular place, time and culture). Conversely, beliefs and doctrines require a specific constellation of facts and situations in order to pass from potentiality to actuality. The student of the subject is therefore faced with two distinct problems: 1) How do messianic ideas arise and develop, and how do they function within the total culture and history of a specific society? and 2) What situations or events precipitate movements, that is, turn a messianic ideology (which sometimes has been kept in theological deep freeze, like the belief in the Second Coming in most major Christian churches) into active social ferment and historic movement?

Since messianism, as has been suggested above, is a constant human possibility, it should occasion no surprise that even originally non-messianic religions should in due course acquire, borrow or develop the necessary symbolic equipment which can be socially and culturally mobilised when the circumstances are appropriate. Islam is an example of such a "morphologically" (or typologically, viz., phenomenologically) non-messianic religion. But here, it may be objected, we have a religion that

received its original impulse from two messianic religions. (In fact, it has been argued, in a brilliant and brilliantly wrongheaded book, that Islam started out as a sectarian Jewish messianic movement that then forked off and took its own course). But my point is not a genetic one. It is rather a typological one, to the effect that mahdism (like belief in the parousia) can be doctrinally marginal, and in fact “dormant” for most of the time, but become central at the right *kairos*. Space does not permit here a fuller discussion of the problem of “marginal” *versus* “central”. Suffice it to say that major developments in religion, at times even revolutionary transformations, are often best accounted for in terms of shifts between these two terms: no absolute innovations, but what has been marginal moves to the centre and vice versa. Hinduism is not even heir to a messianic pre-history; yet the expected appearance of a saviour-avatara once the present *yuga* (cosmic period) has run down to its inevitable zero-point of self-destruction can acquire eschatological and even messianic characteristics. Each cosmic aeon has its own Buddha; even our present aeon of the Buddha Gotama Shakyamuni is degenerating and running down to its inevitable end, and we are waiting for the manifestation of the next Buddha who, at present, as Bodhisattva Maitreya, is biding his time in the Tushita Heaven. Maitreya is mentioned here because, as a matter of fact, ever so many peasants’ revolts in Southeast Asia can be shown to have been sectarian religious movements focussed on the figure of this expected Saviour-Bodhisattva. Much the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for many revolts and movements in China aspiring to usher in the “Great Peace” (T’ai P’ing), although the famous 19th-century T’ai P’ing rebellion (which in spite of its name, leads us back to much earlier Taoist and Yellow Turban movements) was of definitely Christian inspiration.

The distinction marginal-central is of considerable relevance for an understanding of Jewish messianism. Clearly Judaism was not, to begin with, a messianic religion. The tribes that settled in Canaan surely felt themselves bearers of, and witnesses to, the fulfilment of a promise (though definitely not in the sense of “realised eschatology”) rather than representatives of a messianic vocation. To the extent that God is gracious and granteth salvation, it is – as the Psalms amply demonstrate – in his capacity as an ever-present *ad hoc* help and rock of refuge. In Him the Psalmist puts his trust, for He is a refuge in times of distress, the source and object of confident hope, a saviour and redeemer whenever saving intervention becomes necessary (e.g., sickness bringing the pious into the shadow of death, persecution, the triumph and taunts of the wicked, the oppressive sense of sin and guilt). “Save us, O Lord, we beseech thee. O

Lord, we beseech thee, give us success" (Ps. 118:25) is precisely such an appeal for a permanent saving presence. The ancient litanies which belong to the earliest strata of the liturgy of the Jewish prayerbook contain ever so many references to the acts of succour and salvation wrought by God, who "answered the prayers" of the patriarchs, biblical and post-biblical heroes, prophets and saintly men of old when they cried unto him in times of need. On the collective level it was the Exodus from Egypt which provided the paradigm of spectacular saving intervention, and this point is emphasised twice daily, in the morning and evening prayers. But precisely because the Exodus was not only paradigmatic but also constitutive of Jewish history, it could serve equally well as a paradigm of the messianic *eschaton* – a kind of strictly historical *Urzeit* (parallel to the cosmogonic one) undergirding the *Endzeit* – once eschatological concepts and perspectives had begun to develop. Deutero-Isaiah provides a good example of precisely this type of messianism *avant la lettre*.

The emergence of the messianic complex, its relationship to the establishment of the monarchy and to the evolution, viz., assimilation of the so-called near-eastern "kingship ideologies", as well as the lexical fact that even the biblical passages susceptible of a "messianic" interpretation (a golden age under an ideal Davidic king) still lack the word *mashiah* – all these are outside the purview of the present essay. So also is the notion of a messianic pair (a priestly-Aaronic and a royal-Davidic messiah) found at a later date, though this notion might serve as a useful reminder of the antiquity of the view (to be met with also subsequently in kabbalistic messianology) that the messiah is not so much a saviour-redeemer as a sign and symbol of the redeemed order over which he presides. After all, the actual redeemer is God himself, who cometh *unto* Zion (Isa. 59:20), and not *from* Zion as the reading of St. Paul (Rom. 11:26) has it. And as a Redeemer He cometh unto the Jewish semi-Pelagians (or should we say full Pelagians?) viz., "unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob". Here we find the original form of Jewish messianic "activism": a moral activism of repentance which only much later became a magical activism.

Of course there is no denying that the messianic complex moved from marginality to centrality, and at certain periods it even moved into the very centre of Judaism. But this movement of the messianic idea to a central and prominent place has to be seen in proper perspective. For one thing, it proves that no matter how non-messianic Judaism was originally and remained in some ways (more of this later), it also possessed sufficient seminal potential to produce, in the fullness of time, a full-blown messianism strong enough to enable the Jewish people to survive with strength,

steadfast faith and hope, dignity and integrity the kind of suffering, persecution, humiliation and oppression that would, in other circumstances, have led to disintegration. The messianic hope balanced the deficit in the present. But the present is not sheer *privatio boni*, deficiency, and expectation concentrated on the future. It has its own *summa bona* and immanent validity in its no less important non-messianic dimensions, namely *Torah* and *halakhah*. It is not without reason that kabbalistic messianisms, in contrast to kabbalistic halakhism and even “supernomianism”, evinced such an ambivalent attitude to the *halakhah*, perhaps precisely because the latter is meant not so much to hasten the advent of the messiah but, in good Old Testament manner, to assure the right, “just”, god-willed and god-pleasing order and life of both the sacred community and the individuals forming part of it. After all, Abraham was called not in order to be “saved” (let alone bring salvation), but to be a model and paradigm of the righteous and blessed life. He was called to be a paradigm of blessing (and not a source of blessing: this is a much later homiletical interpretation which, to be sure, is of the greatest interest to the historian of religion), and in order to “charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). This basic structure is continued in the teachings of the prophets recalling Israel to its obligations under the Covenant although, of course, for the Prophets, preaching in a situation of (actual or impending) disasters and corruption, the recapture of God’s promised blessing could not but assume a redemptive and at times near-eschatological character. This structure is even more marked in the halakhic system of the rabbis. For although repentance (cf. again Isa. 59:20) and the proper observance of the law might help to bring about or hasten the advent of redemption, the main purpose of *Torah* and *halakhah* was not redemption, let alone the frenzied pursuit of “justification”, but joyous and faithful living with God in accordance with his revealed will. *Halakhah*, as the most characteristic feature of historical (the so-called “normative”) Judaism as developed and bequeathed to later generations by the ancient rabbis, thus preserves the unique tension between its original quality of a way of life in its own right with inherent religious values, and some kind of almost instrumental messianic-salvational reference.

If Jewish history produced messianic doctrines and expectations, these were rooted not in *angst* or *nausée*, but in the concrete experiences of suffering and exile, not to speak of pogroms and constant humiliation. Hence the content of these hopes was essentially a *restitutio in integrum* of the lost boons of the (actual or idealised and imaginary) past. For Jeremiah