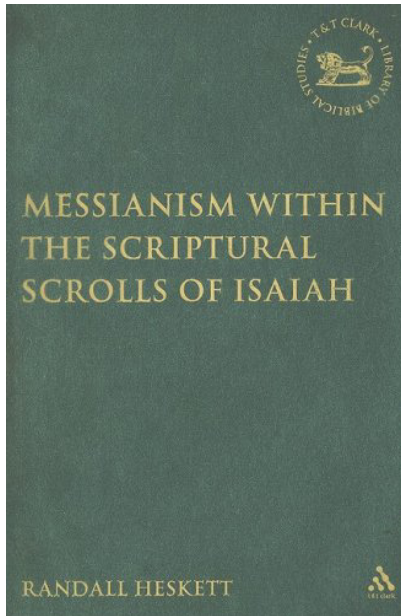


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**Heskett, Randall**

***Messianism within the Scriptural Scrolls of Isaiah***

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Understanding the various forms of messianism in Second Temple Judaism is complicated and complex, for several reasons. One important discussion in understanding the phenomenon centers on the messianic interpretation of certain texts in the Hebrew Bible. Randall Heskett's *Messianism within the Scriptural Scrolls of Isaiah*, originally a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Toronto in 2001, explores the warrant for messianism based on a select group of texts from the book of Isaiah. Heskett's impressive study is less concerned with the contours and details of particular messianic readings than with whether the later editing of the book of Isaiah moved interpretive trajectories in a direction that anticipated and warranted later messianic readings. He is interested both in how later redactions of the book gave originally preexilic texts a new context that established messianic readings and how exilic and postexilic texts acquired new or clarified messianic meanings in the context of the book as a whole.

Heskett divides his study into six chapters: an introductory chapter in which he outlines his methodology and offers a definition for messianism; four chapters that offer close readings of selected texts from Isaiah (Isa 45:1; 7:14; 9:1–6; 11:1–9; 52:13–53:12; and 61:1–3), all of which have played some role in the discussions about messianism in Jewish and Christian history; and a concluding chapter in which he offers a summary of his study.

Heskett's interaction with the secondary literature, especially in the four middle chapters, is impressive. He has read widely in Isaiah studies (through 1999), and it shows. One of Heskett's main concerns is to try to understand how the Isaian texts' meaning changes over the course of the development of the book. To get at this, he presses the distinction, which is not always clear, between the prebiblical and biblical context for the text in question. By *prebiblical* he means something like the original context in which the author (not always Isaiah) produced the text, while by *biblical* he generally means the final form (i.e., canonical) of the book of Isaiah (see below). To illustrate how he understands this distinction functioning in the history of interpretation, he includes sections in each chapter that survey the interpretations of those (both ancient and modern) who argue for or against messianism at the prebiblical level and at the biblical level.

In chapter 1, Heskett lays out the aim of the project and poses two preliminary issues. The first concerns how to define messianism. Heskett never offers a concise, clearly stated definition, but he does suggest some elements that shape how he approaches the topic. His understanding of messianism is restricted to a royal, Davidic figure modeled on 2 Sam 7 (whether this is because of how it is presented in Isaiah or his own understanding of messianism generally is never explained). In Heskett's view, the demise of the Judean monarchy in 587 B.C.E. is the catalyst for the development of this Davidic messiah, and hence, he dismisses a priori any preexilic notion of messianism. Additionally, messianism also involves an eschatological dimension. In the course of his study, he returns the eschatological criterion quite frequently and uses it as a means to rule out certain texts as messianic.

The second preliminary issue Heskett addresses deals with his methodology for the study. Here the discussion centers on his distinction mentioned above between prebiblical Isaiah and biblical Isaiah. In the way he uses this distinction, *prebiblical* describes the meaning of texts in Isaiah before the book reached its final (i.e., biblical or canonical) form. *Biblical* Isaiah refers to the final, canonical form of the book, which Heskett understands to be a product of the postexilic Persian period. For Heskett, the changing historical context of the book's formation has a parallel in the changing interpretive context. So, for example, he argues that earlier texts that refer to particular persons or events may become ambiguous in later forms of the book, or later editors may add eschatological elements to texts that enhance their messianic connection. The distinction between prebiblical and biblical is, arguably, the most important methodological factor in Heskett's study.

Chapter 2 deals with the reference to Cyrus as "YHWH's anointed" in Isa 45:1. The importance of this text is obvious for his study, since it is the only text in Isaiah in which someone is labeled a **משיח**. Despite this, Heskett concludes that neither Second Isaiah

nor the final form of the book of Isaiah understands Cyrus as a messiah figure. He argues that the scriptural form of Isaiah alters the basic meaning of the text by connecting it with 65:17–25 (among other passages) and the reference there to “former things.” In so doing, Heskett says, this passage clarifies “the post-exilic sense of messianism” and rehistoricizes “Cyrus’s role by de-messianizing him in order to re-express the hope of an eschatology Davidic king who will usher in the messianic era” (35).

In chapter 3 Heskett examines possible messianism in three originally disparate texts from Isa 7–11: 7:14; 9:1–6; and 11:1–9. He treats these texts together in one chapter because, he argues, later editors have arranged them to be read together through interpretive comments in the immediate context of Isa 7–11. Consistent with his understanding of messianism as a postexilic phenomenon, Heskett argues that 7:14 and 9:1–6 were not messianic at the prebiblical stage. The former referred originally to Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, while the latter was a royal enthronement psalm. The events of 587 B.C.E. changed the way later editors understood both of these texts in the book of Isaiah. In the case of Isa 7, “God with us” links up with 41:10, which situates this hope in the context of the exile. Heskett’s examination of how the destruction and exile change the way Isa 7 (not just v. 14) functions in the book of Isaiah is solid, although he does not offer a clear explanation of how and/or why this necessitates a messianic interpretation. Heskett asserts that the later historical and literary contexts of Isaiah’s biblical form permits a messianic reading of 9:1–6, but he recognizes that, like 7:14, no eschatological element exists in the text. Rather, this passage depends on 8:19–23 for its messianic interpretation.

Isaiah 11:1–9 is different altogether. Heskett argues that Isa 11 depends on Isa 10 for its messianic interpretation. In his view, 11:1–9 was “originally messianic” and did not describe an actual Israelite king. Moreover, he concludes that, because the passage originated after the demise of the Davidic dynasty, it “was fashioned to anticipate an eschatological event that did not include such an event in human history.” The inclusion of eschatological events in 11:6–9 warrants understanding this as a messianic text. Additionally, he argues that 11:1–9 exhibits connections with Isa 61 and 65, both of which originated in the postexilic period and further substantiate its messianic quality.

Chapter 4 is devoted to understanding how Isa 52:13–53:12, the so-called Suffering Servant text, contributes to messianism in Isaiah. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to an extensive exegesis of the text, with an eye toward identifying warrants for messianic interpretation in the text itself. The failure of the text to identify the suffering individual is important to Heskett and is a result of the text’s “functional ambiguity.” In fact, it is the anonymity of the figure described that enables, to a certain degree, later messianic interpretation (this is the opposite of the Cyrus text). Moreover, this ambiguity allows

interpreters to understand the figure in messianic and eschatological categories, even though the original text is clearly not messianic. In particular, Heskett argues that, because this text envisages a *suffering* messiah, suffering became a core element of some messianic understandings (e.g., early Christianity). The suffering element alters how the book of Isaiah presents Israel's messiah: "No longer is the Messiah merely a Davidic king who fulfills the promises to David after the monarchy has ended, but he is one who suffers and atones for the sins of the people" (224).

Chapter 5 is devoted to Isa 61:1, which declares that an individual has been "anointed" by YHWH (one of only two uses of the verb *משח* in Isaiah). Given that Heskett establishes links between Isa 11 and 61 earlier in his work, it is curious that here he dismisses those who suggest links between these two texts as a way of establishing the messianic credentials of the latter. He argues that, although the anointing here may recall similar statements about David (see 1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 23:1–2), it "exceeds" David's because of the eschatological framework of Isa 60–62. Further, he argues that the incompleteness of the restoration project at the time Isaiah reached its scriptural form enabled the passage to take on an eschatological dimension. In his view, the speaker is, somewhat remarkably, a royal figure.

Heskett's final chapter offers a helpful summary of the study and suggests further lines of investigation that go beyond what Heskett has done. In particular, he offers a brief exploration of messianism and the Psalms from the perspective offered in his study.

Heskett is to be commended for producing a thorough, if not always convincing, study. For this reviewer, the importance of his book is primarily in two areas: his attempt to differentiate between prebiblical and biblical layers of meaning in Isaiah and to understand how messianism may be grounded in Isaiah itself (rather than originating outside the book as something read back into it). The first of these issues presents well-known difficulties for those who attempt to read and interpret Isaiah critically, largely because of the book's composite nature and long editorial history. Heskett's work is most helpful for pressing the distinction consistently. Although students of Isaiah will undoubtedly disagree with some of the conclusions he draws on the matter because of, among other things, their hypothetical nature, his attempt to contribute to the discussion is commendable. The second issue is potentially the most important contribution made by the book. Here Heskett admirably attempts to place messianic interpretations on firm exegetical ground, at least for the case of Isaiah. That he does not always succeed is primarily testimony to the fact that messianic interpretations often have only loose connections with the original or biblical context.

As noted earlier, Heskett has read widely, although one wishes he had been able to interact with many of the important studies of Isaiah that have been written since 2001 (e.g., Childs, Blenkinsopp, Goldingay, Baltzer). Additionally, it is unfortunate that the book contains far more than the usual number of typographical and grammatical errors.