



Messiah
מָשִׁיחַ MESSIAH
Messiah מָשִׁיחַ Χριστός
Jesus
MESSIAH Christos. Messiah
מָשִׁיחַ Christos MESSIAH
Messiah מָשִׁיחַ Christos
Χριστός Messiah
Christos

When I was a Jewish Studies student at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, I had occasion to meet once a week for three months with Rabbi Daniel Moskowitz who was then the head of Chabad (the college outreach) for the Lubavitcher sect of Judaism. As a Jewish believer in Jesus, I had no illusions regarding his openness to my position. Instead, I saw it as an education in how a modern Orthodox rabbi might respond to the claims of Jesus as our Messiah.

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connected to the term “messiah,” the relationship of the two was certainly understood by the first century Jews.

Even noted Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner acknowledges the promise of a personal Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures:

In many of the books of Hebrew Scripture there is no human Messiah at all; the LORD above is the redeemer and no other. In many other books there is no individual Messiah but only a collective Messiah: the Kingdom of the house of David. In two of them there is an individual Messiah though he is not an ideal man but an actual person, Zerubbabel of the house of David. In the rest of the prophetic works there is an ideal human Messiah. ⁴

Klausner describes a zig zagging evolution of the concept of Messiah within the canon of Hebrew Scriptures. Yet even this acknowledgment highlights the division that exists in Jewish scholarship concerning the development of the messianic idea. In fact, before the time of Jesus, the topic of Messiah was a controversial one among Jewish scholars. The Talmud records a statement on Messiah by Rabbi Hillel who lived in the second century B.C.:

There shall be no Messiah for Israel because they have already enjoyed him in the days of Hezekiah. R. Joseph said: May God forgive him [for saying so] (Sanhedrin 99a). ⁵

The concept of Messiah in the New Testament

Klausner does not just deny that the concept of a personal Messiah existed in Judaism, he asserts that the New Testament *Christology* (understanding of the nature and work of the Messiah) is foreign to Jewish thinking. He not only believes that the Jewish Messiah is to be considered a human figure, but he points out that:

... in the belief in the Messiah of the people of Israel, the political part goes arm in arm with the ethical part and the nationalistic with the universalistic. It is Christianity which has attempted to remove the political and nationalistic part which is there and leave only the ethical and spiritual part. ... A Jewish Messiah would never say, “My kingdom is not of this world.” ⁶

Yet as much as Klausner and other Jewish scholars may be reluctant to admit it, New Testament Christology does not spring from foreign soil. In addition to examples in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is ample evidence from the literature of the intertestamental period (approximately 400 B.C. to first century A.D.) to confirm a messianic hope.

One example is found in the book of Enoch, written during this period. Not only does it speak of a personal Messiah (Chapter 90), but this Messiah is to be God’s agent in a coming spiritual transformation of the earth. He is a preexistent being, now seated on his throne, now coming to judge the earth. While previously Messiah was seen as a human agent through whom God extends blessing to Israel, Enoch sees Messiah as a heavenly agent, who “. . . though man like, is no mortal. Without beginning or end, he comes down from heaven to reverse the processes of history by segregating good and evil . . .” ⁷

With the discovery and translation of the Qumran texts (the Dead Sea Scrolls) in 1947, our knowledge of first century Judaism has been significantly expanded. There is now solid confirmation that what Jewish scholars at that time had rejected in New Testament Christology as foreign to Judaism was, in fact, part of the fabric of the Jewish messianic expectation well before then. There had been the development of a two Messiah concept—Messiah son of Joseph and Messiah son of David. Other passages portrayed both a kingly and a priestly Messiah. However, in the Qumran literature, both the royal and the priestly roles are ascribed to just one person—a Messiah who had the power to forgive sin:

This is the exact statement of the statutes in which they shall walk until the coming of the Messiah of Aaron and Israel who will pardon their iniquity (Damascus Rule xiv) ⁸

From a survey of this literature, we see that even prior to the first century, Jewish expectation of a personal Messiah was well established. Theological ferment ran high as to who or what the nature of the Messiah would be. Certainly, the common people were expecting an ideal figure, a deliverer, who embodied the hopes of an enslaved people. Messiah would be a descendant of David and Solomon. He would be wise and knowledgeable, upright and courageous. He would have the power of God on his side so that he might overthrow Israel’s enemies and establish God’s kingdom.

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It was this expectation that greeted Jesus as he began his public ministry. He was certainly aware of the burden of Roman occupation that fueled the fires of messianic expectation among his own people. He knew of the great promises of the Hebrew Scriptures concerning Messiah. Doubtless he was also cognizant of the wide variety of notions and literature concerning the messianic hope that circulated in and around the various groups in first century Israel. It is reasonable to assume that these hopes and speculations had an impact on how Jesus chose to present himself and his credentials to the nation.

Would he declare himself the Messiah with some spectacular and incontrovertible proof? Might he choose instead to keep his identity a secret out of fear of being misunderstood? Such questions are set to rest as one looks at the record of his life in what is commonly called the Gospels. There we see a picture of Jesus, confident in himself and his identity, careful, yet clear in his self-disclosure. We see Jesus as he knew himself to be and as he declared himself to his disciples and all who had ears to hear. We see Jesus as the son of David—the Messiah of Israel.

The Claim of Jesus to be the Messiah

The writers of the Gospels believed Jesus was the Messiah and sought to prove it through their accounts of his life and teachings. Some say that it is precisely because the Gospel writers were seeking to prove Jesus was the Messiah that the assertions made in their writings cannot be taken at face value. But is belief in a cause really sufficient grounds to dismiss the reliability of those who recorded events pertaining to that cause? Noted New Testament scholar, R.T. France would consider that an extraordinary assumption:

When due allowance has been made for the historian's bias, he is still accepted as a source of historical information unless and until it can be shown that he has either deliberately or inadvertently falsified the record. The mere fact of his personal involvement, even bias, is not in itself a sufficient reason to assume that he has done so. Why then should the gospels be treated differently? Is a Christian commitment and an evangelical aim somehow more destructive of historical concern or integrity than other motives for writing?⁹

Are the Gospels merely biased musings or do they measure up as historical accounts? Shouldn't the reliability of these accounts be weighed according to the evidence?

Certain New Testament passages point very clearly to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

New Testament Evidences

Let's look at some passages that deal with Jesus in his role as Messiah. Peter's words in Mark 8 and the parallel passage in Matthew's gospel read:

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29).

Instead of rebuking Peter, Jesus responds, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).

Even Joseph Klausner understands the centrality and historicity of this statement. Commenting on the account in Mark, he points out the significance of the fact that immediately after this statement, Jesus begins teaching about his suffering. Says Klausner, "To deny this would make the whole history of Christianity incomprehensible."

At his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus' words on the subject of his messiahship are noteworthy:

But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62).

Some critics have argued that perhaps Jesus wasn't really saying that he was the Messiah. But Jewish scholar Samuel Lachs, in commenting on Jesus' silence, asks the question, "Is this meant to be the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7?"¹⁰ thereby fulfilling one of the prophecies of the Suffering Servant role of Messiah.

A more direct statement by Jesus on his messiahship is found in the gospel of John when Jesus responded to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Sychar:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:25-26).

How ironic that Jesus' most direct acknowledgment of his messiahship is made to a Samaritan woman. Yet how in keeping with divine wisdom. While we certainly can't know what this woman's understanding of Messiah was, it

Entering Jerusalem

A second event that was both deliberate and planned was Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. While we aren't told that Jesus planned the event, it is obvious from the instructions he gave his disciples concerning the donkey that these details were prearranged (Matthew 21:1-3). Then Matthew provided the messianic import, quoting from the prophet Zechariah:

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, see, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:4-5).

Jesus would not have ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, were he trying to avoid the messianic title.

Jesus' Last Passover

Another amazing messianic claim was seen in the events of the last Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples. Jesus prepared his followers for what lay ahead when he took the matzoh—the bread of affliction—and broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19b). Likewise he then took the cup of redemption—the third cup of wine—and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20b). In those two symbols he attributed to himself the role of Redeemer; God's provision for his people and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Klausner recalls this event, almost sounding like a believer himself:

No other place was better fitted for the Messiah, nor was any other time better fitted than the feast of Passover, the feast of the national Redemption (and therefore the feast of the Messiah. . . .¹⁴

The Ultimate Event

Yet there remains one final messianic chapter—Jesus' death, burial and resurrection—without which all the other events would be meaningless. There can be no adequate explanation of Jesus' consciousness of those events apart from his firm confidence in the plan of his Father. One can only look at his death in two ways; either as an elaborate hoax or the proof positive that Jesus was who he claimed to be—Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. This certainly was without a doubt the least understood qualification of Messiah. Only in the strongest confidence of his own messiahship could Jesus have entered into his saving act. His consciousness was evident throughout. Witness his messianic cry on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" (Mark 15:34). These are the words that begin Psalm 22, a psalm which climaxes in the exaltation and praise of God. They are not the words of defeat, but of hope in a God who keeps his promises.

A Challenge

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah to his final breath. Claiming something doesn't necessarily make it so, but Jesus' words and actions are a striking fulfillment of that hope for a personal Messiah. Was Jesus the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament? We need to be willing to look at the evidence. Only then can we answer one of Jesus' most pointed questions, "Who do you say that I am?" with certainty. Our eternal destiny depends on that answer.

—David Brickner



End notes

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Stephen Katz—college days

A Rhetorical Journey *by Stephen Katz*

Rhetoric was a required course at the University of Illinois at Urbana and I was not a happy camper. As a Jewish kid from Chicago who considered Bob Dylan my idol, I found it difficult to reconcile being a no-name college student when I

was certain my destiny was to pursue my music and song-writing career. But in the meantime, I was taking this class. Little did I know that it would change the course of my life.

The professor, Dr. Palmer, was Jewish and immediately sized me up. He confronted my blatantly flip attitude and though I didn't want to care, I respected him for it. Nevertheless, I was not eager to write the long term paper he required of all his students. About six weeks into the semester, I entered his office where I was to give him a "progress report" on my paper. There were other students present as well, and when I told him that I had not yet chosen a topic, he told me to just wait while he dealt with the others.

During this somewhat lengthy "wait" an idea popped into my head that I had not considered before. I immediately interrupted him and declared, "Professor Palmer, I'm going to write my paper on why the Jews at the time of Jesus didn't think he was the Messiah." He was interested. It turns out that this was a subject that he, as a Jew, had looked into on his own. He let me know then and there, "I'm going to be more critical of your paper than usual." I inwardly moaned, thinking that his special interest in my paper was not good news! Nonetheless, I got a Bible, some other books and I began my research.

My approach was to explore exactly what was the Jewish concept of the Messiah. I vaguely remembered some things from Hebrew school, like the Messiah would change the world for the better. But now I was going to actually use historical and biblical sources to determine what the people were expecting and why they came to the conclusion that Jesus didn't fit the portrait. I read much of what the traditional Jewish scholars had to say on the subject as well as what was available from the perspective of Christians, areligious historians and textual critics.

It seemed to make sense to get my answers from practitioners of faith, so I met with two rabbis and two Christian ministers to discuss these unsettling matters. I was

eager to hear both sides. I asked many questions of the rabbis like, "Why do you think the Jewish people of that time rejected Jesus?" "How can we know that he wasn't the Messiah?" One rabbi spoke of many different philosophies and sects that were prevalent at the time of Jesus. Much of it was over my head. The other rabbi responded in a more visceral way. He was quite upset over my questions. He said to me, "In light of the Holocaust, I find this subject abhorrent. Besides which, I'm not going to do your work for you. You need to read more!"

My questions for the Christian ministers went right to the issue. "What evidence makes you think he is the Messiah?" I asked. "Why are you so sure that the messianic prophecies refer to Jesus?"

Of the four clergy with whom I met, the most striking comments came from one of the Christian ministers. He actually opened our interview time by asking me if the questions I would pose to him were for my paper or for Stephen Katz. I was taken aback by his directness and perceptivity. In the course of researching the paper, I started wondering that very thing. The minister ended our interview with another astute comment, this time in the form of a challenge. "Stephen," he said, "the only way for you to know if Jesus was the Messiah, is to ask him into your life. I can tell you that if you do that, you will know the answer one way or the other."

The truth of the matter was that I had started to lean in the direction that it just might be true that Jesus was the Messiah and that his claims were not unfounded. But that was as far as I went. I was not ready to act on that kernel of faith.

I got an "A" on the paper and wanted to just shelve my unanswered personal questions of faith for another day or maybe forever. I quit college and pursued my music, but very shortly I came face to face with my own limitations and failure to be who I thought I could be. At the same time, my girlfriend decided to follow Jesus as her Messiah. All the discomfort precipitated by my paper for the rhetoric course flooded in on me. I recalled the minister's challenge to find out if Jesus truly was the Messiah. I began to pray that if God really existed, I would know it and if Jesus was the Messiah, that I would know the truth of that as well.

A very short time after that prayer, I realized that it was all true. I wish I could have written Professor Palmer a postscript to my college paper. It would have been something to the effect of: "Some Jews at the time of Jesus did believe he was the Messiah, and two thousand years later there are still Jews (your author included) who agree."

Editor's Note: Stephen Katz did return to college and went on to get two graduate degrees in Social Work and in Missiology.

THE IXOYE-FILES

