

MESSIAH/CHRIST

By Ben Witherington, III

The term "messiah" or in Hebrew, *mashiach* is in fact very rarely used in the Old Testament, but it does not follow from this that the concept cannot be found there. It in fact occurs in surprising ways and places. The term simply means an "anointed one" and could in fact apply to a prophet, priest, or king all of whom might be anointed with oil as they were invested with their royal or religious role or function. Thus, one can point to Psalm 2:2 when the Davidic king, in this case David, is called God's anointed one. The claim to be anointed by God (not just by a prophet such as Samuel) involved a claim to have been authorized, empowered and legitimized by God to perform some special or specific task. Thus it is surprising but not entirely unexpected that Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, is called "my anointed one" in Isaiah 45:1-2 because he was going to set God's people free and return them to their homeland. It is clear from this text that the term messiah was not yet a technical term for some sort of Jewish messianic figure. In fact we do not have that kind of technical use of the phrase in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, in the inter-testamental period, and during the lifetime of Jesus, messianic concepts were developing in early Judaism and one can look at texts like Psalm of Solomon 17 and see that a warrior messiah figure modeled on David was expected by some, perhaps many, early Jews. Since this is not how Jesus envisioned Himself and His role during His earthly ministry, Jesus seems to have mostly avoided using a term like *mashiach* of himself, though He did accept the title when others proclaimed Him this—whether it was a disciple like Peter or an adversary like Caiaphas. We will look at the relevant texts where messiah occurs on these two figures lips in a moment, but first we must consider the controversial dialogue found in Mark 12:35-40.

The discussion in Mark 12:35-40 begins with Jesus Himself asking a question to prompt a discussion. What is interesting is that the question He asks reflects common opinion of various religious experts of the day, namely the teachers of the Torah or Law. They are said to hold the opinion that Messiah is or would be the Son of David. This is no surprise in light of texts like 2 Samuel 7 which had led, at least in Judea, to the expectation that Messiah would come from Judea and be a warrior king like David—in this case someone who would come and clean the Roman overlords out of Jerusalem and reign from there. This was not Jesus' *modus operandi*, and therefore Jesus chose to suggest, without denying that the Messiah might be a descendent of David, that these teachers really needed to think in much higher categories.

Using a bit of exegetical slight of hand, Jesus quotes to these teachers a version of Psalm 110:1. Drawing on the common assumption that David himself had written this psalm, Jesus casually points out that David calls this messianic figure "Lord" in some sense, which suggests He is superior to David, perhaps even existed in the time of David! In the phrase "the Lord said to my lord" the second lord is assumed here to be Messiah, the first one God the Father. Having thoroughly befuddled His audience, He then innocently asks David himself calls him "Lord," how then can He be David's Son?" There is no answer or rejoinder from the teachers. They are dumbfounded. Now the entire point of this exercise was to make clear that their messianic categories were much too narrow and narrow-minded. Messiah would be far more than just another in a long line of Davidic kings. This brings us back to Peter and Caiaphas.

Mark 8:27-30 is the crucial pivot or turning point in the Markan narrative where the identity of Jesus which was announced in Mark 1:1 is confirmed for the first time by one of Jesus' disciples. The setting of this pronouncement is also crucial. Caesarea Philippi was outside of Galilee and Judea, and instead was in Herod Philip's territory, in the city he renamed in honor of himself and of Caesar. It was the ancient pagan city of Panias/Banyas and was noted for its various statues of pagan gods on display in various places. In

addition there was the statue of Caesar who was called "son of the gods" as part of the worship of the Emperor. It was here that Jesus chose to ask His disciples who they thought He was. Here at least proclaiming Jesus as the Jewish Messiah was less likely to be misunderstood than say in Judea where Davidic models of messiahship were common (see Mark 12:35-40 noting that the discussion takes place in Judea).

Nevertheless, the disciples do misunderstand. Peter is right in affirming that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, but Jesus immediately warns Peter and the others to tell no one, not least because others would put their own spin, bring their own conceptions to the term. *Mashiach* was a loaded term, indeed a highly politicized term, and Jesus did not intend to pursue the agendas and violence of King David. He came to save, to heal, to love, and to have mercy—a very different agenda. Notice then in Mark 8:31-32 for the first time Jesus broaches the difficult subject of His coming demise. This was unfathomable to Peter and the others precisely because they did not expect a suffering Messiah, they expected a conquering one. As odd as it may seem to us, early Jews before Jesus apparently did not read Isaiah 53 as referring to the Messiah. They understood this text to be referring to the whole nation of Israel, called "my servant" in Isaiah 40 and following text, and so they expected Israel as a nation could expect to suffer for the world's sins.

In light of the scarceness of the use of the term messiah by Jesus himself, it is important to ask how this term (in Greek rendered *christos*, in Latin, *christus*) came to be a technical term and then almost a second name for Jesus. Technically the phrase should read "Jesus the Messiah/Christ," but instead we frequently find "Jesus Christ". Why is it that the New Testament writers (almost all of whom were Jewish followers of Jesus, with the possible exception of Luke who may have been a Gentile) use the term "Christ of Jesus" so very frequently, compared to Jesus' use of the term. Well of course one reason is they wished to stress Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, even though most Jews in the first century denied this acclamation. But there is another reason.

When Jesus was crucified, He was crucified quite specifically as King of the Jews, and the terms on the cross were not "Messiah", Christ, *christus*, but rather the term for king in three languages—*rex*, *melek*, *basileus*. The idea that Jesus was King of the Jews was politically charged and clearly subversive. No Jew unauthorized by Caesar could be proclaimed King of the Jews. Jesus in fact was crucified precisely because of such a claim, which was considered treason in the Roman Empire. It is not a surprise then that when Paul and others proclaimed Jesus to the Greco-Roman world, the milder and less politically loaded term Christ was chosen as a sort of second name for Jesus. This would not have immediately raised the same objections that calling Jesus the Jewish King would do. It was simply good apologetics.

It is well to stress as we draw this discussion to a close that the phrase "crucified Messiah/Christ" would have been seen as an oxymoron by most early Jews. How could God's anointed one end up on a cross? Did not the cross convey the idea that the person crucified had been cursed by God? Surely God would not curse His own blessed one, His own anointed one? It is not a surprise that Paul was later to say to the Jews that preaching of Christ crucified was considered a scandal or stumbling block to the Jews (see 1 Cor. 1:23). They wanted a conquering messiah, not a crucified one, for crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in antiquity, and it was difficult to believe God would allow His anointed one to endure a shameful death like that. Clearly, when Jesus spoke of a suffering Son of Man, indeed an executed Son of Man and Servant of God, He was imparting a new concept into the Jewish discussion. Jesus did not want others to define who He was, and so He shied away from using the familiar terms like *mashiach* which had all the wrong connotations compared to the sort of ministry Jesus came to fulfill. To this day the notion of a crucified Christ is a scandal to many, including for example Muslims, many of whom believe that God substituted Judas at the last minute on the cross for Jesus, for God would not allow His holy prophet to die that way. But for Jesus, clearly the way of the cross was to redefine forever what Christ was to mean. For more on this subject see Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1990).