

The Messiah



The Prophet Malachi 3:1 "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"

I am often asked at this time of year about why the Jewish people of Jesus' day didn't recognize him as the "Messiah," which seems so obvious to many of us. "Messiah" is the Hebrew word most often translated in the New Testament into the Greek

word "Christ." Both words simply mean "an anointed one," as kings and prophets and priests were regularly anointed at their appointment by God. At the beginning of the first century of the Common Era, there was a very real longing and expectation among many of the Jews, but certainly not all of them, for a new Messiah, a new king, a new ruler of some kind, who would bring peace on earth and goodwill among the people.

The problem was that there were different Hebrew Scriptures as to who that Messiah would be and how one could identify him, too many different prophecies, different images, and different expectations. Some Jews, like the Essenes, for example, were looking for 'one like the Son of Man coming in the clouds' to be the Messiah, a phrase that interestingly Jesus used repeatedly, as I preached about last Sunday. Others imagined a more earthly Messiah, but they differed amongst themselves as to which ancient prophecies applied and how. For example, some following Malachi's reading today, thought the new Messiah would just "suddenly" appear at the Temple, and no one would know where he came from. Others followed Zephaniah's writings, that we hear next week, and thought that the Messiah was simply someone born of the house of David. Others followed the prophet Micah's writings, which we will hear in two weeks, and imagined the new Messiah had to be actually born in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Some of these different expectations can be clearly seen in the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John, where a group of Jews in Jerusalem disagree with each other about who the Messiah might be. There it reads: "About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning' (7.14). "Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom (the Jewish authorities) are trying to kill (because of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple)? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?' Yet (others in the crowd said) we know where this man is from, but when the Messiah comes no one will know where he is from,'" (because he will suddenly come to the temple as Malachi prophesied) (7.25-7). Other Jews were expecting the Messiah to call the nation of Israel to repentance and purification, as today's reading noted that the promised messenger would be "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. . . and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness." Think then of someone like John the Baptist. Thus, not surprisingly then the Pharisees and Sadducees earlier went down to the River Jordan to ask John the Baptist specifically whether or not he

was the Messiah, as he was calling upon the people to repent and be baptized as prophesized.

The debate continues in that chapter from John's Gospel, when ". . . some in the crowd said (about Jesus), 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' (Apparently, no one in that crowd had ever heard that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, nor did Jesus or his disciples speak up and correct them here). So, there was a division in the crowd." (7.40b-3). Meanwhile, other Jews imagined the Messiah more as a military leader to overthrow the Romans and recover the Holy Land for God's people, someone like good King David, who defeated the Philistines and brought peace to the land, or like the Maccabee brothers, who overthrew the Greek rulers of their day, and so it is not surprising that in 132 C.E. the leader of a large-scale rebellion against the Romans named Simon Bar Kochba was labeled as the long-expected Messiah by many of his people, but who was defeated by six Roman legions two years later. Thus, there were simply lots and lots of different Scripture passages that hint at who the Messiah would be, but there was no agreed list of acceptable proof texts then, or now. Indeed, there are still disputes among contemporary Jews about

who the Messiah is or will be, and there have certainly been many throughout history who have been labeled as that longed-for Messiah.

And so, you can see why the later Gospel writers trying to satisfy the varied expectations of the Jewish people added stories of Jesus of Nazareth being born in Bethlehem, stories that only exist in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke and sadly conflict with each other, with details that are otherwise unmentioned and unknown in the Christian Scriptures. The question whether Jesus was descended from King David, however, is more widely attested, as he is often called by others as "son of David." But the two genealogies in the Gospels that affirm Jesus was born of the house of David differ in how or through whom that is so.

It is also interesting to ask the question whether Jesus ever accepted the title "Messiah" for himself. Surprisingly 'Christ' or 'Messiah' is a title that others ascribed to Jesus, and not one which he appears to have acknowledged. Remember that Jesus earlier had fled from the crowd at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth that sought to crown him king; that is to make him 'an anointed one'. And Jesus frustrated the crowd in Jerusalem on one occasion when he would not openly accept the title for himself, where it is noted "Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So, the Jews gathered around

him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly'" (Jn. 10.22-4).

At his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14.61f), the high priest asks Jesus straight out, "Are you the Christ?" How Jesus actually responded to this question is uncertain though, because the three accounts of the story in three different Gospels record four different answers. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus responded "You have said so" (Mt. 26.64). In Luke's Gospel, Jesus replies similarly to the Jews in Jerusalem, "If I tell you, you will not believe," and then when pressed again, replied, "You say that I am" (Lk. 22.67, 70). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus seems to have remained silent throughout the questioning at first, like a lamb that is dumb before its slaughter. And only later is Jesus recorded as clearly responding affirmatively as to whether he was the Christ by replying "I am" (14.62). But because of the varying answers recorded in the varying accounts, most people cannot with confidence conclude that Jesus did indeed at the trial before the Sanhedrin clearly accept the title "Christ" for himself!

Similarly, Jesus was evasive at the trial before Pilate when he asked, "Are you the king of the Jews," and Jesus answers in the Synoptic Gospels, "You have said so" or in John, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" but never really answering the question. Thus, the only

other place where the Gospels record Jesus as possibly accepting the title "Christ" for himself is the story of Peter's Confession at Caesarea Philippi. It is a story fortunately recorded with little change in all three Synoptic Gospels. In each case, it begins with Jesus asking the disciples who do people say that he is, or at least who do they say the Son of Man is, seeming to refer to himself? And who did the people say that Jesus was? There seems to have been no agreement. The disciples answered that some people say that he was John the Baptist returned from the dead. Others said that he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It appears that most people did not think of the title "Christ" or "Messiah" for Jesus at that time.

So, what about Jesus' disciples? What did they think? There seems to have been an awkward silence when Jesus asked them, and only Peter's simple response is recorded, "You are the Messiah (the Christ)." This is the first and only time in the Gospels that one of his followers during his ministry declared that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He had been called many things before this, rabbi, teacher, Master, Lord, prophet, but never Christ. And what was Jesus' response to Peter. Was it welcoming? Was it time now to reveal himself to his disciples? No, Jesus immediately commanded his disciples not to tell this to anyone.

So unlike some other religious leaders of that time, Jesus according to the Synoptic Gospels did not make himself the center of his teaching or demand submission or loyalty to himself as a condition for acceptance in the Kingdom of God. The religion of Jesus was not about Jesus. Jesus' whole mission was with announcing the coming Kingdom of God and calling upon the people of God to change their behavior, to repent, and to love one another. It was not with himself that he was concerned. In fact, this lack of self-consciousness about himself may explain his confusion about who he really was, and therefore the very question asked at Caesarea Philippi of "who do men say that I am?"

And in a time when there were so many messianic pretenders, it is intriguing to think that Jesus never clearly accepts the title of Messiah for himself. Therefore, I am more interested in subscribing to the religion of Jesus, than to any of those about Jesus. I am more interested in following his commands to love God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. So perhaps we should, like Jesus, not worry about theological titles and declarations, and simply get on with the work of the Kingdom of God, with caring for widows and orphans, for the sick and suffering, for the stranger in our midst, and the least of those amongst us, with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and

imprisoned, and seeking to respect the dignity of every human being. AMEN.