

4

What Messiah did the Jews Expect?

That first-century Jews were – and some Jews *still* are – expecting a Messiah, is a fact of history. But what sort of Messiah did they expect? And how did the infant born in Bethlehem who later grew up in Nazareth differ from this expectation? Once these pieces are slotted into the “Christmas” jigsaw, the events of the *Incarnation* become much clearer as we see them in God’s overall plan of salvation. It can be stated at the outset that the basic ideas of the rabbis concerning the Messiah were at great variance to the reality found in the carpenter from Nazareth. This goes some way to explain the enmity which the religious leaders of Jesus’ day displayed towards Him, but we might also observe that any ‘Messiah’ who did not confirm and approve the power of the Rabbis would have been rejected by them.

John Blanchard, in his excellent short book *Why Y2K?*, subtitled “What the millennium is (really) all about”, commented on Jesus’ own claim to be the Messiah. Whilst Jesus never said “I am the Messiah”, it is plain that this is what he meant his followers – and those who opposed him – to understand. He proved his messiahship by his deeds. The circumstances of his birth supported, rather than detracted, from that claim and in his dealings with the religious leaders of his day Jesus was as open as circumstances would allow as to his true identity. In John 5:39

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

we read that Jesus pointed out to the Jewish religious leaders that, in spite of their “diligent” study of the Scriptures they failed to recognise that those same Scriptures “testified” about him. John Blanchard comments:

‘About 2000 years before Jesus was born, God told Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation, that through his offspring “All nations on earth will be blessed.” (Gen 22:18). This means that twenty centuries before Jesus was born every other family except Abraham’s was out of the running as far as producing the Messiah was concerned. Other Old Testament prophecies showed that Abraham’s line of succession would run through Isaac (who was not Abraham’s oldest son) Jacob (who was not Isaac’s first born) and Jacob’s fourth son Judah (by-passing his eleven brothers). Eleven generations later a man called Jesse was identified as being in the messianic line, and of Jesse’s eight sons David was the one of whom he said that he would ‘raise up ... a righteous Branch’ (Jeremiah 23:5).

‘In a nutshell, then, the Old Testament said that the Messiah would come from a line taken directly through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesse and David. This family tree would itself preclude most of the human race, but there were two other significant pointers. One of the messianic prophecies said that the tribe of Judah would provide Israel with all its kings *until the Messiah arrived*: “The sceptre will not depart from Judah until he comes to whom it belongs” (Genesis 49:10) —and Jesus was born just before Judah’s government collapsed with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The second pointer was the prophecy which told *exactly* where Jesus would be born. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be the ruler over Israel.” (Micah 5:2). There were two Bethlehems, one in the region of Ephrathah in Judea, and the other seventy miles to the north in Zebulun. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the one identified by the Old Testament prophet. (Matthew 2:1.)’¹

WHAT MESSIAH DID THE JEWS EXPECT?

Messianic prophecy

Appendix 3 to this series of studies is a simple table identifying the key events in the reports of the Nativity found in the Gospels, together with the Old Testament prophecies which point directly or indirectly toward them. The table which follows immediately below, is developed fully in W. Graham Scroggie's scholarly work *A Guide to the Gospels*,² but only the prophecies that concern Jesus' 'human pedigree' and birth are included here. Readers are encouraged to work through these:

	Prediction	Fulfilment
1 To be the woman's seed	Gen 3:15	Matt 1:18
2 To be born of a virgin	Isa 7:14	Matt 1:22-3
3 To be of the line of Abraham	Gen 12:3, 7 Gen 17:7	Gal 3:16 Rom 9:5
4 To be of the Tribe of Judah	Gen 49:10	Heb 7:14 Rev 5:6
5 To be of the House of David	2 Sam 7:12-13 Isaiah 11:1-2	Rom 1:3 Lk 1:31-33
6 To be born at Bethlehem	Micah 5:2-3	Matt 2:6 Luke 2:4, 15
7 To be called Immanuel	Isaiah 7:14	Matt 1:23
8 To be worshipped by Gentiles	Isaiah 60:3	Matt 2:11
9 To have a forerunner	Isaiah 40:3, 6, 9 Malachi 3:1	Matt 3:1-3 Mark 1:2-3
10 To be incarnate by birth	Isaiah 9: 6	Luke 2:11
11 To be called out of Egypt	Hosea 11:1	Matt 2:15

There may, of course, be some debate as to whether the prophecies *were* fulfilled as identified above —indeed as to whether they were prophecies at all. It is only necessary at this point to say that these prophecies have been generally accepted through the history of the Christian church as being *messianic prophecies* and are relatively few among many that can be identified as such.

The offices of the Messiah

The word Messiah comes from the Hebrew verb *mashach* which means *to anoint*. The Messiah therefore is ‘the anointed one’. In Hebrew practice anointing was associated particularly with three types of people. First and foremost, it was associated with the office of **king**. When Samuel saw the young David, the Lord said to him ‘Arise and anoint him; he is the one’. So Samuel took his horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers. (1 Sam 16:12-13). Later we read of God speaking through the Psalmist, “I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.” (Ps 89:20). David, of course, was the greatest of the Jewish kings, but we also read of Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointing Solomon (1 Kings 1:45) and Jehoiadah similarly anointing Joash (2 Kings 11:12). Secondly, anointing was associated with the office of **priest**. God’s command was that the priests should be anointed and consecrated—anointing was by pouring oil over the head (Ex 29:7). Finally, anointing was associated with the **prophets** themselves; so Elijah was instructed to anoint Elisha as his successor as prophet (1 Kings 19:16) whilst Isaiah was able to claim that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him to preach good news to the poor (Isaiah 61:1).

It is significant, therefore, that from the beginning the Messiah – the anointed one – was King, Priest and Prophet. These, of course, were three of the great offices of the Lord Jesus. He was **King** in being King of the Jews (Matt 2:2 and Matt 27:11) and by Him God’s kingdom would be established, although Jesus always recognised God the Father as King (“your kingdom come” was how He taught His disciples to pray – not “my kingdom come” – Matt 6:10). He was **priest** (see Hebrews chapter 7, especially verses 23 - 5) in being of the priestly order of Melchizedek³. He was **prophet** to the people of His time (e.g. Luke 7:16; Luke 9:8; Mark 6:15) and also referred to himself as prophet (Luke 4:24; Matt 13:57; John 4:44). Bear in mind that the word Christ is the Greek translation of Messiah, and that from the earliest times believers linked the name Jesus with the title Christ, almost as if it were a proper name. This is the way the title is often used today,

but strictly speaking we should refer to *Jesus the Christ*. The word Christ is used thirteen times in Matthew, six in Mark and twice in Luke and very often in the synoptic Gospels the word is used as a title. So, when John the Baptist began his ministry, people wondered whether he was *the Christ* (Luke 3:15). At Caesarea Philippi Peter first referred to Jesus as *the Christ* (Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29). Jesus Himself did not deny the title (Luke 22:67). To give Jesus the title Christ is the same as calling Him Messiah.

There is no doubt that the New Testament presents Jesus as Messiah. This was the basis of the teaching of the apostle Paul, particularly when he preached to Jews. After his Damascus road experience of conversion, Paul amazed the Jews who knew him as a zealous anti-Christian, by proving in their synagogues that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22). His message in Thessalonica was that, "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:3). Again, in Corinth, "Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:3). Not only Paul, but Apollos in Ephesus, "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). So there is clear and unmistakable evidence that the early preaching of the Christian church presented Jesus as the Messiah.

The Jews expected the Messiah to be intrinsically a part of Israel: the Messiah was thought of as the seed of Abraham, as the 'son' in a unique sense, as well as the 'son of David'. They saw the whole of the Old Testament as a picture in which the figure of the Messiah was clearly discernible. There was a belief, referred to in detail by Alfred Edersheim, that all the miracles and deliverances of Israel's past would be re-enacted, only in a much wider manner, in the days of the Messiah. Israel's whole history was seen as symbolising its future and in this past/future perspective, says Edersheim, we should understand two sayings of the Talmud: "All the prophets prophesied only of the days of the Messiah (Sanh 99a), and, "The world was created only for the Messiah' (Sanh 98b)⁴.

The Messiah as the Son of David

The belief in the coming Messiah was closely associated with the covenant relationship of Israel to God, who had chosen Israel to be His special people. Sovereignly, God had entered into the unique relationship with Israel in which He took them to be His unique people and He in turn would be in a unique way, their God. The Jewish people pledged themselves to keep and obey God's laws (Exodus 24:1-8) and believed, both in their religious convictions and in their popular sentiment, that one day the nation would enter into the visible state of honour, glory and supremacy which they believed to be their right. The Messiah would be the agent of God who would bring about this destiny.

The messianic dream was at first very simple: it was a dream of peace and prosperity to be accomplished under a king of David's line. Sometimes the vision centred not so much around an individual king, but a dynasty of kings of the Davidic line. Later the ideal assumed rather more superhuman proportions, but the idea of the Messiah as a son of David was never totally lost. In 2 Samuel we read how King David decided to build a temple to the Lord, but that Nathan the prophet told him that this honour was reserved for his son Solomon. Nathan also spoke God's great promise to David: "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). Succeeding prophets repeated the promise, interpreting the messianic vision in its light. This was to be a dream that never died:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

Isaiah 11:1, 10

"The days are coming" declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the Land. In his days Judah will be

WHAT MESSIAH DID THE JEWS EXPECT?

saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.

Jeremiah 23:5f

They will serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.

Jeremiah 30:9

In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

Jeremiah 33:15

For this is what the Lord says: 'David will never fail to have a man sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to present sacrifices.

Jeremiah 33:17

I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.

Jeremiah 33:22

I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

Ezekiel 34:23

Afterwards the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days.

Hosea 3:5

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be.

Amos 9:11

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

On that day the Lord will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the Lord going before them.

Zechariah 12:8

Once and for all, I have sworn by my holiness – and I will not lie to David – that his line will continue for ever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.

Psalms 89:35-37

What are we to make of the mysterious prophecy concerning a *shoot* emerging from the stump of Jesse? And what of the *righteous branch*? What do these prophecies in particular signify? The branch became another name for the Messiah. This was because in spite of God's clear promise to David that his throne would last forever, it appeared from the time of King Nebuchadnezzar who had destroyed Judah, as though the royal throne had been chopped down like a tree —sawn right down to the roots and destroyed. For six hundred years from the time of Jeconiah (also rendered Jehoiachin) no descendant of David had held the throne. As we have already seen, King Herod who tried to kill the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, was not a true Jew, but a second-generation Edomite —to all intents and purposes, a foreign king.

Mary's line of descent from David was unbroken (see chapter 11), however Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem had Joseph's descent not also been from David. So, from the apparently dead stump of David's fallen family tree, a shoot would suddenly emerge. Prophecies concerning the branch spanned 300 years. First Isaiah foretold some 760 years BC, at a time when David's descendants still ruled, that David's tree would become a stump remaining where it was felled, but the stump would remain as a holy seed. (Isaiah 6:13). This was elaborated further in Isaiah 11 verses 1 and 10. A shoot would emerge which would bear fruit

and be a banner to the peoples (not ‘people’ —a sign that the new king’s dominion would extend beyond Israel). The theme continues in Isaiah 53, perhaps the most messianic of all the messianic prophecies, speaking as it does of the atoning death of the Lord Jesus. In verse 2 we read, “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.”

A hundred and fifty years later, the prophet Jeremiah was also inspired to speak of the Branch. At this time the royal tree had been destroyed by Babylon. But Jeremiah was given the words we read above, about a “righteous branch” emerging. Perhaps a hundred years after this, the prophet Zechariah was given a similar picture. “Listen,” he wrote, “O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch”. The theme of the Branch is explored thoroughly by Dr E K Victor Pearce in his book *Prophecy*. Having pointed out that Zechariah speaks of the Branch removing the guilt of the world in a single day (Zech 3:9), he writes: “Mary’s line crossed with Joseph’s at Zerubbabel’s name ... and, as Mary’s cousin was a priest, it meant that Jesus would be both priest and king. As priest, his atoning sacrifice would remove Earth’s guilt in a single Good Friday. No wonder that, in Chapter 4, there were to be joyful shouts of ‘Grace, grace, unto the stone which had become the head of the corner’ and Zerubbabel would be the Davidic ancestor ‘not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.’”⁵

Could there be a clearer picture of the infant born into a poor family in an obscure backwater of the ancient world’s mightiest empire, yet who would rule not by might, nor power, but by God’s spirit? A picture of one born not by the agency of a human father, but by the agency of God’s spirit.

The Messiah as nationalist leader

The image of the Messiah in the collective mind of the Jewish nation, was one of Israel’s exultation through its Messiah, rather than salvation for the world. The rabbinic ideal was not of ‘a light to the Gentiles’ (Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 49:6). Accordingly,

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

there was a fundamental antagonism between the rabbis and Christ, quite irrespective of the manner in which Jesus carried out His work. The purely nationalistic elements, which formed the greater part of the rabbinic expectation of the future Messiah, never entered Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. Jesus so fundamentally separated Himself from the ideas of messiahship prevalent during His day, that it is of no surprise that he was not widely recognised as the Messiah. Furthermore, it is important to note that the doctrine of original sin, and the sinfulness of the whole human nature, were not held by the ancient rabbis. So, whilst they recognised the effects of sin, and of sin in Adam, the rabbis saw no need for a Redeemer who, as the second Adam, would restore what Adam had lost. These doctrines are fully developed and made explicit only in the New Testament, although Christians would argue that they can be fully deduced from the Old Testament as well.

What was the Jewish expectation of the nature, person and qualifications of the Messiah? Two inferences can be made from rabbinic writings and from Old Testament prophecies viewed as messianic. First, the idea of a divine personality, and of the union of two natures in the Messiah, was alien to the rabbis—and even, at first, to Jesus' own disciples. Second, Jewish orthodoxy viewed the Messiah as far above any human being, any prophet or even any angel. The boundary line between the Messiah and God was, in the rabbis' estimation, very narrow, so that when the reality of the Messiah Jesus finally burst upon the minds of the disciples, they had no difficulty in worshipping Jesus as Son of God. These two inferences accorded with ancient Jewish teaching. Beginning with the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 49:10 and Numbers 24:7, 17, we gather that the kingdom of the Messiah was higher than any earthly kingdom, and destined to rule all earthly kingdoms. The rendering of Ps 72:5, Ps 100:3, and especially Isaiah 9, goes much further, however. They teach the existence of the Messiah before his entry onto the world stage—before the moon (Ps 72), before the morning star (Ps 110), and eternal (Ps 72).

WHAT MESSIAH DID THE JEWS EXPECT?

And what of the other rabbinic writings that held such sway in Jesus' time? What clues did they give about the Messiah? There are a number of these and they are dealt in some detail by Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (see for example Book 2, Chapter 5), and also in William Barclay's *Jesus As They Saw Him*.⁶ The treatment below is necessarily brief:

The third book of the **Sibylline Oracles** which, with a few exceptions, date from over 150 years BC, presents a picture of messianic times. Here, the Messiah is the King sent from heaven who would "judge every man in blood and splendour of fire" (Sybill Or. 3.285, 286).

This is repeated in a reference to "the King whom God will send from the sun" (Sybill Or. 3. 652). The writings go on to present an eternal superhuman kingdom (Sybill Or. 652-807). Such a kingdom, it might be added, would have a superhuman King. In the so-called **Book of Enoch** which most historians believe to be dated in its oldest parts (chapters 1-36 and 72-105) from 150 to 130 BC, there are messianic references to 'the Woman's son' (Enoch 62.5) and 'the Son of Man' (e.g. Enoch 48.2; 62.7; 69.29) amongst other obscure titles.

Still more explicit is a collection of eighteen psalms, dating from the century before Christ, which are now known as the **Psalms of Solomon**. These are quoted quite extensively in Barclay's *Jesus As They Saw Him* (see pp 98-100), from which the following very limited extracts are taken:

Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king,
the son of David

At the time in which thou seest, O God,
that he may reign over Israel thy servant.

And gird him with strength that he may
shatter unrighteous rulers,

And that he may purge Jerusalem
from nations that trample her down to destruction.

Wisely, righteously, he shall thrust out sinners

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

from the inheritance.

He shall destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter's vessel.
With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces their substance,
He shall destroy the godless nations with the word of his
mouth;

At his rebuke nations shall flee before him.....

And he shall gather together a holy people,
whom he shall lead in righteousness,

And he shall judge the tribes of the people that have been
sanctified by the Lord his God.....

For he shall know them, that they are all sons of their God.

This, then, was the Davidic Messiah that was expected by most Jews at the time of Christ. He would be the picture of a nationalistic king. Gentiles have no part in His future kingdom. The Lord Jesus, this humble carpenter from Nazareth, this Prince of Peace of Isaiah 9:6, and the God of peace celebrated in the New Testament, was very far from the rabbinic expectation. To those Jews who still await the Messiah, the essentially nationalistic king who will exalt Israel is still very much in contemplation. How different is this expectation from those beautiful words from Isaiah chapter 9 which point to a holy and peaceful kingdom where righteousness and justice flourish:

For unto us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,

WHAT MESSIAH DID THE JEWS EXPECT?

establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Finally, what of the birth of this superhuman king Messiah? Alfred Edersheim takes up the story: "It is not without hesitation, that we make reference to Jewish allusions to the miraculous birth of the Saviour. Yet there are two expressions which convey the idea if not of superhuman origin, yet of some great mystery attaching to his birth. The first occurs in connection with the birth of Seth. 'Rabbi Tanchuma said, in the name of Rabbi Samuel: Eve had respect [had regard, looked forward] to that Seed which is to come from another place. And who is this? This is Messiah the King' (Ber. R. 23, ed. Warsh. p. 45b). The second appears in the narrative of the crime of Lot's daughters (Gen 19:32): 'Is it not written, "that we may preserve a son from our father"' but "seed from our father". This is that seed which is coming from another place. And who is this? This is the King Messiah.' (BerR. 51 ed. Warsh p 95a). I am, of course, aware that certain Rabbinites explain the expression "seed from another place" as referring to the descent of the Messiah from Ruth - a non-Israelite. But if this explanation could be offered in reference to the daughters of Lot, it is difficult to see its meaning in reference to Eve and the birth of Seth".⁷

All this may be difficult to follow without a thorough grounding in Jewish messianic prophecy and rabbinic writings, but it should by now be abundantly clear that the Messiah expected at the time of Jesus (and indeed later) was a superhuman king who would lead Israel to new heights of domination among the nations of the world and who would, in all probability, throw off the yoke of Rome. It was precisely this vision of the Messiah that the Lord Jesus rejected and which led him into conflict with the Jewish religious authorities, whose power base they felt to be threatened by this prophet from Nazareth.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

Notes

¹ John Blanchard *Why Y2K?* (Evangelical Press, 1999), p. 48.

² W. Graham Scroggie DD *A Guide to the Gospels* (Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 1948), p. 482.

³ Melchizedek—a mysterious biblical personality whose name means “king of righteousness”. The historical record about this priest king is contained in Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 5:10, 6:20 and 7:1-17. A good Bible Encyclopaedia will provide useful background about Melchizedek’s place in messianic prophecy.

⁴ *Op. cit.* p. 115.

⁵ Dr E. K. Victor Pearce *Prophecy*, Vol. 3 in the Evidence for Truth series (Eagle, 1998), p. 63.

⁶ William Barclay *Jesus As They Saw Him* (SCM Press Ltd, 1962).

⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 125.