

What Did Jesus Claim?

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The specific question which is now to occupy our attention is: Did Jesus claim to be the Christ, the Messiah? This question is purely historical. It does not ask: Was Jesus actually the Messiah? Christians and non-Christians would answer this latter question in different manners; but all people, regardless of their personal religious beliefs, ought to be able to give the same answer to the purely historical question: Did Jesus *claim* to be the Messiah?

Strange as it may at first seem, people have divided on this as well as on their personal religions. The orthodox Christians have always answered in the affirmative and have said, "Yes, Christ made the claim, and I believe it." But others who like to retain the name Christian because of its dignity, and yet who do not accept the only possible norm of what can properly be called Christianity, i.e. the Bible, have asserted that as a matter of historical fact Jesus made no such claim, and that it would have been untrue had he done so.

Since the evidence taken at its face value abundantly proves that Jesus did claim to be the Messiah, one naturally wonders why anyone should give a negative answer. To satisfy this wonder two things must be done. First, it is necessary to state exactly what is meant by the term, Messiah. And second, something must be said of the type of religion held by those who give us the negative answer.

Four factors seem to be involved in the concept of Messiahship. First, a Messiah is some sort of savior. He is a deliverer of his people. What his people need to be delivered from, and what means he may use to save them, will vary according to the situation one has in mind. In the Old Testament, the Messiah was to save from sin. Secondly, the Messiah of the Old Testament, regardless of what messiahs colloquially so-called may be, was to be a King. This aspect of the notion of Messiah became especially prominent after the time of David, whose son the Messiah was to be.

But there are kings and kings. Therefore, in the third place, the Jews expected the Messiah to be more than a human King. As is indicated in Daniel 7:13-14, and in the apocalyptic book of Enoch—a Jewish book not included in the Old Testament—the Jews expected their deliverer and King to descend from heaven, to intervene in history as an angelic, or in some sense supernatural savior. It is to be noted that apart from the context a savior or king may operate on a purely natural level and be no more than a mere man. But the idea of intervention, the idea that history is to be culminated by an agent introduced into it by God from without, definitely makes the Messiah a supernatural being. Now, in the fourth place, the Messiah in the New Testament is pictured as more than a supernatural being, such as an angel would be. He is called the Son of God, and he identifies himself with God in such an intimate way that unless the claim is actually true, the claimant is guilty of the worst blasphemy.

These two latter considerations explain in some measure why a group of nominal Christians have said that Jesus made no such claim. Many respectable people have lost their faith in the

*This material is taken from, and the interested reader is referred to, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* by G. Vos; George H. Doran Co., 1926.

truth of the Bible, and yet they continue to think of Jesus as a most excellent teacher and example. They feel the attraction of his personality. Since, therefore, they regard him as an example to be followed and not as one who satisfies God's justice by the sacrifice of himself on the cross for sin, they consider it derogatory of him to attribute to him the claim that he was the Jewish Messiah. If that claim should be admitted, they would be forced to sever all ties of admiration toward him, and this they are not prepared to do. To make the situation clearer, an illustration may be used. Suppose someone in Italy should approach Mussolini and say, "My dear sir, I admire your ability to play the violin"—I do not know whether Mussolini plays the violin or not, but other Roman emperors have done so—"but I think you are the world's worst ruler."

Obviously there could be little friendship between that man and Mussolini, because whatever Mussolini thinks of his alleged musical ability, it is quite certain that he regards himself quite highly as a ruler. In a somewhat similar fashion, a person who thinks that he is Messiah naturally views all his actions and directs all his thoughts with reference to this stupendous claim. Nothing that he does is unrelated to his consciousness that he is the Messiah. Therefore, if someone should come to him and say, "My dear sir, I consider you a rather remarkable teacher and an altogether excellent example, but I cannot abide your foolish notion that you are a special messenger from God," obviously there can be no friendship between the two. In fact, a person who did not believe in the supernatural would never consider as an excellent example one who claimed to be Messiah. He would rather regard such a claimant as insane. Therefore those who have been attracted by Jesus' teaching, but have refused to accept him as the Lord, have been forced to assert that he did not claim to be the Messiah.

These people now faced the necessity of tampering with the historical evidence which was so preponderantly opposed to them. At first they tried to make a dogmatic denial, but this under the light of scholarly research proved too crude. Then some adopted an agnostic position, and said nothing definitely could be known about the whole matter. This was soon seen to be an unattractive confession of failure. Then various compromises were tried. Perhaps Jesus was at first sane and made no such claim, but later toyed with the notion that he possibly might be or become the Messiah. And finally, the theory was advanced that while he claimed to be Messiah, he did not mean what he said. That is, the Jews were in his day somewhat primitive and given to superstition. The message which Jesus had to preach was an unfamiliar one of universal brotherhood, and so he attempted to teach them the new message in familiar words, he talked of Messiahships because it was a notion they understood, and hoped thereby to explain his golden rule and other ethical precepts.

After some seventy-five years of discussion of the technicalities of this problem, no answer can be maintained except the original affirmation: Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ.* More progress can now be made by examining at least one part of the actual claim. In the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter twenty-one, Jesus illustrates his claim by the parable of the wicked husbandmen. Briefly the story is that a man rented his vineyard to husbandmen who refused to pay the rent. The servants whom the owner sent to collect the rent, they maltreated, until finally the owner sent his son, who, being the heir, had more authority than the servants. The husbandmen killed the son and plotted to seize his inheritance permanently.

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In its main details the interpretation of the parable is easy. By Matthew's own statement the husbandmen represent the Jewish nation, particularly its religious leaders; the servants whom the owner sent to collect the rent are obviously the Old Testament prophets. Note next that the son occupies a higher station than the servants, for the simple reason that he is the son. The servants do their master's bidding and no doubt are paid, but the son is not paid, he is the heir of the vineyard. This parable therefore teaches that the Son of God is on a much higher plane than any of the Old Testament prophets, indeed he is the prospective owner of Israel. It is further implied in the parable that the Son is the last and final ambassador whom God sends to the Jewish nation. After the Son is sent, no further attempts are to be made to collect the rent. Since, therefore, the Son is the highest messenger of God conceivable, the husbandmen, because they reject him, suffer complete destruction. With the intervention of the Messiah in Jewish history, and with the Jew's rejection of him, God's dealings with the Jewish theocracy are ended.

Jesus closes the parable by asking the Pharisees, "When therefore the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" They say unto him, "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out the vineyard to other husbandmen, who shall render him the fruits in their season."

This answer which the Pharisees gave Jesus, while plausible, is only half correct; and he immediately proceeds to tell them how and why they have made a mistake. The answer as given assumes that nothing more radical would follow Christ's rejection than a change of administration, that Caiaphas and his colleagues would be turned out of office, a new high priest put in his place, after which things would go on as before. This answer, however, does not do justice to the gravity of rejecting the Son of God, and betrays the ignorance of the Pharisees with respect to the nature of the Messiah.

Jesus saith unto them, "Did ye never read in the Scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner; this was from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes?"

The correction which Jesus makes amounts to no less than this: in the reconstruction following the destruction of the wicked husbandmen, the Son will occupy the most important place and will therefore receive full vindication and supreme honor. Note also parenthetically that this honor given to the Son implies, though it is not explicitly mentioned in this place, that after his death at the hands of the husbandmen he will be raised from the dead.

In saying that the Son is to be made the head of the corner, Jesus was trying to impress on his hearers that the Messiah was a greater person than they thought. The Messianic office is not like the office of prophet which God might give to various men of various abilities. But it is an office of such high rank that only one person could fill it, namely the Son. He was chosen because he was the Son.

The word savior may mean much or little, depending on the context. So may the word king. Had Jesus claimed merely to be a savior, the Pharisees might have thought him deluded, but they would not have charged him with blasphemy. When, therefore, on this occasion Jesus

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revealed to them that he was Savior and King *because* he was the eternal Son of God, they sought to kill him. His claim was stupendous.

And in conclusion, we today can see in the last verses of the chapter the consequence to us of our reaction to this stupendous claim. Jesus Christ is not just an example or benefactor whose rejection is unfortunate; he is the Son of God whose rejection is fatal. He that falleth on this stone, he that stumbles at Jesus' concept of Messiahship, shall be broken into pieces; and on whomsoever the wrath of Messiah shall fall, it will scatter him as dust. But he that heareth Christ's word, and believeth on God who sent Jesus as Messiah, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.

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