

On The Messiah

Hello, God's People – There is a lot of preaching in Acts about Jesus being the Messiah.

Peter does it. "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." – Acts 2:36

Paul does it. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah." -- Acts 17:3.

The concept is a key element of the Christian witness. But, where did this idea originate? How did it take root in the lives of Jesus' followers? For answers, we must go back to centuries-old understandings found in the Hebrew scriptures.

In Psalm 89, you'll find references to anointing and an anointed one in verses 20, 38 and 51. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Jesus' day, uses the word *Christos* and its variants. "*Christos*" is Greek for "Messiah", the Hebrew word for the anointed one. So, the idea begins as one who has been anointed, made king. It often referred to David, or any anointed king. The Jews would describe such a person as a Messiah. But how does this concept evolve through the centuries from the ancient Hebrews to the early Christians of the New Testament? Here are two long quotes to help us along.

"...Messiah 'anointed' refers in late texts to the high priest and to the patriarchs, but in most cases to the king. The expression reflects the close connection between Yahweh and the king. Invincibility and endowment with the Spirit of Yahweh are mentioned as results of anointment. A specifically eschatological-messianic significance of the title is not yet discernible in the Old Testament, not even in Isaiah 45:1. Cyrus is not equated with the expected eschatological king, but acquires an especially lofty title as Yahweh's chosen instrument. Thus the further development of the title as a designation of the 'Messiah' does not belong to Old Testament usage, but to its later development in early Judaism. ... The close connection between the divine and the earthly king established in the Jerusalem cult and the accentuation of the cosmic-supratemporal dimensions of the former as early as the pre-exilic era created preconditions in Judaism for the eschatological expectation of a realized kingdom of God, governed by a divine anointed figure. ... It is obvious that nontheological, even foreign concepts, such as political frustration or Persian ideology also contributed to this new configuration, but these contributions do not explain the total situation: for a consistently conceived and deepened belief in the kingship of God alone must lead to a hope in an actualized kingdom of God." -- *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

"The New Testament witnesses bring Messianic expectation with them from their history and origins. In them the complex of Messianic ideas is given a real content which is provided by the story of Jesus and which refashions the whole concept of the Messiah. One may see from the Gospels that Messianic expectation was attached to Jesus and yet is neither plain nor indisputable that Jesus called Himself the Messiah. After Easter He obviously bears the title in a new form fashioned by the Easter event. ... Decisive for the new understanding of the Messiah

is the confession that the Messiah has become the Lord over the power of evil in sin and death. He frees his followers from its dominion and brings them under His own lordship. This is a primary statement of apostolic witness. If the Messiah in Israel is an earthly man, on whom religious, national and political hopes are set, for Christians He is the Conqueror of the death which He suffered for those who confess Him. ... The connecting of Messiahship to the resurrection and exaltation gives new expression to what is conferred by anointing in the Old Testament; it imparts strength and glory. The person of the anointed is invincible because He is commended to God's protection as one who is commissioned and sent by Him, and He is equipped for His task by anointing with the Spirit of God." -- *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

Many of these concepts come together in Jesus' baptism in which he is "anointed" by the Spirit and, in a sense, is declared by God as "my Son, the Beloved," but also as the Messiah, the anointed One. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth becomes Jesus the Christ.

Here are a few closing words from Alan H. McNeile's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew: "Of all the forms of Jewish Messianic hopes, few were wholly free from the thought that the advent of the Kingdom would involve the subduing or the annihilation of the enemies of Israel, either in this world – Palestine – or in another world when Heaven and earth passed away. For Jesus, the present usurper of the sovereignty was not Caesar, but the devil. He penetrated beneath earthly hopes and ideas to spiritual principles. ... In the whole range of Jewish Apocalyptic the awful and transcendent Messiah is never pictured as a Being of human love and sympathy. The Lord seems to carry on the thought of Isaiah 53 from His passion and death to His glory; He will not only suffer as the Representative of His nation, but when invested with His cosmic functions will identify Himself with all sufferers."

God's peace,

Fr. Dion