**“Messiah” in Christian Faith**

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It’s a few weeks now since the Jewish new year and rather more weeks since the Muslim new year, and in two or three weeks it will be the Christian new year. For Christians, traditionally the year starts at the end of November/beginning of December, with a period of four week that leads into Christmas. It’s a period in which we are looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, in two senses. We are looking forward to the coming of Jesus that happened two thousand years ago, and we are looking forward to the second coming of Jesus when he will complete the work he began then.

During these weeks and at Christmas, we read passages from the Jewish Scriptures which help us understand the first and the second coming of Jesus. What we will do now is look at some of these passages and at the way the New Testament reflects them. First, from Matthew 2.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship him.’

The magi or wise men are astrologers. The story is really rather funny, because King Herod thinks that he is king of the Jews, and the last thing he wants is someone announcing another king of the Jews. So Matthew goes on,

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:

**6**‘“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
    are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
    who will shepherd my people Israel.”’

Matthew is quoting from Micah, a prophet in Judah who was a contemporary of Isaiah. Here are the actual words in Micah 5.

Marshal your troops now, city of troops,  
    for a siege is laid against us.  
They will strike Israel’s ruler  
    on the cheek with a rod.

**2**‘But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
    though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
    one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
    from ancient times.’

There’s something else to make people smile there. Micah came from Moresheth, a little town down the mountains from Jerusalem on the way to the airport, and he has rather a low view of the Jerusalemites and their unfaithfulness. One suspects he enjoys being able to point out that the ruler who will come one day will not come from their city which they are so proud of, nor even from Hebron or Beersheba, the other big cities, but from little unimportant Bethlehem. Micah doesn’t say that the ruler will actually be born in Bethlehem, though he will ultimately come from there because that is where David came from. But when Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem, it was neat for Matthew to be able to apply the prophecy that way.

Looking back to Matthew’s version of this prophecy draws attention to a more explicit significant difference in his words. Matthew says “you are by no means least among the rulers”; Micah actually said, “you are small among the clans.” The result of Jesus being born in Bethlehem was that Bethlehem was no longer small, it was “by no means least,” and Matthew adapts the quotation in light of that, in midrashic fashion.

Now a second passage in Matthew. One extraordinary thing about Jesus, Matthew 1 says, is that his mother gave birth to him without having had sex with anyone. Matthew begins,

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.

One opening comment that also applies to the other passages we will look at. When the Prophets are talking about a coming ruler, they themselves don’t use the word Messiah, *meshiaḥ*. The word Messiah means “anointed one” and it always refers to an anointed king or an anointed priest in the present. The word Messiah came to apply to a future ruler only in the Second Temple period, when there was no current Messiah and people therefore looked forward to God bringing one in the future. In the prophets’ time, people had what we might call a messianic hope, but they didn’t call it a messianic hope. Matthew goes on to speak of an angel appearing to Joseph, then says

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).

### Here is the passage from Isaiah that Matthew is quoting. It’s a time of crisis in Jerusalem, and the Lord wants to encourage king Ahaz to trust in him.

10The Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11“Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.” 12But Ahaz said, “I won’t ask; I won’t test the Lord.” 13Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? 14Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.

It’s a trickier passage, which is why I dealt with the Micah one first. The more traditional translations of Isaiah have “a virgin will conceive,” which suits Matthew very well because he can then link the prophecy with Jesus being actually born of a virgin. But I assume that Isaiah himself wasn’t talking about a girl who would still be a virgin when she conceived, and anyway he wasn’t talking about a girl who would have baby in 700 years’ time, which would be no sign for Ahaz. He would be talking about a girl who was a virgin now but who would get married and conceive and have baby, and by that time, maybe a year, the present crisis will be history and she will be able to call her baby Immanuel, God is with us, because what has happened has demonstrated that God is with us.

But the version quoted above is from the Common English Bible, which I think has the best translation of the tricky words. The noun needn’t indicate a virgin, just a girl, and the verb is a participle. So the Lord is talking about a girl who is pregnant now, and by the time she has her baby the Lord will have done his act of rescue. And it’s just possible maybe then that the girl is a wife of Ahaz and the baby will be King Hezekiah, who will be a kind-of Messiah. But whatever exactly Isaiah meant, Matthew is then applying Isaiah’s words to Jesus in light of how he was born. And in Isaiah and in Matthew, the Lord’s closing words are maybe the most important ones: what will happen will show that God is with us.

Another passage from Isaiah that Christians are especially inclined to read in the run up to Christmas comes from Isaiah 9. In Advent every year, there is a Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at King’s College, Cambridge, and since it was introduced there, many churches have their own version. One of the standard lessons for this event comes to a climax like this:

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
    and authority will be on his shoulders.  
    He will be named:

    Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
    Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

There will be vast authority and endless peace  
    for David’s throne and for his kingdom,  
    establishing and sustaining it  
    with justice and righteousness  
    now and forever.

“A child is born to us, a son is given to us.” It’s gift passage to apply to Jesus, if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah. But the odd thing is that the New Testament doesn’t quote it!

Yet in a way it was appropriate that it didn’t, because the last line is then troublesome. Jesus did not bring in reign of peace and justice and righteousness. And that shows that when we as Christians say that Jesus is the Messiah, we have to bear in mind that the hope of Advent remains a hope, and that we look forward to Jesus returning to bring to completion the work he has begun.

Now two other passages from Matthew that nuance what Christians need to mean by calling Jesus Messiah. First, from Matthew 11.

Now when John [the baptizer] heard in prison about the things the Christ [the Messiah] was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, **3**“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

You can’t blame John for being a bit confused. If effect he has been proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, but things are not turning out the way you would expect if this was so. Jesus sends a message back to him.

“Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”

The interesting thing about that list of things that Jesus has been doing is that none of them are things that the Messiah was supposed to do. Some of them are things the Scriptures say that God will do in fulfilling his purpose; none of them are things that the Scriptures say that the coming king would do. In effect, Jesus says, look at what I have been doing, not at what I have not been doing.

Then, finally, Matthew 16:

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.”

**15**He said, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

**16**Simon Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

**17**Then Jesus replied, “Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. . . .

**20**Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Messiah.”

Excuse me? That doesn’t make sense. He’s the Messiah, and people are to keep it a secret? But the rationale comes in what Matthew says next.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day.

The idea of the Messiah suffering, being killed, and then being raised from death also wasn’t part of the idea of being the Messiah. To put another way, as Christians see it, Jesus is the Messiah, but he is also a prophet like Jeremiah who gets attacked, or like the servant figure in Isaiah 53 who gets martyred or nearly gets martyred and then gets restored to full life and vindicated. And this presumably relates to the way Jesus asks the question that he puts to the disciples. He asks them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” It’s a puzzling expression, but it’s his distinctive way of describing himself, and it would not bring with it such a clear set of expectations and assumptions as the word Messiah.

So when Christians say that Jesus is the Messiah, we are saying that he is indeed the one through whom God’s purpose was being effected in the world, and through whom God’s purpose will be effected, but the idea of his being the Messiah has to be nuanced quite a bit when you apply it to him.