

“What Do You Think About The Christ?”

By Martin Pickup

Why did ancient Jews reject Jesus as their Messiah? One would think that Jesus' own people would accept his messianic claims, particularly since he validated those claims by performing numerous miracles. Yet the striking fact is that Jesus' messiahship was denied by most Jews of his day. Why?

“Because they were hard of heart,” someone says. It is certainly true that the New Testament identifies moral stubbornness as the fundamental cause of Jewish disbelief (John 12:37-40), yet hardness of heart lies at the root of all disbelief in the face of God's evidence (Eph. 4:18; 2 Thess. 2:10-12). We need to realize that there also was an *intellectual reason* why Jews denied Jesus' claims, a reason that they felt justified their militant opposition to him. To put it bluntly, ancient Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah of prophecy because he did not fulfill prophecy. Or, so it seemed to them.

This controversy between Christians and Jews hinged upon the question of how Scripture should be interpreted: as Jews had traditionally understood it?—or in the novel way that Jesus and his disciples proposed? New Testament writers argue that the Jews did not fully and accurately understand God's plan for the kingdom, and when it was finally explained to them, they were unwilling to give up their erroneous ideas.

The Nature of Old Testament Revelation

Why were the Scriptures so hard to understand? For one thing, Old Testament prophecy was somewhat vague in its discussion of the future kingdom of God. The prophets spoke of the

kingdom in general terms, using highly metaphorical language and giving few details about the particulars of God's intentions. But more importantly, God kept much of His eternal scheme hidden during the Old Testament era. He revealed to the prophets enough information to give the Jewish people hope for the future, but the fullness of His plan—that which pertained to the Messiah and the nature and scope of the kingdom—God kept “a mystery” (Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). The Old Testament gave a truncated account of God's plan. The complete plan would be revealed only in the last days.

As a result, Jews read Scripture for generations according to their own speculations about what God had in mind, never realizing how much of His plan God had concealed. But God wanted to make the eventual disclosure a way of testing the hearts of His people. When Jesus and (later) his apostles began to unveil God's full plan, those who truly sought to do the will of God manifested this attitude by accepting Jesus and his explanation of Scripture. But those who sought their own will denied Jesus and clung to their traditional beliefs.

A Royal Messiah

What picture of the kingdom age did Jews typically draw from their reading of the Scriptures? First of all, they believed that God would raise up a royal Messiah from the lineage of David. Many passages of Scripture prophesied of an ideal, eschatological monarch who would restore the Davidic throne and rule over a world-wide kingdom (e.g., Ps. 2; Ps. 110; Isa. 11:1-4). But most Jews interpreted these passages to be speaking of a warrior-king, like David himself had been, one who would defeat the Gentile nations in battle and liberate Israel from her political enemies.

It's not surprising that the Jews read Scripture in this way. The prophets had used military language to speak of the Messiah's end-time role. But Jesus never claimed to be a carnal type of warrior. He spent his three-year ministry preaching about righteousness, not raising an army. Jesus saw sin as the real enemy of man, and his crucifixion and resurrection as the decisive victory over sin (Matt. 1:21; 26:28).

Jews of the first century also did not envision a Messiah who would possess more than a human nature – certainly not a Messiah who was the incarnation of Yahweh. Scripture never explicitly stated such an idea. Of course there were prophecies that closely associated the Messiah with God, assigning him titles like “Yahweh our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:6) or “Mighty God” (Isa. 9:6). But such passages seemed to suggest nothing more than that the Messiah represented God's presence among His people.

This is why Jesus shocked people with his display of miraculous power over nature and authority over demons. The way he spoke of being one with God, addressing Him even as “My Father,” seemed blasphemous to Jewish ears. He implied that he was on the level of deity. At the end of his ministry, Jesus tried to nudge the Pharisees toward considering the idea that Scripture hinted of a Messiah who would be more than a man (Matt. 22:41-45). “What do you think of the Christ?” Jesus asked them. “Whose son is he?” If the Messiah were only a human descendant of David, why would David in Psalm 110 call him “my lord”? Didn't this suggest that the Messiah held a higher rank than king David himself? The inability of the Pharisees to respond to this puzzle was quite understandable. God had kept the divine nature of the Messiah a mystery. But when Jesus ascended to heaven to reign at the right hand of God, his

apostles began proclaiming that the Messiah of Scripture was the incarnation of God (John 1:1-3; Col. 2:9).

Another important point to realize is that ancient Jews did not expect the Messiah to be the single, all-encompassing figure of the kingdom. Most Jews understood Scripture to predict the advent of other eschatological figures besides the royal Messiah. Many Jews believed that a great prophet would arise (based on Deut. 18:15-18; Isaiah 61:1-3), and some believed that a high priest would come in the last days to restore the temple liturgy in Jerusalem to its proper Mosaic form (based perhaps on Jer. 33:17-18; Zech. 3:1-10). The Jews presumed that each one of these eschatological figures would have his own special role in God's kingdom.

There was a good reason why they didn't see the Messiah as the single focal point of prophecy: Scripture kept that idea a mystery. If we read the Old Testament on its own, removing from our minds any New Testament explanations of Old Testament passages, it does not appear to predict the advent of one figure who will carry out all of God's prophecies. Yet this new way of reading Scripture is exactly what first-century proponents of Christianity affirmed. Jesus, they argued, was the anticipated Messiah, Prophet, and High Priest all in one person. He was the unique Son of God who would actualize all the promises of Scripture himself.

A Suffering Messiah

The crucifixion of Jesus was the great stumbling block to Jewish acceptance of Jesus (1 Cor. 1:23). The Jews never dreamed that the Messiah would be a rejected, suffering king—much less that he would die at the hand of the Romans. There were no prophecies of Scripture that explicitly and necessarily taught such an idea. Yes, Isaiah 53 spoke about a suffering

servant who was smitten by God because of the sins of his people, and suffering figures were present in Psalm 22 and many other psalms. But first-century Jews never thought that these texts spoke of the royal Messiah. He was to usher in the kingdom era by conquering the enemies of God's people, not die at the hands of those enemies. For most Jews, the crucifixion of Jesus seemed to be the ultimate proof of his falsehood. A dying Messiah was in glaring conflict with what they understood the Scriptures to foretell.

But beginning with the first Pentecost after Jesus' crucifixion, the apostles of Christ began to unveil the mystery of God's plan. God intended for the Messiah to be crucified because his death and subsequent resurrection would provide atonement for the sin of God's people (Acts 2:21-24). Passages of Scripture that spoke of a suffering figure were really foreshadowings of the Messiah's future travail. Since he was a prophet as well as a king, the Messiah would suffer the same fate that so many prophets before him experienced: rejection by his nation, and martyrdom. Jesus' death on the cross was the climax of God's plan—a final sacrifice to provide atonement for man's sin.

Jesus' crucifixion also pointed to something else about God's purposes that the Jews never anticipated. If redemption was accomplished by means of the Messiah's death—a sacrificial atonement that was not part of the Mosaic system—then the Law of Moses could not be the grounds of Jewish redemption. This meant that a Jew was saved not by keeping the Law of Moses, but by being a loyal disciple of Jesus. Salvation was through faith in Christ, not works of the Law. And that fact logically demanded a corollary: since the Law of Moses was not the means of salvation, there was no reason why salvation couldn't be offered to people who were not under the Law: the Gentiles.

This was a startling conclusion. No Jew ever imagined that Gentiles could be fellow heirs of God's kingdom along with them. Long before, God had told Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 22:18), but God kept the prophecy's full import a mystery. He revealed the mystery for the first time through the apostles and prophets of Jesus (Eph 3:4-5). The acceptance of Gentiles nullified Jewish supremacy in the kingdom and meant that God welcomed all nationalities equally (Acts 10:34). As far as most Jews were concerned, if this was the plan of God that Christians were advocating, then Christianity needed to be opposed and opposed vigorously.

Why did Jews reject their own Messiah? Because they were unwilling to reconsider their assumptions about Scripture and accept the fact that God's plan differed from their own desires. As a result, they opposed Jesus, and the true meaning of their own Scriptures eluded them. "For until this very day," Paul wrote, "at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ" (2 Cor. 3:14-16). Jesus is the focal point of Old Testament prophecy. But that truth remains obscure to a person unless he is willing to believe in Jesus. The miracles performed by Jesus and his first-century disciples provide the proof for all that Jesus claimed about himself and about Scripture. If one is willing to accept Jesus as the Messiah, then one will accept his explanation of the Scriptures, and the full eternal plan of God will become clear. May we all allow Christ to open our eyes.