

## A HEBRAIC PERSPECTIVE ON JESUS' MESSIANIC CLAIMS

by Dr Robert Lindsey

One of the things a person can acquire in Israel, if he stays long enough and studies hard enough, is a deeper understanding of many words in Scripture, including words used in the Gospels.

Based upon my seminary training I had supposed that if one knew the New Testament in Greek, one could understand the New Testament. Although I knew that Jesus was Jewish and that he taught in the synagogue, I had never considered the importance of understanding the Hebraic background to Jesus' life. It was not until many years later, when I began work on a new translation of the Gospels into Hebrew, that I saw that the words preserved in many parts of Matthew, Mark and Luke can be turned back from Greek word by word into good Hebrew.

I started my translation work on the Gospel of Mark, and somewhat to my surprise I often had the feeling that the Greek text was more like Hebrew than Greek. This may sound strange, but it is an interesting fact that if one tries to put the Greek texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke into Hebrew, it seems as if one is putting them back into their original language.

Looking at the second chapter of Luke, for example, it is apparent that the wording in the Greek text is exactly like Hebrew. One can see, as one translates word for word into English, that the words are not in the proper order in English; neither are they in the proper order in Greek. But they are in good order in Hebrew.

Let me give an example in English of the sort of thing one finds. In certain parts of Oklahoma where once there were many German immigrants, people often would say something like this: "Go throw the cows over the fence some hay." The words are English, but the sentence structure is German, and if one were translating into German from such a text, it would feel very much as if one were putting the text back into its original language.

So it is with much of the synoptic Gospels. When one learns how to find the Hebrew equivalents for the Greek words, the ancient language of Hebrew seems to spring directly from the Greek texts. Clearly, therefore, a knowledge of Hebrew - particularly the Hebrew of Jesus' day - is helpful in understanding what the Gospels have to say. In fact I believe that there are many things Jesus said which we will misconstrue or miss altogether if we are not familiar with the Hebraic background to his life and teachings.

One misunderstanding that has arisen due to this lack of familiarity concerns Jesus' identity as Messiah. A pastor once asked me, "When do you think Jesus really began to understand that he was the Messiah?" What troubled this pastor was that he could not find in the Gospels that Jesus actually claimed to be the Messiah, and he seemed to feel it was not until certain dramatic events quite late in Jesus' life that our Lord's Messiahship became apparent, even to himself. This is a question that has troubled many Christians, yet if we knew more about the Hebraic way in which Jesus spoke, we would see that at least from the age of twelve, Jesus knew himself to be the Messiah and was not at all shy about proclaiming the fact.

There seems to be a certain guardedness about the way the Holy Spirit spoke of the Messiah in prophecy, for the coming messianic King of Hebrew Scripture was rarely actually called "the Messiah". There are dozens of synonyms used for the Messiah such as "The Branch", "My Servant", "My Elect", but Scripture hardly ever speaks of a coming one called "The Messiah". If Jesus was the Son of God, one should expect him to talk like God's Spirit, and so he does. When Jesus came to describe himself and give himself a title, he did not use the word "Messiah", but titles such as "Son of Man".

This term, rather than alluding to Jesus' humanity, is the most supernatural designation for the Messiah found in Scripture. Jesus took it from Daniel 7:13 which speaks of one "like a son of man" coming on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus openly claimed to be God's Son, but he did so in a rabbinic fashion by suggesting and juxtaposing Scripture passages which refer to the special father-son relationship between God and his anointed one. One finds a good example of this in Luke 2:41-52, which is the first recorded instance of Jesus making a messianic claim. I will translate the passage word by word from the Greek text:

"And went his parents every year to Jerusalem and the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years (old) they went up according to the custom of the feast, and when the days were fulfilled, in their returning, remained Jesus the boy in Jerusalem. And did not know his parents, and thinking he was among the band (of pilgrims), they went a day's journey and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances. And (when) they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for him. And so it was that after three days they found him in the Temple sitting in the midst of the teachers (i.e. the rabbis), both hearing them and questioning them."

(The expression "hearing them and questioning them" is a typically rabbinical way of referring to the manner in which a disciple learned Torah. When someone studied with a rabbi in those days, he essentially did two things; he listened and he asked questions.)

"And were astonished all those who listened to him at his intelligence and his answers. And (when) they saw him, they were astounded, and said to him his mother, 'Son, why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I in great distress have been searching for you.'

And he said to them, 'Why did you search for me? Didn't you know that in my Father's house I must be?' And they did not understand the word which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them, and his mother kept all these words in her heart."

What was strange to Mary and Joseph was that Jesus was telling them he was not under their authority but under God's, and that God was his father in a uniquely special way. Apparently this was something his earthly parents could not quite comprehend, yet whatever Jesus' answer meant to them, it tells us what our Lord thought of himself when he was twelve years old. He already knew who he was: the Messiah, the Son of God, and he claimed the right to call God Avi, that is "my Father."

Synagogue prayers contain the expression "our Father (Avinu) who is in heaven" many times, and Jesus taught his disciples to pray a prayer which also begins "Our Father who is in heaven." The expression "my Father (Avi,)" however, almost certainly must have seemed improper to the Jews of that period.

Only once in the Hebrew Scripture is God referred to as "my Father," and that is in Psalm 89, which speaks prophetically of the coming Messiah. Verse 26 reads, "He will call to me, `Avi ata - You are my Father.'" The Messiah has the right to call God `my Father.'

I am quite sure that the rabbis of Jesus' day taught the people to say `our Father who is in heaven' because they knew that the right to say `my Father' was reserved for the Messiah alone.

II Samuel 7:14 also contains a prophecy about the Messiah: "I will be to him a father, and he will be to me a son." This verse marks the beginning of the Jewish understanding of a coming Messiah who is the Son of God.

This idea is expanded in the messianic Psalm 2. The first two verses read, "Why have the Gentiles raged and the foreigners imagined a vain thing? They have risen up against God and against his anointed (literally, `his Messiah') ....". In verse 7 it says, "You are my son, this day I have brought you forth." The word in this passage usually translated "begotten" (i.e., fathered) actually means `brought forth' or `produced,' and suggests here the image of a midwife or doctor holding up and presenting a newborn son. It was this Psalm that was quoted at Jesus' baptism when God announced his Son to the world: "This day I have brought forth my Son."

It was known from Psalm 89:26, II Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7, that the Messiah would be the Son of God, but these verses do not contain the expression "Son of God." What is used is "He will call to me, `You are my Father,'" "I will be a father to him, he will be a son to me," and, "You are my Son, this day I have brought you forth." This is the Hebraic way of expressing messiahship - it is the way the Holy Spirit spoke and the way Jesus spoke.

There are many other passages in the Gospels which record Jesus' messianic claims, and I hope to deal with a number of them in later articles. Although Jesus did not directly say "I am the Messiah" or "I am the Son of God," yet in a first-century rabbinic way he made it very clear that that was precisely who he was. Anyone who says that Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, or did not know that he was the Messiah, simply does not understand Jesus' words.

What one must always keep in mind when reading the Gospels is that they preserve words and ideas that originally were spoken in Hebrew against a backdrop of rabbinic thought which today is utterly foreign to most Christians. Hidden in the text of the Scriptures are words such as those mentioned above which, when spoken in Hebrew in the first century, clearly expressed things that now seem obscure to us.

If we want to know more about who Jesus was and what he said, we have to learn more about the language he spoke and the milieu in which he lived.

Copyright Dr Robert Lindsey