

Lesson 3: As Spoken by the Prophets (Acts 3:11-26)\*

## Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

The second speech of Peter follows a healing he performed in route to the Jerusalem Temple for evening prayers. A man crippled from birth asked Peter and John for alms, Peter responded by healing him, which resulted in a celebration by the man healed. Following this event Peter made his second public declaration of the messiahship of Jesus.

*While he (the one healed-mwl) was holding on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them on the colonnade (stoa) called Solomon's; they were filled with wonder (ekthamboi). 12 And seeing this, Peter responded to the people: Men, Israelites, why are you filled with wonder (thaumazein) at this, or why are you looking at us as though by our own power or godliness we made him walk?*

*The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, he glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, having that other one released. 14 But the Holy and Righteous One (hagion kai dikaios) you denied and requested a man, a murderer, to be given to you. 15 But the Prince of Life (archegon tes zoes) you put to death, who God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses; 16 and through faith in his name (Jesus), this one whom you behold and know is strengthened through his name (Jesus), and the faith concerning him (Jesus) gave him (the lame man) this healing in the presence of all of you, (3:11-16, my translation - MWLIII)*

In all this it is important for us to see and hear what was seen and heard by those who were a part of it. This requires that we

understand Peter's words as Peter intended them and as received by his listeners. This involves an understanding of the descriptive designations used by Peter in his presentation concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

## The Christological Titles Used

Peter first identifies Jesus as **the servant of God** (*ebed Yahweh*) of Isaiah 52-53 "**God's servant**," (verse 13), and then speaks of him as "**the Holy and Righteous One**," (verse 14). He then uses the poetic expression, "**the Prince of Life**," (verse 15). Then in verse 18, he speaks of him as the one who was the fulfillment of all things spoken through the mouths of the prophets concerning the suffering of the Messiah, which he mentions again in verse 22. He then identifies him with "**the Prophet**" spoken of by Moses (verse 22), and then concludes with the designation with which he began, **the servant of God** of the servant songs of Isaiah, chapters 42-53.

These messianic titles were all drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, which were, very possibly, the body of instruction given to the eleven disciples by Jesus during the forty days prior to his ascension (cf. Luke 24:25-27, 32, and 44-49).

In an attempt to put ourselves on stage with the original audience receiving Peter's speech, we need to ask what the original listeners would have understood by the messianic terminology Peter used to identify Jesus. What would they have understood by the expression "his servant Jesus?" Why did Peter identify Jesus with the descriptive designations used in the Hebrew Scriptures to speak of God, "the Holy One" and "the Righteous One," and the expression "the Prince of Life?" What did Peter mean by calling Jesus by these titles? Of course the concept of "the Prophet" was not given to God, but it was a title having great significance to the Jews in that it was used to speak of "the prophet like unto Moses" of Deut 18:18, which was well known as a designation for the one who was to come in the place of Moses.

This text is filled with christological ore and none of these descriptive designations would have been lost on this audience. They all had their roots in the Hebrew Scriptures (and the LXX), within the narrative stories, psalms, and prophecies which are rich in special titles given to those who were considered chosen in some sense; especially, if that figure was somehow empowered to provide deliverance to the Jewish people. We now move to a study of each of these the titles found in this text.

### *His Servant, Jesus*

The Greek expression found here has its origins in the LXX translation of the Hebrew *ebed Yahweh*. The Hebrew *ebed* (servant) is from the verb *abad* meaning "to serve as the subject of another." It is translated 744 times out of 800 occurrences as "servant," in the sense of one who is subject to someone of superiority. It is a common expression used for corporate Israel. In Isaiah 41:8 we read,

*But you, O Israel, my servant [Hebrew - ebed] Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, 9 I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant [ebed] I have chosen you and have not rejected you' (Isaiah 41:8-9).*

But, it is also used in a very unique way for a designated representative of Israel who becomes Israel's deliverer or savior, found in a series of "servant songs" throughout chapters 42-53 of Isaiah.

*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).*

Also in Isaiah 49:5-6 we read,

*And now the LORD says – he who formed me in the womb **to be his servant** to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my*

strength- 6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you **to be my servant** to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept [his deliverance is not for Israel only-mwl], I will also make you a light for the gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth," (Isaiah 49:5-6).

But the most important and most used by the early church is Isaiah 52:13-14; and 53:3-5, and 11,

*Behold, **my servant** will act wisely he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. 14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness (Isaiah 52:13-14).*

*After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge **my righteous servant** will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:11).*

This is, most likely, the meaning Peter intended by these references to Jesus as the servant of God here in Acts 3:13,

*The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant [pais – young person, a son or endeared servant] Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.*

The Greek term *pais* is not the primary Greek word for servant; it is a generic term used in Classical Greek for a descendent, a child, a son or daughter (Liddell & Scott, *Lexicon*). In fact, the word for education, *paideia*, is a derivative of *pais*. In the *Koine'* Greek of the NT period, it had taken on the broader meaning of a child who was under the authority of another and included student under a tutor, or a servant as well as a child; (Moulton & Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek NT*). The term used to translate the Hebrew *ebed* in the Septuagint is *pais*. In the NT interpretation of this servant of God in Isaiah, the fact that *pais* is used seems to suggest that this "servant" was also a "son." Here in Acts 3:26, Peter's words, "When God raised up his servant (*paida*) he sent him first to you to bless you by turning

each of you from your wickedness," leaves open then possibility that Peter saw "the servant of God" in Isaiah as "the son of God."

### *The Holy and Righteous One*

Then there is Peter's use of the titles, "the Holy One" and "the Righteous One," both references to God in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Peter here applies to Jesus. In Psalms 71:22, the psalmist says of God, "O my God; I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel."

However, these designations are used in Psalms 16:10 to speak of David the king, the Anointed one of God, "you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." In Isaiah 53:11, the prophet says of this servant of Yahweh, "**my righteous servant** [*pais*] will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." In Zech 9:9, the one coming to bring salvation to Israel is called "the one who is righteous." All of these references are from the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scriptures and were considered to be in some way messianic.

When Saul of Tarsus was told by Ananias that the risen Jesus had appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Ananias says, "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see **the Righteous One** and to hear words from his mouth." The "Righteous One" was the risen Jesus of Nazareth, who was now enthroned as one with God.

### *The Prince of Life*

Then, there is the very curious expression, "*ton archegon tes zoes*" - the author of life," which is not easy to translate or identify as a christological title. The problem lies in determining the meaning of the Greek word *archegos*, which has been translated in various in the English versions.

*Archegos* is used to identify the head of a family, or the chieftain of a tribe or clan; it is sometimes translated "the princes of Israel,"

referring to the twelve sons of Jacob and their heirs who serve as the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The reason for this is that the word "prince" means a principal person. This is the root idea of our word "prince" from the Latin, *principis*, - the first, chief, prince," lit. that which is first or the principal one.

In Exodus 6:14 (LXX), we read, "These were the heads (*archegoi*) of their families." This same usage can be seen in Numbers 10:4; 13:3; Deut 33:21; and 1 Chronicles 5:24; 8:28, and Nehemiah 7:70. All references are to the heads of families or the principal person of a clan or tribe.

The translation "author" (the cause of) is a possible rendering for *archegos*. In Acts 3:15, Peter is speaking of Jesus as the principal or essential cause of life; if "author" is understood here the cause of life, as a writer is the cause of a composition, then the term is to be understood as the principal figure who gives life (new creation existence), because he is the one "God raised from the dead" and through whom he effected the creation of a new existence. Jesus is given this title by Peter here in Acts 3:13 and in 5:31, and also by the writer of Hebrews in 2:10 and 12:2.

### *The One Foretold by the Prophets*

*Now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as also your leaders. 18 But God fulfilled the things he foretold (prokataggello - to foretell or show beforehand) through the mouth of all the prophets, that his Messiah was to suffer, (3:17-18 my translation - MWLIII).*

God fulfilled the things he foretold (*prokatengello* - to foretell or show beforehand) through the mouth of all the prophets is clearly a reference to the array of messianic prophecies found in explicit and implicit language (through types and metaphors) in the Hebrew Scriptures. As mentioned earlier, the messianic titles and imagery found in the speeches of Acts were all drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures which was, very likely, the content of the instruction given to the eleven disciples by Jesus during the forty days prior to his ascension (cf. Luke 24:25-27, 32, and 44-49).

## *The Prophet Spoken of by Moses*

*Moses indeed said, "a prophet to you the Lord your God will raise up from your brethren, like me, to him you will listen according to everything whatsoever he may say to you, (3:22, my translation - MWLIII).*

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was perceived by many to be a prophet sent from God. When Jesus began to work wonders in the presence of the people, Mark tells us that some said, "He is Elijah," and still others claimed, "He is **a prophet**, like one of the prophets of long ago," (Mark 6:15). So also Luke tells us, "They were all filled with awe and praised God. '**A great prophet** has appeared among us,' they said, 'God has come to help his people'," (Luke 7:16). When Jesus entered into Jerusalem the last week of his life the visitors who wondered who he was, were told, "This is Jesus, **the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee**," (Matt 21:11), and when the Sanhedrin wanted to arrest him, Matthew tells us, "They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was **a prophet**," (Matthew 21:46). Following the crucifixion of Jesus, two of his disciples identified him to the stranger with whom they traveled as, "**Jesus of Nazareth a prophet**, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people," (Luke 24:20).

But, according to Peter, Jesus of Nazareth was more than one of the prophets; he was "the prophet" of whom Moses spoke before his death,

*The LORD your God will raise up for you **a prophet like me from among your own brothers**. You must listen to him. 16 For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." 17 The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. 18 I will raise up for **them a prophet like you from among their brothers**; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 If*

*anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account (Deut 18:15-19).*

John tells us in his Gospel that some had already expressed belief that Jesus was "the prophet." In John 6:14, following the feeding of five thousand Jewish pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, John writes, "After the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they began to say, Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world." Later in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, following Jesus' teaching in the Temple, Peter tells us, "On hearing his words, some of the people said, Surely this man is the prophet," (John 7:40).

Here in this text of Acts 3:22, Peter declares Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promise of Moses, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people. You must listen to him." Again in Act 7, Stephen express this concept as part of faith of the primitive community, "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, God will send you a prophet like me from your own people," (Acts 7:37).

## Conclusion

Peter's sermon is a case or defense from the Greek word, *apologia* meaning a defense presented in the form of argumentation. In this speech Peter was responding to the interest aroused by the miracle he had performed. He began his "*apologia*" with a discussion of the miracle he had performed which everyone was able to confirm; this man who had been crippled from birth had been completely healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

He then moved to a discussion of "the cause" of this wonder. It was not he himself or John that was the causative force producing this miracle; rather, it was God who had acted in response to the faith of these apostles, and that faith centered in the person Jesus of Nazareth and his promise to the twelve that he would send power from on high to them.

Through him God had fulfilled all things he foretold through the mouth of all the prophets, he was the one spoken of beforehand who would be sent by God as Israel's Messiah - the one of whom God had spoken through the ages by the mouth of the holy prophets. Do we still believe this?

The two travelers from Emmaus, after listening to Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning the Messiah, they said to one another, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened to us the Scriptures," (Luke 24:32 and verse 27)? This was also the reaction of three thousand on the day of Pentecost, and also here in the text of Acts 3. But, sad to say, this is not usually the way such a marvelous apologetic piece concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is received today. What's different now? Perhaps, people don't think they need to know who he really was. How much does one need to know in order to know enough about the identity of Jesus in order to become a believer and thus receive the salvation he offers to mankind?

What we have before us is an excellent example of how Jesus was presented by his apostles. Peter presents a case for the identity of Jesus of Nazareth by the use of an array of christological titles; all of which became the essential content of the preaching and teaching of the earliest Christians. From the titles presented in this sermon we see him as a man who submitted himself to God in full service to the will of God, even if that service included suffering and death. But more, he is also identified with by the use of titles used to speak of the God of Israel: he is the one who is "holy" as God is holy and "righteous" as God is righteous. Is there a subtle presence of a hidden identity of this Jesus of Nazareth in Peter's words?

The description of Jesus as "the prince of life" is curious and fascinating. What did Peter mean by this and what did his listeners understand him to mean? Further, he is identified with "the prophet" God would raise up to wear the mantle of Moses. Moses is called by many names, he was "the deliverer" sent by God to lead Israel out of bondage to Egypt, as Jesus was the deliverer sent by God to deliver Israel and the nations from their bondage to the powers of

darkness. Moses was “God’s spokesman,” the one through whom God spoke to the people. He was to Israel “the teacher” in all matters pertaining to God, as Jesus was God’s spokesman and a teacher come from God.

But Moses called himself “a prophet” and foretold the rising of another prophet like himself who would speak to the people on behalf of God, unto this prophet Israel was to listen or be cut off from the people. This was what so many of the people of Israel did, but not all. We must remember that those who made up the church in its beginning and for the first generation of its existence were almost totally Jews, as Jesus and the apostles were Jews.

The messianic community was first a community of messianic Jews who were the first of Jesus’ followers. It was the Jews who had been waiting for the Messiah, not the nations (or gentiles). This was one of the most important factors in the spread of Christianity in its beginnings, the Jews provided the audience for the story of Jesus the Messiah. As Paul and his fellow laborers entered into synagogue after synagogue they found there a people who knew of the longed for Messiah. There in the synagogues of the Diaspora were the Hebrew Scriptures or more specifically the Greek translation called the Septuagint. As they told the story of the Messiah, they opened the Scriptures and offered those of the synagogue audience their proof that Jesus was the one God had sent in fulfillment of his promise.

The story told by these divinely appointed storytellers concerned the one they believed to be the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the salvation that now existed for Israel and the human race because of him. The point we must see is that it was always about him, Jesus the Messiah, not about other matters or issues of interest. This is why their evangelistic endeavors worked and why ours does not. Here is why this sermon by Peter is such an excellent example of how one leads a person to faith in Christ. This speech presents the listener with the wonder of who was here in the figure of a Galilean peasant rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth, and fills the minds of the listeners with an array of mind staggering claims concerning who he

was and the significance of who he was for Israel and the whole of the human race.

MWLIII