

Are You Who They Say You Are?

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Jesus of Nazareth clearly made claims to being the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. This fact is evidenced in abundance throughout the four Gospels. In Jerusalem he claimed, in the very presence of Judaism's highest ranking scholars, to be the very one spoken of in Scripture:

*You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and **it is they that bear witness to me**; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:39-40).*

One of his first acts after receiving his messianic anointing at his baptism was to go to the synagogue at Nazareth and identify himself as the promised Messiah:

*And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. **He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."** And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. **And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,"** (Luke 4:16-21).*

There are two distinctive themes present in these passages. Jesus clearly claims to be the one spoken of in these Scriptures as the Messiah, and the Scriptures are clearly portrayed as the source of the

evidence establishing his messianic claims. In this lesson we will develop these themes.

The Messianic Claims of Jesus

One of the most important expressions of this whole discussion is the expression "messianic claims." Essential to the whole case for Jesus' messianic identity are these "messianic claims" of Jesus. Did he actually claim to be the Messiah? The overwhelming testimony of the New Testament is that he did make such claims. Those who became his earliest followers were those who believed these claims. Here is where Christian faith centers: in the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth and the confessions of belief of these claims by those who became his disciples. From these messianic claims of Jesus it appears evident that he believed himself to be the Messiah foreshadowed in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Explicit Claims that He Was the Messiah

In John 5:34ff Jesus presents a very well developed defense for his messiahship. His case is based on five witnesses who testify to his messianic identity:

*. . . there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true. You sent to **John** [first witness], and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony which I receive is from man; but I say this that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for **the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish** [second witness], these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me. And **the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to me** [third witness]. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen; and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search **the Scriptures** [fourth witness], because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you*

*may have life. I do not receive glory from men. But I know that you have not the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is **Moses** [fifth witness] who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:32-47)*

In other texts he clearly affirms that he is the expected Messiah:

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven **Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ** (Matt 16:15-17, 20).*

*The woman said to him, "**I know that Messiah is coming** (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "**I who speak to you am he,**" (John 4:25-26)*

Throughout the Gospels Jesus consistently affirms that God is his Father and that he is the Son of God.

*All things have been delivered to me by **my Father**; and no one knows **the Son** except **the Father**, and no one knows **the Father** except **the Son** and any one to whom **the Son** chooses to reveal him (Matt 11:27; cf. Luke 10:21-22).*

*But Jesus answered them, "**My Father** is working still, and I am working." This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but also **called God his Father, making himself equal with God.** Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son** can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees **the Father** doing; for whatever he does, that **the Son** does likewise. For **the Father** loves **the Son**, and shows him all*

that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel (John 5:17-20).

*The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because **you, being a man, make yourself God.**" Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of **him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world**, 'You are blaspheming,' because **I said, 'I am the Son of God'**?" (John 10:33-36)*

*But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that **the Son of God** may be glorified by means of it," (John 11:4).*

*When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "**Father**, the hour has come; glorify **thy Son** that **the Son** may glorify thee (John 17:1).*

Implicit Claims of His Messiahship

Throughout the New Testament Gospels Jesus acknowledges others' designation of him as the Messiah and accepted specific messianic designations or titles (Messiah/Christ, savior, the king, son of David, the son of God, the Holy One of God, etc.).

*And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, **a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"** (Matt 3:16-17).*

*One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, "**We have found the Messiah**" (which means Christ), (John 1:40-41).*

Philip found Nathan'a-el, and said to him, "We have found him of

*whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." . . . Nathan'a-el answered him, "**Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!**" (John 1:45, 49)*

*Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; **and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God,**" (John 6:68-69).*

*Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, "**When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?**" (John 7:31)*

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; **I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world,**" (John 11:25-27).*

*And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, **O Son of God?** Have you come here to torment us before the time?" (Matt 8:28-29; cf. Luke 8:28)*

*And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon; and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ah! What have you to do with us, **Jesus of Nazareth?** Have you come to destroy us? **I know who you are, the Holy One of God,**" (Luke 4:33-34).*

*He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him,**" (Matt 17:1-6).*

Another strong line of argumentation is the fact that Jesus assumed the role or work of the Messiah. In Matt 11:2, we have an account of John the Baptist sending a message to Jesus inquiring whether he was truly the Messiah. Jesus' answer to the Baptist was to

perform the works of the Messiah (i.e., fulfill Isa 29:18-19; 35:5-6; and 61:1) and send the messengers of John back with a report of what Jesus was doing, which would affirm his messianic identity.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (Matt 11:2-5).

The Biblical Case for His Messianic Claims

All Things Written in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings

That Jesus must have developed something of an *apologetic case* for his messianic identity from these ancient texts is evidenced throughout the four Gospels. Nowhere can this better be seen than in Luke 24:25-27, in his discourse to the two men on the way to Emmaus, and further in his discourse with the gathered disciples, recorded in 24:44-45. In both instances he appears to have systematically developed the case for his identity from the threefold division of the OT Scriptures: *the law of Moses* (the first five books of the OT), *the prophets* (the whole collection the writings of the prophets), and *the writings* (the devotional literature beginning with the Psalms).

*And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe **all that the prophets have spoken!** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with **Moses and all the prophets**, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. . . . And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while **he opened to us the scriptures?**" (Luke 24:25-27, 31-32)*

*Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that **everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.**" Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures . . . (Luke 24:44-45).*

He Opened to Them the Scriptures

In both accounts we are told that "he opened the Scriptures" to his disciples. What is the meaning of this expression? The Greek term here is *dianoigo* which here means to open or reveal that hidden by means explanation or interpretation. The tense (continuous action) of the Greek verbs of verse 32 indicates that this "opening of the Scriptures" was a somewhat extended or involved process. The verse reads from the Greek text literally:

*They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked (i.e., was talking - continuously) to us on the road, **while he opened** (i.e., was opening - continuously) **to us the scriptures?**" (Luke 24:32)*

In verse 27 we are told that what he was doing was interpreting (*die-hermeneuo*) the Scriptures. *Hermeneuo* is the term from which we get the word *hermeneutics* (i.e., the technical term for the science of interpretation). What were these Scriptures was he opening to them and what interpretation was he giving to them? We are told that the Scriptures he was opening to them were the messianic texts found throughout the Old Testament and the interpretation he was giving to them was that they were speaking of him. No wonder the hearts of these disciples burned within them; to them were revealed the grandest themes of the Hebrew Scriptures by the one who was, himself, the very fulfillment of those Scriptures.

*Think not that I have come to abolish **the law and the prophets**; I have come not to abolish them but **to fulfil them** (Matt 5:17).*

*If you believed **Moses**, you would believe me, for **he wrote of me**. But **if you do not believe his writings**, how will you believe my*

words?" (John 5:39-40, 46-47)

For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was reckoned with transgressors'; for what is written about me has its fulfillment," (Luke 22:37).

*Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But **how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled**, that it must be so?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. **But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.**" Then all the disciples forsook him and fled (Matt 26:53-56).*

Conclusion

From this Biblical data it appears that Jesus clearly believed himself to be the promised Messiah foretold in the old Hebrew Scriptures. He gave interpretations to these messianic texts that were oftentimes traditionally interpreted, but it is clear that he possessed a more insightful knowledge of who the Messiah was than was found in the traditional interpretations of the Jewish scribes and scholars of his day.

This raises the issue of his messianic consciousness (i.e., what did he know concerning who he was and how did he know it?) This issue will be pursued in a later lesson. Here what is important to see is that the New Testament clearly portrays Jesus of Nazareth as one who believed fully in his messianic identity and made no uncertain claims to this fact. Those who believed the messianic claims of Jesus became his earliest disciples and out of these developed the religion we know today as Christianity.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What is significant about the fact that Jesus made messianic claims with reference to himself? Why is this important?
2. What is the significance of Jesus' claims that the Scriptures actually spoke of "him" in the messianic texts of the OT?
3. What do we learn from the reaction of the synagogue audience of Nazareth when Jesus read from a messianic text (Isa 61:1-2) then stated, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."?
4. What do you make of the claims of Jesus that God was "his Father" and he was "the Son"? In what sense is this to be understood?
5. What is the significance of the fact that Jesus allowed people to confess belief in him and/or call him by certain messianic titles (e.g., Messiah/Christ, Son of God, the Holy One of God, etc.). What conclusions can be drawn by the way Jesus responded to all of this?
6. What can be made of the fact that Jesus assumed the role and/or work of the Messiah? Does this prove that he believed himself to be the Messiah? How did he know what the work of the Messiah was to be?
7. What is the significance of the fact that Jesus developed the biblical case for his messiahship from whole of the biblical canon of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT). He refers repeatedly to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalm/Writings. Why?
8. What do you make of the expressions of Luke 24:32 and 45 that he "opened the Scriptures to them," and "he opened their minds that they might understand the Scriptures"? How do you understand these statements and what is significant about them?
9. How do you understand the expression "that all things might be fulfilled"?

10. In view of the data presented here who do you think Jesus believed himself to be? What is significant about the fact that Jesus *believed* that he was the Messiah spoken of in the OT Scriptures. In effect, he *believed* in himself! What is important about this for us as *believers*?