

# Is Jesus Really the Expected Messiah?

Thomas Robinson, *Following or Rejecting Jesus, I*, September 22, 2013

## *Matthew 11:1-6 [Cf Luke 7:18-23]*

- <sup>1</sup> When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.
- <sup>2</sup> Now when John [the Baptist] heard in prison about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”
- <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

## *Isaiah 35:3-7*

<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup> Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with judgment, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

## *Isaiah 61:1-2*

<sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

## *Isaiah 29:18-19*

<sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. <sup>19</sup> The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

## *Psalms 118:26*

<sup>26</sup> Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

## *Luke 4:14-21*

<sup>14</sup> And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup> And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. <sup>16</sup> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, <sup>18</sup> “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,* <sup>19</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” [Isa 61:1-2]

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

## Teaching, Signs, Discipleship

Matthew is beginning a new section of his narrative. In ch 5-10 he unfolds Jesus' teaching (Sermon on the Mount, ch 5-7), Jesus' remarkable deeds as signs pointing to discipleship (ch 8-9), and Jesus' specific teaching to his disciples (ch 10). Now in ch 11, Matthew turns to the topic of doubts and questions about Jesus, opposition to him, controversies swirling around Jesus.

There has been hardly a single thing that Jesus said or did that was not controversial, but Jesus lived in a world of Judaism filled with theological debate and political danger. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots struggled intellectually and politically under Rome's domination. And there were quite a few influential "voices in the wilderness" like John the Baptist.

Jesus, as we see him through the Gospels, was deeply a part of that world of Israel seeking to discover where their history and scriptures should lead. But he also had a very distinct profile: "You have heard...but I say," tax-collectors & sinners, 12 apostles, critique of purity codes, etc.

## John the Baptist and Questions About Jesus

Jesus was baptized by John, a powerful prophetic preacher like Elijah, calling all Israel to repent. John was in the wilderness, ascetic. He proclaimed God's coming judgment and "one who ... is coming after me" who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11).

John courageously challenged Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and Perea under Rome, for his immorality, and John was so influential that Herod had him imprisoned in a fortress (Mt 14).

John hears of what are called "deeds of the Messiah" (Christ) done by Jesus. But Jesus is so different from himself. Jesus hasn't overturned Herod, set John free. John has questions, doubts. This is not a theoretical seminar. Life and death are at stake. Is Jesus the one?

The Gospel includes such questions and doubts. It is always clear that there were other powerful points of view. Even Jesus' disciples often misunderstand. John, an ally, doubts. Jesus values those doubts. He doesn't attack John or debate him. He points and waits.

## The Unfolding Discovery of Jesus

The Gospels are all very aware that Jesus challenged practically every standard paradigm of the messiah in one way or another. Yet Jesus was deeply a part of the whole history and scripture of Israel, living out its meaning, even as he surprised and transformed people's prior expectations. He was aware that his story was unfolding and that in many ways it would only be fully understandable from the end, after death and resurrection.

In the meantime his teachings, miracles, and prophetic actions were signs that highlighted and gave substance to the words of the prophets, esp. Isaiah. He was a living fulfillment and re-visioning of the prophets' words. He challenged the reading of Israel's story that led to war.

## Jesus as a Question in Our Time

The question "Are you the one?" still challenges people today and has for a long time. An example is the book *Zealot* by Reza Aslan on the NY Times best seller list. It's the most recent in very long line of "life of Jesus" books that show that the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus is all a great mistake: Jesus was an illiterate village woodworker who pushed for the violent overthrow of Rome and Temple and got killed. Paul turned him into a religion.

The doubts are understandable and old. Since the enlightenment raised the view that God (if he exists) does not/cannot interact with our world (no incarnation, no resurrection, no miracles, etc.), Jesus' whole story is a real problem. The stories must all be wrong. Various suggestions: Jesus the zealot, the gnostic, the moralist, etc. The questioning is good. But the reality of Jesus remains a challenge. With God, Jesus makes powerful, challenging sense.