

A Suffering Messiah?

By Dr. Bart Ehrman from his book [*Did Jesus Exist?*](#)

Ancient Views of the Messiah

The word “messiah” is Hebrew, and literally means “anointed one.” The Greek translation of the term is “christos,” so that “Jesus Christ” literally means “Jesus the Messiah.” The origin of the term goes back into the ancient history of Israel, to the time when the nation was ruled by kings, who were said to have been specially favored, “anointed,” by God. In fact, the king was literally anointed during his inauguration ceremonies, when oil was poured on his head as a way of showing that he was specially favored by God, as seen in such passages as 1 Samuel 10:1 and 2 Samuel 23:1.

Other persons thought to be God’s special representatives on earth were sometimes anointed as well, such as high priests. Most commonly, however, the term was applied to the king of Israel. Within the ancient Israelite traditions there developed the notion that God would always favor the nation by constantly ruling them through his chosen king. A prophecy is given to Israel’s greatest king, David, in 2 Samuel 7:11-14, that he would always have a descendant on the throne, that for perpetuity there would be an anointed one ruling the nation. That promise, however, did not come to fruition. In the year 586 BCE, the Babylonian armies under King Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land of Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, burned the Jewish Temple, and removed the king from the throne. For the next several centuries the Jewish people were ruled by foreign powers: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, then the Syrians.

Some Jewish thinkers, however, recalled the original promise to David that an anointed one, a messiah, would always be on the throne, and came to think that the promise would come to fulfillment in days to come. In some future time, possibly soon, God would

remember his promise and bring a future king like David to rule his people. This future ruler was naturally enough referred to simply as the “messiah.” He would be a human, like David, Solomon, and the other kings. But he would be raised up by God to overthrow the enemies of the Jews and establish Israel once again as a sovereign people in the land God had promised them.

Around the time of Jesus there were some Jews who were expecting some such messiah. At that period, the Jews in Palestine were ruled by the Romans. But it was sometimes thought that God would intervene and raise up a great warrior who would destroy these pagan enemies and reinstate the kingdom to Israel. One of the clearest expressions of this kind of messianic expectation is in a Jewish writing known as the Psalms of Solomon, written probably during the first century BCE. Its powerful expectation of what the coming messiah would be is worth quoting at length:

*See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,
the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel
in the time known to you, O God.
Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers,
to purge Jerusalem from gentiles
who trample her to destruction;
in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out
the sinners from the inheritance;
to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar;
to shatter all their substance with an iron rod;
to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth;
at his warning the nations will flee from his presence;
and he will condemn sinners by the thoughts of his heart....
And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke....
And he will purge Jerusalem
and make it holy as it was even from the beginning....*

*And he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God.
There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days,
for all shall be holy,
and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.*

Obviously we are not dealing here with the expectation of a messiah who would be tortured to death by his enemies the Romans. Quite the opposite: the messiah would destroy the enemy and set up his throne in Jerusalem where he would rule his people with power, grandeur, and justice.

Is that what Jesus was said to have done? If not, how was he the messiah?

Other Jews at the time of Jesus had yet other expectations of what the future ruler of Israel would be. But all these expectations had several things in common. In all of them the messiah would be a future ruler of the people of Israel, with a real kingdom in which he was the head, here on earth. He would be visibly and openly known to be God's special emissary, the anointed one. And he would be high and mighty, a figure of grandeur and power.

And who was Jesus? In all our early traditions he was a lower-class peasant from rural Galilee, thought by some to be the future ruler of Israel, but who instead of establishing the kingdom on earth, came to be crucified. Who would make up the idea of a crucified messiah? No Jew that we know of. And who were Jesus' followers in the years immediately after his death? Jews living in Palestine. It is no wonder that Paul found their views so offensive. They were claiming that Jesus was God's anointed one, the one who stood under God's special favor, the great and powerful ruler over all Israel. Jesus? The man who was executed for sedition against the state? He's the one blessed of God, his powerful solution to the plight of the chosen people? A crucified criminal? That's

worse than being crazy. It's an offense against God, blasphemous. Or so thought Paul. And so he persecuted this tiny sect of Jews and tried to destroy them.

It is hard today to understand just how offensive the idea of a crucified messiah would be to most first-century Jews. I try to illustrate it to my class by giving an analogy. What would you think if I tried to convince you that David Koresh was God's chosen one through whom he is going to rule the earth? David Koresh? The leader of the Branch Davidians at Waco, who stockpiled guns and abused children, who was killed by the FBI? He's God's chosen one? Yes, he is the Lord of all. What are you, completely nuts? (I get in trouble with my students every time I use this illustration. At the end of term, I invariably get a comment or two from students who can't believe that Ehrman thinks David Koresh is the Lord...).

If it is hard to imagine Jews inventing the idea of a crucified messiah, where did the idea come from? It came from historical realities. There really was a man Jesus. Some of the things he said and possibly did made some of his followers wonder if he could be the messiah. Eventually they became convinced. He must be the messiah. But then he fell afoul of the authorities, who had him arrested, put on trial, and condemned to execution. He was crucified. This, of course, radically disconfirmed everything his followers had thought and hoped, since he obviously was the furthest thing from the messiah. But then something else happened. Some of them began to say that God had intervened and brought him back from the dead. The story caught on, and some (all? There is no way to know) of his closest followers came to think that in fact he had been raised. This reconfirmed in a big way the hopes that had been so severely dashed by his crucifixion. For his re-inspired followers, Jesus is, he really is, the one favored by God. So he is the messiah. But he is a different kind of messiah than anyone expected him to be. God had a different plan, from the beginning. He planned to save Israel not by a powerful royal messiah, but by a crucified messiah.

A Suffering Messiah?

But weren't there any Jews who expected the messiah to suffer and die? The short answer is that so far as we can tell, there were not. My students often find this hard, even impossible, to believe. They have been raised in Christian churches where it is taught that the messiah, in fact, was supposed to suffer, and they are guided to such passages as Isaiah 53, in the Old Testament, as proof:

*He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
Upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed (Isaiah 53:3-5)*

Students will sometimes quote these verses to me and then say, with a smug smile, "See! The messiah was predicted to suffer!" My response is always the same. I ask them to show me where in the passage the word "messiah" occurs. My interlocutors are typically non-plussed, since in fact the word messiah is not to be found anywhere near this passage. They protest: but this sounds just like the crucifixion of Jesus! And so does Psalm 22. And Psalm 69. And, and, and — and I ask them, in each case, to look to see if the author is talking about the messiah. In all of these passages that talk about someone suffering, they are never talking about the **messiah**.

That is clear from the passages themselves, on the one hand. Just with respect to Isaiah 53, for example, the passage calls the sufferer not the “messiah” but the “the servant of the Lord,” and it speaks about his sufferings in the past tense, as something that had already happened at the time of writing (600 years before Jesus). As interpreters have long noted, in the nearby context, the author actually tells us who this servant of the Lord is. In Isaiah 49:3 the prophet declares, *“And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”*

It is Israel who is God’s servant, who has suffered for the sins of the people and so brought healing. Isaiah 53 was written during the Babylonian exile when the Babylonian armies had taken the leaders of Judah hundreds of miles away and forced them to live in Babylon. Isaiah is lamenting the exile, but indicating that the suffering will bring atonement for the sins of the people, and God will restore their fortunes. He is not talking about the future messiah.

And an even more important point is this: there were no Jews prior to Christianity who thought Isaiah 53 (or any of the other “suffering” passages) referred to the future messiah. We do not have a single Jewish text that interprets the passage messianically before Jesus. So why do Christians traditionally interpret it messianically? For the same reason they think that the messiah had to suffer. In their view, Jesus is the messiah. And Jesus suffered. Therefore, the messiah had to suffer. And this must not have come as a surprise to God; it must have all been planned. And so Christians turned to passages in the Hebrew Bible that talked about someone else’s suffering and said that it referred to the suffering of the future messiah, Jesus. Jews roundly and loudly disagreed with these interpretations. And so the arguments began.

Before he converted, Paul was on the side of the non-Christian Jews. The idea of a suffering messiah was so counter to Scripture and the righteous expectations of God’s

people that it was completely unthinkable, even blasphemous against God. Paul, though, had a change of mind, and later decided that this one who stood under God's curse – since anyone is cursed “who hangs on a tree” – was in fact the Christ. He was cursed by God not for anything he himself had done, but for what others had done. He bore the curse that others deserved, and so saved them from the wrath of God. Once Paul was convinced of this, he turned from being a persecutor of the Christians to being their most famous advocate, missionary, and theologian. It was a conversion for the ages.