



Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels

Available March 2013

\$18, xii + 207 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-2823-4

The Gospel of John: The Elusive Messiah?

According to Mark Stibbe, in the Gospel of John, “Jesus is an elusive figure. Even when Nicodemus finds him, Jesus proves opaque to his understanding. When the crowds seek Jesus, he only allows them to find him when he is ready for them. And as for the Jewish authorities, I am reminded of Baroness Orczy’s *Scarlet Pimpernel*: ‘they seek him here, they seek him there, those Jews seek him everywhere.’” One of the things that makes the Johannine Jesus so elusive is that he is unequivocally the Messiah according to the testimony of the author (John 1:41; 11:27; 20:31), yet the make-up of Jesus’ messianism is somewhat different in texture from that of the Synoptic Gospels, while also diverging in some degree from contemporary Jewish sources. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is *more* of a “heavenly revealer” sent by God the Father than an eschatological deliverer demonstrating himself to be the king of God’s coming kingdom. Over a hundred years ago, Charles Briggs suggested: “The Gospel of John gives us a Messianic ideal that is beyond the conceptions of the synoptic evangelists, and which may be summed up under the title, the *Messiah from heaven*.” That is all well and good, but it does not explain why John’s Christology is different from the other evangelists at this point, nor does it clarify the narrative function of Jesus’ messianic claims in the Gospel; and we are still left with the issue of how John’s christological portrait relates to Jewish hopes about messianic figures.

Wayne A. Meeks said: “The uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel in early Christian literature consists above all in the special patterns of language which it uses to describe Jesus Christ.” How the messiahship of Jesus functions within the symbol-laden language of John’s Gospel is particularly intriguing, as Jewish messianism is put in service to a particular Christian conception of Jesus as the Son of God. The messianic identity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel constitutes a crucial motif in the plot, but also an entrée into the christological claims being made by the author. The great Bishop J. B. Lightfoot commented: “Among friends, among foes, among neutrals alike, it [i.e., Jesus’ messianic identity] is mooted and discussed. The person and character of Jesus are tried by this standard. He is accepted or he is rejected as he fulfils or contradicts the received idea of the Messiah.” C. H. Dodd noted that the messiahship of Jesus is a persistent theme in the Gospel of John, as it constitutes a key point of contention between Jesus and the Judean authorities. Rudolf Schnackenberg similarly observed that the question about whether Jesus is the Messiah dominates the Fourth Gospel (see 1:20–25; 4:29; 7:26–27, 31, 41–42; 10:24; 12:34). C. K. Barrett affirms that “the synoptic language of the messianic hope is not abandoned; on the contrary it is more common in John than elsewhere.” John Painter sees the Gospel as based around the “Quest” for the Messiah, specifically to answer the questions: “Who is the Messiah?” and “What he is like?” Accordingly, John raises the question as to “who” exactly the Messiah is, and “what” kind of Messiah Jesus is. John’s answer to the “who” is obviously Jesus, and the “what” is defined by way of reference to his signs and glory. Yet a vexing issue for commentators is that John

 INTERVARSITY PRESS

Visit ivpress.com/media



FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com

Alisse Wissman, academic print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com

ivpress.com/academic



Michael F. Bird is lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia.

Previously he served at Crossway College in Australia and Highland Theological College in Scotland. He is the author of several books, including *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* and *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective*, as well as numerous essays, articles and reviews.

www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion

has chosen to explicate Jesus' messianic identity in a manner that is, in many ways, quite dissimilar from the messianic discourse of the Synoptics, Paul and Revelation. The question is: Why?

Many also object that the Johannine Jesus is so Christianized that he has lost all vestiges of Jewish messianism in his identity and mission. As such, George MacRae states: "The Johannine church wants to insist that Jesus qualifies as Messiah without fulfilling the requirements. The concept has become a radically transcendent one. . . . The Johannine Messiah, however, shares relatively little with the Jewish and even other Christian concepts of Messiah in that the eschatological dimension of the messianic role is diminished, if not eliminated." Perhaps Justin's Jewish dialogue partner Trypho was right that Christians "invent a Christ for yourselves." But in violent contrast, C. H. Dodd declared: "As for the title Messiah itself . . . no other New Testament writer shows himself so fully aware of the Jewish ideas associated with it as does the Fourth Evangelist." Whether John's Jesus is an authentically *Jewish* Messiah seems to be up for debate.

— from chapter 4, "The Gospel of John: The Elusive Messiah"