

## **Jesus the Christ (5 BCE – 30 CE)**

### ***The Coming of the Messiah***

### ***The Gospel Accounts***

### ***Introductions by the Gospel Writers***

**Readings: *Mark 1:1; John 1:1-18; Luke 1:1-4***

### ***Reflections:***

#### ***The Coming of the Messiah***

- The nation of Israel, desperate for political freedom, is longing with anticipation for the coming promised one. A number of would be messiah movements have been attempted only to be crushed by the powerful Roman Empire. The term “messiah” in Hebrew or “Christ” in Greek means “Anointed One”. This was a term to signify a king that had been empowered by God’s spirit. Israelite kings were anointed with oil as a symbol of God’s spirit resting on them for the task of leading the people to victory and freedom. Other phrases are used by Old Testament prophets like “Emmanuel” which means “God with us” and “one like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13) which refers to a common title for a prophet but also points back to the idea of seed of Eve, or the son of Adam. The Jesus movement that came to be view Jesus as the “anointed one” or king of a new spiritual kingdom was both religiously subversive to the Jewish establishment and politically subversive to the Roman establishment. It was a movement that undercut all forms of human power structures to call people to a higher loyalty to God and to his call to love all people regardless of religion, race, gender, class or political loyalty.

#### ***The Gospel Accounts***

- Roman-Greco biographies were common for famous people within the Roman culture. Roman-Greco biographies did not follow strict chronological ordering of events but allowed the author to structure the events to strengthen the themes he as an author was highlighting. This would explain some of the variations we see between the different accounts (e.g. Jesus cleansing the temple is at the end of Jesus’ life in Matthew, Mark and Luke where it is at the beginning of John’s account). Most scholars believe that Mark was written first and that Luke and Matthew both used Mark as a source when they wrote their biographies. Matthew and Luke also share a series of stories that scholars assume was another shorter source document or oral tradition. They have named this source Q. Most scholars acknowledge that in the first years following Jesus’ death and resurrection the

stories of Jesus' life were shared orally until Mark finally wrote down this first biography. This was so helpful that the others followed suit with each sharing their own perspective. Luke's introduction follows the pattern of a scientific document of that era which makes sense since we know he was a physician. John is considered the latest and reflects maybe the most intimate and personal telling of Jesus' life.

### ***Introductions by the Gospel Writers***

- Mark: Mark's opening statement is concise. "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the King (or "the anointed" – Messiah or Christ), the Son of God." The terms "good news", "anointed" and "son of God" would have had two different contexts for the first century readers. In both settings, this opening statement was very subversive. To the Roman audience, the term "good news" or "gospel" referred to a royally declared decree of something that was to be considered as great news for the people, possibly the announcement of a new king. The term "anointed" and "son of God" were terms that would normally be associated with the Caesar. So Jesus was being declared as a new rival ruler to the Caesar and that his kingdom was to be received as the true royally declared good news. For the Jewish audience, the term "anointed" referred to their long awaited Messiah. To refer to him as the "Son of God" though bordered on blasphemy. It was the kind of statement that pagan Caesars made about themselves. It is no surprise that Jesus prefers to use the phrase "son of man" to minimize the amount of early conflict with the religious establishment. To both groups, this opening statement is fully subversive. An alternate Caesar? A divine Messiah that was crucified by the Jewish religious leaders?
- John: John's prologue is on the other end of the spectrum in terms of length and theological complexity, yet it follows similar themes. It is intentionally patterned after the opening of statement of Genesis to indicate a completely new beginning and redoing of what would become the fall of humanity. The opening line is shocking – God's word, a distinct revelation and communication of the essence of God, was God and was eternally co-existent with God, yet somehow distinct. He is the means by which all things are created. He fully reveals God to humanity. He opens the way for people to be restored as children of God. The essence of the divinity of Jesus and the salvation he offers is summarized in these opening eighteen verses. In this opening prologue, John also refers to the role the John the baptizer played in preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. Without doubt, John wants the reader to know that Jesus is nothing less than God coming to rescue us.
- There is another parallel to the Old Testament in this text that we should highlight. Everything in the Old Testament centered on the Torah, the word of God that came in the form of the Law. John here points out that Jesus was the eternal word of God that predates the law given by Moses. This is the new revealed Word of God that brings us grace (love) and truth. From this revelation of grace we receive an endless out pouring of blessing from God. As Paul would one day write, "We have been blessed in the spiritual realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." (Ephesians 1:3)

- We should also note the very personal nature of God's relationship with the Word. He is referred to as the "One and Only" and as being "at the Father's side." These are very personal, intimate terms that ensure we understand the relational nature of God, even within himself as he reveals himself to humanity.
- Luke: Luke's introduction follows a pattern that we would see at the beginning of scientific or medical writings of that era. It acknowledges who has sponsored the writing of this document and the outlines the intent of the writing. Theophilus means "lover of God." This may be a person's name who actually financially invested in having Luke research and write the two volume series that we call "Luke" and "Acts." It may also be a way for Luke to say that he is writing this to all those who truly love God.
- We should note that Luke maintains that he clearly researched everything that he is sharing and basing his writings on eyewitnesses. At times he even refers to his sources in the text (see Luke 2:19, 51). This also would support Luke's use of Mark's gospel as a source as well as the theorized source Q. Luke himself was an eyewitness of the later events of Acts as he joined Paul on his journeys. In fact in Acts, Luke switches from referring to Paul's team as "they" to the personally inclusive "we." In all of this, we see the high priority Luke and the other writers placed on being accurate and properly representing the truth that changed their lives. They wanted everyone to know the certainty of the truth they were teaching about God and his rescuer.