

Who Do You Say I Am?

BIBL6308

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I. Introduction: “Who do you say I am?”

In a pivotal moment within the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus asks his disciples privately, “Who do people say that I am?” After giving their response, Jesus presses them further, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). In doing this, Jesus moves from public opinion to demanding a personal confession from his disciples and introduces one of the most enduring and complex questions in both history and theology. This question is still just as relevant today as it was over two thousand years ago, and whether we realize it or not, we all have an answer to this very personal question, either consciously or even subconsciously.

A conscious attempt to answer this question must account for multiple perspectives, as Jesus of Nazareth can be understood historically as a first-century Jewish figure, theologically as Israel’s Messiah, and devotionally as a figure of personal significance. Historically, Jesus emerges as a Jewish teacher operating within the religious world of Second Temple Judaism, with his life ending in crucifixion under Roman authority. From a theological perspective, however, Jesus is confessed by his followers as the Messiah: “You are the Messiah” (Matt 16:16). This identity carried specific expectations of kingship, deliverance, and the restoration of Israel. These perspectives are not easily reconciled, especially due to the perceived contradiction between the crucifixion Jesus experienced and the messianic expectations of the first century.

These tensions raise a central theological problem: if the Messiah was expected to bring victory and restoration to Israel, how could someone who was crucified under Roman authority be understood to fulfill that role? The Gospel of Luke preserves this tension in the words of the disciples who confess, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Yet Jesus and the apostles go on to interpret this apparent failure as necessary, suggesting that the

suffering and death of Jesus were not contradictions of messianic identity but essential to it (Luke 24:26).

This essay explores this question further and argues that Jesus of Nazareth is best understood historically as a Jewish teacher who was crucified under Roman authority, yet theologically as Israel's Messiah whose crucifixion did not negate messianic identity but instead forced a redefinition of what "Messiah" meant. By examining the historical, theological, and devotional perspectives, this paper will demonstrate that what first appeared to be failure became the foundation of a transformed understanding of messianic identity, one that continues to shape how people understand the person of Jesus in their lives.

II. A Jewish Teacher Crucified

What does it mean for Jesus of Nazareth to be considered a Jewish teacher within Second Temple Judaism? A Jewish teacher, as described here, is one who is rooted in the religious and cultural world of Second Temple Judaism. This is much more than a time period; it represents a culture with its own literature, patterns of teaching, interpretations of Torah, synagogue-centered community life, and worship at the temple.¹ When Jesus is defined as a Jewish teacher, it situates him within this Jewish tradition, meaning that his teachings, comments, challenges, and even his identity as Messiah must be understood within this framework rather than outside of it.²

The Gospel accounts provide clear evidence that Jesus functioned within Jewish traditions, particularly through his engagement with Scripture, synagogue life, the temple, and ongoing debates about the interpretation of the Torah. Jesus was engaged in Torah study very early in his life (Luke 2:41–52), and although we only know one of his teachers by name—John the Baptist

¹ James C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 212-13.

² Markus Bockmuehl, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

—his teachings reflect close engagement with interpretive traditions commonly associated with groups such as the Pharisees, with whom he shared theological concerns while also entering into debates over interpretation and application.³ Jesus regularly participated in synagogue worship, where he often read and taught from the Scriptures (Mark 1:21–28; Matt 4:23; Mark 3:1–6; Luke 13:10–17; John 18:20). This was not on rare occasions, but, as Luke emphasizes, it was “his custom” (Luke 4:16).⁴

Jesus also actively engaged with temple worship, learning and discussing Scripture from a young age (Luke 2:41–52), traveling to Jerusalem for festivals (John 10:22–23), and demonstrating great zeal for the honor and holiness of the temple (Matt 21:12–13), even declaring it “my Father’s house” (John 2:16). He further participates in established practices such as paying the temple tax (Matt 17:24–27), reflecting the central role of the Temple in Jewish religious life as a focal point of worship and communal identity. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Jesus did not operate outside of Judaism but was deeply embedded within its religious life and interpretive traditions.⁵ This foundation is essential for understanding how his later teachings and actions—including those that led to his crucifixion—were perceived within his Jewish context.

The crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most historically reliable events of his life, not only is this attested to by the writings of the four gospels and early Christian authors, but also in non-Christian sources such as Tacitus and Josephus, both of whom confirm that Jesus was executed under Roman authority.⁶ Yet this raises a critical question: why would this Jewish teacher be

³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chap 9.

⁴ Lee I. Levine, “The Synagogue,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0029.

⁵ Peter J. Tomson, “Jesus and His Judaism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 25–26.

⁶ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3.

crucified when many others operated within the same religious world? The first century witnessed several figures who led movements or made significant claims, such as Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), Theudas (Acts 5:36), and an Egyptian leader (Acts 21:38), to name a few. This demonstrates that messianic or charismatic leaders were not uncommon in the first century, and while many of these movements ended under some form of Roman suppression, the death of Jesus by Roman crucifixion stands out. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment typically reserved for those perceived as political threats, suggesting that Jesus' execution was not merely the result of theological disagreement but of a perceived danger to public order.⁷

This perceived danger likely emerged from a combination of factors. Jesus' proclamation of the "kingdom of God" as the "gospel of God" (Mark 1:14–15) carried implicit political meaning, particularly within the context of Roman occupation, and following the Hasmonean leaders, where claims of kingship could be interpreted as challenges to imperial authority.⁸ His actions in the temple, where he disrupted established practices (Luke 19:45–48), further intensified tensions by challenging both religious leadership and the economic structures tied to the temple system. Additionally, his growing influence among the crowds and his authoritative teaching created concern about potential unrest. Taken together, these factors suggest that Jesus was not crucified simply for his teachings, but because his message and actions were perceived as a destabilizing force within the religious and political landscape of the time. A crucified figure, therefore, would not merely appear unexpected as a Messiah—it would appear disqualified.

III. Israel's Messiah

⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chap. 9.

⁸ Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), chap. 6.

In Peter's response to the posed question "Who do you say that I am?", he articulates a theological response saying that Jesus is "the Messiah" (Mat 16:16). However to understand the significance of this confession, it is necessary to define what "Messiah" mean within Israel's scriptures and the expectations of Second Temple Judaism. The term "Messiah," meaning "anointed one," was closely associated with Israel's hope for a coming Davidic king (2 Sam 7:12–16) who would restore the nation (Ezek 37:21–24), establish justice (Isa 11:3–5), bring peace (Isa 9:6–7), defeat Israel's enemies (Ps 2:6–9; Zech 9:9–10), and ultimately restore God's people (Amos 9:11–15).

These expectations were not merely theoretical but were reinforced by Israel's historical experience, particularly through the Hasmonean period, in which political and military victory led to a temporary restoration of Jewish rule. Jewish literature from this period reflects similar hopes, anticipating a ruler who would purify Jerusalem, defeat foreign powers, and reign in righteousness, as seen in texts such as *Psalms of Solomon* 17, which envisions a Davidic king who will cleanse Jerusalem and subdue the nations, and in *1 Maccabees*, describing the rise of the Hasmonean dynasty and presents a model of deliverance through military victory and temple purification.⁹

Yet the crucifixion appears to contradict these expectations entirely. The disciples of Jesus expressed this supposed contradiction when they confessed after his death, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). And even still had this tension after the resurrection when they asked "Lord, is thus the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). To the disciples and the Jewish world of the first century, a Messiah executed by Roman authority would have been understood not as victorious, but as defeated and

⁹ *1 Maccabees* 3:1–9; 4:36–61, in Michael D. Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 213, 217.

disqualified. However, Jesus does not present his suffering as an unfortunate outcome, but as a necessary part of the messianic role itself. He explains, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”(Luke 24:26).

While passages such as Isaiah 52–53 most clearly describe a suffering figure, other texts also reflect themes of rejection, suffering, and eventual vindication, including Isaiah 50:6–7, Zechariah 12:10, Psalm 118:22, and Wisdom of Solomon 2:12–20. These texts demonstrate that the concept of a righteous sufferer was present within Israel’s Scriptures and Jewish literature, even if it was not commonly applied to the Messiah. Jesus brings these themes into direct connection with messianic identity and existing traditions within the Jewish world, including the suffering of God’s messengers, the suffering of the righteous, and the belief that deliverance can come through great suffering, and that the suffering of one person might have redemptive benefit for others.¹⁰

In this way, Jesus does not abandon Israel’s messianic hope but redefines the path by which it is fulfilled, showing that suffering precedes glory. The expectations of restoration and victory are not rejected, but deferred, as both Jesus and his followers continue to affirm the future renewal of Israel and the restoration of all things (Acts 1:6–7; 3:21).¹¹ At the same time, this redefinition expands the significance of the Messiah beyond Israel, as the promises given to Israel are extended to the Gentiles, who are brought into this hope (Rom 11:17).¹² This understanding of Messiah, in which victory comes through suffering, not only reshapes Israel’s expectations but also challenges how power, success, and faithfulness are understood more broadly.

¹⁰ Joel B. Green, “Crucifixion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99–100.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, “The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, ed. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 176.

¹² Scott J. Hafemann, “The Redemption of Israel for the Sake of the Gentiles,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, ed. Rudolph and Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 207–208.

These themes are reflected throughout Israel's Scriptures, where prophets are rejected, righteous individuals suffer unjustly, and God's purposes are often accomplished through hardship (Jer 20:1–2; Ps 22:1–18). In addition, some Jewish texts suggest that the suffering of one individual may have significance for others, as seen in Isaiah's depiction of the servant who bears the burdens of many (Isa 53:4–6) and in Wisdom of Solomon's portrayal of the righteous one whose suffering exposes injustice (Wis 2:12–20)

IV. A Master worth following

To define Jesus only historically and theologically would miss a significant way in which we define him for ourselves. When we answer the question “Who do you say that I am?”, we also are implicitly or explicitly answering the question “Who is Jesus to me, and how does that shape my life?”, and this is different for every person. From a personal perspective, I would describe Jesus as my Master. This language reflects the relationship between a disciple and a rabbi within the Jewish world, where a disciple was not merely a student of ideas but one who followed closely, imitated the life of the teacher, and submitted to their authority. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls individuals not simply to belief, but to discipleship, inviting them to follow him in a way that requires transformation and repentance (Mark 1:17; Luke 9:23; Luke 14:27). To call Jesus “Master,” therefore, is to recognize his authority not only in teaching but over one's entire life.

This understanding is deeply connected to the theological portrait of Jesus as the suffering Messiah. If Jesus fulfills the role of Messiah through suffering before glory, then following him as Master necessarily involves a similar pattern. Jesus himself makes this connection explicit, calling his disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily” (Luke 9:23), and teaching

that true life is found not in preserving oneself, but in laying one's life down (Mark 8:35). In this way, discipleship becomes participation in the pattern established by Jesus—the suffering righteous one—where faithfulness is expressed not through power or control, but through sacrifice and obedience.

This is a concept that I find is sometimes underemphasized in the modern evangelical church setting that I call home, where the gospel message can at times prioritize a confessional declaration or prayer without an equal emphasis on life change and obedience. In doing so, the idea that following in the footsteps of our Master may require suffering or even social rejection in his name is often diminished. Yet, as one commits their life to him, they begin to recognize the same reality that the disciples came to understand about their Messiah: that he redefines expectations of power, comfort, and success. To follow him is to align one's life with a pattern of suffering that ultimately leads to true life. In this way, the identity of Jesus as the Messiah is not merely a theological claim, but one that actively shapes how I live in response to him.

V. Conclusion

The question “Who is Jesus?” cannot be answered from a single perspective. Historically, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish teacher rooted in second temple Judaism whose life ended in crucifixion under Roman authority. Despite the appearance of contradicting messianic expectations, Jesus is understood theologically as Israel's messiah whose suffering forces a rethinking of what it means to be Messiah.

This understanding also shapes how we would answer this question personally. If Jesus really is the Messiah, then he is not only someone to be understood but also someone to be followed. His life challenges the common expectations of success, power, and comfort, and shows that true

life is found in obedience, even when it involves sacrifice and laying down one's own life. In this way, the identity of Jesus is not just a historical or theological claim, but one that continues to shape how we live in response to him.

Annotated Bibliography:

Bock, Darrell L. "The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts." In *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, edited by David Rudolph and Joel Willitts. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013.

Bock examines how Luke-Acts presents the restoration of Israel as an ongoing and future-oriented hope rather than as something rejected or replaced. This chapter was used to support the claim that Jesus and his followers continue to affirm Israel's future restoration, especially through passages such as Acts 1:6–7 and Acts 3:21. It helps strengthen the argument that Jesus redefines messianic fulfillment without abandoning Israel's promised restoration.

Bockmuehl, Markus, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001

This source provides a collection of scholarly essays on the historical and theological understanding of Jesus. It was particularly useful in explaining how Jesus must be understood within his Jewish context and how themes such as suffering and messianic identity are connected in early Christian interpretation. This work supported the argument that Jesus reinterprets existing Jewish traditions rather than introducing entirely new concepts.

Coogan, Michael D., Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

This text provides access to important Second Temple Jewish literature, including *1 Maccabees* and *Wisdom of Solomon*. These writings were used to demonstrate how Jewish expectations of deliverance, righteous suffering, and national restoration were already present prior to the time of Jesus. This source helped support the claim that Jesus' redefinition of Messiah builds on existing Jewish themes.

Fredriksen, Paula. *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Fredriksen examines the historical context of Jesus and the development of early Christian beliefs. This source was helpful in explaining why Jesus' crucifixion must be understood within Roman political practices and how his followers interpreted his death. It supported the argument that Jesus was perceived as a political and social threat, not merely a religious teacher.

Green, Joel B. "Crucifixion." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, edited by Markus Bockmuehl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Green examines the crucifixion of Jesus from historical, political, and theological perspectives, paying attention to how Jesus' death was understood within both Roman and Jewish contexts. This chapter was used to support the argument that Jesus' crucifixion was not merely the result of religious disagreement, but was connected to the perceived threat his message and actions posed within the political and religious landscape of the time. It also helped support the paper's theological claim that Jesus' suffering became central to the early Christian understanding of his messianic identity.

Hafemann, Scott J. "The Redemption of Israel for the Sake of the Gentiles." In *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, edited by David Rudolph and Joel Willitts. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013.

Hafemann argues that the redemption of the Gentiles is connected to God's promises to Israel rather than separated from them. This chapter was used to support the claim that Jesus' identity as Messiah remains rooted in Israel's story while extending its significance to the nations. It helps show that Gentile inclusion does not replace Israel's hope but participates in the mercy and promises given through Israel's Messiah.

Levine, Lee I. "The Synagogue." In *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, edited by Catherine Hezser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199216437.013.0029>.

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the synagogue's role in Jewish daily life during the Roman period, including its functions as a communal gathering, prayer, and the reading and interpretation of Scripture. It was used in this paper to support the claim that synagogue participation was a regular and central aspect of Jewish life, helping to situate Jesus within established Jewish practices. This source reinforces the argument that Jesus functioned as a Jewish teacher within the normal religious and social structures of his time.

Tomson, Peter J. "Jesus and His Judaism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, edited by Markus Bockmuehl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

This essay examines Jesus within the context of first-century Judaism, arguing that his teachings and actions must be understood as part of the diverse and complex Jewish world in which he lived. Tomson emphasizes that Jesus' message and religious practice make sense only within Judaism rather than in opposition to it. This source was used to support the argument that Jesus functioned as a Jewish teacher embedded within Jewish interpretive traditions rather than as a figure operating outside of them.

VanderKam, James C. *An Introduction to Early Judaism*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.

VanderKam provides a comprehensive overview of Jewish beliefs and practices during the Second Temple period. This source was essential in establishing the historical and religious context in which Jesus lived and taught. It supported the

argument that Jewish thought was diverse and included a range of messianic expectations.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Wright offers a detailed historical and theological study of Jesus within first-century Judaism. This work was used extensively to explain how Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God carried political implications and how his crucifixion should be understood as a response to perceived threat. It also supported the idea that Jesus redefined messianic expectations through suffering and eventual vindication.