



Great Events in the Story of the Church



Geoffrey Hanks

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PREFACE

This is the third volume written to give an overview of the story of the Church, from the first century down to the present day. Together with its two companion volumes – *70 Great Christians* and *60 Great Christian Founders* – the growth of the Church is followed through the lives of leading men and women who have contributed towards the shaping of Church history, and aims to present in a readable format some account of the events that are recognised as landmarks in the story of the Church.

The present book, like its two predecessors, has been written for the lay-man and woman interested in furthering their understanding of the development of the Faith, from its origins up to the end of the last century. It is impossible to fully comprehend where we as Christians stand today unless we have some grasp of the significant events that have determined the course of the history of the Church. To gain an insight into the lives of those who have gone before us and laboured, often at great personal sacrifice, to build the Church of Christ, leaves us with a sense of awe and admiration. Through these real-life dramas we can trace the hand of God in the progress of the Faith and can more easily understand the reasons for what we believe.

Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, formerly minister of Westminster Chapel, London, and probably the most outstanding preacher of the last century, offered further reasons for such studies. He made the following comment about the value of reading the lives of Christian people and past events: 'The real value of looking to the past and to history is that it should help us to face the problems and difficulties of our own age and generation. I am not interested in that which is merely antiquarian and historical; (we) turn to these men (and women) in order that we might learn from them.'¹

1. From the Annual Lecture of the Evangelical Library for 1962, published by the Evangelical Library, London.





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AD 30 THE DEATH OF JESUS THE MESSIAH

The Road to the Cross



In the year AD30, at the Jewish festival of Passover in Jerusalem, three men were led outside the city walls to be executed by the Romans. Two of them were brigands who had taken part in an insurrection. The third man was innocent. Accused by the religious leaders of claiming to be ‘the Messiah, the Son of God’, he had been condemned to be crucified by the Roman procurator on the grounds of being King of the Jews. The death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus proved to be the most awesome events the world has ever known and form the foundation rock upon which the Christian Church is built.



First century Israel was gripped by a messianic expectation that excited the hopes of the whole nation. Especially since the Roman occupation of the land, the people had been looking for a Deliverer, a prophet whom it was believed God would send to save them from their enemy and set up his kingdom. When Jesus preached the kingdom of God and confirmed his message with miraculous signs, many ordinary people acknowledged him to be ‘the one who was to come’ – the Messiah. It was mainly the religious leaders who rejected his claim, for he failed to conform to the popular image of a victorious military leader.

The concept of the Messiah has its origins in the Old Testament, where there are numerous passages regarded by the rabbis as prophetic of the special person who would one day be revealed by God.¹

1. Edersheim lists 456 OT passages which ancient rabbis applied to the Messiah or messianic times. See *Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol 2, p.710.



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The term 'messiah' (Hebrew, 'anointed') is rendered in Greek as *christos*, which is used for the New Testament designation of Jesus. It was not until the first century, however, that the term was first applied in a technical sense, when it appeared in Jewish apocryphal works such as the Similitudes of Enoch and the Psalms of Solomon. By the time of the Lord's appearance the term was generally recognised as a reference to a future Redeemer whom God would send to restore the kingdom of Israel.

Further ideas of the Messiah can also be gleaned from a study of the non-canonical literature, rabbinic writings and synagogal prayers of the time of Jesus. In some references the messianic person was spoken of as a priest or a prophet, whereas other sources suggested he would combine the two functions in one role. It was also assumed that he would have supernatural powers, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 35:5ff).

The main idea to emerge, however, was that of a descendant of King David, a warrior-king who would bring victory over the Roman conquerors and usher in an age of peace, righteousness and justice. Anyone speaking of a Messiah during the New Testament period would have had in mind this picture of 'Messiah son of David', a person endowed with military prowess who would establish the messianic kingdom.

There are also references in rabbinic literature to a slain Messiah, designated 'Messiah son of Joseph', one who would be 'pierced for our transgressions' (cf. Isa. 53:5; Zech. 12:10-12). Just as the patriarch Joseph had suffered at the hands of his brothers, so would the Messiah also suffer. One consequence of these diverging portraits was the development within Judaism of the notion of two Messiahs, one from the royal line of Judah who would bring peace ('son of David') and the other from the priestly tribe of Levi who would suffer vicariously and die for Israel ('son of Joseph'). This is in contrast to the Gospels which speak of one Messiah coming twice.

Messianic Claim

Although Jesus never openly claimed to be the Messiah, he clearly portrayed himself as the one spoken of by the prophets. Because of his apparent silence on the matter, the idea was put forward, known as the 'messianic secret',² which proposed that Jesus deliberately refrained from making such a public declaration. Yet the Gospel accounts clearly portray Jesus' claim to be

2. The term was coined in 1901 by William Wrede, a German scholar who proposed that Jesus deliberately kept secret his claim to be the Messiah (cf. Mk. 8:27ff).



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Israel's Messiah. The earliest indication of the awareness of his vocation was given at his baptism, when he was designated by the heavenly voice as Messiah and Suffering Servant of the Lord (Mark 1:9ff). While both these concepts were spoken of in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) by the prophets, the Jewish rabbis had never previously linked them together.

Throughout the Gospel accounts there are allusions by Jesus to his identity as the messianic person, both in his teaching and by his miracles. Many of those who followed him, grounded as they were in the Scriptures and rabbinical teaching, recognised his claims. More than this, however, Jesus also showed himself to be the Divine Messiah which filled the concept of the Messiah with an altogether new content and was in opposition to Jewish expectations.

One of Jesus' most revealing actions was the healing of the demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb (Matt. 12:22ff). Though rabbis were also known to perform healings and cast out demons, by the first century they had listed seven miracles which they judged only the Messiah would be able to perform, one of which was the kind of healing in question. When Jesus healed the man, enabling him to both see and speak, people asked, 'Could this be the Son of David (i.e., the Messiah)?'

As the healing was in public, the Pharisees had either to reject the implication of his action or explain how else Jesus could have performed a messianic miracle. Their answer (v. 24) was that he cast out demons by the prince of demons, an argument Jesus showed them to be absurd. So, on the grounds that he was said to be demon-possessed the Pharisees rejected his messianic claim; as a false prophet, therefore, he should be put to death (Deut. 13:1-5).

When from time to time Jesus spoke of himself in terms of the Messiah, he did so by his self-designation as 'the Son of man'. The title, derived from Daniel 7:13ff, appears to have been readily understood and accepted by the crowds who followed him. However, this passage has an even wider implication, for it speaks of a heavenly King, one who would 'come with the clouds of heaven' and whose kingdom would be everlasting; in other words, the Messiah would be of divine origin. When, for example, Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins (Mark 2:1-12), the teachers of the law who were present were indignant, declaring that only God had such authority. To which Jesus responded by healing the man and affirming his divine prerogative, that 'the Son of Man had authority on earth to forgive sins...'

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SON OF MAN

The title 'Son of man' occurs over sixty times in the Synoptic Gospels where it is used exclusively by Jesus to refer to himself. It is a Greek translation of a Semitic phrase meaning 'man' (Hebrew, *ben adam*). Whilst some scholars deny that the title has messianic implications, many suggest otherwise. Brad H. Young (*Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, p.244) discerns three meanings in the use of the term and argues that the context should be allowed to determine the interpretation:

- (1) In some instances Jesus used it as a generic term, to refer to a human being or as a substitute for the personal pronoun 'I' (e.g., Matt. 12:32; 13:37).
- (2) On occasions, the Son of man is conceived of as a supernatural being, spoken of in Jewish apocalyptic teachings, and was an elevated way of referring to the messianic task (e.g., when Jesus spoke about the final judgment, Matt. 25:31-36).
- (3) Then, a combination of the two previous usages, employed by Jesus when speaking of his Passion and his future return to complete the messianic task during the last judgment (e.g., Mark 8:31; Luke 17:30).

This title of the Messiah is based on Daniel 7:13ff, and more than any other reflects Jesus' claim to be the one of whom the prophets spoke.

Divine Messiah

The pivotal event of the gospel story is the incident at Caesarea Philippi, when Peter declared Jesus to be 'the Messiah of God' (Luke 9:18ff). Straight away Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone, possibly from fear of a premature arrest that would have hindered his mission. Having acknowledged his identity, Jesus began to teach the Twelve what kind of Messiah he was to be: he must suffer, be rejected and be killed, but would rise again the third day. This was in complete contrast to the popular expectation of a military leader who would lead the nation to victory.

It is clear the disciples did not fully appreciate Peter's insight. Nor, either, did Peter understand Jesus' prophecy concerning his death and resurrection, for he was offended by the thought of his master's mission ending in apparent failure. Only when the Lord had been raised from the dead did the disciples begin to understand the meaning of this prophecy.

From here Jesus set off for Jerusalem, knowing that the time of his death was approaching (Luke 18:31). If there was any lingering doubt about his Messiahship, then his entry into Jerusalem at Passover, a time when messianic expectations ran high, convinced even his enemies. For here was a clear declaration by Jesus, deliberately fulfilling a messianic prophecy (Zech. 9:9). Pilgrims going up for the festival recognised his action and acclaimed him with shouts of 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'



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The incident in the Temple, when Jesus rebuked those who were using it for purposes of profiteering, was an open challenge to the Temple authorities. The chief priests and elders consequently looked for an opportunity to arrest him, in order to have him killed. The Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) had also become fearful of his popularity and determined to have him silenced. Following the raising of Lazarus, one of them had protested, 'If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our Temple and our nation' (John 11:48). It was better, the high priest argued, that one man should die rather than the whole nation be put at risk.

Arrest

The opportunity to arrest Jesus came when Judas, one of the twelve disciples, went to the chief priests and discussed how he might hand over his master to them without attracting public attention (Luke 22:1ff). The following evening, as Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples, Judas was able to slip away from the upper room and begin to put the plan into action. From then on, events happened at great speed.³

It was late at night, in Gethsemane – a grove of olive trees on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives – when Jesus was arrested. From here he was taken across the Kidron Valley to the house of the high priest in the upper city, where he was awaited by Caiaphas and certain members of the Sanhedrin. By now it was nearly midnight. Normally, any trial involving a capital charge could only take place in daylight, but Caiaphas was anxious to have the matter dealt with before news of Jesus' arrest became public. In this and several other matters the trial would appear to have been illegal.

At this preliminary hearing, held to determine the charge, the high priest introduced false witnesses in an attempt to produce a conviction. But despite this ploy he was unable to find any grounds for a case against Jesus. Finally, in exasperation, he applied the most solemn form of oath in Jewish law and asked a direct question: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?'⁴ As a law-abiding Jew, Jesus was bound to give an answer. 'I am,' he replied. He then went on to speak of himself as the 'Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power[†] and coming on the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:61ff). In

3. The following outline of the arrest and trial of Jesus is based on the traditionally accepted chronology.

4. One of a number of terms employed by Jews to avoid using the name God. See also the use of 'Power'.



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saying 'I am', Jesus used the same expression given by *Adonai* when he revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. Thus Jesus put himself on equality with God and identified with the LORD of Exodus 3:14. His answer clearly demonstrated his claim not only to be the Messiah, but also that he shared the nature of God.

Death Sentence

The gathering was in no doubt about the significance of Jesus' answer. Alarmed at his profession, the high priest accused him of blasphemy and the Council condemned him as deserving death, the penalty for profaning the sacred name. There was no further need for witnesses, they argued, as the prisoner had convicted himself by his own words. At daybreak a further gathering was held in the Council chamber (situated in the Temple Court) to legitimise the decision reached during the night. It only remained to persuade Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator of Judea, who alone held such jurisdiction, to pass the death sentence.⁵

To successfully carry through this schedule of events must have involved a degree of preparation on the part of Caiaphas. Having judged the right moment for making the arrest, it was then necessary to ensure that an execution order was confirmed and carried out before sundown, the eve of Sabbath. This would have meant consulting with various officials, including Pilate, to ensure there were no hitches. To secure a death sentence, however, it was necessary to change the accusation from a religious to a political one, for the Romans were not interested in Jewish religious squabbles. Of the three charges brought by the religious leaders against Jesus (Luke 23:2), the most serious one was that of treason, that he claimed to be a king.

Pilate did not accept the charges against the prisoner and made several attempts to have him released. But to no avail. Backed by a crowd that had gathered outside the Procurator's residence (formerly the palace of Herod the Great, near the present Jaffa Gate) the religious leaders⁶ put pressure on Pilate for a 'guilty' verdict. Normally suspicious of any messianic pretender and faced with continuous disorders throughout the land, Pilate could not afford to ignore any threat to his authority (John 19:6).

5. Authority to execute a death sentence had been withdrawn from the Sanhedrin shortly after AD6, when Judea became a Roman province.

6. Strangely, the Pharisees – Jesus' most outspoken opponents – are not mentioned as being involved in either the trials or the crucifixion. It could be because they regarded handing over a Jew to a foreign power as a sin that could not be forgiven.



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Reluctantly, he yielded to the demand. He had Jesus flogged, and on the basis of his admission to being 'king of the Jews' sentenced him to be crucified (Luke 23:24ff).

Crucifixion

It was shortly before nine o'clock in the morning when Jesus was led away to his death. Forsaken by his closest friends, with only John and a group of loyal women watching from a distance, he was taken to Golgotha, the 'Place of a Skull',⁷ a plot of rising ground outside the city wall. The Gospel writers give no details of the execution; they simply say 'there they crucified him'.

Paradoxically, the crucifixion clearly witnessed to Jesus' twofold claim, that he was the Divine Messiah.⁸ On the cross, over the head of the prisoner, the Romans nailed a board on which the charge was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews' (a messianic title). Then the religious leaders who had engineered his death challenged him to display his divine powers: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God,' they jeered (Luke 23:35).

Jesus hung on the cross for six hours, during which time he spoke only briefly. At three o'clock in the afternoon he called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'. And with these words, he bowed his head and yielded up his life. This prayer is a quote from Psalm 31:5 and is still the prayer of a dying, observant Jew (cf. Acts 7:59).

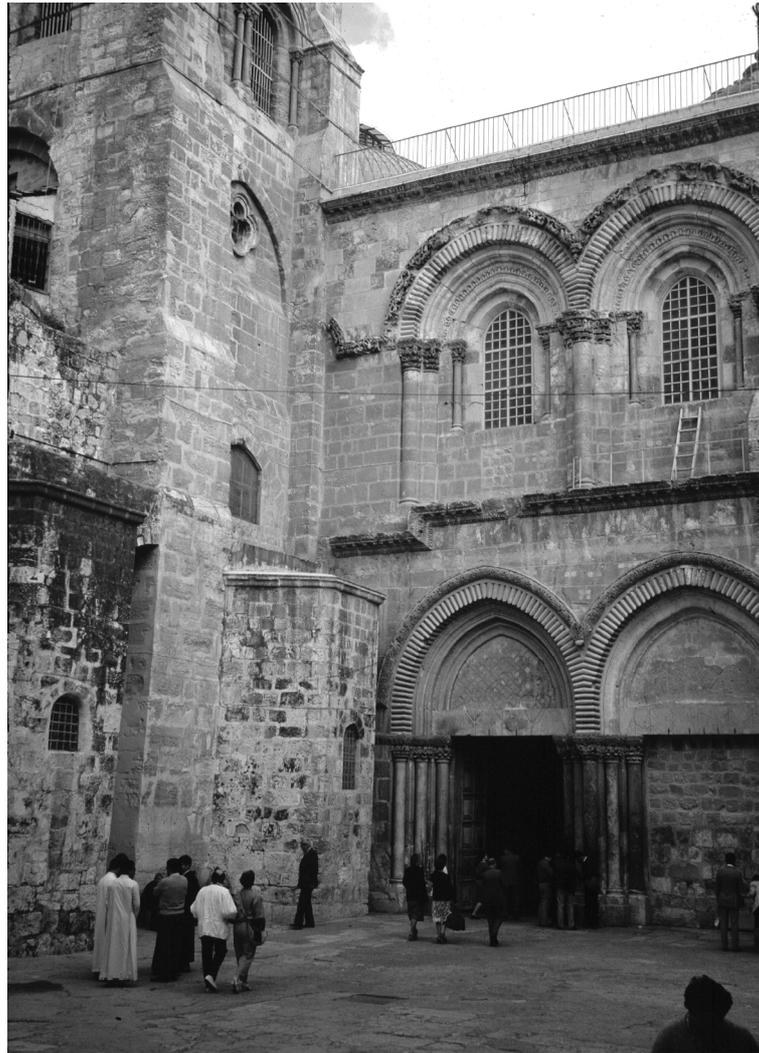
Burial

Under Jewish law it was forbidden for the bodies of criminals to remain on the cross overnight. As the next day was the Sabbath, it was especially necessary to hasten their deaths so that burial could take place before the day of rest. In which case, the prisoner's legs were broken with a mallet (or similar instrument). No longer able to sustain the weight of their body, the victims soon died of suffocation. Jesus, however, was already dead, but to make sure one of the soldiers plunged a spear into his side, just below the heart.⁹

7. Alternatively known as Mount Calvary.

8. The Jewish Talmud speaks of Jesus as a '*mesit*' (an inciter to idolatry), who was stoned and hung up for practising magic, and not just for claiming to be the God-Messiah.

9. This action resulted in a gush of blood and water from Jesus' body. Medical opinion has it that while suffering on the cross Jesus' heart swelled until it burst, resulting in an effusion of blood and water serum. This evidence supports the Gospel account that he died from crucifixion and from a ruptured heart. The idea that Jesus only swooned on the cross and was later revived in the tomb simply does not hold.



The church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem,
built over the probable site of the crucifixion



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The burial was a hurried affair, as the Sabbath was only an hour or so away. But Jesus' body was not released until Pilate had checked that the prisoner really was dead. Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus and a member of the Sanhedrin, made his own nearby tomb available and, accompanied by Nicodemus, another secret disciple, carried out the burial according to standard Jewish practice. Two women watched where the body was laid, in order to return after the Sabbath to complete the task of embalming the body.

For the disciples, it seemed an end to their hope that Jesus would redeem Israel. While some of them returned to their homes in the country, others hid behind locked doors in the city. It was not until after the resurrection, when the disciples met with the risen Lord, that they began to understand who he really was. Fifty days later, at the Feast of Pentecost, the disciples were confidently able to declare in public that Jesus was both 'Lord and Messiah'.

FALSE MESSIAHS

Throughout the history of post-biblical Judaism there have been many petty 'messiahs' who have claimed the title, as foretold by Jesus (Matt. 24:5). The earliest messiah of significance was Bar Kokhbar ('son of a star', cf. Num. 24:17). In 132 he gathered an army of about 400,000 men, captured Jerusalem and forced the Romans to evacuate the Holy Land. His Jewish army was eventually overcome. Jerusalem, left in ruins, became a Gentile city, and many Jews fled to Arabia.

The most remarkable and influential of all the claimants was Shabbathai Sebi of Smyrna (western Asia Minor) who lived in the seventeenth century. He believed he had magical powers; he was a member of a mystical sect called Kabbalah, which taught that only a privileged few were able to enjoy direct communication with God. Learning of the belief of some English sects that the year 1666 would be the opening of the millenium, in 1648 he declared himself to be the messiah.

Excommunicated by the rabbinical authorities, he wandered the Middle East until 1665 when he arrived in Jerusalem. He announced himself as messiah and was publically hailed as such in the synagogues. His reputation reached as far as Europe, where some Protestants even began to doubt the claim of Jesus. In 1666 Sebi moved to Constantinople, only to be arrested. To save his life he converted to Islam and died in disgrace ten years later.