

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Zechariah 12:10-11,13:1; Psalm 63 (62); Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

Luke 9:18 Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” 19 They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” 20 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

Luke 9:21 He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, 22 saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

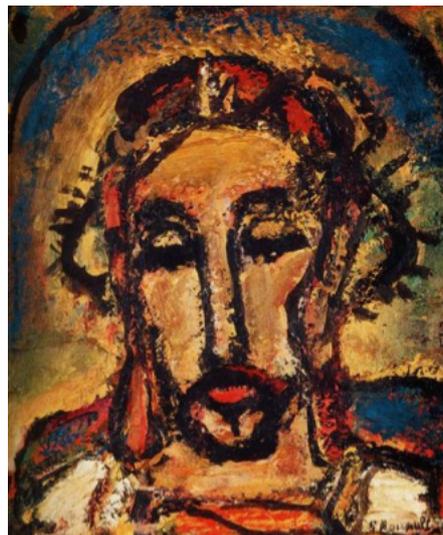
This passage is a key one in all three Synoptic gospels because it makes explicit the rumbling question of Jesus’ identity and brings it into the open. It is one of those passages which looks out from the page and seems to address the reader directly.

KIND OF WRITING

It is a *chreia* (lit. saying the *need*-ful) or anecdote, in the form of a question and answer with a double appendix about the destiny of the Son of Man and the call of discipleship.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) “Christ” is found regularly in this Gospel from the very start (Luke 2:11, 26; 3:15; 4:41; 9:20; 20:41; 22:67; 23:2, 35, 39; 24:26, 46).



(ii) “Son of Man” is likewise found regularly and significantly Luke 5:24; 6:5, 22; 7:34; 9:22, 26, 44, 58; 11:30; 12:8, 10, 40; 17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8, 31; 19:10; 21:27, 36; 22:48, 69; 24:7. It was definitely a self-designation of Jesus because it is not used in early Christian creeds and affirmations (with the exception of the book of Revelation) or in Gospel texts created by the community.

(iii) The immediate context in Luke is Herod’s perplexity about Jesus.

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about everything that was happening, and he was thoroughly perplexed, because some people were saying that John had been raised from the dead, while others were saying that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had risen. Herod said, “I had John beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” So Herod wanted to learn about Jesus. (Luke 9:7–9)

(iv) Once more, Luke underlines the context of prayer. Cf. Luke 2:21-22 (baptism); 5:12-15 (desert); Luke 6:9-12 (mountain); 9:18-20 (who do people say I am?); 9:28, 29, 35 (the

Thought for the day

There used to be on billboards around the country the following message in large letters, using old English: *What say ye of the Christ? Whose Son is He?* Every Christian has to ask herself this question sooner or later. The answer we give will shape our entire attitude to the Christianity, the Gospel and the living out of our faith. Each person, each generation must find a way of speaking about the faith that is personally significant and culturally resonant. How would you describe your faith in Jesus, in the language of today?

Prayer

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father’s unending grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death. Amen.

Transfiguration); Luke 11:1-13 (the Lord’s Prayer); 18:1 (instruction on prayer); 22:31-32 (prayer for Simon); 22:39-46 (Mount of Olives); 23:34 (Father, forgive); 23:46 (words on the cross).

This entire Gospel is framed by prayer:

Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. (Luke 1:10)

And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:52–53)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

“Messiah” (Greek: Christos = anointed) is an expression used literally for kings and priests and metaphorically for prophets.

There is no undisputed text of the OT which refers to an *anointed* one as the agent of final salvation. However, in Jewish (non-biblical) writings from about 200 bc onwards, there is such reference. Here are important examples from the non-canonical *Psalms of Solomon*:

And he (shall be) a righteous king, taught of God, over them. And there will be no unrighteousness in his days in their midst, for all will be holy and their king the Lord's Messiah. (Ps Sol. 17:32)

A psalm of Solomon; about the Lord *Messiah*. (Ps Sol. 18:0)

May God cleanse Israel against the day of mercy and blessing, against the day of choice when he brings back his *Messiah*. (Ps Sol. 18:5)

Under the rod of chastening of the Lord *Messiah*, in the fear of his God, in the spirit of wisdom and righteousness and strength. (Ps Sol. 18:7)

“Son of Man” is an expression mostly in Ezekiel which means simply “a human being”: Job 25:6; Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3-4, 10, 17, 25; 4:1, 16; 5:1; 6:2; 7:2; 8:5-6, 8, 12, 15, 17; 11:2, 4, 15; 12:2-3, 9, 18, 22, 27; 13:2, 17; 14:3, 13; 15:2; 16:2; 17:2; 20:3-4, 27, 46; 21:2, 6, 9, 12, 14, 19, 28; 22:2, 18, 24; 23:2, 36; 24:2, 16, 25; 25:2; 26:2; 27:2; 28:2, 12, 21; 29:2, 18; 30:2, 21; 31:2; 32:2, 18; 33:2, 7, 10, 12, 24, 30; 34:2; 35:2; 36:1, 17; 37:3, 9, 11, 16; 38:2, 14; 39:1, 17; 40:4; 43:7, 10, 18; 44:5; 47:6. (The NRSV, in the interest of inclusive language, obliterates the usage.) It occurs elsewhere in the OT only in Daniel which it seems to have a rather special meaning (the translation use for the rest of the comment is the NET bible).

I was watching in the night visions, “And with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man was approaching. He went up to the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. (Daniel 7:13)

So he approached the place where I was standing. As he came, I felt terrified and fell flat on the ground. Then he said to me, “Understand, son of man, that the vision pertains to the time of the end.” (Daniel 8:17)

In these cases, Son of Man means an agent of final salvation

ST PAUL

From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. This gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his Son who was a descendant of David with reference to the flesh, who was appointed the Son-of-god-in-power according to the Holy Spirit by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received grace and our apostleship to bring about the obedience

of faith among all the Gentiles on behalf of his name. You also are among them, called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all those loved by God in Rome, called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! (Romans 1:1-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 Luke increases the mentions of Jesus at prayer, linking it always with significant moments in the ministry. The revelation of the identity of Jesus is definitely one such moment. Notice that he specifies this is directed solely at disciples. The question is apparently about the crowds' opinion.

Verse 19 Like Herod early in chapter 9, the disciples report the categories being used at the time by the ordinary people. The return of John the Baptist was a superstitious reaction to his death. Elijah was expected on the basis of Mal 4:5:

Look, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord arrives. (Malachi 4:5)

One of the ancient prophets, Moses himself, was expected on the basis of Deut 18:15:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you—from your fellow Israelites; you must listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

Verse 20 The question becomes directly. In the Luke-Acts, Peter has a pre-eminent position as spokesperson and as church leader (Luke 5:8-9; 6:14; 8:45, 51; 9:20, 28, 32-33; 12:41; 18:28; 22:8, 33-34, 54-55, 57-58, 60-61; 24:12; Acts 1:13, 15; 2:14, 37-38; 3:1, 3-4, 6-7, 11-12; 4:1, 7-8, 13, 19, 23; 5:3, 8-9, 15, 29; 8:14, 17, 20, 25; 9:32, 34, 38-40, 43; 10:5, 9, 13-14, 17-19, 21, 23, 25-27, 32, 34, 44-46; 11:2, 4, 7, 13; 12:3, 5-9, 11-12, 14-16, 18; 15:7).

Verse 21 The command to silence may well have a basis in history, although it also serves the theological agenda of the

gospel writers.

Verse 22 Passion predictions are found in all three synoptic Gospels. It is well possible that Jesus, on the basis of the known history of prophet-martyrs, foresaw his end. However, the versions in our texts have been amplified in order to reflect retrospectively what actually happened.

Verse 23 Naturally, the destiny of Jesus and the destiny of the disciple are intimately linked.

Verse 24 This paradoxical sentence, in the form of biblical parallelism, captures the challenge of discipleship very closely.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus asks the disciples how people understand who he is and then asks them “Who do you say I am?” How would you answer that question? What title or description would you give to describe who Jesus is for you?

2. Jesus goes on to teach his followers that discipleship is not about fame and honour. It is about living gospel values and will involve suffering, but that suffering will be a prelude to new life. When have you found that living gospel values was indeed costly but that you were glad you had paid that price?

3. The message of Jesus was not addressed just to his chosen twelve but “to all”. Perhaps you also have found that it is a fact of life that we often have to pay in effort, time or patience, to experience growth, progress and the good things in life. Can you bring specific experiences to mind?

PRAYER

O God, whose Son, our Messiah and Lord, did not turn aside from the path of suffering nor spare his disciples the prospect of rejection, pour out your Spirit upon this assembly, that we may abandon the security of the easy way and follow in Christ's footsteps towards the cross and true life.

We ask this through Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.



For, in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith

Gal 3:26 For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Wisely, perhaps, the lectionary breezes through Galatians, avoiding the convoluted arguments of chapter 3 and brings us to the one text that everyone remembers from Galatians. Its wide inclusivity is very acceptable today, for various reasons. For Paul, however, it was not grounded on some philosophy of humanity but rather in his rich understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross.

KIND OF WRITING

Letter opening	1:1-5
Introduction	1:6-10
Thesis	1:11-12
Proof 1	1:13-2:21
Proof 2	3:1-4:7
Proof 3	4:8-5:12
Proof 4	5:13-6:10
Conclusion	6:11-17
Postscript	6:18

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context in Galatia is the same: how much of the Jewish Law should Christians keep and practise? The purpose of the ritual laws, the so-called ‘identity-markers’, was to set apart God’s first chosen people as God’s standard bearers through history. By means of the dietary laws (the *kashrut*), circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath, the Jewish people did stand out.

The widespread practise of these regulations stems, it would seem, from the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC). It was a time when the risk of assimilation, absorption and even disappearance was great. The regulations then set the exiles apart. Perhaps the most effective regulation was the dietary laws. These kosher food rules were instituted so that the exiles (1) would not eat with Babylonians; (2) therefore would not socialise with them; (3) with the result that their

children would not intermarry. Still followed up to today, such laws have proved very effective, over two and a half thousand years, in setting the chosen people of God apart from the rest of humanity.

Scholars use the term “identity-markers” to refer to these regulations. As we know, Jesus did disregard the dietary law, Sabbath observance (as an absolute) and ignored the purity regulations. The reaction was severe because he thereby touched not just customs but the whole identity of being Jewish.

Paul kept all these laws as a happily practising Pharisee. Now, he was totally against such observances. We read in the letter the following:

Listen! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you at all! And I testify again to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be declared righteous by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace! (Galatians 5:2-4 NET) Why this enormous turnaround? For three reasons.

The cross

Paul’s objection to the Christian proclamation was, in part, founded on a text from Deuteronomy: “whoever hangs on a tree is under God’s curse.” “Curse” meant in this context to be outside the covenant blessings. After his encounter with Christ, Paul *knew* that Jesus was risen, Lord and Messiah. What was God’s Messiah doing in a place of curse, that is, a place of exclusion from the benefits of the covenant? Paul’s understanding was direct: he was there to identify with the excluded (all the Gentiles) so as to bring them into God’s new covenant of grace to all humanity. Jesus’ compassionate solidarity is thus, for Paul, the meaning of Jesus’ death. As such, it is also consistent with Jesus’ own ministry to the marginalised.

The Spirit

It is evident that the full out-pouring of the Spirit, allowing the Galatians to call God, Abba Father, took place *before* the agitators came along and disturbed the community. The timing is important: to know the power of the Spirit, the Galatians did not need *any* regulations.

Faith and the promise

The really central figure in Israelite and

Jewish imagination was Abraham. He was *the* figure who “believed the LORD, and the LORD considered his response of faith as proof of genuine loyalty.” (Genesis 15:6 NET) The promise to Abraham was brought to fulfilment by Jesus through faith, thus opening the path salvation to all who trusted in the promise and in the faithfulness of Jesus. This gift is for everyone “without distinction” (see Rom 3:22 and 10:12).

Thus Paul’s encounter with Jesus triggered a huge revision of his understanding of salvation history and led him to see that the time of a people *set apart* was itself *set aside* on account of Jesus’ death, the gift of the Spirit and the renewed centrality of the promise and faith.

RELATED PASSAGES

For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. (Romans 10:12 NET)

Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:11 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 26 All humanity now has access to God’s grace and all of us are equally the children of God, *through faith*.

Verse 27 This faith is comes to communal expression in baptism.

Verse 28 Paul means that the distinctions of ethnic origin, social position and even natural gender are radically irrelevant when it comes to being in Christ. This universalist vision was threatened by the agitators who came to Galatia.

Verse 29 Thus God fulfilled the ancient promises to Abraham.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. To be a child of God is wonderful gift. When did you discover it for yourself?

2. Paul teaches that real personal faith in God—radical trust—is the way to God. How is evident to me, on my path of discipleship?

PRAYER

Faithful God, we recognise in Christ your Son, your compassionate outreach to all. Help us to respond to your grace by faith, that we become heirs of Abraham, children of the promise. Amen

On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem

Zech. 12:9 *And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.*

Zech. 12:10 And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. 11 On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. 12 *The land shall mourn, each family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves;* 13 the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves; 14 and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves.

Zech. 13:1 On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

Zech. 13:2 *On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more; and also I will remove from the land the prophets and the unclean spirit. 3 And if any prophets appear again, their fathers and mothers who bore them will say to them, "You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the LORD"; and their fathers and their mothers who bore them shall pierce them through when they prophesy. 4 On that day the prophets will be ashamed, every one, of their visions when they prophesy; they will not put on a hairy mantle in order to deceive, 5 but each of them will say, "I am no prophet, I am a tiller of the soil; for the land has been my possession since my youth." 6 And if anyone asks them, "What are these wounds on your chest?" the answer will be "The wounds I received in the house of my friends."*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The lectionary joins two parts of Zechariah, 12:9-14 and 13:1-6. The fuller context is given in these notes above.



KIND OF WRITING

The first section, 12:9-14, describes a rite of mourning. The setting for this is unclear—some kind of national “liturgy.” The second section, 13:1-6, is an oracle of salvation and the language is also cultic.

The book has the following layout:

- 1-6 Call and visions
- 7-8: From fasts to feasts
- 9-11 Restoration, cleansing
- 12-14 Future victory

We read from the final section.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The work of Zechariah took place during the Persian period, after the return from the Exile. Under Cyrus the Great, Media and Persia had been united, leading to the defeat of Babylon in 539 BC. Thus began the Persian period which ended roughly 200 years later when Alexander the Great defeated Darius III in 334-330 BC.

The book itself provides dates: In the eighth month of Darius’ second year, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah son of Iddo (Zechariah 1:1). This yields a date: October, 520 BC. There are other dates in the book: see 1:7 and 7:1.

Earlier scholarship tended to divide Zech 1-8 from 9-14. However, more recent study offers an integrated reading. Although generally regarded as “obscure”, we may note that Zech 9-14 is the most quoted section of the prophets in the Passion Narrative and the New Testament Apocalypse uses only Ezekiel more frequently than Zechariah. Clearly this book was important for early Christian thinkers and writers.

RELATED PASSAGES

Ezekiel has a somewhat similar pattern of salvation followed by repentance.

I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel. (Ezekiel 36:30–32)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 This is a spirit of repentance, generated by the Lord’s restoration and victory. Cf. Ezekiel 30 above. Who is “the one whom they have pierced”? A king, such as Josiah? Prophetic successors to Second Isaiah, echoing the Suffering Servant Songs? God himself? NT reception points to Jesus, of course.

Verse 11 The reference here is to some kind of public lamentation annually celebrated in the plains of Megiddo. In the context of Zechariah, the best sense seems to be: the mourning on that day will be as great as the traditional lament for the demise of local fertility gods.

Verse 1 This verse bridges the section from 12:9-14 and 3:2-6. The fountain in this context builds on the fountain of expiation in Numbers and Ezekiel. The cleansing is eschatological: not only idols but also false prophets, as we read in vv.2-6.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Like peace, true repentance, real change of heart, “comes dropping slow.” When have I experienced such a softening of attitude, such a spirit of kindness and prayer?
2. To be restored, to come again before God in innocence of life—a great longing in us all. Of what do I desire to be cleansed?

PRAYER

God of new life and forgiveness, touch our hearts that we may know true inner conversion and come before you with our lives renewed. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.