

"Prophet" as a Messianic Title

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Jesus spoke of himself using many messianic titles from Scripture. Names such as "Son of Man" in Luke 19:10, "Green Tree" in Luke 23:31, and "King" in Matthew 25:34 all have their origins in messianic passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus also was referred to by such messianic titles as "Lord" (Luke 5:8), "Son of God" (Luke 1:35) and "Son of David" (Luke 18:38).

One title applied to Jesus is not so clearly messianic: "Prophet." There can be little doubt that Jesus viewed himself as a prophet, and that many of his contemporaries concurred.

Jesus the Prophet

Jesus claimed to be a prophet when he quoted the popular saying, "No one is a prophet in his own village," going on to compare himself to Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24-27). He made the same claim when he said, "It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).

But what did the people of Nain have in mind when they exclaimed, "A great prophet has been raised in our midst!" (Luke 7:16)? Since they had just witnessed the bringing to life of a dead man, a miracle that also had been performed by Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 4:18-37), one might conclude that the people viewed Jesus as a prophet of the stature of these or other biblical prophets. However, the language of their exclamation suggests a connection with a scriptural passage that points to a more radical conclusion.

Prophecy of Moses

Moses told the people: "A prophet from your midst, from your brothers, like me, will raise for you the Lord your God. To him you must listen" (a literal translation of Deut.18:15).

These words, and those used by the inhabitants of Nain, are too similar to be coincidental. Both passages speak of "a prophet" in the singular and without the definite article; the Deuteronomic passage has "will raise" and "from your midst," while the Lukan passage has "has been raised" and "in our midst."



One possible candidate for the New Testament city of Nain is in the Judean wilderness east of Jerusalem. Photograph by David Bivin.

Perhaps Moses' statement in Deuteronomy 18 originally referred to his successor, Joshua. Surprisingly, however, one does not read at the end of the book of Deuteronomy that Joshua was a prophet *like Moses*, but rather, "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses...no one has ever shown the mighty power and performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel" (Deut. 34:10, 12).

This statement may have indicated to some that the "prophet like Moses" was not Joshua, but someone yet to come. In the post-biblical period, Moses' statement often was interpreted as referring to a messianic figure: the "Second Moses," the "Prophet of the Last Days."

First and Last Redeemers

In his book *The Messiah in the Old Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings* (Jerusalem: Keren Ahvah Meshihit [1980], 59), Risto Santala points out an intriguing rabbinic interpretation that supports the idea that the Messiah would be a prophet comparable to Moses:

Like the first redeemer so is the last redeemer. Just as it is said of the first redeemer, "And Moses took his wife and sons and put them on a donkey" [Exod. 4:20], so it is said of the last redeemer, "Gentle and riding on a donkey" [Zech. 9:9]. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)

This interpretation, attributed to Rabbi Isaac, cannot be dated before the end of the third century A.D., but it may have originated in an earlier period. Notice how the "last redeemer," the humble Messiah who comes riding on a donkey, is compared to the "first redeemer," Moses. It is interesting that Stephen also referred to Moses as "redeemer" in his speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:35). The two disciples that met the resurrected Jesus on the Emmaus Road declared Jesus a prophet and then immediately mentioned their hope that he was the one to *redeem* Israel (Luke 24:19, 21).

Greater than Moses

The "brook Cherith," also translated as "Kerith Ravine" (NIV) and "Wadi Cherith" (JPS), was the place where Elijah hid from Ahab, drinking from the brook, and being fed bread and meat morning and evening by ravens sent by God (1 Kgs 17:3, 5). The reference to this brook in 1 Kings 17:3 should be translated "which is before the Jordan," and not "east of the Jordan." Photograph by David Bivin.

According to the sages, אין בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גָּדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ (*ein beyisrael gadol mimenu*; "There is no one in Israel greater than he [i.e., Moses]") (Mechilta, *Beshallah*; to Exod. 13:19 [ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 79, lines 5-6]). However, there is a rabbinic tradition that refers to the Messiah as being more exalted than Moses (David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* [New York: Adama Books, 1987], 64-65):

It is written, "Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground" [Zech. 4:7]. What is "Who are you, O great mountain"? This is the King Messiah. And why is he called "a great mountain"? Because he is greater than the patriarchs...elevated beyond Abraham, exalted above Moses and superior to the ministering angels. (Tanhuma, *Toledot* 134-138 [ed. Buber, p. 139]; to Isa. 52:13; cf. the parallel in Sifre to Num. 12:3-7)

This tradition of exalting the Messiah above Moses may be the reason the Nainites added "great" to their allusion to Moses' prophecy. It is interesting that the angel Gabriel promised Mary that Jesus would be "great" (Luke 1:32).

A Trustworthy Prophet

Since of Moses it was said, "He is trusted throughout my house" (Num. 12:7), the "prophet of the last days" came to be regarded, like Moses, as the "trustworthy prophet."

Even a century or more before the time of Jesus there was the expectation among the people that God would send this "trustworthy prophet." In 140 B.C., a great assembly of the people and its leaders resolved that Simon the Maccabee would be "their leader and High Priest for ever until a trustworthy prophet will arise" (1 Macc. 14:41). This is a reference to the "prophet like Moses" who would one day appear.

In line with this theology, Hebrews 3:1-6 draws a comparison between Moses and Jesus emphasizing the trustworthiness of the two.

Messiah: The Prophet

Some of the strongest evidence for the existence of the early Jewish belief that the Messiah would be the prophet promised by Moses comes from the New Testament. For instance, one sees from sermons recorded in the Book of Acts that the earliest disciples preached Jesus as the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15. Both Peter and Stephen quote this scripture and relate it to Jesus (Acts 3:22; 7:37; cf. John 7:40).

A further indication that Jesus was seen as the "Second Moses" of Deuteronomy 18:15 is found in the New Testament in the Transfiguration account. The heavenly voice pronounced Jesus to be "my son, my chosen," and commanded "to him listen" (Luke 9:35). This "to him listen" is the same command found in Deuteronomy 18:15.

From such passages in the New Testament, and from other contemporary Jewish sources, it seems clear that the title "prophet" was often used to mean more than prophet. Those who applied it to Jesus may have used it as a synonym for "Messiah."