

Messiah

Psalm 110:1, "The LORD says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"

Question: Can I trust that Jesus is the Messiah God promised?

Key Verses: Matt 22:41-46; Acts 2:34-35; Heb 7:1-3.

Psalm 110 is quoted more in the New Testament than any other passage. One of those quotations, however, is from Jesus himself (Matt 22:44/Mark 12:36/Luke 20:42-43). That raises the stakes! In fact, this particular conversation capped off a full day of vituperative debates. Each of the major political parties of his day sent an envoy to trap Jesus with a question. They were tricky; Jesus crushed them; that's a discussion for another day. Right here, right now, the point is that when all his opponents were silenced, Jesus followed their question with one of his own, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"

Who is the Messiah?

When the Bible uses the word "Christ" it is a Greek translation of the original Hebrew word "Messiah." These are foreign terms for us in America. So let's make sure we understand them. First of all, "Christ" is not Jesus' last name. It is his title, roughly equivalent to the term "king" or "monarch". Secondly, this title indicates an earthly ruler not a divine figure. Is Jesus divine? Yes. But that's not the point of the title *Christ* or *Messiah*. It is not a description of his deity but his sovereignty. Third, during Jesus' lifetime, there was not a lot of discussion about or expectation of the coming Messiah. Case in point, of the 800 scrolls found in Qumran from that era, only about a dozen even mention the Messiah. Moreover, if any group of people were prone to mention the Messiah, it would be these desert monastics called Essenes. The whole point of them abandoning Jerusalem and living in the dusty hills of Qumran was to await God's dramatic displacement of the Jerusalem elites with a new and better High Priest. Even so, their description of the Messiah was scant. Clearly the Old Testament hinted at the coming Messiah. As a point of reference, the top dozen are (arguably) these: Deuteronomy 18:15-18; 2 Samuel 7:12; Psalm 2; 22; 118:22; Isaiah 9:1-7; 53:1-12; 61:1-2; Daniel 7:13-14; Micah 5:2; Zechariah 9:9; 12:10. Most of these will feature in this project of the top 100 verses.

No one prior to Jesus applied the title "Messiah" to a specific person. The next Jewish leader to receive the acclaim was Bar Kokhba in the 2nd century. Since he was assassinated in short order by the Romans, his fame quickly faded. This should have happened to Jesus after his execution were it not for the fact that he rose from the dead. So, when Jesus burst on the scene claiming the title, heads turned and tempers flared, in no small part to the fact that he didn't fit their preconceived notions of the nature of Messiah. Though opinions varied, the dominant idea was that Messiah would be a violent warrior who decimated their enemies. Several texts make that perfectly clear. "He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" (Isa

11:4). “The Gentiles will be shattered before the Messiah” (*Tg. Isa* 10:27). “First he will bring them alive before his judgment seat, and when he has reproved them, then he will destroy them” (2 *Esd* 12:33). “The last leader of that time will be left alive, when the multitude of his hosts will be put to the sword, and he will be bound, and they will take him up to Mount Zion, and My Messiah will convict him of all his impieties” (2 *Bar* 40:1). This regal-warrior and Davidic destroyer was the dominant messianic portrait of Jesus’ day. Psalm 110 leans hard in that direction: “²The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! ... ⁵The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. ⁶He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.”

Jesus’ Use of Psalm 110

Back to the debate. Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem the Tuesday before he died. His antagonists stand in stunned silence as this peasant carpenter stymied their greatest apologists. So Jesus turned the tables and asked them a question. It should have been easy enough to answer. Who is the Christ? Surely the national religious leaders could weigh in. It should have been in their wheel-house. Furthermore, Psalm 110 was a famous passage. Surely they had an informed opinion. It is at this point, however, that it gets a bit complex. Two points of clarification will help mental map the discussion. The first is linguistic the second cultural.

When David wrote, “The LORD said to my Lord,” you might notice in the English translation that the first “LORD” is in all caps. Why? Because it is a different Hebrew word. The Hebrew literally says, “Yahweh (LORD) said to my *Adonai* (Lord).” Clearly Yahweh is a reference to God. *Adonai* is also often a reference to God. At other times, however, it is a reference to a human being of superior status. We might translate it with titles like Mr. President, your majesty, or simply “Sir.” So which is it? Is Jesus claiming to be divine or just the human descendent of David?

That’s makes the second point of clarification critically important. In Jewish culture, the father was greater than the son. Always! So if the Messiah (or Christ) was a descendent of David (cf. 2 *Sam* 7:13-14; *Isa* 9:2-7; 11:1, 10; *Jer* 23:5), who is greater? Obviously and always the forefather. Yet that is not what David wrote. He said the Messiah was *his* Lord. How is that possible? That was Jesus’ question for which they had no answer: “‘If then David calls him “Lord,” how can he be his son?’ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions” (*Matt* 22:45-46). They were not only tongue-tied. They were hog-tied (a very uncomfortable turn of events for a Rabbi).

The problem, of course, is they had no category for incarnation. If God can’t become flesh, then David’s statement is a conundrum. Once we admit the category, however, the entire poem pops into place. There are two particular statements that only make sense in the context of incarnation.

(1) "Sit at my right hand." That is a position of divine power as is seen in Daniel 7:13-14. If Jesus is not divine, then he could not be placed at God's right hand. This is, however, the very place we find him after his ascension throughout the New Testament. "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69). "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Romans 8:34). "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3).

(2) The second statement of Psalm 110 that suggests deity is this: "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4). This strange mention of a mysterious figure harkens back to when Abraham honored the King of Salem with a tenth of the spoils of war. Melchizedek, like Santa Claus, had a real history but his legend is greater by far. This king of a Canaanite city was somehow also a priest of the Most High God and honored by the Father of Faith. What is striking about that was that kings and priests were separate vocations. In fact, Jewish kings were prohibited from sacrifice. The Davidic line of kings and the Aaronic lineage of priests ran on two different tracks. Hence, if a Jew was to be both Davidic king and priest, their qualifications for priest would have to come from a completely separate lineage. Enter Melchizedek. Because he had no recorded genealogy, this mysterious ruler served as a muse for a Messianic portrait. In fact, one of the scrolls of Qumran wrote this about him (11Q13):

Melchizedek will carry out the vengeance of God's judgments, and on that day he will free them from the hand of Belial and from the hand of all the spirits of his lot. To his aid shall come all the gods of justice and he is the one who all the sons of God, and ... This is the day of about which he said through Isaiah the prophet (Isa 52:7), who said: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, the messenger of good who announces salvation, saying to Zion: your God reigns. Its interpretation: And the messenger is the anointed of the spirit as Daniel (9:25) said about him: Until an anointed, a prince, it is seven weeks. And the messenger of good who announces salvation is the one about whom it is written.

Clearly, this Melchizedek is metaphor for the Messiah. Interestingly, about the same time this scroll was hidden in the Qumran caves another Jewish scrolls was penned that was received into the Bible. The book of Hebrews, chapter 7, has a very similar description of Melchizedek. "For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of

everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace.³ He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Hebrews 7:1–3).

Jesus fulfills Psalm 110. He is a human descendant of David who was anointed as both king in the royal lineage and high priest in the divine lineage of Melchizedek. It wasn't just Jesus, however, who promoted himself this way. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, used this Psalm in public preaching in the midst of his enemies. This makes sense. If you were to preach to an antagonistic and volatile audience would you not want to lean into one of Jesus' most effective proof-texts during his public debates? In fact, Peter preached standing near the very spot Jesus had earlier recited these words. Here is Peter's rendition from Acts 2: “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool”’” (Acts 2:34–35). It was so effective that the crowd repented and asked what they could do to be saved. Consequently, three-thousand were baptized right after this citation.

Paul follows suit. Twice he alluding to Psalm 110, claiming that Jesus is at the right hand of God (Eph 1:20 and Col 3:1). The author of Hebrews concurs, placing Jesus on the throne as God's co-regent (Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). So the unanimous voice in the New Testament is that Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 110. No other individual in history has ever successfully made that claim. No other individual fits the description. Jesus alone can claim to be God's son and David's *Adonai*. We are, therefore, right to worship him as the divine Messiah sent to save God's people and subdue his enemies. He is in the process of both as we speak.

Key Points:

- The Messiah (or Christ) was an earthly king that few talked about until Jesus.
- Only the incarnation of Jesus solves the interpretive problems of Psalm 110.
- No other individual in history fits the description of Psalm 110.

Action Step: Pray through Psalm 110 using the words of the passage to shape your acclamation of Jesus.

Further Resources: Donald Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah* (1972).