

Two Messiahs?

By Graham Osborne

As we approach Advent (Latin *ad-venio*, to come to, coming), we do so with a dual purpose: to recall, prepare for, and celebrate Jesus' past coming into the world two thousand years ago, but also, and very importantly, to anticipate and prepare for Jesus' second Advent: his final coming at the Last Judgement.

Given the particularly tumultuous times we are currently in, some have speculated that perhaps we have entered into "the end times". I have personally never received more questions on this topic than now.

Few Catholics are unaware of Jesus' constant reminder on this matter: it is not for us "to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). But Scripture and the Catechism both record two events that *must* happen before Jesus' return: the appearance of the Antichrist, and the grafting in again of the Jews to the Christian Church.

Regarding the antichrist, Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) are clear. CCC 675 provides a solemn warning: "Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers (cf. Luke 18:8). The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth⁵⁷⁵ will unveil the "mystery of iniquity" in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.⁵⁷⁶"

But it is St. Paul's bold prophecy in Romans 11 that I would like to focus on here, as he shares God's plan for his chosen people. *Before* Jesus' Second Coming, the Jews will be "grafted in" to God's family again, St. Paul insists: "if they do not persist in their unbelief, (the Jews) will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again ... a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved", for God's call to his chosen people is "irrevocable" (Romans 11:1-28). He then sternly warns every Christian not to consider themselves somehow superior to the Jews because of their current "preferred" status: "if God did not spare the natural branches (the Jews), neither will he spare you."

Similarly, the Catechism confirms this: "The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history *until* his recognition by 'all Israel' ... The 'full inclusion' of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, **in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles",⁵⁷² will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ",** in which "God may be all in all" (CCC 674).

There is much discussion around whether the Jews should be evangelized or not, but Scripture gives us some insight here. St. Paul, over the course of his life constantly reached out to his own people, claiming to be a Pharisee of Pharisees yet fearlessly urging every single Jew to turn to Jesus as the long awaited Messiah – even to the point of being beaten to near death on more than one occasion. Eventually he turned largely to the Gentiles, while St. Peter became the Apostle to the Jews (cf. Galatians 2:7-8). But there is no question that both of these key New Testament figures tirelessly evangelized their Jewish brothers and sisters.

So if we are to follow in their footsteps, are there perhaps clues we can share with our “elder brothers in the faith” (St John Paul II) that might help them come to see who Jesus really is? Absolutely! And some fascinating ones!

The first centers around Yom Kippur, the yearly Jewish Day of Atonement. On this day, as outlined in Leviticus 16:3-22, the high priest would cast lots between 2 male goats, sacrificing one to God as a sin offering, and laying his hands on the other, praying that the sins of the nation of Israel would be “laid on him”. This “Azazel” goat was then released to the wilderness, carrying the sins of the people away with it – the “scapegoat”.

A red thread was tied to this goat, but a portion of this red thread was also tied to the temple door. For centuries, this thread had miraculously turned white, signifying that God had accepted their atonement offering and forgiven their sins: “though your sins be as scarlet [crimson], they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as [white] wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

But in 30AD, interestingly, the year Jesus began his public ministry, things radically changed. The Talmud, a massive, authoritative compilation of ancient and more recent (as late as 500 A.D.) rabbinic teaching, records the details in multiple passages with chilling accuracy: “Forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the western light went out, the crimson thread remained crimson, and the lot for the Lord always came up in the left hand. They would close the gates of the Temple by night and get up in the morning and find them wide open” (Jacob Neusner, *The Yerushalmi*, p.156-157).

Suddenly, the temple thread no longer turned white. For forty years in a row, the two black and white stones the priest cast as lots to determine which goat was the “scapegoat” *always came up black*. The odds of this happening are a staggering one in 5.5 billion!

Additionally, the temple menorah candles (particularly the “western light”, which always remained lit, 24/7) would go out on their own *every single night for 40 years* (over 12,500 nights in a row!) And the closed temple doors would swing open of their own accord every night as well. The Talmud records chief Jewish

leader of the day, Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai, insisting that this was a sign of impending doom, and that the Temple would be destroyed, quoting Zechariah 11:1 as confirmation of this: "O Temple, why do you frighten us? We know that you will end up destroyed. For it has been said, 'Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars.'"

The parallels to Jesus in all of this are striking. He had already prophesied that the temple would be destroyed in Mark 13:2. And 40 years later, typically the Biblical period of testing, in 70 A.D., that is exactly what happened. But his reference to his own body as the new temple is unmistakable as well: "three days later I will raise it up." But who could miss the clear timing of it all? 30 A.D. was exactly when Jesus began his public ministry!

Did the rejection of Jesus as the messiah trigger a forty year warning to God's chosen people? Many Jewish converts to Christianity today are convinced of it. From a Christian perspective? The Jews rejected Jesus, the messiah sent to atone for their sins, and consequently, the temple thread ceased to turn white – because their atonement for sin was no longer accepted.

And what Christian wouldn't see the messianic fulfillment of Isaiah 53:6 in Jesus' death on the cross: "he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole." And then the clear parallel to the Jewish scapegoat: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

But this brings up our next fascinating prefigurement. There is much discussion about what the Jews were expecting from the messiah. Many assume they primarily anticipated a military ruler, but scholars tell us most were expecting much more. The Messiah would be a new Moses, who would bring about a new Covenant, complete with a new Passover and a new Exodus to a new promise land. I suspect every Christian is getting the picture about now!

But here is the stunning part. Rabbinic scholars have been pouring over the Scriptures for centuries now, questioning when the messiah will come, and how they will recognize him. And many have come to a rather shocking conclusion: that Scripture seems to speak of not one messiah, but two! One kingly and conquering, yet another peaceful, humble and suffering.

There are the obvious traditional messianic references of Isaiah 11: the kingly and conquering Messiah ben (son of) David: "a shoot from the stump of Jesse ... he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked."

In Zechariah 12 and 14, similarly, the messiah is clearly a warrior king. And while still seemingly of the house of David, interestingly, this messiah king almost

sounds like God himself: "the house of David shall be like God" (Zechariah 12:7-9).

But others quickly point out the contrastingly humble, messiah of peace that Zechariah also describes earlier in chapter 9: "your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." Similarly, in Isaiah 9 we hear more of peace: "For to us a child is born ... his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace* ... Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore." He is a warrior king, yet he brings peace? Interesting!

And a few chapters later in Zechariah, the confusion grows. Scripture clearly says they will, "look on him whom they have pierced" and "mourn for him ... as one weeps over a first-born" (Zechariah 12:10). The messiah king *must die*? How can this be?

And building on this seeming inconsistency, many rabbis have similarly noted the contrasting suffering messiah described in places like Isaiah 53: "he was spurned ... a man of suffering ... We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God ... pierced for our sins ... cut off from the land of the living, struck for the sins of his people."

They comparatively describe this "second", suffering messiah as Messiah ben Joseph, naming him after the patriarch, Joseph, who: was thought to be dead, sold into slavery for 30 pieces of silver, suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, but then peacefully rose to power, was exalted by the Gentiles of Egypt, forgave his brothers' sins, and saved Israel. The parallels to Jesus are unmistakable.

And to add to the confusion, in Micah 5 we read the messiah is to be born in tiny, unlikely Bethlehem, but Daniel 7 says the messiah will come with "the clouds of heaven ... like a son of man ... his dominion is an everlasting dominion ... his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." Which will it be?

The Talmud records another interesting rabbinic tradition expressed by Rabbi Joshua: "If they (the Jews) are meritorious, he will come with the clouds of heaven; if not, lowly and riding upon an ass" (Talmud Sanhedrin 98a).

Of course the Christian explanation to all of this unites all these seemingly opposing traditions. The messiah is not two people at all, but one person *who will come twice*. He will come first as a suffering servant, the Messiah ben Joseph – literally Jesus, "son of Joseph" (Luke 3:23) – to take on the sins of Israel as prefigured by the scapegoat: "pierced for our sins ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). But then he will return triumphant, as saviour, king and judge of all: the Messiah ben David, who will reign gloriously forever.

Luke 1:31-33 weaves all these elements together beautifully: “you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” [see Revelation 19:11-16 also).

Christianity has never seen itself as replacing Judaism, but fulfilling it. Jesus longed to gather his chosen people “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” in Luke 13:34. Nothing has changed! **“Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 20:22).**