

Bible Studies about Peter

Study 2: Peter's Concept of Christ

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Background

Peter was one of the first disciples that Jesus called. He was also one of the three who formed an inner circle around the Master:

"He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James."¹

"They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.'"²

Peter held a position of trust born out of his recognition and understanding of Christ, which is what we will consider further in this study – Peter's concept of Christ. Our next study in this series will look at Peter's walk on water.

The Message

Intimacy with Scripture, along with prayer, is a way to know the heart and mind of God. When we study the Bible we gain some understanding of the personhood and character of Jesus through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. This is something we develop from reading about Jesus directly in the New Testament, but also through prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The concept that we have of Jesus is an important aspect of our Christian faith. Indeed, knowledge of the personhood and character of Christ is also one aspect of discernment, which is covered in a separate study. When we are faced with situations in life, we should try to ask ourselves 'What would Jesus do in this situation?' Our response to this question is to some extent shaped by this concept, and in some cases by our own selfish ambitions and desires. So often we are ill-prepared or unwilling to follow the instruction Jesus gives to all of us *"deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*³

In the Bible it is clear that so many people wanted Jesus to be shaped by their own expectations, their own personal desires. And so many people failed to recognise that Jesus came to fulfil the relevant prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Israelites, in light of the occupation of their land by the Romans, had a dominant expectation and hope that prophecy would be fulfilled by a Messiah who was a Warrior King or Priest, or a liberator⁴. Their interpretation of prophecy was shaped by their own expectations, and as a result they overlooked some of the other key Messianic prophecies that they knew so well. Jesus well knew this, which was perhaps why He was so reluctant to use the term of Himself.

When we take a look at Peter's concept of Christ later we shall see how 'The Christ' (Greek) and 'the Messiah' (Hebrew) both mean 'the Anointed One'. In Old Testament times, anointing signified being set apart for service,

¹ Mark 5:37

² Mark 14:32-34

³ Matthew 16:24

⁴ The Samaritans expected a Messiah who would mainly be a teacher, but their rejection of all the inspired writings after the Pentateuch meant that they knew little about him.

particularly as a king (1 Samuel 16:1, 13; 1 Samuel 26:11) or a priest (Exodus 40:13-15; Leviticus 4:3). People were not just looking for an anointed one, but the Anointed One, the Messiah.

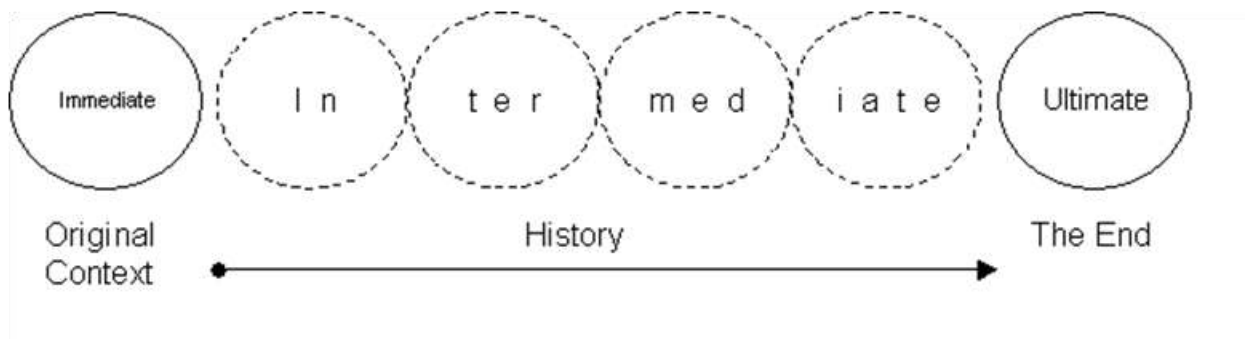
We will therefore first take a look at what the Bible tells us about the personhood and character of Jesus, before taking a look at the concept that Peter himself had of Jesus.

The concept of Jesus through prophecy

It is clear that prophecy in Scripture so often crosses three time-frames, bringing with it dimensions of fulfilment:

- Fulfilment at, or soon after, the time of prophecy
- Fulfilment in the first coming of Jesus Christ
- Fulfilment in the second coming of Jesus Christ

Others have commented that biblical prophecy may be termed 'iterative'⁵. This can perhaps be expressed most simply in the form of a diagram:



Here, “the immediate fulfilment in its original context is well-defined, as is the ultimate fulfilment, by the descriptions given in the biblical texts themselves. Thus they are shown in the diagram as distinct, solid circles. The various intermediate ‘fulfilments’ occurring throughout history, however, are dotted circles, to show that their definition is uncertain or only partial, and conjoined to show that these are a part of our continuous history as opposed to The Beginning (the original context of prophecy) and The End (the ultimate fulfilment of the prophecy).”⁶

Fulfilment of prophecy can therefore be in any part of this time horizon, or just simply in one part of the time horizon. We can also see in Scripture examples of where prophecy is fulfilled and is being fulfilled.

With this in mind, let us take a look together at one of the key examples in the context of the concept of Jesus:

Jesus – Son of man

The expression ‘Son of man’ is Jesus’ most common title for himself and is used 81 times in the Gospels, and never used by anyone but Jesus. Its roots in the context of Jesus may be found in the book of Daniel:

“As I watched in the night visions,

⁵ Edgcomb K.P., (2002), *On Iterative Prophecy*, <http://www.bombaxo.com/iterative.html>, Berkeley, California (used with permission)

⁶ Ibid

*I saw one like a human being⁷
 coming with the clouds of heaven.
 And he came to the Ancient One
 and was presented before him.
 To him was given dominion
 and glory and kingship,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages
 should serve him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 that shall not pass away,
 and his kingship is one
 that shall never be destroyed.”⁸*

The phrase ‘Son of man’ is used more frequently than any other to refer to Jesus in each of the four Gospels, with the exception of ‘Jesus’ itself.

In the prophetic sense, this expression was used by Jesus in three dimensions of fulfilment:

- Jesus – Son of David – Messianic King – Present Authority
- Jesus as Suffering Servant
- Jesus – Son of God – King of Glory – the Second Coming

We shall therefore take a look at each of these, concentrating on the Book of Mark (we encourage you to draw parallels in the other Gospels):

Jesus – Son of David – Messianic King – Present Authority

Jesus speaks of His authority to forgive sins:

“When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your

⁷ The NRSV translates ‘Son of man’ as ‘human being’. Looking at the original Hebrew I am inclined to support other translations’ use of ‘Son of man’ here

⁸ Daniel 7:13-14

mat and walk? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”⁹

One purpose of the miracles was to give evidence of the deity of Jesus.

Jesus also speaks of His Lordship of the Sabbath:

“One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”¹⁰

The Sabbath is a day intended for man for spiritual, mental and physical restoration.

Jesus – Suffering Servant

Perhaps one of the most poignant accounts we can read in Scripture may be found in Isaiah 53, many parts of which are quoted in the New Testament:

*“Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

⁹ Mark 2:1-12

¹⁰ Mark 2:23-28

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.*

*Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.”¹¹*

Jesus – Son of God – King of Glory –The second coming

There are three key references in the Book of Mark to a future coming of the Son of man “*in clouds with great power and glory*” to gather His chosen people and reject those who were ashamed of Jesus. This coming is associated with His being seated on the right hand of God:

“Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”¹²

“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”¹³

“Jesus said, ‘I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”¹⁴

Here we have looked at but one aspect of how Jesus fulfilled prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures, and we would encourage you to study the other aspects.

Judas Iscariot

Judas’ concept of Christ was perhaps overwhelmingly skewed by his expectation that Jesus would come immediately as Son Of God – The King of Glory, and perhaps his hope of personal gain in being associated with this Messianic figure. Through his betrayal of Jesus, he perhaps hoped to catalyse Jesus into an action in line with this expectation. It seems that Judas never really stopped to consider the real message that Jesus was bringing and the significance of His teaching. How little he grasped the significance of the actions of Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus with precious ointment:

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal

¹¹ Isaiah 53:1-12

¹² Mark 8:38

¹³ Mark 13:26

¹⁴ Mark 14:62

what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”¹⁵

How little Judas understood the price that Jesus had to pay, the great sacrifice that He had to make for each and every one of us.

A criminal crucified

Luke’s account of the crucifixion tells us:

“One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”¹⁶

This man, about whom we know so little, came into an awareness of Jesus as he too hung and suffered on the cross. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” – not some desperate plea from a dying man, but following confession, an acknowledgement of the deity of Jesus in a sentence that although so brief says so much. And what comfort we may receive from Jesus’ response that fills us with such hope and reassurance that one day we too will be with Jesus in paradise.

Peter’s concept of Christ

In the region of Caesarea Philippi, which was a particularly pagan region at the time, Jesus asked His disciples “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”¹⁷ It is later in this Chapter that we read of Peter’s response:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”¹⁸ Jesus’ reply to Peter was “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹⁹

In John, Peter’s response to Jesus when He asked His disciples:

“Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”²⁰

Of all the people who had encountered Jesus, including the other disciples, Peter was one of the few people whose concept of Christ was so ‘right’, the only person who had an inkling of the truth. He knew that Jesus was the ‘Son of the Living God’, and was filled with the hope of the glory of the Lord.

Peter had great faith and a child-like insight and implicit trust...but of all the things in which trust can be placed, his was in the personhood and character of Jesus – the “stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”²¹ and a “stone

¹⁵ John 12:1-8

¹⁶ Luke 23:39-43

¹⁷ Matthew 16:13b

¹⁸ Matthew 16:16

¹⁹ Matthew 16:17-19

²⁰ John 6:67-68

²¹ Mark 12:10b, Acts 4:11b, Psalm 118:22

*that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.*²² Judas rejected Jesus, and therefore stumbled and fell – Peter figuratively embraced Jesus wholeheartedly.

This wholehearted desire of Peter to serve Jesus is perhaps best illustrated in John 13. Here we read the account of where Jesus washes His disciples' feet:

“He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”²³

Some accounts are critical of Peter here, stating that he is dictating to Jesus. I personally don't quite see this – yes, there is a mixture of pride and humility in Peter's initial response. How would you feel if Jesus prepared Himself to wash your feet? And how do you feel when you acknowledge the great price that Jesus paid once for all? I think that Peter began to grasp why Jesus was about to wash the feet of His disciples – and his enthusiasm and commitment is indicated in his final response.

Questions

1. When we read of many of Peter's responses to Jesus we should feel challenged. Sometimes we need to ask ourselves what is our concept of Christ, and how are we changed by that knowledge?
2. When we compare with our account of Judas, we should also ask ourselves what is our motive, and what does our heart reveal about our relationship with God?
3. We may enter into a discussion with a perfect stranger, or perhaps even a work colleague. How would we respond if they asked us about Jesus and what language would we use?
4. How would you feel if Jesus prepared Himself to wash your feet?
5. How do you feel when you acknowledge the great price that Jesus paid once for all?

²² 1 Peter 2:8, Isaiah 8:14

²³ John 13:6-9