

# What Does "the Messiah" Mean?

By Abu Alex

The common word used for Messiah in the Christian Scriptures, in the original Greek texts, is *ho Christos*. Twice it is said to be a translation of the word *Messias* (John 1:41, 4:25) and, as in the Qur'an, no attempt is made to define or explain the meaning of the title. Nevertheless, just as the Qur'an uses the definite article *al* to apply the title to Jesus alone, so in the Christian Scriptures he is constantly called *ho Christos*, that is the Messiah.

Throughout the Scriptures the title is set forth as applying to God's supreme deliverer who was eagerly awaited by the Jews. It is therefore to the Jewish Scriptures that we must turn to find its real meaning. In many places in the original Hebrew texts we find the word *mashiah*, meaning "anointed." It is applied to the anointed high priest in Israel (Leviticus 4:3)—as well as the nation's king (2 Samuel 1:14). It is also given to the prophets of God (Psalm 105:15) as well as to the Persian king Cyrus who was anointed by God to prepare the way for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its Temple after its destruction by a previous king, Nebuchadnezzar (Isaiah 45:1). The prophet Daniel, however, predicted that after the rebuilding of Jerusalem, a period of time would pass wherefore a *Mashiah*, an "Anointed One", would come (Daniel 9:25). This use of the word as a title for the coming Prince of God led the Jews to speak freely of him as *ha Mashiah*—"the Messiah."

The prophets of old spoke regularly of this great personality who God promised would come to the nation. It was little wonder that the Jews concluded that the Ruler of God's own kingdom, whose origin was from of old, and whose dominion would last forever, was to be far greater than a prophet. When Daniel spoke of him as "God's Anointed One" (Daniel 9:25), the title *Mashiah* stuck and became the common title to describe him. "The Messiah" became their long-awaited Ruler and Deliverer.

We have already seen that the Qur'an openly acknowledges that Jesus was indeed *al-Masih*, "the Messiah," the long-awaited Deliverer whom God had promised. We have also seen how the Jews failed to recognize the Messiah when he came because they could not fully understand the prophecies of the former prophets regarding him and the purpose of his coming to earth (Acts 13:27). We now proceed to see whether Jesus regarded himself as the Messiah and whether his coming was announced. When we read a contemporary record of John's life and ministry we find that he looked toward the coming Messiah as one far superior to himself. As all the people of that time were in expectation of the coming Saviour, and "questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Messiah" (Luke 3:15). John replied to them all by saying: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16). These statements were all consistent with those of the former prophets who had predicted the glory of the coming Messiah whom John openly identified as Jesus. John too spoke of the pre-existence of the Messiah as Micah and others had done before him and, being the only prophet to rise at the same time as Jesus, rejoiced at the honour of being appointed to reveal him to the nation (John 1:31). He was indeed sent from God, but only as a prophet to bear witness to the true light who was coming into the world just as the former prophets had done. "He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light" (John 1:8).

Some months later a Samaritan woman came to the well of Jacob at Sychar and saw Jesus sitting next to it. A brief discussion followed and, when she saw that he could see

right through her and could read the background of her life, she said, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (John 4:19). Yet, as he continued to discuss with her and now began to speak of a new age that was about to be brought in where opportunities would arise for all men in all nations to have a living knowledge of the truth of God in their hearts and thus worship him fully in spirit and in truth, she sensed that he was far more than a prophet and said to him: “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things”. (John 4:25)

To this Jesus openly replied, “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26). Her question was an indirect way of prompting Jesus to disclose himself—was he just another prophet or was he possibly God’s Supremely Anointed One, the heavenly ruler of ancient days who would bring the full and final revelation of God to man? Jesus gave her an emphatic answer—I am he. On another occasion, when the Jews said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24), Jesus again answered quite openly “I told you, and you do not believe” (John 10:25). He had no doubt whatsoever that he was the Messiah, the man of glory foretold in the prophecies of the prophets who came before him. Indeed when the high priest of Israel himself directly asked him “Are you the Messiah?” (Mark 14:61), he answered equally directly, “I am” (Mark 14:62).