



# THE BEREIA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## **The Messiah: What Did They Expect? Utilizing Historical-Cultural Background — A Case Study, 2**

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From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt 16.21–23).

In [part 1](#), we noted the importance of understanding historical-cultural background and then introduced the above text as a case study in the New Testament. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus just after his confession of him as the Messiah (vv. 13–20) is similar to the other disciples’ responses to later announcements of his suffering (17.22–23; 20.17–20). It is also out of character in a first century Jewish master-disciple relationship where “it was unthinkable for a disciple to correct his master, let alone ‘rebuke’ him as Peter does here” (Wilkins 2002, 104).

Why did Peter rebuke Jesus? Why did the other disciples share his outlook? Though their actions may be attributable to spiritual immaturity, hubris, or some other human failing, we should explore such possibilities only after considering the historical-cultural understandings of their world, especially their beliefs about the expected identity and actions of the Messiah, the confession of whom prompted the exchange in 16.21–23. At the forefront of their outlook was the national “hope for a renewed Davidic dynasty” embedded in the Old Testament prophetic literature. That hope had been “infused into eschatological expectations about an Israelite ruler with grandiose qualities and superlative strengths” (Bird 2013, 116) (cf. Hos 3.3; Amos 9.11; Isa 9; 11; Jer 23.5–6; 33.17–22; Ezek 34.22–24; Zech 9.9–10; 12.7–13.1).

The notion of a renewed Davidic dynasty is not the only messianic expectation evident in the prophets, however. They also pointed to the coming of an anointed priest and anointed king who would hasten Israel’s restoration (Zech 4.12–14; 6.11–12), as well as to a vision for God’s kingdom that, through the actions of “one like a son of man,” would crush all human kingdoms and vindicate the saints of the Most High over the pagan empires of the Near East (Dan 2.44–45; 7; 9.24–27) (Bird 2013, 116).

But, while primary, the Old Testament writings were only part of what informed messianic expectations in the Jewish world the disciples inhabited. Later Jewish ideas, which are recorded in the literature that appeared in the four centuries between the last of the Old Testament writings and birth of Jesus, were also part of the first century cultural messianic expectations that

were “in the air” (see [part 1](#)). Blomberg identifies “at least six different strands of messianic expectations” in the time of Jesus’s ministry (Blomberg 2009, 476).

1. The Maccabean revolt had initially eliminated the need for a literal messiah in the minds of some. (Strauss 2007, 139, notes that the Sadducees were among those who did not expect a Messiah to come.)
2. In the sectarian Judaism represented at Qumran, both *priestly* and *kingly* Messiahs were anticipated.
3. A significant portion of mainstream Judaism was looking for a *warrior* king who would help the Jews break the shackles of Rome.
4. The well-known parables of similitudes in *1 Enoch* equated the Messiah, portrayed as an apocalyptic Davidic king, with titles such as “Holy,” “Elect one” and “Son of Man” (cf. similar ideas in the post-Christian 4 Ezra).
5. The Samaritans were looking for a *Taheb* (a “restorer”) who would fulfill the prophecy of a new Moses outlined in Deuteronomy 18.18. Some saw this figure as a political deliverer while other traditions depicted him as a teacher.
6. The idea of a *teacher* or *sage* became prominent in post-Christian rabbinic literature, the seeds of which were at least probably beginning to grow in the first century (Blomberg 2009; 476–477; cf. Strauss 2007, 139–140).

Blomberg summarizes as follows:

Thus, we must beware of any glib generalizations about what all or most Jews were looking for at the time of Jesus. Messianic expectations were diverse and in some circles virtually nonexistent. Where they were present, they were often politicized. This probably explains Jesus’ reticence to accept the term without qualification (Mark 8:29; 14:62 pars), the relative scarcity of occasions in which he uses the term himself, and his concern to silence others at times when they do use it (the ‘messianic secret’ motif, ...). One must also take into account belief in certain Jewish circles that it was inappropriate for the Messiah to identify himself as such until after he had fulfilled his ministry” (Blomberg 2009, 477).

Evidence of the diversity of messianic expectations in the world where he walked is found in the New Testament, e.g., in the disciples’ reply to Jesus’s request to report what others were saying about his identity: “And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’” (Matt 16.14). We also see indications of the diversity in John’s references to some who wondered if Jesus was “the Prophet” (John 1.21, 25; 6.14; 7.40). In short, the people, including the disciples, had varied messianic expectations that were ingrained in their thinking. These constituted the presuppositions through which they filtered their interactions with and understanding of Jesus. To be sure, one view was more pronounced than the others. We’ll look at that view and how it might have colored the disciples’ outlook in part 3.

### Works Cited

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