



# THE BEREHA PAGE

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

## Expectation: A Messiah Who Conquers Utilizing Historical-Cultural Background — A Case Study, 3

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In [part 2](#), we posited that the resistance of Peter and the other disciples to Jesus’s three announcements that he would be handed over to the Romans and killed (Matt 16.20–23; 17.22–23; 20.17–28) is better understood when we are aware that, in first century Israel, there were “at least six different strands of messianic expectations.” We should therefore “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” (Blomberg 2009, 476–477).

We get a sense of the diversity of views from Matthew 16.13–14 where, in response to Jesus’s question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” the disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” The expectations associated with those conclusions were rooted in Old Testament texts like Deuteronomy 18.15–18 (the prophet like Moses) and Malachi 4.5 (the return of Elijah; cf. John 1.21, 25; 6.14; 7.40) and were enhanced by passages like *2 Esdras* 2.17–19, written in the second century BC: “Do not fear, mother of children, for I have chosen you, says the Lord. I will send you help, my servants Isaiah and Jeremiah. According to their counsel I have consecrated and prepared for you twelve trees loaded with various fruits, and the same number of springs flowing with milk and honey, and seven mighty mountains on which roses and lilies grow; by these I will fill your children with joy” (NRSV).

The politicizing to which Blomberg refers is evident in the notion of messianic kingship that is present in more than one of the different expectations, including those that emphasized other roles such as priest and prophet. Since, except for the time between the completion of the Maccabean revolt and beginning of Roman rule (142–63 BC), the Jews had been subject to foreign rule since the early sixth century BC (586), this is not surprising. They were looking for the deliverer and king promised in Old Testament texts such as Isa 9; 11; Jer 23.5–6; and Zech 9.9–10. A notable example of the development of the messiah-as-king expectation in the intertestamental period is found in the first century BC writing, *Psalms of Solomon*:

Behold, O Lord, and *raise up to them their king, the son of David*, at the time, in the which you choose, O God, *that he may reign over Israel your servant*. And gird him with strength, *that he may shatter unrighteous rulers*. And *that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample (her) down to destruction*. In the wisdom of righteousness he will thrust out sinners from (the) inheritance, He will destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter’s vessel.

With a rod of iron he will break in pieces all their substance. *He will destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth.* At his rebuke *nations will flee before him.* And he will reprove sinners for the thoughts of their heart (*Pss Sol 17.21–25*; emphasis added).

Throughout the remainder of chapters 17–18, the author of *Psalms of Solomon* refers to expectations of the Messiah’s exemplary character, benevolent rule, and role as the one who would make the hope for God’s rule over all other nations a reality. In first century Israel, where Roman power was absolute, the latter notion would have been especially encouraging (see Martin 1985, 109–115).

We can’t know whether Peter, James and John, or any of the others had ever read or heard a reading of the words written in *Psalms of Solomon*, but the ideas conveyed there and elsewhere were embedded in the cultural climate they inhabited. Unlike most in that world, however, they had been given the opportunity to see Jesus up close. They saw that his character was exemplary and believed he would rule benevolently. They had also seen him do some extraordinary things, drawing on power that, if applied to political ends, would surely be able to “shatter unrighteous rulers ... purge Jerusalem from nations that trample (her) down to destruction,” and “destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth.” They would have been confident that, with a word, he could rebuke the “nations,” even one as powerful as Rome, who would surely “flee before him” (*Pss Sol 17.22, 24–25*).

So, it’s reasonable to conclude that Jesus’s announcement of suffering and death created dissonance in the disciples. They knew he was “the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God” (Matt 16.16). How could he be rejected, suffer, handed over to the Romans, and killed? No, that simply *could not happen!* So, in what was probably motivated, in part at least, by a desire to resolve their inner conflict, “Peter ... began to rebuke him: ‘Far be it from you, Lord!’” (16.22). When Jesus repeated the prediction again, they all were grieved at his words (17.23). And when, still unable to fathom the idea that ran counter to what everyone knew, James and John heard him say it a third time, they proceeded with their plan to ask for appointments to positions in the coming kingdom comparable to the secretaries of State and Defense in our world (Matt 20.21).

On all three occasions, the text of Matthew unequivocally says their responses were wrong. We will think about what we can learn from their experience in part 4.

### Works Cited

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