

Chapter Two Jesus and the Tradition of the Elders – Part One

Before we can move on to properly understand Jesus’ reaction to unbiblical teaching and practices we need to first appreciate that Israel’s religious leaders rejected him in the full knowledge that he was indeed their long awaited Messiah. This is clear, for instance, from the fact that the Lord expected John the Baptist to know he was Messiah simply on the basis of his fulfilment of Old Testament scripture:

“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’ Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.’”¹

By quoting from the prophet Isaiah Jesus makes it clear that his fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures was complete and sufficient proof that he was Israel’s Messiah. After all, Micah had predicted Messiah’s birthplace², and in his famous prophecy of the ‘seventy weeks’ the prophet Daniel had even provided a time frame in which that birth would occur.³ When a man arranges in advance not just the place of his birth but it’s timing as well then it is pretty obvious that he is someone special. Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah would have sunk without trace had he fallen at either of these first two hurdles: the predicted time and place of his birth. So when the same man starts fulfilling Old Testament Messianic prophecy in other regards as well, then it is rather evident what you have got on your hands - the appearance of the long awaited Messiah.

In this regard, the teaching you sometimes hear that Jesus never actually claimed to be the Messiah or to be Divine is born out of ignorance of both the New Testament and its Jewish background. The Jews, as we will move on to see, knew exactly what he was claiming for himself. He was accused of blasphemy precisely because he claimed to be both the Messiah and the Lord God in human form. Likewise, the idea often put forward that the title ‘son of God’ referred to His Divinity whilst ‘son of man’ to his humanity is also flawed. Against the background of the prophet Daniel and the visions he reported, ‘son of man’ was actually a Messianic title *par excellence*.⁴ It cannot be emphasised enough how important it is to approach scripture from the viewpoint of the thinking, expectations and understanding of the Jews of Jesus’ day.

But as if completely fulfilling Old Testament prophecy was not enough on its own, Jesus proved himself to Israel in another way entirely. It had little to do with scripture, but absolutely everything to do with *the tradition of the elders* and the theological teachings that surrounded it.

One of the features of the thinking which surrounded the *Oral Law* was a continuous tendency to go beyond what scripture taught. This is always a mistake and Paul counselled the Corinthian church to avoid doing it:

“Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, ‘Do not go beyond what is written.’”⁵

That is to say, do not go beyond scripture. Even when it came to the issue as to how one would know if the Messiah had appeared *Pharisaic Judaism* went further than the Old Testament and outlined various other ways in which the Messiah would be known. Not only did Jesus prove himself to be the Messiah according to what the Old Testament taught but he also did so according to the Pharisee’s extra-biblical teachings as well.

¹ Matthew 11 v 2-6

² Micah 5 v 2

³ Daniel 9 v 24-27

⁴ Daniel 7 v 13-14

⁵ 1 Corinthians 4 v 6

At the time of Jesus the Jewish religious leaders taught that there were two different categories of miracles. Firstly, there were miracles that anybody could perform if empowered to do so by the Spirit of God. But secondly, there was a category of miracle that only the Messiah could perform. *Pharisaic Judaism* taught that there were specific Messianic miracles,⁶ and we will examine three of them.

The Healing of a Leper

According to the Mosaic Law the only way someone could become unclean by touching a live human body was if the person they touched was a leper. In Leviticus chapter 13 there are detailed instructions to priests concerning how to diagnose a leper and what to do with them. Chapter 14 then gives instructions as to what the priest should do when a leper was healed. There was to be a sacrifice of two birds followed by a seven-day investigation in which to fully verify the healing. If it transpired, as a result of the investigation, that the healing of a leper had indeed occurred, then on the eighth day there would be more sacrifices and sundry rituals after which the healed person was fully restored to society and a normal life.

However, whereas the instructions concerning the diagnosis of leprosy had been invoked and carried out countless times throughout Israel's history, the second set of instructions concerning when a leper had been healed had never been invoked. The simple fact of the matter was that throughout Israel's history, from the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai to the time of Jesus, no Jewish leper had ever been healed. There were, of course, such exceptions as Moses and Miriam, but these are not examples of normal leprosy being healed, but rather temporary bouts of the disease imposed and then quickly removed by the Lord for reasons we need not go into here. For our purposes we simply need to understand that, because of the astounding fact of there being inspired instructions in scripture concerning a situation no one had yet faced, that is, the healing of a leper, the Pharisees designated such a Messianic miracle. Only the Messiah, they reasoned, can do such a thing. What should happen then, according to *Pharisaic Judaism*, should a Messianic sign be alleged to have occurred? What was the procedure that would need to be followed?

The Investigation of Messianic Signs

Whenever a Messianic miracle was claimed to have happened, the Jewish leaders implemented a two-stage investigation. The first stage was purely that of observation, a delegation of leaders would be dispatched to the people concerned to observe for a period of seven days. During this time they were not permitted to ask questions or to raise objections, but merely to look on. The objective was purely to establish whether or not a Messianic miracle had taken place, or whether the whole thing might be a misunderstanding or even some kind of deception or trick. If any claim was subsequently considered to be of no significance then the matter would be dropped. But, if any such claim was believed to be significant, that is, that the claimed Messianic miracle had genuinely taken place, then a second stage was implemented – the interrogation stage. For this a second delegation would be sent out to those involved; only this time the object was to ask questions and raise objections, precisely in order to ascertain whether or not the Messiah had actually come:

“While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.’ Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”⁷

Here, towards the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus heals a leper and sends him to the priest, according to the instructions we have already seen in Leviticus chapter 14. He is fully aware that this would set off a Messianic investigation, and we can see clearly see that it did as we read the next part of Luke's account:

⁶ Article, “The Three Messianic Miracles” by Arnold Fruchtenbaum, on the Ariel Ministries website: <http://www.ariel.org>.

⁷ Luke 5 v 12-16

“One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, ‘Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, ‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....’ He said to the paralyzed man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’”⁸

Two things emerge from the above. Firstly, due to the fact that suddenly religious leaders are coming to see Jesus from all over Israel, we can see that the Messianic investigation – set off by the healing of the leper – has been implemented and is in full swing. Secondly, since they are only ‘thinking to themselves’ and not voicing their outrage audibly, we can deduce this is the first seven days of the process. That is, it is phase one of the proceedings, the observation stage. However, we can deduce as well that the initial investigation did indeed proclaim Jesus’ healing of the leper as being significant given that, later on in the same chapter, they proceed to voice objections out loud. This confirms that the proceedings had progressed to phase two, the interrogation stage:

“After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’? Jesus answered them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’ They said to him, ‘John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.’”⁹

This interrogation stage of the Pharisaic Messianic investigation continues throughout the rest of Jesus’ ministry.

The Casting Out of a Dumb Spirit

Pharisaic Judaism devised a formula for the casting out of evil spirits that consisted of three stages. Firstly, verbal communication was established with the demon in the demonized person. Secondly, the name of the evil spirit would be ascertained. Finally, the demon would be cast out through the use of its name.

It must be noted that this had nothing whatsoever to do with the teaching of scripture and was suspect through and through. Certainly Jesus never used any such formula, and the instance recorded in the gospels of both Mark and Luke, in which a demoniac approached him and Jesus asked for a name, can be explained by the simple fact that He was addressing the man himself and not the demons inside him.¹⁰ The idea that demons have names accessible to human beings is nowhere found in the Bible, and why anyone would want to get into conversation with a demon anyway is completely beyond me. After all, anything an evil spirit did say would be totally irrelevant for the simple fact that you could never know whether what it said was true or false. Satan and his demonic hordes are not, after all, known for their honesty! Far from conversing with the demons He cast out, Jesus rather took the complete opposite approach and told them to be quiet. No, when confronted with demonized

⁸ Luke 5 v 17-26

⁹ Luke 5 v 27-33

¹⁰ Mark 5 v 8-9; Luke 8 v 30

people don't talk to the evil spirits in them, just cast them out in the name of Jesus! It is further interesting to note that precisely the same wrong practice survives today and is taught in the context of the completely unbiblical demonology of the charismatic movement. It owes nothing whatsoever to the pages of the New Testament, but rather has everything to do with *Pharisaic Judaism*. It is merely a modern day rehash of two millennia old Jewish false teaching. (Not a lot of people know that!)

However, with this Pharisaic formula for exorcism came a somewhat unsolvable problem, and it was encounters with demons that refused to talk to anyone. Jewish exorcists simply could not cast out these 'dumb demons', as scripture refers to them, because they could not get them to reveal their names. Indeed, they were unable to get them to say anything at all. Thus the casting out of 'dumb demons' was declared to be another example of a Messianic miracle. Only Messiah, they reasoned, could cast such evil spirits out of people:

“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’”¹¹

'Son of David' was another of the main titles the Jews used for the coming Messiah, and we can see from the above that the common people of Israel were well versed in the concept of Messianic miracles. They well knew Pharisaic teaching in all these regards for the simple fact that it was the standard teaching of the day. Hence, seeing Jesus cast a 'dumb demon' out of someone immediately raised the issue of Him being the Messiah. And of course with Him being now constantly the subject of the interrogation stage of a Messianic investigation, it was immediately after this incident that the Pharisees accused him of doing such things in the power of the devil.¹² The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, as Jesus phrased His accusation against them, can therefore be seen as Israel's rejection of Jesus as their Messiah *in the full knowledge that he was precisely who he claimed to be, having proved himself not just by scripture, but also in accordance to Israel's own extra-biblical teachings and practices*. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was Israel's national sin of rejecting their Messiah, and God's judgement on them as a nation for this was therefore being rejected themselves by God, being taken (yet again) from the land, this time by the Romans, and temporarily replaced by the (largely) Gentile Church. It is not a sin committed by individuals, and we know from the New Testament that many who were amongst those who rejected him here, even priests, later became believers and were therefore personally saved. This was a national sin that led to the rejection of a nation and did not relate to individuals on a personal level.

The Healing of Someone Born Blind

The last Messianic sign we are interested in occurred because, rather like the healing of a leper, the healing of someone who had been born blind had never been known to happen. Therefore, said the Pharisees, it was a sign that only the Messiah could perform:

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ (*Pharisaic Judaism taught that a fetus could sin.*) ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ‘Go,’ he told him, ‘wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. ”

“‘We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.’ (*This was a completely dishonest statement as it was well known where Jesus came from and it could have been easily verified.*) The man answered, ‘Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. (*This is an acknowledgement that he must be Messiah and therefore came from Heaven.*) We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ To this they

¹¹ Matthew 12 v 22-23

¹² Matthew 12 v 24-28

replied, ‘You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!’ And they threw him out. Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ ‘Who is he, sir?’ the man asked. ‘Tell me so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said, ‘You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.’ Then the man said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him.”¹³ (*The healed man’s Messianic acknowledgment.*)

So we can see from all this that people’s reactions to these Messianic miracles were quite singular. If the ordinary, non-Messianic miracles Jesus performed brought forth loud and amazed “Wows!”, then these Messianic ones solicited even louder double “Wows!”. Such miracles were clear testimony that the one performing them was indeed Israel’s long awaited Messiah. The Pharisees knew full well that Jesus was their promised Messiah, and this by His repeated fulfilments of both the Old Testament scriptures and their own extra-biblical teachings and practices. The problem, though, was that He was not the kind of Messiah they actually wanted, and it is this that led to such conflict between them.

We are now in a position to properly look at, and appreciate and understand, just how Jesus faced and tackled this problem of the *tradition of the elders*. What was His verdict on a situation whereby unbiblical practices and teachings were taking precedence over scripture, yet whilst those so doing claimed it to be a result of them acting on Divine leading?

¹³ John 9 v 1-7, 29-38. Italicized brackets mine