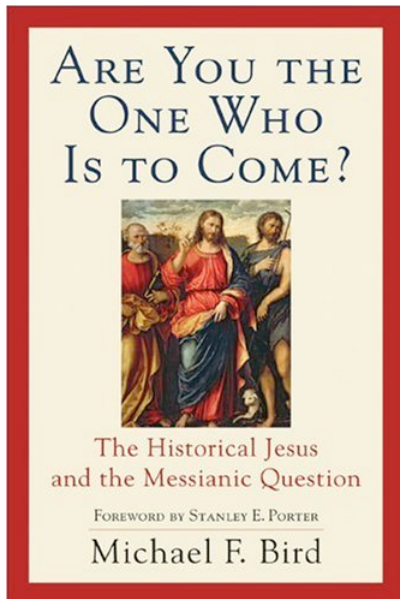


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Bird, Michael F.

Are You the One Who Is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question

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It is considered axiomatic in current historical Jesus scholarship that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah. It is also thought to be unlikely that he ever regarded himself as a messianic figure. These elements of the New Testament narratives are held to represent later Christian reflection on the significance of Jesus' death. According to this line of reasoning, the explicitly messianic presentation of Jesus in the canonical Gospels finds its basis in the confession of the early church rather than Jesus' historical vocation. In this volume, Michael Bird aims to challenge the scholarly consensus by raising and answering the question, "Did a self-professedly messianic claimant lie at the root of this messianic movement, or was the messianic identity of Jesus a subsequent development in the christological reflection of the early Christian communities that attributed the title to him in the course of their post-Easter theologizing?" (25).

In his introductory chapter Bird states that his goal is to argue that the historical Jesus regarded his vocation in messianic categories. Preferring the term "messianic self-understanding" to the more common "messianic self-consciousness," Bird begins with the candid admission that Jesus likely never referred to himself as Messiah. Nevertheless, he believes it possible to demonstrate that Jesus thought of himself in messianic

categories. He attempts to accomplish this by raising questions of Jesus' intentions and identity and thereby to show that Jesus led a life that was "performatively messianic."

Chapter 2 provides an overview of messianic expectations in the Second Temple period. Among the issues covered in the chapter are the variety of expectations during the period, the light Old Testament texts can shed on these expectations, and a consideration of different messianic figures in the first century. Bird makes a distinction between historical figures explicitly regarded as the Messiah (Jesus of Nazareth, Simon ben Kosiba) and historical figures whose messianic identity was implicit but inferred by others (Judas the Galilean, Simon the servant of Herod, Athronges, Menahem, Simon bar Giora). In this chapter he also provides a working definition of what constitutes a messianic text. He writes:

[W]hat I propose then is that we identify an Old Testament text as "messianic" when the plain sense of the text (i.e., its semantic and linguistic operation) designates a royal figure sent by God, and also that either the text itself was treated as messianic in postbiblical interpretation, or else the pattern of activity that the figure embodies corresponds to a pattern of activity often expected of messianic figures in antiquity. (46)

Among the Old Testament texts identified as having a messianic interpretation are Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; 2 Sam 7:12–16; Ps 2; Isa 11:1–6; 53; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 6:12; Dan 7:9, 13–14; and Amos 9:11. Overall, Bird's hermeneutical approach is more progressive than most studies that seek to defend a traditional understanding of Jesus' messianic status embraced by confessional or ecclesial readings of the New Testament. Ultimately, he argues that, for messianic figures in the first century, *functions* are more important than *titles*. This would have made it possible for Jesus to regard himself as Messiah and behave in ways that can be deemed overtly messianic without an explicit claim to be Messiah.

In chapter 3 Bird looks at reasons traditionally offered for denying the messianic shape of Jesus' historical vocation, with the intent of showing that those reasons lack the substance they are generally assumed to have. An interesting argument Bird pursues in this chapter is that Mark's secrecy motif (traditionally called the "messianic secret") likely goes back to the ministry of the historical Jesus (see 66–70). Using Wrede as his primary conversation partner, Bird appears to set up a false choice between Wrede's position and his own. A great deal has been written on Mark's secrecy motif, and although he cites a number of these studies in his footnotes, Bird's argument appears to be somewhat of an oversimplification. In addition, his conclusion is unlikely for several reasons. First, it is clear from the outset of Mark's Gospel that the reader is supposed to understand that Jesus is "Christ [=Messiah] and Son of God." This is confirmed a number of times in the

narrative, most notably in the Gospel's two climaxes: 8:27–31, when Peter confesses that Jesus is the “messiah”; and 15:39, when the centurion confesses, “truly this man was the Son of God.” All of this appears to be a deliberate literary attempt aimed at having a rhetorical effect on the audience. Second, contrary to Bird's claim that there is a similar secrecy theme in John, Mark's secrecy motif is unattested elsewhere in the canonical tradition. While it is possible for things that are singly attested to have a historical basis, I think that such an important element of the historical Jesus' ministry would have found stronger exposition elsewhere in the New Testament.

Chapter 4 considers “son of man” sayings, “I have come” sayings, New Testament allusions to royal Old Testament figures, and other elements of the Jesus tradition that are invested with messianic significance. This examination concludes with the assertion that Jesus had an acute sense of authority and purpose, although Bird cautiously recognizes that his evidence does not establish beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus saw himself as Messiah in the way traditionally envisioned by Christian confession. The discussion in chapter 5 probes the passion narratives for further messianic material. Here Bird displays a strong awareness of both literary and intertextual issues in his analysis of materials from the passion narratives.

A brief final chapter entitled “Toward a Messianic Christology” explores the theological significance of Bird's conclusions. It also provides him an opportunity to include a final paragraph stating his own confessional understanding of Jesus' messiahship. Given Bird's approach throughout the book, one would fully expect him to end with such an emphasis.

This is a short book (only 167 pages of text) packed with a lot of information and analysis. Bird writes with clarity, which will help make his arguments accessible to a wider audience. He also reflects an awareness of issues across a spectrum of ancient texts and modern scholarship. Throughout the book he cleverly interacts with the publications of his conversation partners. The book's title is fashioned after Joseph Fitzmyer's *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), a volume that Bird states partly inspired his own response to modern scholarship. In addition, the titles of chapters 3 and 5 recall language from the works of James Dunn and Nils Dahl, respectively. Apart from issues of style, however, what can be said for the substance of Bird's argument?

It goes without saying that there is a certain amount of circularity in nearly every discussion in historical Jesus scholarship. One's presuppositions can often predetermine both the course of an argument and its conclusions. For what is described on the back cover as a “neo-conservative” defense, this book is more intellectually honest than one might expect. Texts are dealt with fairly, and Bird is cautious though optimistic in his conclusions. The book does end with an apologetic flourish, and this will likely give

ammunition to those who want to reject Bird's conclusions as motivated by tradition or arrived at through confessional presuppositions. While I do not share Bird's optimism about all the details of his study, his argument is not without its merits, and it deserves a hearing. Perhaps the best setting for use of this book will be the evangelical classroom, although it has the potential to serve as a useful resource in a number of settings, especially those where a balanced voice of dissent is missing.