**Questions Jesus Asked**

“Who am I to you?”

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

**Questions Jesus Asked: “Who am I to you?”**

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**Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Text(s):** Mark 8:27-30; Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18

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**The Texts and Their Contexts**

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<td>27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” 28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ.” 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.</td>
<td>13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, &quot;Who do people say the Son of Man is?&quot; 14 They replied, &quot;Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.&quot; 15 &quot;But what about you?&quot; he asked. &quot;Who do you say I am?&quot; 16 Simon Peter answered, &quot;You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.&quot; [see below] 20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.</td>
<td>18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, &quot;Who do the crowds say I am?&quot; 19 They replied, &quot;Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.&quot; 20 &quot;But what about you?&quot; he asked. &quot;Who do you say I am?&quot; 21 Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.</td>
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**Introduction**

This week’s question that Jesus asked appears in three of the four Gospels, each with a slight variation, and Matthew providing thicker commentary by adding three additional sentences. We will not belabor the point about Matthew’s further information, whether the words belong to Jesus or to the writer as commentator. Scholars disagree about that. Our concern is with the texts as they come down to us from the hands of faithful witnesses, and these include the Christian scribes who put the Bible into its final form. That said we want to pay attention to the shared material in all three, paying attention to the main questions which are directly related to each other:

“Who do people say that I am?”

*and*

“Who do you say that I am?”

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**Looking at the Texts: A Question of Identity**

At one level, Jesus is checking the opinion polls to discover public perceptions of his person and his work. He does this, not because he intends to change direction or accommodate popular sentiment, but to offer a foil to
his more important question to follow that puts the onus on the disciples to disclose their own feelings about him. If you’ve been reading through the Gospels (have you been ☺?) up to this incident, you will know that religious figures have attacked him, his family considers him mad, and others think he insults the God of Israel. Still, the people — the crowds — follow him, most without having any inkling about his true identity. And that’s pretty much what this question is about: the Identity of Jesus. The results of the recent polls were probably mixed, but his followers shield Jesus from all the bad stuff when they offer a list that, from the three Gospels, distills down to this one:

1. John the Baptist
2. Elijah
3. One of the prophets
4. Jeremiah (Matthew’s contribution)
5. One of the prophets who has come back to life (Luke’s phrasing).

In a nutshell: “Jesus, they think you are a Nobel Prize winner!” Hurray, two points for the good guys!

Hidden underneath these glowing accolades are, of course, the darker and more mischievous sentiments of those who really want to do away with Jesus. If the majority of people think that Jesus is “on the list,” then those who want him dead probably won’t be especially threatened. After all, doesn’t Luke capture the essence of their answers best when he proposes that one of the prophets “has come back to life”? Who would believe that sort of thing, except the crowds who never studied theology with the rabbis? So, allowing this popular press to float in the air isn’t an issue. And for Jesus, that’s why the answers offered by the disciples aren’t particularly helpful. Anybody who thinks that Jesus is on that list is probably a kook, and if Jesus encourages that kind of thinking, then he’s probably crazy as well — an idea his own family has already entertained (Mark 3:18).

Now beyond the charge of lunacy, there might have been good reasons for making the list.

1. John the Baptist, without question, had been the most exciting development in Israel’s public life for a long time. He had all the marks of a prophet. Indeed, he had all the marks of looking like Elijah, who is also on the list! People easily connected John with Malachi’s prophecy about Elijah returning before God’s final Day of Judgment arrived (Malachi 4:5-6). Armed with fiery words of repentance for the crowds and indictment for the ruling authorities, John had that fearlessness expected in the one God would send to do His serious work of setting things right again. But John was executed, and the dream died — or so it seemed. He wouldn’t have been the first (or the last) Jewish prophet to stir up the ire of those in charge. Nobody speaks truth to power and walks away with a kind handshake. Imprisonment and death were John’s destiny. Let down by this cruel turn of events, the people probably found the preaching and miracles of Jesus a hopeful promise that maybe — just maybe — John hadn’t stayed dead, and that Jesus was a second incarnation of the man who himself looked like Elijah.

2. Elijah had always played big on the stage of Jewish history. He was, to put it directly, a really big guy! Along with his protégé, Elisha, he occupies a substantial portion of 1 Kings 17:1-2 Kings 13:21 — roughly nineteen chapters! Reading the Elijah-Elisha story is a great deal like reading the Gospels: these prophets multiply oil and bread, make an ax head float on water, heal the sick, raise the dead, confront kings, and ascend into heaven. It wouldn’t be hard to draw the connection between Jesus and both these ancient prophets.

3. Only Matthew mentions the Jeremiah connection, although the other writers refer generically to “one of the prophets,” allowing for at least Jeremiah in that list. What did they see in Jesus that caused this association with Jeremiah? Historically, Jeremiah spoke against the excessive injustices of the ruling elite in Jerusalem, often at peril to his own life. He was called the “weeping prophet” because he mourned the loss of the holy city at the hands of the Babylonians — a prophecy he repeatedly gave when other prophets simply glossed over the likelihood that such a thing could happen. Jesus certainly spared few words, nor did he hold back his own grief about what would happen, one day, to Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37; 11:21; 23:13-29; Luke 6:24-26; 10:13; 11:42-52; 13:34; Luke 19:41).
4. When the list grew thin, the disciples offered simply “one of the prophets,” with Luke including the bit about “raised from the dead” since the hope for future resurrection coincided with Israel’s belief about the way the world would end. This was probably driven by the writings of Daniel, especially Daniel 12:1-4. Since Jesus performed miracles involving the gift of new life, whether as healings or raisings from the dead, perhaps the people imagined that a recently resurrected person likely had special powers to give life as well as receive it!

What’s interesting about “the list,” is not that the crowds got it so terribly wrong, as that they saw in Jesus something that was too hard to explain on ordinary terms. What sort of language would peasants and artisans use to talk about the deeds of Jesus? What possible precedent could they identify that would explain what was, on other terms, simply without explanation? That was, you see, the big problem with Jesus: he didn’t fit into anybody’s expectations, and constantly burst the boundaries others tried to put around him. Answering the question, “Who is this guy?” isn’t easy, and the best proposals drew from the common storehouse of Jewish stories in the memory of their sacred Scriptures.

But Jesus doesn’t care about opinion polls, and, like his enemies, even he knows the foolishness of equating his identity with anybody on the list. What Jesus does care about is the understanding of his disciples. Do they know who he is? Convincing a large number of people to embrace Jesus under a single identity would never be a simple matter. Knowing this, Jesus strategically chose to build his kingdom personnel in smaller groups. The Twelve disciples were, after all, a small group. As we have noted in previous studies about the nature of rabbis and their disciples, the disciples (Hebrew: talmidim) did life together with Jesus for nearly three years. They watched him live, heard him speak, witnessed his miracles, observed his prayer life, and saw his courage in the face of opposition. First-hand, the disciples knew a great deal about Jesus, and their understanding was constantly being informed and corrected by Jesus’ words. Little escaped their notice. His walk with the Father was certainly personal, and yet was not altogether private. Jesus wanted his devoted followers to learn from him, taking on themselves his mantle:

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

By the time Matthew’s version of this week’s text had taken place, the disciples had already heard these words from chapter 11. They are by far the most sublime summary of what it meant to be one of Jesus’ disciples. But the number of those invited into that yoke was small by comparison to the crowds, and Jesus intended it to be that way for the time being. Just as God began his kingdom work centuries before with the single family of Abraham, before launching His holy nation, so Jesus begins his project with the Twelve. And it matters deeply to Jesus, not just what the masses report about him, but what James, John, Peter, and the others in that little circle believed about him. If Jesus is able to firmly plant the truth about himself with them, then through them, he will be able to change the world.

Before we consider the second facet of Jesus’ larger question about his identity, a few comments are in order about the word “crowds.” In the cases of Mark and Matthew, the original question Jesus asks is about who people say he is. The Greek word here is hoi anthrōpoi: “the men” or “the humans” or “the people.” Luke chooses an alternative construal of Jesus’ meaning by using the word crowds, form the Greek word hoi ochloi: “a moving crowd, throng, mob, mass, multitude.” A master of Greek nuance, the writer Luke won’t settle for a bland rendering, and like his Greek forebears, knew the intemperate nature of large numbers of people. After all, many Greek historical characters met their fate at the hands of the “mob.” The trial and conviction of Socrates rank at the top of that list. So Luke wants to line out the turbulent nature of the people who offer their opinions about Jesus, suggesting that the resulting list itself was unstable and volatile and could change at a moment’s notice. He may be implying by his word choice that Jesus doesn’t play to the unpredictable mob to gain recognition, and chooses rather to begin his self-disclosure with a community that lives on more than sound-bytes.
Turning to those he chose as apostles, he puts the crucial question directly to them: “But who do you say that I am?” Watching Jesus up-close, they are in the ideal position to assess Jesus’ genuineness, his lucid words, and his restorative power. They know Jesus is no ordinary human being. In Mark 4:41 (and parallel Gospels), they witness Jesus still a raging storm: “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’” What Jesus asks is not a test question, as if he had taught the disciples all the right answers, and they were expected to spew back canned replies. Good rabbis didn’t operate that way, and neither did Jesus. He was less interested in applauding them for giving the right answer, and more interested in their telling him what they truly thought and believed about him. His question offers to them an opportunity to clarify his identity in their own hearts.

Laying aside the stock answers given by the crowds, his followers might have observed that he was God’s Son, second person of the Trinity — except the theology on that doctrine had not yet been composed. They might have dealt in on his plans to reform Judaism or bring down the Romans. What if Jesus asked them questions in order to find out what new and clever ideas they had — ideas that he might adopt and they be given credit for later? Did they ponder Jesus’ reasons for asking? One or the other of them might have wanted to give Jesus the best answer, as if this were some kind of contest to impress him.

In the end it’s Peter who speaks up, and the three Gospels agree on this point. Matthew, of course, gives thicker detail. Comparing the reportage of each Gospel yields slightly different results for Peter’s answer:

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<th>Mark</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Luke</th>
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<tr>
<td>You are the Christ (Messiah)</td>
<td>You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God.</td>
<td>The Christ (Messiah) of God.</td>
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Though they differ, yet they share one element in common: Christ, that is, Messiah. Matthew has Peter offering more by way of divine Sonship, and Luke attempts to keep some of that detail by making clear that the Messiah in question is of God. The third Gospel may attempt to correct at the outset any false concepts found in the word Messiah, for it was a greatly misconstrued term, and Jesus will immediately need to warn about the darker implications. That is, Christ is of God and not of human design.

Claims to Messianic status abounded in the years before and after Jesus. The list is depressingly impressive:

- **Simon of Peraea** (c. Unknown – 4 BCE), a former slave of Herod the Great who rebelled and was killed by the Romans.
- **Athronges** (c. 3 CE), a shepherd turned rebel leader.
- **Judas the Galilean** from Gamala and **Zadok a Pharisee** (6 CE) formed a tax revolt.
- **Theudas** (45 CE) claimed to be a prophet with powers to divide the Jordan River like Joshua.
- **Menahem ben Judah** (c. 66 CE), allegedly son of Judas of Galilee, partook in a revolt against Agrippa II before being slain by a rival Zealot leader.
- **Simon bar-Giora** was a would-be Messiah in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 CE.
- **Simon bar Kokhba** (died c. 135), founded a short-lived Jewish state before being defeated in the Second Jewish-Roman War.

Each of these failed. The word Messiah (Christ, in Greek) attracted meanings that did not agree with Jesus’ mission. That is why in each of the three Gospel accounts, Jesus “warned” his disciples not to use Messiah language when talking to others about him. Jesus rejected the use of armed violence to advance his Father’s kingdom in the world. On the night of his arrest, he limited Peter to one sword, and then when the disciple used it against Caiaphas’ servant, Jesus scolded him: “Put your sword back in its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). When Pilate explored with Jesus the possibility of armed revolt to make him king, Jesus replied: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not
from here" (John 18:36). Using the word *Messiah* to identify Jesus carried plenty of ideological baggage, and Jesus attempted to minimize the enormous misperceptions with his warning: “Tell no one!”

We come now to the special material added by *Matthew* to the core narrative about Jesus’ identity question. Jesus begins with a *blessing* on “Simon son of Jonah.” None of the other Gospels offer this information. They seem to know nothing at all about an additional word from Jesus to Peter. *Matthew* arranges this special commentary intentionally. Calling Peter “Simon son of Jonah” is not necessarily a compliment. *Jonah* as an Old Testament figure was *resistant* to Yahweh’s call to be His prophet to the Assyrian Empire (see the book of *Jonah*), and even after Jonah accepts his call, he proves to be unreliable in supporting God’s purposes, preferring his own advantages instead. If Peter is really a “son of Jonah,” does *Matthew* imply that he will prove unreliable?

Jesus presses the characterization further by saying that Simon could not (or *should* not) come up with this statement on his own, and any use of the word *Messiah* would require authorization from “my Father in heaven.” The man called Simon can only become Peter the Rock because God reveals His purposes to him. When the term “heaven” appears in this context, it carries the usual meaning of “from God.” Simon acts as Peter, speaking reliable words and telling the truth about Jesus only because God gives him revelation to do so. The ability to build the church, to secure the church against Hades, to bind and loose on earth — all of these initiatives require God’s direct authorization. None of the disciples are permitted freedom to attribute meaning to Messiah or kingdom or church without the specific authorization of God. Nor are they authorized to launch the kingdom project on their own initiative.

Making these additional remarks, *Matthew* simply adds sobriety to any use of the term *Messiah* by the disciples. Because the word allows for a wide range of possible meanings, many of them lived out through tragic events by false Messiahs, Jesus must impose controls over how, why, and where the expression is applied. Just because Peter gives the *right answer* to Jesus’ question does not mean that the identity of Jesus is thereby settled in everybody’s mind. The real question, waiting in the wings, is *what kind of Messiah defines Jesus?* For that reason, we cannot leave the texts above floating in mid-air without a sequel. Nor do the Gospel writers allow our understanding of Jesus’ identity to rest only with the confession of Peter. So what happened next?

### When Messiah is Really Messiah: The True Identity of Jesus

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<td>31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.</td>
<td>21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.</td>
<td>22 And he said, &quot;The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.&quot;</td>
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<td>32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. &quot;Get behind me, Satan!&quot; he said. &quot;You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.&quot;</td>
<td>22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. &quot;Never, Lord!&quot; he said. &quot;This shall never happen to you!&quot; Jesus turned and said to Peter, &quot;Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.&quot;</td>
<td>23 Then he said to them all: &quot;If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever</td>
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<td>34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: &quot;If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever</td>
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<td>loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37 Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.</td>
<td>loses his life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.</td>
<td>loses his life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? 26 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.</td>
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The three Gospel accounts agree that as a result of Peter’s answer to the important question, “Who do you think I am?” Jesus began to teach more openly with the disciples about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection. Whatever Messiah might have meant to Peter and the others, a wholly different meaning suddenly enters their conversations with Jesus. His insights are full of irony. Had we witnessed the rise and fall of other Messiahs before and during the time of Jesus, the outcomes would have been exceedingly clear: Crucified Messiahs are failed Messiahs. There were no exceptions to that assessment. Ringing the hillsides around Jerusalem were the upright poles waiting for cross-beams borne by condemned enemies of the state — enemies of Rome. They were graphic signs of what happened to anybody who opposed the Empire. To mention a cross in the presence of these messianic movements would be to stir up anger, defiance, hatred, and ultimately violence. The Zealots as a separate political party within Judaism acquired energy from Roman threats posed by the image of these crosses.

Thus, when Jesus takes his disciples aside, he reveals a shocking new prospect — one that held out no favorable possibility to the followers of any successful Messiah. He tells them that he will die on the cross in fulfillment of his Messianic mission, and then be rescued from death itself by the power of resurrection life. My guess is that, in their minds, the disciples never got passed his words about dying. They could scarcely accept the fact of his coming crucifixion; how could they possibly make sense out of his coming resurrection? If Jesus really was the Messiah as Peter confessed him to be, he certainly was not the kind of Messiah the disciple expected. And Jesus’ further invitation for them to “take up your cross and follow me,” losing their lives in the process, must have struck them like a ton of stone. Was Jesus mad?

Peter spared no words, as Mark and Matthew record: “Peter rebuked him….” In reply, Jesus, who earlier blessed Simon son of Jonah in Matthew 16:17, now meets Peter’s resistance with the words, “Get behind me, Satan…” and then proceeds to show how Peter’s understanding of Messiah is no different than the popular notions:

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23).

Recall the counsel Jesus gave Peter earlier, namely, that Peter’s confession about the Messiah must remain firmly under the authorization of God’s revelation. “Flesh and blood” must not inform Peter’s understanding of Messiah, otherwise, as is the case here, Peter has “…in mind … the things of men…not the things of God.” Peter’s view of Messiah resisted the element of suffering and death on the cross, and as such, Peter stood opposed (the real meaning of the word Satan — “adversary”) to God’s coming kingdom.

And a flawed understanding of Jesus’ identity as Messiah would not only affect the disciples’ view of Jesus, it would also impact how they would, in the future, follow him. That is, the identity of Jesus as Messiah and the identity of the disciples are bound up together. If the disciples will not accept the suffering Messiah, then they will not be able to accept their own future suffering for his sake.

The question, “Who am I?” turns out to be more directly, “Who am I to you?” and even that formulation comes with consequences. The question points to no abstraction, points to no theological tenent, or to merely a right view about Jesus. Answering the question implicates us in the real world swirling around Jesus; a world that is
risky, dangerous, and costly. Peter obviously had all the right words, and yet he failed to grasp at the core what Messiah truly meant. He might have even been pumped up by Jesus’ blessing that included heady language about being a rock, building the church, binding, and loosing. What Peter missed was the overriding statement that none of his understanding of Jesus could come solely from his own understanding — from “flesh and blood” — but only from “my Father in heaven.” That is why Peter needs the correcting words from Jesus about minding the things of “men” and not “God.”

What shapes the identity of Jesus is not the famous title of “Messiah,” but instead the coming sacrifice of the cross where Jesus will find definition in unexpected ways. When Jesus translates the meaning of the cross for Peter and the others, he does so in terms of “losing your life” as an act of self-giving obedience. Just as Jesus would give himself away on the cross, so must the disciples do the same. To speak of Jesus as Messiah meant something radically different than the popular conceptions that danced in the minds of the crowds, and Peter, by his confession, uncovered the deeper misconceptions that threatened to mislead even the disciples. We are all quite close to selling out Jesus by hanging on him everything we want to have happen to us. And it has been the same throughout history where human beings hijacked the Jesus story, placing him at the head of whatever movement they cared to lead or whatever program they sought to implement. The shape of the church, historically, often followed suit. Members would decide what kind of community they wanted, and then attach Jesus to their project as its chief endorsement!

By warning the disciples to “tell no one” that he was Messiah and by rebuking Peter’s resistance to the idea of a suffering Messiah, Jesus reminded future generations as well about distorting his identity by imposing their own. To the Jews, Messiah was a kingly warrior-like figure, and yet when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he chooses an ass to carry him in self-deprecating fashion, counter to the ostentatious military-style entrances of kings. These counter-images of Jesus’ identity don’t end there:

- Jesus … appears to do no work, and is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He is presented as homeless, propertyless, celibate, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinsfolk, without a trade, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, careless about purity regulations, critical of traditional authority, a thorn in the side of the Establishment, and a scourge of the rich and powerful …

- The morality Jesus preaches is reckless, extravagant, improvident, over-the-top, a scandal to actuarials and a stumbling block to real estate agents: forgive your enemies, give away your cloak as well as your coat, turn the other cheek, love those who insult you, walk the extra mile, take no thought for tomorrow…

And so Jesus resists all efforts to domesticate him, pour him into preconceived ideas, clothe him with a uniform, ensconce him behind sacred walls, and treat him like a chameleon. Responding to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” we pause, defer, shuffle, avoid eye contact, and hope the answer we give is in the back of the book. Except it probably is not, and Jesus continues to challenge our comfortable characterizations of his ministry and mission, while at the same time showing intense interest in what we actually do believe about him. He wants to know our closely-held conceptions about him, not to endorse them, not to tell us what smart Christians we are for figuring him out, but to draw out our prejudices and our invested interests that have become tangled in our own version of Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

In Peter’s response and in Jesus’ critique of it we discover the very dangerous nature of Jesus’ question. Every word Peter utters gets scrutinized. Every attempt to use language to preserve personal opinion is found out. Every “hunch” about what Jesus is really doing is outing. Bound up with the identity of Jesus is the absolute need to “get to know him” on his own terms, and, reciprocally, knowing Jesus involves coming to terms with ourselves. Jesus learns from Peter how very afraid he is of suffering and the cross. Often bold in his speech, promising to go all the way with Jesus to the cross, Peter reacts angrily to Jesus just minutes after uttering the words “Messiah” and “Son of God.” On the surface, Peter seemed to get his theology straight — at least to any

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dreamy-eyed evangelical for whom statements of faith seem to overshadow lives of faith. We sometimes forget that the church wouldn’t formulate the Nicene Creed for another three hundred years — a creed that tried getting the identity of Jesus said right. The words might confuse, clarify, and contain the heart-felt truth about Jesus, and yet the church managed to get all of this said before the professional managers of theology published the final drafts of their work.

And that’s why the question Jesus asks is so dangerous. It dares to put into the hands and hearts of ordinary people like Peter and his peers the opportunity to confess the identity of Jesus, to witness the identity of Jesus, and to risk being wrong about the identity of Jesus. Faith in Jesus, Son of the Living God, is less a proposition and more a proposal — a faithful witness to the reality of Jesus in the lives of real people who dare to speak of the living God as the person of Jesus. Jesus let Peter get it wrong so that through the ordeal of the cross Peter might later come to get it right. This means: that we cannot rush to judgment about Jesus after a single reading of his story; that we cannot easily pick the Daily Double in a Jesus version of Jeopardy; that Jesus will always remain bigger than our idea of him. We come to know Jesus through the identity crisis he provokes in us.

Sequel Texts about the Identity of Jesus
If we dig deeper into the Gospel narratives, we are met by further insights into the identity of Jesus through other questions he asked. Reflect on the examples which follow:

1. “Why do you ask me about what is good / call me good?” (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:19).
2. “Did you know that I must be in my Father’s house” (Luke 2:49).
3. “Woman, how does your concern affect me?” (John 2:4).
4. “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?” (Matthew 12:48; Mark 3:33).
5. “What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” (Matthew 22:42).
6. “Can the wedding guests fast/mourn while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34; Matthew 9:15).
10. “Have I been with you for so long a time and still you do not know me?” (John 14:9).

Some comments are in order about a few of these.
1. The setting for Jesus’ question in John 2:4 is the wedding at Cana where the mother of Jesus seems to be directly involved in making arrangements to accommodate the guests. She has just told Jesus that the wine has run out — a serious social faux pas under the circumstances that might well bring shame to the family. Translating the Greek text is challenging, yielding different results: a) “What have I to do with thee?” (KJV) b) “How does your concern affect me?” (NAB) c) “Why do you involve me?” (NIV); d) “Is that any of our business — yours or mine?” (Message); e) “That’s not our problem” (NLT); f) “What concern is that to you and me?” (NRSV); g) “Why are you saying this to me?” (NET); h) “Is it our problem?” (The Voice); i) “Why should that concern me?” (CJB); j) “Why do you come to me?” (GW; NCV); k) “Is that a concern of mine?” (Phillips); l) “What does that have to do with us?” (NASB).

As you can see, the possibilities are embarrassingly plenteous! The Greek construction is: "ti emoi kai soi" — only four words. Literally rendered this is: “What to me and to you?” Help is nearby if we examine the use of this phrase by the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament known as LXX). It turns out that it is an idiom and the same wording appears in the following texts in the LXX (noted in italics below):

Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?” (Judges 11:12).

She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” (1 Kings 17:18).
Elisha said to the king of Israel, "What have I to do with you? Go to your father's prophets or to your mother's." But the king of Israel said to him, "No; it is the LORD who has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab" (2 Kings 3:13).

But Neco sent envoys to him, saying, "What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, so that he will not destroy you" (2 Chronicles 35:21).

The Greek phrase translates Hebrew words that ask about the relationship between two people, whether friendly or hostile. At the heart of the idiom is personal involvement and the attempt to understand its basis in reality.

Jesus, the son of Mary, explores with his mother the nature of their continuing involvement with each other. Scripture reveals a normal, conflicted identity struggle in which a Jewish mother and her son experience the challenges of differentiation. Jesus might well have asked her, “Who do you say that I am in relation to you?” and along with that question the implied concern that Mary might very well be losing her son in ways that she only understands subconsciously. For Jesus is not only the son of Mary, and, as we noted in our last study, he needed to be about his Father’s business in his Father’s house. Was Mary simply telling Jesus to help her with the wine crisis because she expected him to fulfill this role as the eldest son of a widow's household? If so, then Mary proposes an identity for Jesus that is bound up directly with her own needs. The fact that she tells Jesus about the wine and doesn’t ask him to deal with it in a certain way may press this identity crisis further, suggesting that she expects him to use his powers to fill her request. That might be a harder proposal to defend, except his response about common interests and future events could support it. When he says, “My hour has not yet come,” he refers to his coming death and the climax of his earthly work, a prospect Mary doesn’t seem to factor into her approach to Jesus for help.

In sum, the question Jesus poses to Mary is really for all of his disciples read through a wider lens. We might translate this simply by asking, “Are both of us on the same page?” or “Are you in or out?” or “What’s your agenda, and is it the same as mine?” If we are left only with Jesus and Mary, the question might fall into a stereotypic struggle for adulthood on Jesus’ part and Mary’s letting go to make that possible. Ironically, Jesus proceeds with the miracle anyway, but performed quietly without fanfare, such that only the disciple saw the “glory” that the sign revealed (John 2:11). There’s a great deal more going on between 2:4 and 2:11, but the real identity of Jesus is in play throughout. As a teaching moment, we have Mary to thank for her determined request, giving Jesus opportunity to define himself in ways that exceed her expectations. We may take a great deal away from this encounter, as we think about Jesus challenging us to fess up to our own agendas when we make statements about what we think he ought to do for us. In so doing, we allow Jesus to define himself in the face of our conflicted desires, hopes, anxieties, and dreams.

2. Luke 12:14 is Jesus’ response to the request about a family’s inheritance and who should get it. A brother has just asked Jesus to intervene in a probate case. “Tell my brother to define the inheritance with me” is a much stronger version of Mary’s statement, “The wine ran out.” The brother is more direct, acting as if Jesus has the authority (as a rabbi, perhaps) to settle a legal matter through a direct ruling based on Torah law. It is true that rabbis did that sort of thing: they explained how the ancient texts applied to contemporary issues. In his reply, Jesus challenges the view held by this man concerning Jesus’ identity: “Who made me your judge and arbitrator?”

Evidently the matter of inheritance was a big enough issue to bring to Jesus who had shown adeptness at handling tricky legal points. Maybe the brother had seen Jesus in action, besting the Pharisees on some fine point of Torah, and he assumed that Jesus could fix his problem with equal facility. Jesus the fixer shows up elsewhere in the Gospel stories, and when such requests came without any indication of life-commitment on the part of the petitioner, Jesus rarely accommodated them. No doubt lesser rabbis might have jumped at the opportunity to make their mark with a clever ruling in this case. Jesus didn’t pay attention to the ratings, however, and dove deeper into the intentions that drove the brother’s request. He warns about “greed” and
uses the exchange to tell a wisdom story about the true identity of human life. “Possessions” don’t make the man, Jesus ultimately teaches the acquisitive brother, and life based on possessions has no lasting future.

This incident reinforces the identity of Jesus as undetermined by human greed. Our need for more does not influence who Jesus is. Seeking Jesus as judge, the brother receives Jesus, instead, as teacher. The brother wanted a ruling and he got a life-changing story instead.

3. The question posed by Jesus in John 14:9 is filled with pathos — with feeling that reaches the depths of his being. As readers who are familiar with John 14 already know, in it Jesus makes his famous identity claim: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (14:6).” Then, responding to disciple Phillip’s request, “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied (14:8),” Jesus rejoins with the hard question: “You’ve been with me all this time, and you still don’t know who I am?” If John’s chronology is consistent with the last hours of Jesus’ life on earth, then this question comes after the question of Matthew 16, and uncovers the disciples’ difficulty with Jesus’ identity — even at this late hour. Phillip wanted what many Jews wanted, all the way back to Moses on Sinai when he requested, “Show me your glory! (Exodus 33:18)” — a proposal Yahweh needed to decline to spare his servant’s life (33:20). What the disciples of Jesus missed was the “glory” immediately present in the words and deeds of their Master, and that the words and deeds revealed the true character of God — the Father Phillip wanted to see.

They failed to see the dynamic nature of his identity, woven into the warp and woof of his teaching and his miracles, always at hand in his authentic dealings with other human beings, whether they were in need or at odds with him. They missed seeing the Father in the acts of self-giving love when “power went out of him” during the course of his daily ministry (Luke 8:46). Soon, they would see Jesus in his suffering and finally discover that the “glory of God” appears precisely in this suffering — in this act of Jesus giving himself away so that he would find himself again in resurrection life.

“Who do you say that I am?” A Cultural Sidebar

How do you “say Jesus”? In purely linguistic terms, the answers are mechanically simple: Gesù or Jésus or Jézis or Yeshua or Iisus or Iosa or Jesu or Jesus. The differences may only be a diacritical mark, an accent, or the simple change of “J” to “I.” But Jesus is more than mechanics, and how we say Jesus more than pronunciation or spelling. How do you spell Jesus culturally? Peter spelled Jesus culturally when he tried to apply the idea of “Messiah” and “Son of God” to Jesus’ more dangerous mission on the way to the cross. He looked through his own cultural lens and saw a warrior-king who would invite the Twelve into his royal cabinet, and maybe make them czars of this or that! Misreading Jesus isn’t just personal; it can be social, but so can seeing Jesus through new eyes — African eyes, Asian eyes, or European eyes.

There are a multiplicity of images and concepts connected with the person of Jesus Christ. Whether Jesus is viewed through the lens of freedom and liberative motifs, or is seen in terms of an ancestor, a healer, a shaman or as a suffering servant, there a plenty of questions around the relevance of this figure to historical and contemporary experience. There is a complex relationship between Christ and the cultural context. When a British Asian Christian hears the question, “Who do you say that I am to you?” her reply might be: “You are Christ the liberator, Christ the re-creator of community, and Christ the transformer of community.”

Consider Jesus’ question through the eyes of your Muslim neighbor or your Indian son-in-law or your Chinese boss. Remember that the words of Jesus about his identity may not evoke the same kind of responses, and may even be as distorted as Peter’s claim to see Jesus as Messiah, Son of God. Or, the responses may surprise us, and the genuine regard they hold for Jesus may be their first steps toward a personal encounter with the one who is known in many cultures, and yet is beyond all culture — including our western-style democracies.

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2 Refer to Cham Kaur-Mann, “Who Do You Say I Am?” in Black Theology 2.1 (2004), 19-44 for an excellent introduction to this concept.
Then there is perhaps the harder issue of re-imagining Jesus through the eyes of the post-holocaust world, through the eyes of Jews threatened by the ovens and yet survived in a world where European Christians still lived and remained constant reminders of something that went horrifically wrong. Who is the post-holocaust Jesus? How does the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ encounter one another under such circumstances?

Culture extends to the world of science, especially in the aftermath of the scientific revolution begun in Bacon’s time, along with the Enlightenment and its consignment of God to the cosmic circumference. Who is Jesus the wonder-worker in the world of subatomic particles or DNA? Who is Jesus in a world that makes miracles through technology? Aren’t we inclined to ask, “How can Jesus compete with that?” So, we might ask, “Who do you, in the age of technology, say that I am to you?”

Concluding Thoughts
At first glance, the twin questions about Jesus’ identity in this week’s main text should have produced different answers. The crowds were easily swayed by popular sentiments, while the disciples were supposed to have deeper insight, having spent time with Jesus. But as John 14:9 explains, the length of time with Jesus didn’t immediately translate into perception of his identity. In fact, comparing Jesus to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets was not completely wrong. Granted, these were lesser claims for his identity, and fell short of the mark. Jesus, after all, did fulfill the types and symbols embodied in those characters. When Peter makes his bold claim that Jesus is Messiah, son of God, he actually put himself between Jesus and his coming sacrificial death. Clinging to these terms was a host of misunderstandings that would take time to sort out. Only the cross and resurrection of Jesus would ultimately clarify the meaning of the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Only by accepting Jesus’ call to “follow me” would genuinely show the glory of Jesus to the disciples.

Kathleen McManus writes:

Peter assigns the title Messiah to Jesus confident in its conventional Jewish meaning as the promised, anointed one who would make Israel victorious over her oppressors and rule in power. Peter, so close to Jesus, nevertheless sets the example here for what discipleship is not. It is not an alignment with power that is recognizable according to human convention, even human religious convention. Furthermore, Peter's blunder illumines why Jesus doesn't want his disciples telling others about him. Even if they spread the "right" answer, they cannot convey the truth of who Jesus is to people who are not disposed to encounter that truth in their own experience. Perhaps that is why, as ministers and proclaimers of the gospel, the most important thing we can do is prepare people to encounter Christ by cultivating an ever deeper awareness of their own being and experience of faith.

Some questions cannot be answered without living them out, without participating in them. Questions of this sort — questions of identity — live beyond the dictionary and the grammar. Instead they are nurtured in the cross-currents of human life where our own identities take a beating in a world that would rather treat us as commodities than as persons. Jesus’ question implicates us in uncovering the deeply suppressed hurts, hidden by years of denial. When Peter contradicted the destiny of Jesus at Calvary, he rolled back the curtain on his own anger, anxiety, and frustration. The same Peter once complained, “We have left everything to follow you!” (Matthew 19:27), and then proceeded to ask what the cash value of this commitment would be! “What then will we have (or get out it)?” It gets worse for Peter, of course, when he denies Jesus in the courtyard, warming his hands by the fire. All that’s left for him is the grief and regret of having lived in denial until the bitter end. Whoever Peter thought Jesus was until then, perished in the ashes that night. His denial of Jesus revealed his own denial.

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The pastor of a rather liberal congregation preached his final sermon for a church he had served for nine years. As he was preparing for that moment, he was sobered by a question from Michael Greene, the British historian of evangelism put to members of the pastor’s own denomination: “When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?” The retiring pastor found himself in the middle of a post-conference debate with his fellow clergy, many of whom didn’t like Greene’s remarks. What his colleagues failed to see was the enormous difference between knowing Jesus personally and parsing Jesus as a concept. The pastor later wrote: “In Jesus, God came to us as a person, but we are much more comfortable talking about him as a concept.” Determined to right the wrong of his preaching, the pastor asked and answered the question in intensely personal terms in his final sermon. After the homily, he stood at the door, shaking hands as was his custom. One woman, overcome with emotion, could scarcely tell him how she felt, but at last with cracking voice she managed to ask, “Why didn’t you tell us this before?” He conclude his article by saying, “I did not know how to respond.”

The identity of Jesus cannot be separated from our own. Follow Jesus on his terms, and you will quickly find yourself. You may not like what you see in Jesus, anymore than you will relish the discovery of your pain-laden self. Tough words — the ones Jesus spoke to Peter after he popped the big question: “Get behind me Satan!” On that day, Jesus scared loose the enemy within Peter — the much vaunted enemy of Pogo, as it turns out! “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Yet, for Peter, thankfully, he meets Jesus before he meets himself. The alternative is usually scary — to see ourselves with Jesus nowhere around. The Gospel gives us a different rendering, however. Come to Jesus, see him as he reveals himself to you, and you will have a companion for the journey that leads back to yourself — back to others — and back to God. “Who am I?” gives way to “Who am I to you?” Good News!

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: Questions Jesus Asked: “Who am I to you?”

(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of this week’s study, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at http://www.c1naz.org, click on Resources, click the tab Series, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the Background Notes link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Read our main text for this week, Mark 8:27-30 along with parallels in Matthew 16:13-20 and Luke 9:18-21. Note the unique handling of each Gospel version, paying attention to additions or omissions between them. What are the two main questions Jesus asks? How do they differ from each other?

2. Discuss the importance of Jesus’ identity in the text. List the various perceptions people had of Jesus, and suggest reasons for each one. Why did Jesus care what the crowds believed about his identity? Did their response influence him in any way? Where might people today get their ideas for the identity of Jesus?

3. Compare the different versions of Peter’s response to Jesus’ second question, “Who do you say that I am?” Why would Peter focus on “Christ” as the main identity for Jesus? How do the different versions vary the form of Peter’s response? Discuss the significance of the variations.

4. Based on your present knowledge or on information you have read (see the Notes), how did most Jews understand the word “Christ” and its Hebrew equivalent, “Messiah”? How might this term been a loaded one, susceptible to misunderstanding when applied to Jesus? Discuss Jesus’ warning in Mark 8:30 (Matthew 16:20; Luke 9:21). Why might Luke have written that Jesus “strictly warned” the disciples about using the word?

5. In Matthew 26:52 and John 18:36, what myth does Jesus dispel about the means and goal of his mission on earth?

6. Why do you think Matthew expanded the basic account by adding to Peter’s answer and then including more information about what Jesus told Peter in 16:17-19? What does Jesus tell Peter about the source for his understanding of who Jesus is?

7. Following our main text, the three Gospels offer additional an conversation between Jesus and the disciples, including a sharp disagreement with Peter. Read these accounts: Mark 8:31-38; Matthew 16:21-28; Luke 9:22-26.

8. In these additional passages, what fresh insight does Jesus give into his identity, and how does it contrast with the popular notion of the Christ/Messiah? What aspect of this insight creates problems for Peter? How does he react to Jesus (note his use of language), and what does Jesus tell him in reply?

9. How is the identity of Jesus, as described in this second group of texts, intimately bound up with the identity of his followers? In what ways has your answer to the question “Who do you say that I am?” impacted the way you live in relationship to God, others, and self?

10. The Gospels offer additional texts about the identity of Jesus, including the following: 1) John 2:4; 2) Luke 12:14; and 3) John 14:9. As you read each one, comment on new insights they provide into the original questions of Jesus we’ve been discussing.

11. How might an individual from a different culture hear Jesus’ question? What factors would influence who Jesus is to her? For example, how might a post-holocaust Jew hear Jesus’ question? An undocumented immigrant?

12. What role does the question “Who am I to you?” play in our witness to others? How might our language about the identity of Jesus get lost in translation to a neighbor, family member, or co-worker? Suggest ways to address this potential hindrance to clearly communicating of who Jesus is.