Books on the Historical Jesus


This is an ambitious book, with an ambitious thesis, by an ambitious scholar. Michael F. Bird tackles the decisive question asked by John the Baptist (Matt. 11:3; Luke 7:19) that many in the academic world would rather avoid. For example, one can only remember the turbulence in evangelical circles with the publication of J. Ramsey Michael’s *Servant and Son: Jesus in Parable and Gospel* (1981). Honest grappling with Jesus’ understanding of his messiahship is a tricky business. It is like trying to nail jelly to a wall.

Bird (rightly) steers away from attempting to analyse Jesus’ ‘messianic self-consciousness’, namely, if and when Jesus had the premonition that he was the Messiah. Bird carefully culls Scripture and extracanonical literature for themes, categories and other ways of evaluating the concept of Messiah. He blazes a new trail by not simply focusing on when the title ‘Messiah’ is used or trying to prove that Jesus referred to himself with the title ‘Messiah’ (Bird believes he did not). Bird rather investigates what he calls the ‘messianic self-understanding’ of Jesus by examining his teachings and various activities.

Bird affirms that the Gospels do offer their readers a recoverable historical Jesus. He succeeds admirably, navigating well the landscape of scholarship, as well as a willingness to let the evidence lead him, rather than beginning with some predetermined conclusion. (Some may argue with me whether this is at all possible.)

This book’s thesis is ‘to demonstrate that the early Christian confession that “Jesus is the Christ” has pre-Easter roots in Jesus’ own mission and purpose’ (p. 11). It has six chapters with a bibliography, indices of subjects, authors, scripture and other ancient sources. Stanley E. Porter, a noted New Testament scholar and Dean of McMaster Divinity College in Canada, wrote the foreword.

In his first chapter (‘Jesus Who Is Called the Christ’), Bird briefly surveys the scholarship on the messianic question, sketches his methodology (i.e., ‘messianic categories’) and affirms the concept that Jesus did claim, in action and speech, to be the Messiah of Israel, even if he redefined the meaning of the role. Bird is mainly interested ‘in intentions and identity as they pertain to Jesus and messiahship’ (p. 29, author’s emphasis).

In Chapter 2 (‘Messianic Expectations in Second Temple Judaism’), Bird with fairness and acuity uncovers the essential messianic threads in the Hebrew Bible and intertestamental literature. This is a daunting task, yet Bird accomplishes it nobly.
Bird here makes a significant observation: ‘When it comes to messianism, functions are more important than titles’ (p. 62).

The following chapter (‘Messiah Jesus—a Role Declined?’) begins Bird’s foray into the question of what Jesus knew and when he knew it. He treats this and the next couple of chapters like a prosecuting attorney trying a court case. Does the evidence begin to lead the jury to a final verdict concerning the question ‘Are You the One Who Is to Come?’ Here Bird affirms that Jesus embraced eschatological expectations, even though he did not conform to a specific, predetermined messianic mold. Bird ponders ‘Why did messianic hopes arise in the pre-Easter period at all if Jesus repudiated the messianic role?’ (p. 76).

In Chapter 4 (‘Messiah Jesus—a Role Redefined?’), Bird examines what he calls ‘coded messianic remarks’ (vis-à-vis Jesus’ teachings and actions). At first blush, I grimaced when reading the word ‘coded’. My mind quickly defaulted to recent popular works expounding hidden biblical messages. Yet, after further inspection, I found Bird makes a distinctive contribution advocating that Jesus’ vocation was ‘performatively’ messianic as opposed to the titular sense. This is where Bird parts cordial company with J. A. Fitzmyer, The One Who Is to Come (Eerdmans, 2007) and others, who seem to lean more towards a titular evidence for messiahship. Bird argues that Jesus intentionally ‘performed’ messianic themes in his teaching and ministry. He then surveys the somewhat complicated debate about the origins and meaning of the title ‘Son of Man’ and concludes that Jesus used this title to intentionally connect himself with the figure in Daniel, thus equating an eschatological figure with a messianic function.

One example of Jesus intentionally performing a messianic theme is Bird’s illuminating explanation of the ‘I have come’ (ἦλθον) sayings. ‘Some of the “I have come” sayings ascribe to Jesus the role of a divine agent that rehearses various messianic traditions’ (p. 115). Even so, Bird is a careful scholar, not confusing a thread of evidence with a foregone conclusion:

I am not insinuating that all the ‘I have come’ sayings are essentially messianic. I am not suggesting that ‘I have come’ equals ‘I am the coming one’ every time. I am not implying that all ‘coming’ figures are necessarily messianic. What I am arguing for is that the Messiah was known as the ‘one to come’, and the ‘I have come’ sayings of Jesus are at least reminiscent of that designation (pp. 113–14).

In his penultimate and longest chapter (‘Messiah Jesus—A Crucified Messiah?’), Bird postulates how Jesus’ understanding of messiahship intersected with the idea of his subsequent suffering and death. He skilfully unpacks the final weeks of Jesus’ life beginning with Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi through the trial and crucifixion. Bird emphatically concludes that ‘the titulus is the smoking gun of the messianic Jesus. The titulus was the final verdict of what his ministry meant to the Jerusalemites, a ministry that led to the charge of being a messianic pretender in his final week, and a charge connected to the various themes of this teachings and activities’ (p. 141). One particular strength is Bird’s investigation into the origins of Christianoi (Acts 11:26). ‘I think that Jesus’ deliberate attempt to act out a messianic vocation is the smoking gun that explains the messianic testimony of the early Church…and their eventual