

Christ/Messiah in the New Testament

We view the HCSB’s distinction between “Christ” and “the Messiah” as justifiable in the gospels and Acts. At the same time, we recommend replacing “the Messiah” generally in the epistles and Revelation with the name “Christ.” We further recommend that the HCSB consider using “the Christ” in certain contexts in the epistles and Revelation.

Among the striking features of the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) is its frequent use of “Messiah” rather than “Christ” as a translation for Χριστός. The Introduction explains that the decision about which rendering to use was “based on its use in different NT contexts.” The “Bullet Note” at the back of the printed edition elaborates: “Where the NT emphasizes *Christos* as a name of our Lord or has a Gentile context, ‘Christ’ is used. Where the NT *Christos* has a Jewish context, the title ‘Messiah’ is used.” *Navigating the Horizons* adds that the presence of the definite article was an additional criterion used by translators to determine when ὁ Χριστός should be understood as “the Messiah” (*i.e.*, the one promised in the Old Testament whose coming was awaited by the Jews) rather than simply as a name for our Lord. The HCSB’s practice of using “the Messiah” more frequently than other English versions is said to have been intended to “alleviate” an unfortunate situation in which “Christ” has for many readers become “only another name for Jesus” (p. 134).

It is certainly a laudable objective to try to put the reader of a translation in a position to experience the connotations of a key biblical term in the same way these were experienced by the text’s original readers and hearers. The HCSB’s practice with Χριστός raises several questions for us, however. First, we wonder whether uses of Χριστός as a title and its uses as a name are quite so easy to distinguish as *Navigating the Horizons* seems to suggest. Second, in many instances in the HCSB it is not at all clear to us how it was determined whether a particular context was “Jewish” or “Gentile.” Put a bit differently, there are many passages in which we would be hard pressed to explain why the HCSB chose to translate Χριστός the way it did. In addition, when it is said that “Christ” has become “only another name for Jesus,” we find ourselves gently objecting to the word “only.” It may be that for many Christians, ancient and modern, the use of “Christ” as a personal name carries an accompanying warmth that the designation of our Lord’s office (“Messiah”) does not. This is one reason we ask that the HCSB consider using “the Christ” in certain situations in the Epistles and Revelation (on which see below).

“Christ” or “Messiah” in the gospels and Acts?

There is something to be said for the old practice followed by several versions (KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV 1984, ESV, etc.): they always or almost always translate Χριστός as “Christ” or “the Christ.” As long as readers of those versions were aware of the equivalence Messiah=Christ=anointed, little or nothing of importance was lost when they constantly saw “Christ” in the NT and encountered “Messiah” in as few as two passages (John 1:41; 4:25). There are those among our ministerium—including one member of our committee—who still feel that the old practice is preferable.

To some extent, the old practice simply builds on an assumption made by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These evangelists assumed that their typical readers would be able to handle the use of Χριστός without explanation, whether those readers were Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians. It remains true today that the equivalence Messiah=Christ=anointed is one of the first lessons a Bible reader needs to learn. With that understanding in place, the old practice remains viable, and if maximum consistency in translation is desired, the old practice is a way of achieving it.

But the old practice is not the only defensible approach. One can make a good case for saying that in the gospels and Acts, Jewish references to “the Christ” and discussions about whether Jesus is “the Christ” sound more natural if “the Messiah” is substituted. In those books we are not troubled by the seeming inconsistency of translating Χριστός sometimes as “Christ” and sometimes as “the Messiah.” The well-known equivalence (or notes bringing it to the attention of novices) can help the reader make the necessary connections.

Χριστός in the epistles and Revelation

The same rationale leads to the conclusion that there is nothing disastrous in following a similar policy in the rest of the NT, as the HCSB attempts to do. Thus, for example, we often find “Christ” in the HCSB epistles and Revelation, but in 54 passages in these books we have “(the) Messiah.” Nevertheless we think an improvement could be made by translating “Christ” or “the Christ” in those 54 passages.

One reason is that it is hard to make a consistent distinction in the epistles between Χριστός as a title and Χριστός as a name. The use of Χριστός as a name (or better, a name charged with additional meaning in view of its titular origin) became more common as the discussion moved from synagogues to churches and especially to churches of a largely Gentile make-up. With names in the Greek NT it is problematical to assume that the use or non-use of the article is significant; as A. T. Robertson writes, “Sometimes we can see the reason for the use of the article with proper names....But in most instances the matter seems quite capricious to us” (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed., p. 759). It may seem attractive to assume that in Paul, for example, Χριστός with the article has a strictly titular sense, “the Messiah,” but does his usage consistently confirm the assumption? See Romans 8:35, 14:18, and 1 Corinthians 10:9. At any rate Grundmann (TDNT IX, 541) was not convinced that the use and non-use of the article with Χριστός marked a conceptual distinction: “Thus ὁ Χριστός and Χριστός mean the same.”

In sum, the practice of translating different occurrences of Χριστός differently gives the reader a strong impression that there is some kind of distinction in the original, when such a distinction is hard if not impossible to find.

“Jewish” or “Christian” contexts?

The HCSB distinction between “Christ” and “the Messiah” is hard to sustain in the epistles for other reasons, too. Why do we find “the blood of Christ” once (1 Cor 10:16) but the “blood of the Messiah” twice (Eph 2:13; Heb 9:14) when the Greek is virtually identical? Why do we read six times “the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 3:2) and once “the good news about the Messiah” (Gal 1:7) when the grammar, words, and word order are the same? Why does Colossians 1:24 talk about “*Christ’s* afflictions” and Colossians 2:11 about “the circumcision of *the Messiah*”?

According to *Navigating the Horizons* (p. 134), the deciding factor was whether the translators were dealing with a Gentile or Jewish context. But how was that determined? In every instance we are talking about Jesus, who is always Jewish and who has no other salvation to offer to Jews or Gentiles than the salvation he accomplished as the Jewish Messiah. According to ancient tradition and probably inference, all the NT writers except Luke are Jews, and even when they write to largely Gentile congregations, those Gentiles still regard the Jewish Scriptures as their Bible and recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of those Scriptures. If a Gentile or Jewish context is the criterion, it seems surprising that in Galatians, which deals extensively with Jewish issues, the HCSB has “Messiah” only once (Gal 1:7—a passage we just noted as

an anomaly), whereas in Ephesians, which deals with Jewish issues less extensively, the HCSB has “Messiah” 17 times. One of them is Ephesians 2:13, “But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah.” That is intelligible, but the switch from “Christ” to “the Messiah” within the same clause seems odd all the same.¹

“Only” a name?

Additionally, we are concerned with what could be called a certain loss of warmth when “Messiah” is used instead of “Christ.”

The warmth of a close personal relationship with Christ was not yet meaningful for the Jews in the gospels and Acts who did not know whether Jesus was in fact the Messiah. The disciples of course did have a warm personal relationship with him, but it was not yet routinely expressed by referring to Jesus with “Christ” as a name. The situation changes in the epistles. There everything about the Savior comes together for the believers in the name “Christ.” It is a favorite way of referring to him, for it contains a reminder of his Messianic office and work and yet it more directly names the Person of the Savior they love—the divine one through whom the world was created, the one who was with the Israelite forefathers in the wilderness, the one who became incarnate and humbled himself to the point of death by crucifixion and rose to glorious life and power, the one who gives his people his Spirit and makes them members of his body so that they live “in Christ.”

The loss in warmth does not seem adequately compensated by a gain in clarity; we already grasp intellectually that the one we call Christ is the Messiah. We modern Christians walk in the footsteps of those early Christians who saw so much in Christ and felt so close to him. Why would we want to replace the dear, warm name of Christ with a title that makes him seem more distant and makes our relationship to him sound more official and less personal?

“The Christ”

Finally, we see the use of “*the* Christ” as a viable solution in certain situations and would respectfully ask that it be considered. There are texts in the epistles and Revelation that contain at least the implication that Jesus of Nazareth was “anointed” by God to fulfill a certain function, a function he fulfilled for Jews and Gentiles alike (e.g. Rom 9:5, 15:7; Gal 1:7 mentioned above; Eph 3:11; Heb 5:5; 1 John 2:22; 1 John 5:1). Use of “the Christ” in these texts and others like them would alleviate the concern, expressed in *Navigating the Horizons* (see above), that modern readers and hearers have come to think of “Christ” simply as Jesus’ last name. “The Christ” would relieve the translators of the obligation to determine whether or not a context is “Jewish” or “Gentile,” a determination that seems to us to have been made somewhat inconsistently as the HCSB now stands. It would also avoid the awkwardness (not to mention the false impression of a different word in the original) that is created when both “Christ” and “the Messiah” are used in the same context (e.g. Eph 2:13). But perhaps the strongest advantage is that “the Christ” retains some of the warmth that has accrued to this name for our Lord by this stage in the development of the New Testament, warmth we believe that modern Christians should also be allowed to feel as they read and hear these texts.

¹ We recognize that adopting our recommendation would require a change to the Bullet Note on “Messiah.” Currently it reads: “Where the NT emphasizes *Christos* as a name of our Lord or has a Gentile context, ‘Christ’ is used. Where the NT *Christos* has a Jewish context, the title ‘Messiah’ is used.”