

THE PESHITTA

“I am Christ, the Living God!”

This is how the Peshitta reports Jesus' own confession to the High Priest at his trial. It is a bold declaration not even hinted at in any Greek manuscript.

Apparently Jesus is claiming He Himself is “the Living God”, which is to say, the LORD God of Israel, indeed the Creator of all things, the One Who is Eternal. Is the Peshitta right? It stands opposed to all other Greek MSS which are united in agreeing that Jesus at his trial claims to be “the Son of Man” (Matt. 25:31; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69), a title which is anything but a claim to full Deity.

Just for the moment, let's put aside all debate about whether the Peshitta predates the Greek manuscripts or not. Indeed, let's for the sake of the argument adopt the Peshitta as our first and most reliable source from the pens of the apostles, who are alleged by some sources to have written their NT first in Aramaic. Did Jesus really stand in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin and claim to be their Christ, and none other than “the Living God” as the Peshitta claims?

Remember that in just a few short hours, by 3 o'clock that afternoon in fact, Jesus would be dead. Imagine this -- if the Peshitta is right -- Jesus was announcing that He as the Living God of Israel, the Creator God, the Eternal God would be dead! God Almighty dead!

It was the boast of the prophets of Israel that the gods of the nations were just stupid creations of their own imaginations. Isaiah, for instance, taunts those who make idol-gods by saying they cut down a tree and shape their god. Then they use the off-cuts, the leftovers from the same tree to light fires to cook on. The pagans bow down to their god and pray to him who cannot see, cannot talk, cannot answer, indeed who must be carried by its adherents if he needs to be transported to a new location, because he cannot walk. Some god this! How unworthy of Israel whose God is the one true and Living God Who Himself has created all things, man included. Israel's God is in a league all of His own, totally unlike the idol creations of unbelievers. Their God sits in the Heavens and is Sovereign over all the peoples of the earth (Is. 40: 19ff etc.) That is the glorious boast of the prophets.

Now, how is it that all of a sudden Jesus "the Living God" *dies*? Here is a totally different God from the One the prophets proclaimed. Here is a God who is even lower, if it were possible than the pagan idol gods, for in death He will not be able to see, or hear, or move. He will be in a cold stone-hewn tomb. Is this credible?

Furthermore, is this the God the apostles of Jesus preached? Paul tells us in First Timothy 1: 17 that "the only God" Whom he and the first Christians believed in is, amongst other qualities, "immortal". The Greek word *aphthartoo* literally means incorruptible,

therefore unable to decay. But when Jesus was dead in the grave he is described as being in a state of corruption (e.g. Acts 2:27). Does Jesus qualify as Israel's Living God on this criterion? The "living God" is corruptible, that is, can decay, after all?

A few short chapters later the same apostle again writes that "the blessed and only Sovereign" is the One Who "alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:15-16). This time Paul's word for "immortality" is different. It is the word *athanasian*. It means never dying, not dying, unable to die. Does this description fit Jesus? Only if he did not die! To this thought I say, God forbid, for on this model we have no saviour to redeem us from our sins!

So, on both counts, "the only God" of apostolic confession is "incorruptible" and "immortal". For Jesus to claim to be "the Living God" Himself makes him sadly deluded. In fact, Paul wrote that since his resurrection from the state of death and corruption to immortality Jesus is not even now in Heaven, "the Living God" ...

In 2 Cor. 13:4 Paul writes that Jesus "was indeed crucified out of weakness, but [now] he lives by the power of God". Right *now* Jesus lives (the Greek is a present active indicative tense) out of and by the power of God. Today Jesus' very life is still totally dependant on his Father God! Without his Father

God's power and gift of immortality Jesus would not, could not live at this very moment! Does this sound like Jesus is "the Living God"? God who is dependent on another God for life? Hmm.

Whilst he was here on earth Jesus stated "the Father has life in Himself" and "has *given* to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). In the next verse Jesus explains the Father has also "*given* him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of Man" (John 5:27). Jesus explains his life and authority are derived from God. Does he claim to therefore be "the Living God"? Hardly.

The Peshitta's version of Jesus' answer to the High Priest is self-contradictory. His death proves Jesus is mortal and therefore he cannot be "the Living God".

There is a second reason why the Peshitta at this verse cannot be trusted. It makes Jesus contradict the entire OT prophetic witness. Take the messianic Psalm 2 as an example. A basic and simple reading of this psalm makes it obvious that "the LORD" (i.e. YHVH as per the original Hebrew Scriptures, or *Adonai* as per the LXX) "sits in the heavens" and makes a universal decree concerning a certain other individual who will be the agent of God on earth. This individual is given three descriptive titles. He is variously titled "the LORD's anointed", "My king", and "My son".

The first description of the coming or promised one God is going to set over the nations is "*the anointed*

one". The Hebrew is *Messiah*. The Greek LXX (Septuagint translated in 250BC) is *Christ*. Note the equivalence of the three descriptions. "The LORD's Messiah" is His appointed "King" is His "Son". It is YHVH God Who anoints this human man to be king and son of God. Clearly, God anoints and needs nobody to anoint Him. As if anybody could anoint God for any task! But people appointed by God to do His work need His Spirit's anointing. By definition anybody anointed in the Bible cannot be "the Living God". "The Living God" needs no anointing!

Therefore the Peshitta's rendering is internally contradictory. Jesus certainly claims to be "the Messiah". The Greek manuscripts all agree. And all Bible scholars agree that the term "Christ" is a title (not a name as most modern Christians seem to think) meaning, "anointed one".

To have Jesus say, according to the Peshitta version, that he is "the anointed one, the Living God" is a blatant contradiction of terms. One title excludes the other, and we must make a choice which one is true to the context. Failure to do this confuses what the OT Scriptures and all the prophets separated – God the Anointer from the man the anointed. No pen of any apostle would have confused such a basic Biblical distinction.

On this occasion where Jesus answers the High Priest under oath, we note Jesus' astonishing claim that he is

“the Son of Man” whom Daniel the prophet predicted will come in the clouds of God’s glory to govern the nations, on behalf of the Ancient of Days.

Let’s listen to Jesus very carefully now. He is on trial. He is under oath. The High Priest asks him, “I put you under oath before the Living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (Matt. 26:63). Mark’s Gospel adds a bit extra to the High Priest’s question to Jesus. There the High Priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One” (Mk. 14:61)? Jesus is not being asked if he is “the Living God”. He is being asked to declare the truth before the Living God. No Jew in that day would have even thought to ask this post-Bible question. He is being asked if he is the promised Anointed One, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God.

Jesus replies, “You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (v. 64). Far from being “the Blessed One” Who is the “Living God of Israel” Himself, Jesus claims to be “the Son of Man” to fulfil the prophetic vision who will “be seated at the right Hand of the power of God” (Lk. 22: 68-69). The Messiah is not “the Living God” Who sits on the Throne as God. Jesus claims he will sit *next* to “the Living God” Who has both anointed him and raised him up to this exalted position as “the Son of Man”.

In this brief article I have given enough evidence to throw considerable doubt over the Peshitta's report of Jesus declaring at his trial, "I am the Messiah, the Living God". The Peshitta on this count should not be trusted. Jesus would never say "the Living God" is going to die. Jesus would never contradict the united witness of all the prophets who pointed to him beforehand to be the Son of Man, anointed by the Blessed God of Israel, as the promised King of the world!

To base one's theology on a doubtful premise that the Peshitta predates the Greek MSS is to build on a shaky foundation. Indeed the truth of the matter is, that no credible qualified Bible textual critic believes the Peshitta predates the original Greek text anyway! If the Peshitta predates the Greek manuscripts and is the source from which all other texts were translated and derived, why doesn't this verse appear in any other tributary?

