

The Messiah

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The Christian conception of Jesus as the Messiah is rooted in the Old Testament. The word "Messiah" is a Hebrew word which means "the anointed one." As used by the literary prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), the Messiah was to be a king of Israel who would overthrow the foreign power, usher in an independent Hebrew nation, and establish justice and peace. The prophets looked for his imminent coming. This would place the anticipated time at from 700 to 500 B. C. E. This is about 500 to 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

There was nothing supernatural in the prophetic understanding of the Messiah. He was to be a flesh and blood king, and he would do the things that a human king would do--no more, no less. The Romans understood the popular hope for the Messiah in just this sense. Therefore, when, in the time of Jesus, a small group of Jews believed him to be the Messiah, the Romans considered him a potential threat to their rule over the Jewish kingdom. Accordingly, they crucified him (they treated many Jews in just this fashion), and over his cross they wrote the mocking words, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of Judea" (so the New Testament informs us). To make the mocking complete, the Romans clothed Jesus in a purple robe (the color of the kings) and placed a "crown" on his head--a crown of thorns. In this fashion, the Roman overlord thoroughly squelched the hope of the followers of Jesus that he might overthrow the foreign power and become "The king of Israel." Apparently, this hope was not shared by many Jews because the basic Jewish sources of this period do not mention this event as being of any major significance.

The New Testament speaks of Jesus as not merely "the messiah," but also as "the son of man." In one of the apocalyptic books written by Jews outside the pale of normative Judaism, Esdras, there is talk of a semi-divine being coming in the clouds at "the end of days" to judge between the righteous and the wicked. This book was outlawed by the Jewish authorities as being not consistent with the mainstream of Judaism (this was, in fact, a Persian doctrine). The followers of Jesus picked up this concept and taught that Jesus was "the son of man." This is why Michelangelo depicts Jesus as "the judge" dividing the lucky and unlucky men, and assigning one group to paradise, the other group to hell (in his painting in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). So much identified with the "Judge" did Jesus become in Medieval Europe that more Catholic Churches were dedicated to Mary than to her son during this period. Mary became the hope of the people for mercy.

While Christian theology gradually removed the human qualities from Jesus (a process that is being reversed today) and progressively made him into "the son of man," and then "the son of god" (a part of the godhead), Jewish teaching gradually took the qualities identified with the messiah and gave them over to the people themselves! When the messiah delayed in coming, Jewish folklore developed in such a way as to teach that he was delayed only because the people did not prepare for his coming. That is, instead of ushering in the era of righteousness, the messiah was to come at its culmination. He would come only when the good society had

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already been achieved by the people (remember, he was still a flesh and blood person in Jewish eyes).

Reform Judaism took this gradually developing viewpoint and crystallized it. While Orthodox Jews still look for the coming of an individual Messiah, in the above sense, Reform Jews do not. We say that one man cannot save us. We look instead for "a messianic age," a time when enough people, Jews and non-Jews, will co-operate sufficiently to create an age of peace and justice. We teach that we are all the messiah. Fragmented, we create war and injustice. Together, we are able to create the good society.

In order to understand the new "death of god" theology in Christian ranks, we must understand it as a revolt against the old supernaturalism which deprived man of all responsibility and power and gave it all over to "the son of man," to Jesus. The radical theologians amongst the Christians would make of Jesus, not the "son of god: or "the son of man" or even "the messiah." They would speak of him as a good man to be imitated. This is a complete reversal of Christian thinking, so we can understand why it is unpopular amongst fundamentalist Christians. On the other hand, the new process represents a judaizing of Christianity. For us, God has never been the sole actor while we are mere spectators. We do not have to "kill" God in order to give man responsibility, for we have always taught that man serves as God's agent.