

Messiah Makeover

Jews, up to the time of Jesus, had slightly different ideas about the messiah.

The Hebrew word for *messiah* meant the same as the Greek word for *Christ*. *Jesus Christ* is the equivalent of *Jesus the Messiah*. *Messiah* means *anointed one*. The title was applied to various Old Testament figures, including kings and priests, who were seen as having been set apart by God to perform certain tasks. They were literally anointed with oil in a ceremony symbolizing God's special favor.

According to ancient Israelites, these verses were very meaningful. 1 Samuel 7:14-16:

The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places.

God promised King David that a descendant of his would always sit on the throne of Israel. However, Israelites were forced to rethink that promise in view of the fact that Israel was destroyed by Babylonians in 586 BCE, and there was, therefore, no longer a descendant of David on the throne. How could that reality be reconciled with God's promise?

One popular theory was that God was punishing his people for disobeying him, but once that was out of the way, God would fix things up by sending them a Davidic king in the form of a messiah. He would be a warrior who would defeat their enemies and restore the sovereign state of Israel. The theory wasn't working out very well, however, as their beloved Israel was taken over by Persians, then Greeks, then Egyptians, then Syrians, then Romans. Still no king from the line of David.

By the time Jesus made his appearance, most Jews weren't giving much thought to the messiah. But a few of them still hadn't given up, and they still looked to Psalm 2:1-9 as an unfulfilled but binding promise.

**Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,
“Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us.”
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
“I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”**

These die-hard believers in the messiah were looking for a great, powerful, political warrior-king. But other Jews had other ideas. They were looking for a messiah more like what Jesus believed in and talked about – one that would also be the judge of all the earth, one who would overthrow the forces of evil. He was sometimes referred to as the *Son of Man*.

Daniel 7:13-14:

**As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.**

**His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.**

Other Jews had other expectations of the Messiah. But, they all had this in common: he would be powerful, he would overthrow God's enemies, he would rule over God's chosen people, and he would be a figure well endowed with splendor and grandeur.

Jesus was none of that. The idea that Jesus was the messiah was, for most Jews, a blasphemous and absurd notion. So, how did we get from that to the Christian concept of a suffering messiah? Like this.

Some of Jesus' followers, prior to his death, believed that he was the messiah – a powerful king who would reestablish and rule over a sovereign Israel. So, when Jesus was killed, that seemed to prove that his followers had been wrong about him. He couldn't have been the messiah, because their messiah wouldn't die, especially like that.

However, then his followers (some or all of them) came to believe that God had brought Jesus back to life. That changed everything for some Jews. That, to them, proved that Jesus was the messiah after all. But that forced them to rethink their concept of what it meant to be the messiah. Starting with the accepted premise that Jesus was the messiah, and acknowledging the fact that he had suffered and died, they came to the inescapable conclusion that the messiah had to suffer and die. They did not accept that there had been no Jewish prophecies about the suffering and death of the messiah. They simply decided that those prophecies must have been there all along, and they just didn't see them or understand them correctly. So, the earliest Christians went back to the Jewish scripture, searching for the signs they had overlooked before. And, in self-fulfilling expectation, they found what they were looking for in passages that said nothing about the messiah and had never been interpreted that way before.

For example, Isaiah 53:1-6 suddenly became messianic.

Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
 and like a root out of dry ground;
 he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
 He was despised and rejected by others;
 a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
 and as one from whom others hide their faces
 he was despised, and we held him of no account.
 Surely he has borne our infirmities
 and carried our diseases;
 yet we accounted him stricken,
 struck down by God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 crushed for our iniquities;
 upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
 and by his bruises we are healed.
 All we like sheep have gone astray;
 we have all turned to our own way,
 and the Lord has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all.

Suddenly Psalm 22:1-18 became a description of the crucifixion.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of
 my groaning?
 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
 and by night, but find no rest.
 Yet you are holy,
 enthroned on the praises of Israel.
 In you our ancestors trusted;
 they trusted, and you delivered them.
 To you they cried, and were saved;
 in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
 But I am a worm, and not human;
 scorned by others, and despised by the people.
 All who see me mock at me;
 they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
 “Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
 let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”
 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
 On you I was cast from my birth,
 and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
 Do not be far from me,
 for trouble is near
 and there is no one to help.
 Many bulls encircle me,
 strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
 they open wide their mouths at me,
 like a ravening and roaring lion.
 I am poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint;
 my heart is like wax;
 it is melted within my breast;
 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
 and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
 you lay me in the dust of death.
 For dogs are all around me;
 a company of evildoers encircles me.
 My hands and feet have shriveled;
 I can count all my bones.
 They stare and gloat over me;
 they divide my clothes among themselves,
 and for my clothing they cast lots.

In the hands of a creative and imaginative believer, a little exegetical prestidigitation can prove anything. But most Jews weren't buying it. They knew that those verses did not include the word *messiah*, they had never been interpreted as applying to the messiah, and Christians were crazy. But Christians were determined to give the whole concept of messiah a makeover, and that's just what they did. They got busy establishing links between Old Testament passages, which now became predictions about the messiah, and the things Jesus had said and done, which now became fulfillments of the OT prophecies they had just invented. They began shaping their stories and accounts in those terms, portraying Jesus as the messiah the OT had been predicting all along. His mother would be a virgin, he would be born in Bethlehem, he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, and on and on. The earliest Christians invented a brand new suffering messiah and named him Jesus. They used a blend of ancient pagan traditions and myths, Jewish

traditions and folklore, and historical fact to fashion the messiah myth we know today as Christianity. They unabashedly borrowed from Egyptian religions of the past. They liberally lifted parables from Buddhism.

Part of the process entailed figuring out exactly when Jesus became the messiah. When did Jesus become divine as well as human? At first, it was generally accepted that it happened at the resurrection. But others began to think maybe it went back to Jesus' baptism. (That's why Mark's gospel starts out with Jesus meeting John the Baptist). Then came the idea that it derived from Jesus' conception and birth. (That's why Matthew starts out with Jesus' genealogy, tying him to King David, and with Jesus' birth). But by the time the gospel of John was written, that wasn't good enough, either. So John pushed Jesus' divinity back to the very beginning of time. John's Jesus had been divine eternally.

By the time Mark was written (around 70 CE), they pretty much had their story worked out, but there were still a lot of details to sort. Luke and Matthew were based on different oral traditions, with lots of details that didn't match each other or Mark, one of their primary sources. The result is a garbled, jumbled, confusing mess of an Easter story. The authors were not relating events that they had witnessed. They were simply retelling the stories they had heard -- stories that had been in the works for decades, all of which had their genesis in the messiah makeover. Paul, too, picked up the new messiah myth and ran with it.

Jews, wisely, parted company with the followers of the newly invented messiah. The new Christian religion would continue to evolve for centuries, with countless variations and competitors. In the fifth century, what we think of today as orthodox Christianity began to emerge, after men dedicated to different doctrines had slugged it out. The last views standing were the ones that prevailed. They were the ones championed by the men who had managed to gain the most power and influence. There were still lots of other varieties that just wouldn't go away, but they became the fringe groups. Or, as they came to be known in the late Middle Ages, *heresies*. Christianity, in an astonishing demonstration of its boundless capacity for cruelty and evil, set about to

systematically destroy and demolish all remaining traces of heresy of all kinds.

Today, Christians want you to remain ignorant of that ugly episode. They don't want you to know that the church in the Middle Ages functioned much like the Italian mafia that came along centuries later. They don't want you to remember all the senseless slaughter at the hands of Christians in the Crusades. They don't want you to know that European Christians enslaved, oppressed, and killed Native Americans by the tens of thousands when people from the Old World traveled to the New World. They don't want you to understand that it was Christians who were responsible for black slavery in America. They want to pretend that the huge pedophile priest scandal wasn't really all that big a deal. Oh well, nobody's perfect. They want you to believe that Christianity is a force for good in the world today, and that the only other option is evil.

Millions of people throughout the world are gullible enough to believe it. You can fool all of the Christians all the time.