



Messiah

Author: CenSAMM

Published: 25th October 2022

CenSAMM. 2022. "Messiah." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 25 October 2022. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/messiah

Introduction

In apocalyptic, millenarian, and eschatological contexts, the term 'Messiah' is used to refer to a redeemer figure for a specific group or community, or for humanity more generally. In Judaism the Messiah is typically understood as a figure who will come in the future, whereas in Christianity and Islam the term usually refers to Jesus as the Messiah who has already come and will return. The term is sometimes used in a less formal sense to refer to redeemer figures in other religious traditions. Various figures in Jewish and Christian history have claimed the status of the Messiah or been identified as the Messiah and as the fulfilment or inaugurator of eschatological expectations.

Origins

The term 'Messiah' derives from the Hebrew *mashiah* and the Aramaic *m^eshiha* meaning 'anointed' or 'anointed one.' The term was usually translated as *christos* ('christ') in the Greek Septuagint, the predominant term employed also in the New Testament. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, *mashiah* was applied typically to a king or ruler (e.g., 1 Kings 19:16; Judges 9:8-15), but also to a priest (e.g., Leviticus 4:3), prophet (e.g., 1 Kings 19:16), or God's chosen line of patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, described as "prophets": Psalm 105:15). In particular, the kings in the line of David were described as anointed and given divine authority, starting with David himself:

Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. (1 Samuel 16:11-13; all biblical translations NRSV unless otherwise stated)

But the term was not restricted to kings in the Davidic line; in Isaiah 45:1, the term was used of the Persian (and thus foreign) king, Cyrus, who was authorised to carry out a divine task: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed/messiah, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes.”

It has often been claimed that, by the first century CE, the singular and titular term ‘the Messiah’ was understood to be a kingly title for a figure expected to restore the fortunes of Israel and transform the world. However, the term was still used with a variety of meanings in the first century and so needed to be qualified in order to specify what sort of messianic or anointed figure was expected (de Jonge 1966). The Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, expected priestly and Davidic figures in the end times (1QS 9.11) while also noting that the biblical prophets were anointed figures. The messiah of Psalms of Solomon 17–18 is an eschatological Davidic king who leads Israel to victory over her enemies and ushers in the reign of God but is a mere human being, whereas the “one like a son of man” of the Similitudes of Enoch (late first century BCE?) who is identified as messiah (1 Enoch 48:10; 52:4) has a heavenly pre-existence (1 Enoch 48:3). The messiah of late first-century apocalypse, 4 Ezra, judges the wicked and delivers God’s chosen people, but dies after his earthly reign. The messiah is a relatively unimportant figure still in the earliest rabbinic literature (early third century CE) but receives relatively greater prominence in later rabbinic literature (Green and Silverstein 2004). As this suggests, messianism—including expectations of a kingly or Davidic redeemer, and various expectations of supernatural assistance—was present, even if we cannot be sure about when the title ‘the Messiah’ began to be used specifically to refer to a dominant eschatological redeemer figure.

Nevertheless, Jews and Christians were using the title ‘the Messiah’ by the end of the first century CE (cf. Reed 2014) and linking it to Jesus or varied anointed eschatological figures, particularly the Davidic ones (for the debate, see, e.g., Novenson 2017). In the New Testament, the Greek word *christos* (‘Christ’ in English) was a common title for Jesus and the standard translation of *mashiah*/Messiah/anointed one and, in Paul and the Gospels, the term ‘Christ’ is both a name and title for Jesus (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3), appearing multiple times in combination: as “Jesus Christ” (e.g., Mark 1:1; Galatians 1:12) or “Christ Jesus” (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 2:14). Most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and Jewish thinking typically envisaged that the arrival of the Messiah would herald the restoration of Israel. Various Jewish and Christian speculations about the Messiah and the details of the messianic era developed over the centuries, including the idea of the Messiah or the Messiah’s name being associated with (among other suggestions) “Shiloh,” a popular interpretation based on Genesis 49:10 (“The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until *shiloh* comes...”).

Jewish and Christian Messiahs

For the last two millennia, a number of Jewish Messiahs have been proclaimed either by their supporters or themselves. The prominent rabbinic authority Rabbi Aqiba was said to have proclaimed the leader of the revolt against Rome in 132–136 CE, Simeon bar Kosiba (/bar Kokhba), as “King Messiah” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 4.8/27; *Lamentations Rabbah* 2.2). Other famous Jewish leaders identified as the Messiah have included David Alroy (c. 1160), the kabbalist Abulafia (1240–1291), Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), Jacob Joseph Frank (1726–1791), and Menachem Mendel Schneerson (the Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe, 1902–1994). The Samaritan Dositheos (first century CE), reputedly a follower of John the Baptist like Jesus, also claimed

to be Messiah, and inspired a messianic movement (Dositheans) still attested some centuries later. According to the Pseudo-Clementine literature, some of John the Baptist's followers acclaimed him too as the Christ.

Within Christian groups and Christian-influenced groups, many figures have been identified either as Christ or a Christ-like redeemer. Christian or Christian-influenced candidates for Christ are found in seventeenth-century England (e.g., the Quaker James Nayler [1618–1660]), African liberation movements (e.g., [Kimpa Vita](#) [1684–1706], [Simon Kimbangu](#) [c. 1889–1951]), and millenarian movements of the twentieth century (e.g., [Octavia/Mabel Bartrop](#) [1866–1934], [David Koresh](#) [1959–1993]). Jack Wilson (Paiute Wovoka, 1856–1932), who was associated with the [Ghost Dance](#), considered himself to be the Messiah, and predicted a time of universal resurrection and an end to sickness. The early twentieth-century Māori prophet [Rua Kēnana](#) gave himself the title Te Mihaia Hou ('the New Messiah') and referred to his community at Maungapōhātu as 'The New Jerusalem.' Ben Ammi Ben-Israel (1939–2014) was considered a messiah by members of the group he founded, the [African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem](#). Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia is widely revered as Messiah within [Rastafarianism](#).

Comparable Examples in Other Traditions

An ancient religious group with origins in Mesopotamia and a small community of followers active today, the Mandeans, have acclaimed John the Baptist as the Messiah. In the Qur'an, Jesus is frequently called al-masih (the Messiah). Yet in Sunni Islam, the major messianic figure is the Mahdi ('Guided One'), who will appear in the end times to overcome the Dajjal (the [anti-Christ](#)), alongside Jesus (who will kill the Dajjal), and bring peace and justice to the world (see Saritoprak 2002.) [Twelver Shi'ite Muslims believe that the Mahdi was the twelfth imam](#), who has not been heard from since the ninth century CE, but who will return shortly before the Day of Judgement and rid the world of evil. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), the founder of the Islamic Ahmadiyya movement, claimed to be both Mahdi and Messiah. Members of the Unification Church proclaim Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) as the Messiah and the Second Coming of Christ. The [Nation of Islam](#) declares their founder Wallace Fard Muhammad (1877–1934) to be both Mahdi and Messiah.

Comparable redeemer figures have also emerged from outside the Abrahamic traditions altogether. For example, the Saoshyant in Zoroastrianism has been identified as a messiah or Christ figure with an apocalyptic inflection (Boyce 2001, 42). Indeed, it has been suggested that Zoroastrian or ancient Persian ideas influenced the development of important aspects of Jewish and Christian concepts of the saviour figure (Hinnells 1969; see also Sanders 2004). Within Buddhism, the idea of a future Buddha ready to lead the world to enlightenment grew steadily through the tradition's history and across its geographies (Sponberg and Hardacre 1988). For instance:

Though perhaps initially a minor figure in early Buddhist tradition, Maitreya thus came to represent a hope for the future, a time when all human beings could once again enjoy the spiritual and physical environment most favorable to enlightenment and the release from worldly suffering.
(Sponberg 1988, 1–2)

The Maitreya concept was taken on and considerably developed by Theosophy and has become a trope in successor esoteric theosophical beliefs, for example, those associated with Jiddu Krishnamurti (see Maxwell 1994), Alice Bailey, and Benjamin Creme (see Pokorny 2021). Raël (Claude Vorilhon), the founder and leader of UFO religion the [Raël Movement](#), claimed to be the Messiah as well as the son of an alien being named Yahweh.

Popular Culture

Messiah or Christ figures are a longstanding trope in ostensibly secular literature. For example, Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin and Alyosha (in *The Idiot* [1868–1869] and *The Brothers Karamazov* [1879–1880]) can be seen as Christ figures reflecting Dostoyevsky's evolving theology (Berg 2003). Associations between characters in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955) and 'Christological imagery' have been discussed by a number of theorists (see Padley and Padley 2010), and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories (1997–2007) have been identified as an exploration of a 'Christ discourse' (Apostolides and Meylahn 2014; see also Mohammed 2020). In film studies, identifying Christ figures (for example, the character of Neo in *The Matrix* series [1999–2021], and E.T. in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* [1982]) has become a common trope in scholarly and popular analyses (see Kozlovic 2004; Walsh 2021). The cinematic western is full of messianic cowboys, often functioning as foundational figures of the American state and values (Seesengood and Walsh 2018; Blanton and Crossley 2021). Frank Herbert's novel, *Dune* (1965)—which is again a major film (2021)—developed (sometimes controversially) Islamic ideas of the expected Mahdi in association with the desert-dwelling wanderers, the Fremen. In music, one of the most famous examples is the oratorio *Messiah* (first performed 1742) by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) which quickly gained widespread popularity, and today is regularly performed in the days of Advent, in the lead-up to Christmas.

In contemporary politics, the rhetoric of messianism continues, sometimes with overt religious connotations. A number of commentators characterised coverage of Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign as messianic (Henson 2019). Donald Trump was seen by supporters as a new Cyrus figure, which facilitated Israeli (e.g., Benjamin Netanyahu, Ayelet Shaked) and American evangelical supporters accepting Trump as a divine agent whatever his perceived shortcomings might have been (Durbin 2020; Trangerud 2021). Trump has a similar profile in the QAnon movement where he "plays a leading role in the QAnon mythos as a secret-agent/warrior/messiah figure" (Bracewell 2021). In line with contemporary attitudes to religion in Britain, the idea of a politician as a messianic figure is used more ironically, even as an insult, as in the case of [Tony Blair](#) who was seen by many as excessively zealous and arrogant, particularly in his foreign policy ambitions. In popular culture, playful uses are common, and these pick up on inherited messianic assumptions. Footballers like Wayne Rooney have been portrayed in advertising as masculine Messiahs and bearers of national hopes (see Edwards 2012). More comedically, messiahship is a major theme in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) where the deluded crowd proclaim Brian as the Messiah despite his vehement denials. The comedy was used to parody certain religious sensibilities by developing a point found in critical scholarship, namely that it was later interpreters (and not Jesus himself) who made Jesus the Messiah (for a wide-ranging discussion of Jesus and the *Life of Brian*, see Taylor 2015). The line in the film spoken by Brian's virgin mother Mandy Cohen ("He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy!") has become one of the most iconic lines in British culture (and beyond) today.

References

- Apostolides, Anastasia, and Johann-Albrecht Meylahn. 2014. "The Crucifixion of Consumerism and Power in the Resurrection of a Community Glimpsed Through Meylahn's Wounded Christ in Conversation with Rowling's Christ Discourse in the *Harry Potter* Series: Original Research." *HTS Theological Studies* 70 (1): 1-7.
- Berg, Lindsay Sargent. 2003. "The Tarnished Halo: Dostoevsky's Christ Figures and the Problem of Moral Authority." Northwestern University Doctoral Dissertation. <https://www.proquest.com/disse...>
- Blanton, Ward, and James Crossley. 2021. "Founding the New Old State: Messianic Cowboys on the Frontiers of Europe and America." In *The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, 323-31. London: T&T Clark.
- Boyce, Mary. (1979) 2001. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge.
- Bracewell, Lorna. 2021. "Gender, Populism and the QAnon Conspiracy Movement." *Frontiers in Sociology* 5. doi:10.3389/fsoc.2020.615727.
- Durbin, Sean. 2020. "From King Cyrus to Queen Esther: Christian Zionists' Discursive Construction of Donald Trump as God's Instrument." *Critical Research on Religion* 8: 115-37.
- Edwards, Katie. 2012. "Sporting Messiah: Hypermasculinity and Nationhood in Male-targeted Sports Imagery." *Biblical Reception* 1: 323-46.
- Green, William Scott, and Jed Silverstein. 2004. "The Doctrine of the Messiah." In *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck, 247-67. Malden: Blackwell.
- Henson, Lori. 2019. "Mocking the 'Messiah': Editorial Cartoons and Critiques of Journalists' 'Obamamania.'" *Visual Communication Quarterly* 26 (3): 161-73.
- Herbert, Frank. 1965. *Dune*. Boston: Chilton Company.
- Hinnells, John R. 1969. "Zoroastrian Saviour Imagery and Its Influence on the New Testament." *Numen* 16 (3): 161-85.
- Jonge, Marinus de. 1966. "The Use of the Word 'Anointed' in the Time of Jesus." *Novum Testamentum* 8: 132-48.
- Kozlovic, Anton Karl. 2004. "The Cinematic Christ-Figure." *The Furrow* 55 (1): 26-30.
- Maxwell, Patrick. 1994. "The Enigma of Krishnamurti." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 7 (2): 57-81.
- Mohammed, Muntadher A. 2020. "Christ-Figure Technique in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: A Case Study." *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 13 (3): 1141- 1152.

Monty Python. 1979. *Life of Brian*. Directed by Terry Jones. HandMade Films.

Novenson, Matthew V. 2017. *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Padley, Jonathan, and Kenneth Padley. 2010. "‘From Mirrored Truth the Likeness of the True’: J. R. R. Tolkien and Reflections of Jesus Christ in Middle-Earth." *English* 59 (224): 70-92.

Pokorny, Lukas. 2021. "The Theosophical Maitreya: On Benjamin Crème’s Millenarianism." In *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, edited by Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter, 195-220. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-55318-0_10.

Reed, Annette Yoshiko. 2014. "Messianism between Judaism and Christianity." In *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, edited by Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman, 23-62. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sanders, Jack T. 2004. "Whence the First Millennium? The Sources behind Revelation 20." *New Testament Studies* 50 (3): 444-56.

Saritoprak, Zeki. 2002. "The Mahdī in Islam: A Social-Cognitive Approach." *Islamic Studies* 41 (4): 661-74.

Seesengood, Robert Paul, and Richard Walsh. 2018. "There’s a New Messiah in Town: The Messianic in the Western." In *The T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, 248-59. London: T&T Clark.

Sponberg, Alan. 1988. "Introduction." In *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*, edited by Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre, 1-4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sponberg, Alan, and Helen Hardacre, eds. 1988. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Joan E., ed. 2015. *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python’s Life of Brian*. London: T&T Clark.

Trangerud, Hanne Amanda. 2021. "The American Cyrus: How an Ancient King Became a Political Tool for Voter Mobilization." *Religions* 12: 1-29.

Walsh, Richard. 2021. "A Modest Proposal for Christ-Figure Interpretations: Explicated with Two Test Cases." In *The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, 1-16. London: T&T Clark.

Article information

CenSAMM. 2022. "Messiah." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 25 October 2022. Retrieved from

www.cdamm.org/articles/messiah

Downloaded: 2023-12-20

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0