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Extension

Taking it further: Messiahs

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A Messiah ('anointed one') is seen as a saviour of a group of people.

In the Abrahamic religions examples are found in texts such as:

'Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his [Saul's] head, and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around.'" (1 Samuel 10:1)

The Jewish Messiah for whom the Jews are still waiting is said to be a human leader who will be descended for King David and King Solomon. It is believed that he will unify the tribes of Israel, bring all Jews back to Israel, rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and introduce a Messianic Age of universal peace.

In Mishneh Torah (11.4) Maimonides describes the Messiah as:

'And if a king shall arise from among the House of David, studying Torah and occupied with commandments like his father David, according to the written and oral Torah, and he will impel all of Israel to follow it and to strengthen breaches in its observance, and will fight God's wars, this one is to be treated as if he were the anointed one. If he succeeded and built the Holy Temple in its proper place and gathered the dispersed ones of Israel together, this is indeed the anointed one for certain, and he will mend the entire world to worship the Lord together, as it is stated: "For then I shall turn for the nations a clear tongue, so that they will all proclaim the Name of the Lord, and to worship Him with a united resolve" (Zephaniah 3:9).

According to Josephus (37 CE–100 CE), a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar:

'There was also Simon, who had been a slave of king Herod, but in other respects a comely person, of a tall and robust body; he was one that was much superior to others of his order, and had had great things committed to his care. This man was elevated at the disorderly state of things, and was so bold as to put a diadem on his head, while a certain number of the people stood by him, and by them he was declared to be a king, and he thought himself more worthy of that dignity than anyone else... . He burnt down the royal palace at Jericho, and plundered what was left in it. He also set fire to many other of the king's houses in several places of the country, utterly destroyed them, and permitted those that were with him to take what was left in them for a prey. He would have done greater things, but care was taken to repress him immediately. [The commander of Herod's infantry] Gratus joined himself to some Roman soldiers, took the forces he had with him, and met Simon. And after a great and a long fight, no small part of those that had come from Peraea (a disordered body of men, fighting rather in a bold than in a skilful manner) were destroyed. Although Simon had saved himself by flying away through a certain valley, Gratus overtook him, and cut off his head.' (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.10.6)

It might be said that the first False Messiah of the Jews was Jesus of Nazareth. Although, according to the gospels, Jesus was descended from King David:

‘An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.’ (Matthew 1:1)

However, the majority of Jews never accepted Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and it remains unclear from the New Testament whether Jesus saw himself as the Messiah:

‘Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 16:16–17)

‘Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.”’ (Mark 15:2)

Since this time there have been more than 20 Jews who have been labelled as False Messiahs from 3 CE to 1994 CE.

However, Jesus promised his followers that he would return:

‘Then if anyone says to you, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “There he is!”—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, “Look! He is in the wilderness,” do not go out. If they say, “Look! He is in the inner rooms,” do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.’ (Matthew 24:23–28)

The first example of a Christian Messiah is Simon Magus (or Simon the Sorcerer) who is mentioned in the Actos of the Apostles:

‘Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.’ (Acts 8:9–13)

Since then there have been countless claims to be the Messiah or the Second Coming of Christ, including in recent years:

- David Icke (b. 1952), of Great Britain, has described himself as "the son of God", and a "channel for the Christ spirit". He also believes that the British Royal Family are aliens.
- David Koresh (b. Vernon Wayne Howell in 1959, d. 1993) the leader of the Branch Davidians (see RELIGIOUS STUDIES REVIEW, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 24–26).
- David Shayler (b. 1965), a former MI5 agent, declared himself the Messiah on 7 July 2007.

It is worth spending some time investigating the claims of some of these if only to see how ludicrous many of them are.

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