

The Old Testament furnishes ample evidence of the Messiah's central role in molding the course of ancient Judaism. This gentleman, variously Son of David, Son of Man, or Son of God, was to come down from heaven in time of crisis to wrap things up here below. He was to be the Jews' final vindicator and champion, overseeing their apotheosis into denizens of the kingdom of God where, along with sundry others, they would bask forever in the rays of divine indulgence, their sins forgiven, their enemies trampled underfoot, their travail over. The Messiah would come in a time of imminent disaster. Indeed his appearance would signal the end of the world, the Apocalypse, wherein the bad guys would be thoroughly trounced while the righteous were delivered to live happily ever after.

And of course the New Testament, at least to those of a Christian persuasion, relates the story of the one who fulfilled the old prophecies, and who consummated the Messianic hope. As had been predicted, he came in troubled times: to Jewish eyes it must have seemed as though the world, their world, was coming to an end. Judaism was in disarray, wracked by internal tensions and political discord. An independent Israel, long in the minds of a people who had suffered exile and foreign domination for centuries, must have seemed further removed than ever under the yoke of control from Rome.

Yes, we read that along came a young man by the name of Jesus, claiming he was the Son of God, exhorting the Jews to repent, to give up their worldly concerns, for the kingdom of God was nigh. No matter that the cataclysm, which was the sine qua non of his mission, came about neither in his generation nor any subsequent one; no matter either that, soon after his death, many of his followers broke with and rejected Judaism, which alone among all the religious traditions made sense of his claims, and of which he saw himself as the culmination. What does matter is that for vast numbers of people this man fit the bill. He is believed to have proven himself by his words, deeds, and death; he was the one and only one referred to in the prophecies; it was he who was meant all along by the Messiah.

But all that will soon change. An ancient document has just come to light which will turn the religious world upside down, causing a revolution in the way we look at Judeo-Christianity. Some time ago a team of archaeologists, lead by Dr. Emmanuel Gutgottin of the University of Leipzig, unearthed a series of obscure scrolls from a secret site in the

Holy Land. After several years of research the team had made considerable headway in deciphering the manuscripts. Intense excitement was generated. Although no official statement had been issued, word had spread that momentous discoveries were being made. But on August 29th of last year, before the work was complete, the whole team perished in a mysterious plane crash. The authorities are still investigating the circumstances surrounding the disaster, and although no arrests have yet been made, foul play is suspected.

Fortunately, the team's labor was not in vain. A copy of the work-in-progress had been locked away before the tragedy.

The scrolls, of which sadly only a fraction have survived, were written in the second century A.D. by some manner of scribe in Jerusalem; by all accounts, he clearly had access to a wealth of historical and religious documents, the existence of which was previously unsuspected by modern scholars. The fragments which remain offer glimpses from which a lay history of ancient Judaism and early Christianity can be conjectured.

Our interest in the scrolls is confined to what new light can be shed on the concrete development of the Messianic conception, and the scrolls are most illuminating in that they relate stories absent or perhaps grossly distorted in the Bible.

The most explosive revelations come when the scrolls treat of the New Testament era. For it is written that the man who has come down to us as the historical Christ was not alone. In fact, far from there being one and only one individual claiming he was the Son of God, a veritable outbreak of potential Messiahs had simultaneously occurred. This is attributed partly to the law of supply and demand: the times were deemed so pressing, and Messianic hope had reached such a pitch, that not a few were inspired to answer the need.

Part of the increased demand, and indeed much of the supply, also was provided by the doings of John the Baptist. This worthy fellow saw fit to raise expectations as he wandered about telling innocent folk that he had come to prepare the way of the Lord. Those who underwent a dunking at the Baptist's hands often suffered lasting delusions of grandeur, and more than a few laid claim to the illusion of communication with a divine spirit. The net effect of John's efforts was that not one, but a whole handful, of characters were stumbling around the Holy Land believing they had been imbued

with miraculous powers and, as far as they were concerned, all had equal claim to take on the mantle of Messiah.

The various contenders must have come into contact with each other, although the New Testament gives no hint of their separate existence, or to the several schools of thought which must have surely developed as to their respective authenticity.

The fascinating conclusion here is that far from the historical Jesus cutting a unique solitary figure, the events which have come down to us in the Gospels may be an amalgam of the lives of a few not wholly dissimilar individuals, or at the very least the historical Jesus had to contend not only with the skepticism of the populace and the hostility of the priesthood, but had to prove himself against his rivals as well.

Also, one naturally has to ask oneself, supposing the Gospels relate the story of one man alone, of the events and teaching which they record: were they inspired by a sense of his divine mission, of his unique authority, or were they designed to worst his opponents, to put himself in the most favorable light vis-à-vis the public?

In Blasphemy™ you take part in the fate of a would-be Messiah. Your aim is to convince your compatriots that your Jesus, and *your* Jesus alone, is the genuine article.

To accomplish this, your Jesus must cut as impressive a figure as possible. He must give stirring sermons, perform miracles, attract devoted followers, and generally carry on in a Messiah-like fashion. Your Jesus must make every effort to discredit his rivals, and in the end, he must get himself killed. Yes, alas, the price of fame was dear in those days. It was clearly written that the Messiah would come to a sticky end. Accordingly, you win the game if you're the first player to get your Jesus nailed up.

Blasphemy™ is the race to the cross!