

Jesus, the Unexpected Messiah

“And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? Yet we know where this man comes from; and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.” So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me.”... Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, “I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come.” The Jews said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? ... What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come?’ ... some of the people said, “This is really the prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” So there was a division among the people over him.... The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this man!” The Pharisees answered them, “Are you led astray, you also? Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee.”

~ John 7:26-29, 31-36, 40-43, 45-52

WHEN JESUS WAS BORN in a stable in a Bethlehem too full of travelers to give his parents lodging, an angel announced his birth to shepherds in a nearby field: *“I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”* (Lk 2:10-11). The

Savior, the Messiah, had entered the world. When Jesus was a mere forty-day-old infant, his parents took him to the Temple and offered him to his Father (see Lk 2:22). An old man, Simeon, whom the Holy Spirit had promised would see the Messiah before he died (see Lk 2:25-26), saw the little family. Taking Jesus in his arms, he prophesied that



*Icon of Christ in the Tomb,
by Fr. Antoninus Niemiec, OP*

the child was “set for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (Lk 2:34).

History records only one religious leader whose coming was plainly foretold (see Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39). For more than a thousand years, the Jews had awaited the coming of a Messiah. The word “Messiah” in Hebrew means “anointed one” (and the word “Christ” comes from a word meaning the same thing in Greek, the language of the New Testament). The idea of a Messiah came into humanity’s consciousness immediately following the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. This sin lost, for our first parents and all of us descended from them, friendship with God, the joys of the Garden of Eden, harmony of soul and body, an unclouded intellect and will, and unending life in harmony with the universe. This tragic loss for all of us was irrevocable — except that Adam and Eve had been made by a God of infinite love. Aware of their naked helplessness, in his almighty goodness he withheld his justified anger at their awful arrogance and, to heal their fatal wound, promised them a savior. He announced that, in time, he would send one who would be utterly at enmity with the serpent, the evil one (see Gn 3:15).

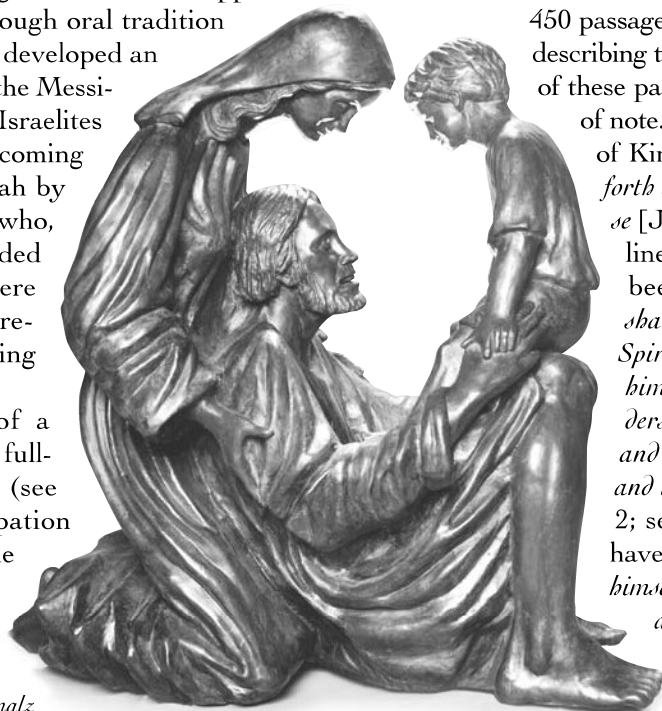
Over the millennia, while God shaped his people to envision, accept, obey, and love but one God

amid tribes surrounding them that worshipped idols, the Israelites through oral tradition and written testaments developed an understanding of what the Messiah would be like. The Israelites were kept aware of the coming of the promised Messiah by God-inspired prophets who, through the ages recorded in Sacred Scripture, were sent to the people to prepare them for his coming (see Is 6:8; Jer 1:7).

The expectation of a Messiah grew until the fullness of time had come (see Gal 4:4), when anticipation was at a peak. Even the Gentiles were aware of the coming of a special person. The

Love’s Bond, by Timothy Schmalz

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magi came from the east, led by a star to the land of Judea, to adore a king to whom they sought to pay homage (see Mt 2:2). Romans wrote that there was an acceptance of the Scriptural prophecies in the East (Seutonius) and even throughout the Roman Empire (Tacitus). Cicero wrote about the people’s need to recognize a King “to be saved” although he did not know who the prophecies foretold; Virgil also spoke of the same tradition. Six centuries before Jesus was born, the Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote of God appearing to end “this curse” by accepting upon himself all our sins. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato both spoke of the “Logos” (the Word) who was yet to come; another of the Greek playwrights, of a savior and redeemer to release humanity from its “primal curse.” And while the Greeks and Romans expected a savior to come from the East (that is, Palestine), Chinese sages wrote of an expectation of a savior from the West (which Palestine is, in relation to China).

Then John the Baptist announced the electrifying news: the day of the Messiah was at hand (see Lk 3:15-17).

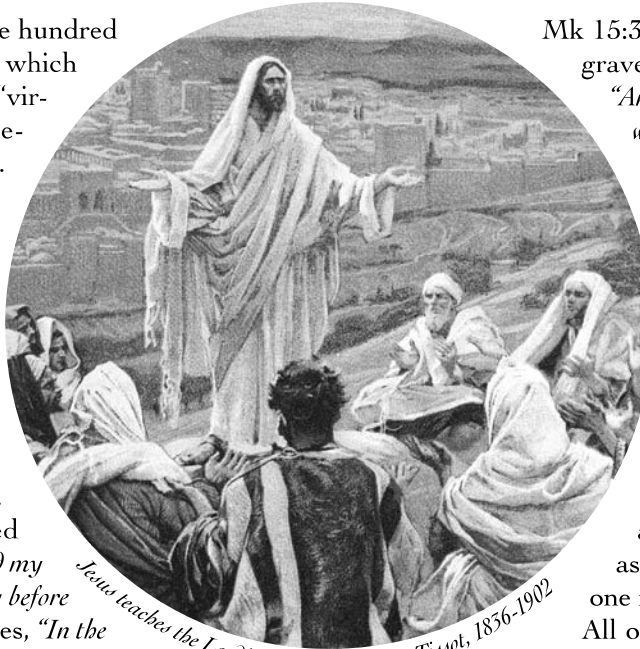
The many prophecies made to the Israelites not only foretold the coming of the Christ, the anointed one, but also gave striking details by which he could be identified.

It is estimated that the Old Testament contains over 450 passages that could be identified as describing the promised Messiah. Some of these passages are especially worthy of note. He would be a descendant of King David: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [Jesse was David’s father; the line of David had, supposedly, been destroyed], and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Is 11:1-2; see Lk 1:31-33). He would have no human father: “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel”

(Is 7:14; see Mt 2:20-23; Lk 1:26-33) (the prophecy of the virginity of Mary is most clearly seen in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures prepared at least one hundred years before Jesus' birth, which used the Greek word for "virgin" to translate the Hebrew "young woman"). His birthplace is named: "O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Mi 5:2; see Mt 2:1; Lk 2:4-7), and it is this identification that led the magi to Jesus (see Mt 2:1-6). He would be announced by a herald: "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me" (see Mal 3:1), who cries, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Is 40:3; see Mk 1:2).

His mission is described: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Is 61:1-2; see Lk 4:16-21). He will come as a triumphant king, as David did, into Jerusalem: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass" (Zec 9:9; see Mk 11:1-11). He will suffer grievously: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:3, 5; see Mt 26:57-68, 27:1-26). He will be scorned, nailed to a cross, and his very clothing will be divided among strangers: "All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" (Ps 22:7-8; see Mt 27:39-44); "they have pierced my hands and feet" (Ps 22:16; see Jn 19:37; Jn 20:24-27); "they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they

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Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

cast lots" (Ps 22:18; see Jn 19:23-24). He will feel the desolation of the sins he has taken on himself: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1; see Mk 15:34). He will be buried in a graveyard in a rich man's tomb: "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death" (Is 53:9; see Mt 27:57-60). He is the savior of all mankind: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6; see Acts 13:47). Each prophecy by itself, however striking, might fit more than one individual; but all together they are astonishingly fulfilled in only one man, Jesus of Nazareth.

All of these prophecies did not create in the minds of the waiting Israelites the same perception of the expected Messiah. The poor of Galilee and Judea, the ordinary people, looked for a Savior who would be the "consolation of Israel" (Lk 2:25; see also Lk 1:46-55). The accounts of the life of Jesus in the New Testament fit the expectations of the poor and ordinary People of Israel. Jesus healed all who were brought to him (see Mk 6:56). He said he was a physician to sinners, not the righteous (see Mk 2:17), and the "good shepherd" who cares for his flocks (see Mk 14:27; Jn 10:1-16). He said of himself that he "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem was hailed by the ordinary folk, who waved palm branches and laid down their garments to honor the humble wonder-worker from Nazareth who came riding on an ass (see Jn 12:12-14). For them he was "he who is to come" (Lk 7:19).

The leaders of the nation were notably absent from this welcoming march; they had been in consultation among themselves as to how to trap, capture, and put Jesus to death (see Mk 3:6; Jn 11:45-53). Jesus was not the Messiah awaited by the nation's religious leaders or those with dreams of conquest or of throwing off the yoke of Rome. The Pharisees

and scribes — and even his disciples, at times — expected a religious leader who would teach only the Jewish law and customs and establish the supremacy of the tribes of Israel (see Acts 1:6). Those with political and military aspirations expected a powerful political leader who would organize the militant spirit of the populace into a mighty army as in the days of Saul and David, defeat the hated Romans, and restore the material might and grandeur of Israel (see Jn 6:15).

For them, he was truly *“a sign that is spoken against”* (Lk 2:34). His daily actions were flagrantly in opposition to their own teachings. He broke the sabbath prohibition against work by healing human ills (see Mt 12:10-13; Jn 5:2-9), befriended sinners and outcasts such as tax collectors (Lk 7:34) and ate with them (see Mt 9:10; Lk 19:1-7), preached by the side of the lake or in a field (see Mk 2:13; Lk 6:17) when the priestly class would teach only in a synagogue or the Temple. Jesus taught as one having authority, not as the scribes taught (see Mt 7:28-29). Even though he said that he had not come to abolish the law (see Mt 5:17), he preached the spirit of the law of Moses rather than the deadening traditions that had grown up around it (see Mk 7:5-12) and healed by forgiving sins (Mt 9:2-7). He said that God was his Father (see Mt 10:32-33), that he was in existence before Abraham and was himself God (see Jn 8:58), and that he was equal to the Father (see Jn 10:30). In the eyes of the Pharisees and leaders of the nation, he was not a Messiah but a blasphemer (see Mk 2:7; Jn 5:18; Jn 8:59; Jn 10:30-33). Had Jesus not truly been God, these were crimes of blasphemy punishable with death by stoning, according to the law of Moses (see Lv 24:16).

Jesus was truly an unexpected Messiah. He was seen as a prophet (see Mt 21:11; Mk 8:27-28), yet he was more than a prophet. He was God’s only Son, and that gift of God to us, no one could ever have expected. He came from the Father, and he

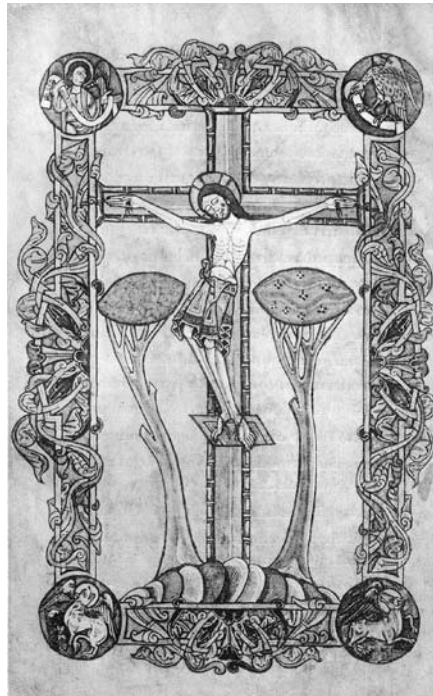
came to do the Father’s will (see Jn 6:38), which was to be the Savior of the world. He came not to be the chief Pharisee or the helmeted ruler of a Jewish kingdom. His Kingdom was not to be of this world (see Jn 18:36). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do, however, emphasize the mission of Jesus as preaching the Kingdom of God that he came to establish (see Mt 4:23; Mk 1:14-15; Lk 4:43). He came to bring a new spirit to the world, the love of the Holy Spirit. Although he healed bodies, he wanted most of all to change hearts. He came to *“cast fire upon the earth”* (Lk 12:49) to burn out the old ways of doing things, the old ways of thinking and behaving — to drive sin out of human hearts. He taught us to love God first and to love our neighbor (see Lk 10:25-37), to love even our enemies and to do good to those who hate and persecute us (see Mt 5:43-47), to sin no more (see Jn 5:14), to *“save the lost”* (Lk 19:10), for truly we are our brother’s keeper. In the Beatitudes (see Mt 5:3-10), he taught us to embrace a new Spirit and, in so doing,

to find true happiness here on earth and hereafter in Heaven. He endured suffering as we do, but made it holy and gave it redemptive meaning because he endured it out of love (see 1 Jn 4:10).

This Messiah was unexpected. He was man and he was God. He reigned in Heaven but came to bring Heaven to our earth. Astonishingly, he considered *us* worthy of *him*. In Jesus Christ, God kept his promise to save us. He sent as Messiah a Son — a gift beyond our expectation, wildest dreams, or comprehension: *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him”* (1 Jn 4:9). And the Son, in imitation of his Father’s stupendous love, not only came among us as our Savior, but also arranged to remain with us always, *“to the close of the age”* (Mt 28:20). Our best response to this most unexpected Messiah is to be, like him, an instrument to continue the work of love that brought him among us.

(CCC 422, 436-445, 559-560, 574-576, 587-591, 702, 711-716)

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Crucifixion, 11th century illuminated manuscript from a Psalter