



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

## Messianism I: Pagan Models

### Egypt

As early as the fourth millennium before the common era (BCE), the Egyptians believed that the reigning Pharaoh was the fifth descendant by emanation from the sky god, Atum-Ra.<sup>1</sup> According to one account, Pharaoh's bride was required to anoint him before their marriage with oil drawn from fat of the holy and deified crocodile (*messeh*).<sup>2</sup> In another version, crocodile oil was used to anoint Pharaoh for his coronation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the crocodile god gave up its life to foster the reign of the earthly god, Pharaoh.

The Egyptian term *messeh* was allegedly adopted by the Hebrews (ca. 1250 BCE) as their *mashiach* (anointed).<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word for "anointed" was then Hellenized by the Greeks to *christos* and, later, by the English to "messiah" and "Christ." The association of *messeh*, *mashiach* and "messiah" may well have explicit relation to Moses' lifting up the serpent (= crocodile, etc.) in the wilderness (Numbers 21:9) and to the words of Christ, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent [= crocodile] in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . ." (John 3:14).<sup>5</sup>

### Persia

At the end of the second millennium BCE, the Persian prophet, Zarathustra, predicted that a Saoshyant (world savior/messiah = "one who will bring benefit") would be born of a virgin within a thousand years. In order to achieve this, Zarathustra believed that he must leave his sperm in Lake Kasaoya. The sperm would then be miraculously preserved until a virgin would eventually bathe in the lake and become impregnated.<sup>6</sup>

It was in this context that the Persian magi anticipated the imminent coming of the Saoshyant, who they believed would “lead humanity in the last battle against evil.”<sup>7</sup> The magi explored the relevant astronomical events, then followed the star and came to Bethlehem (ca. 7/6 BCE) in search of the Saoshyant, who proved to be baby Jesus — born of a virgin.<sup>8</sup>

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## Rome

Shortly after the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BCE), the Roman Senate met and declared that Julius was god himself.<sup>9</sup> When his nephew and adopted son, Octavius, succeeded him on the throne, “some men argued that in him [Octavius] the long-awaited Messiah had come, bringing peace and happiness to mankind.”<sup>10</sup> This became widely known as the Pax Romana (Roman Peace). Later, the Roman Senate declared Augustus to be the son of god.<sup>11</sup> This was the beginning of the Roman imperial cult, which flourished during and after the time of Christ.

In recognition of the imperial cult, King Herod the Great built three temples or *augusteums* to Caesar Augustus (ca. 25 BCE) — Caesarea in Judaea, Sebaste in Samaria, and Omrit in Iturea (northern Galilee).<sup>12</sup> When Caesar Augustus accepted his role as the son of god, King Herod the Great of Judea claimed the messiahship and launched the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple (ca. 19 BCE).<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

From these ancient pagan models, the concept of the messiah involved both divine and human personhood, temple worship, sacrificial death, imperial rulership, liberation of the oppressed, and transformation of Creation.

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## Endnotes

1. See Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991), p. 56.
2. See Sir Laurence Gardner, “The Hidden History of Jesus and the Holy Grail,” at [www.nexusmagazine.com/articles/holygrail1.html](http://www.nexusmagazine.com/articles/holygrail1.html).
3. See Sir Laurence Gardner, “Star Fire — The Gold of the Gods,” *Nexus* 5, no. 6 (October/November 1998), at [www.nexusmagazine.com/articles/starfire1.html](http://www.nexusmagazine.com/articles/starfire1.html).

4. See Gardner, "Hidden History of Jesus."
5. "The sign performed by Aaron with his rod which became a *tannin* — a crocodile — (Ex. 7:9-10) may have been intended as a protest against its sanctity. Ezekiel calls Pharaoh king of Egypt 'the great *tannim* that lieth in the midst of his rivers' (Ezek. 29:3; cf. Isa. 27:1), while Jeremiah (51:34) likens the king of Babylonia to a crocodile that preys on human beings" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. Jehuda Feliks, "Crocodile").
6. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 42.
7. Ibid.
8. See Simo Parpola, "The Magi and the Star," *Bible Review* 17, no. 6: 16-23, 52, 54.
9. See *Frontline*, "Maps, Archaeology & Sources: Chronology," at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/cron.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/cron.html).
10. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944), p. 226.
11. See *Frontline*, "Maps, Archaeology & Sources."
12. See J. Andrew Overman, Jack Olive and Michael Nelson, "Discovering Herod's Shrine to Augustus," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 40-49, 67, 68.
13. "The first messianic claimant of whom we hear is the infamous Herod . . ." (Louis H. Feldman, "Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism in the First Century," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* [Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992], p. 6).