

# The ‘Messianic Vision’ and the second coming of Christ



**Highland Views**  
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Guest columnist

Biblical prophets weren't so much concerned about the past or future but the present. What is happening in the world here and now? What is a faithful response to the world as it is? What is the role of the People of God, or any human being? As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "What saved the proph-

ets from despair was their messianic vision and the idea of man's capacity for repentance." To repent is to "turn," specifically to turn to God, but also to change your way and your way of thinking. The prophets of Israel had something more universal in mind.

That vision, Heschel explains, grew from "the promise of messianic redemption," since "messianism implies that any course of living, even the supreme efforts of man by himself, must fail in redeeming the world." Rarely speaking a gentle message of comfort, "the prophet's word is a scream in the

night." (The Prophets, 1962).

I returned to this messianic vision when a reader asked my opinion on the "second coming of Christ." Because this belief shaped my faith so profoundly during my Evangelical years, I know how important, even central, the belief is for millions. I recall how we preached the Return of Christ to cause others to turn or Return to Christ. A bumpersticker on my car, and button on my jacket, proclaimed: "He's Coming." The intent was to invite the question, "Who is coming?" so the gospel of salvation could be shared. The more conversions, the more

souls were prepared for Jesus to appear in the sky to fly home with him.

But then, along came this disturbing thing called knowledge. In college and seminary biblical studies courses, I was confronted by not only the prophetic messages from the Hebrew Bible but the apocalyptic worldview of Jesus and his followers. Upon deeper, more honest reflection, I formed a clearer understanding of the meaning of "The Return," to First Century Christians and believers today. A more reasonable picture began

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to present itself:

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah was an expected savior of Israel (some believed, and may still believe, he'll be a spiritual leader like Moses, or a military figure like Joshua, standing against the enemies of Israel)

There have been a number of "messiahs" in Jewish history

The Gospel writers and Paul believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah ("Christ" in Greek) who brought salvation to both Jews and Gentiles

Though in some ways Jesus fits the role of a prophet, it's questionable if Je-

sus thought of himself as "The" Messiah Jesus and his followers believed the end of the world (the Day of Judgment) was imminent. When he didn't return in their day, a theology was formulated to explain his absence

Christians have used the story of the return of Christ for two primary reasons: hope in difficult times, and evangelism (the "Turn or Return to Christ" message. For centuries, the Church has claimed "He's coming soon ... so you must be saved or be punished." Almost like a threat to make fearful people become Christians)

The Book of Revelation "reveals" one main message: the "second coming" will be disastrous for the majority of humankind. To state it bluntly, the last book in the Christian Bible is yet another scare tactic to terrorize people into

the kingdom. We might ask: Is this the "good news" Jesus left us?

As I see it, without the myth of a second coming, the whole Christian story crumbles (if he's gone forever, what's the point of faith here and now, except to simply wait to die and go to see him in heaven?)

As a freethinking humanist, I no longer sense the urgency of a savior from the sky. I see any saving—that is, turning or changing—as our human responsibility. No one is coming or coming back to rescue us. I think the "first coming" of Jesus was good enough. You don't have to believe he was God to appreciate his teachings on compassion, justice and basic human kindness.

(You certainly don't have to believe in his apocalyptic vision of the End Times). Like many of the prophets, he

directed most of his condemnation at self-righteous religious leaders, those respected for their knowledge of the Bible and tradition. Looking backward, primarily by adherence to ancient writings and traditions, doesn't show a person is faithful. Living an ethical life of love is the evidence. Likewise, looking ahead to the future, by promising heaven (or hell) or another appearance of a celestial Christ, serves to distract from the value of living now, here, in relation to real human beings, alive and present.

Whether or not a messiah or Jesus returns someday, the present, and each other, is all we have.

*Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).*