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# From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the Church

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## I Introduction

The title of my paper suggests a kind of movement or change: from the Jewish Messiah, which is one thing, to the divine Saviour of the creeds of the church, which is something quite different. If you take this change for granted, another conclusion immediately follows: since the point of departure, the Messiah, is characterized as Jewish, the end product, the Saviour of the creeds, has every chance of being non-Jewish. That is a point of view shared by many Jews, whether they believe Jesus to be the Messiah or not.

The traditional Jewish position is this: Jesus never was the Messiah because he did not accomplish the messianic task, which was to liberate Israel from oppression, redeem the

world and reestablish the full observance of the Torah. Jesus did not live up to what was legitimately expected of the Messiah;<sup>1</sup> accordingly it was a hopeless task, right from the beginning, to proclaim him as the Messiah to a Jewish audience. Therefore this project was soon discarded, and instead Jesus was launched as something other than the Jewish Messiah, and before a non-Jewish audience, and with much greater success. Instead of being the Redeemer of the nation of Israel, he

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1 In Antiquity this objection was stated by Trypho in Justin's *Dialogue*, 32.1. In the Middle Ages it was stated with much force by Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, a.k.a. Nachmanides) at the disputation at Barcelona, 1263; see his *Vikkuach* in Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (London/Washington: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993, pp. 120-122.) In modern times the argument is repeated, for example, in David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and 'Jewish Christianity'* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1978), pp. 18-22.

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was turned into something quite different: the divine Saviour of the individual souls of Gentile Christians.

This development is often called 'the hellenization' of early Christianity,<sup>2</sup> and it is more or less taken for granted in many quarters that this is the right way to describe it historically. Not only do many Jews think this way; many Gentile Christians also share the basic historical presuppositions of this model. They may evaluate it differently, however. Some think it was a healthy and also necessary development, Christianity breaking away from Jewish nationalism and particularism.

This, more or less, was the position of classical liberalism within the Protestant camp. It was a good thing that Jesus did not remain the Jewish Messiah he probably never was. Liberal Protestantism was, however, not entirely happy about the Saviour of the creeds either. They found him too Greek, too embedded in Greek philosophy and metaphysics. So they sought a third alternative, which they believed they had found in the real Jesus, the so-called historical Jesus, who was neither Jewish Messiah nor the divine Saviour of the creeds, but rather a good liberal theologian himself, with a message that modern liberals found congenial.<sup>3</sup>

In recent times, this idea has been widely abandoned, except by the scholars belonging to the Jesus Seminar in the USA, who have tried to modernize it. Much more in vogue, however, and especially in circles engaged in Jewish/Christian dialogue, is another twist to the basic concept. This is the view that Jesus in fact never was and never claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. Instead, his divine mission was to redeem the Gentiles, to become precisely what he became: the Saviour of the Gentiles. In this way, there can be a peaceful and harmonious co-existence between Judaism and Christianity. God gave the Torah and the Covenant to Israel, and he has never revoked either of them. But he gave Jesus to the Gentiles to be their Covenant and their Saviour.<sup>4</sup> This position is not as new and original as some of its defenders may think. In the debate with Justin, Trypho the Jew said the following:

Let him [Jesus] be recognized of you who are of the Gentiles, as Lord and Christ and God, as the

2 The classic statement of this concept is Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte I-III* (several Auflagen, the final from Harnack's hand being the fourth, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1909); English translation: *History of Dogma (in Seven Volumes Bound as Four)* (transl. from the third German ed. by Neil Buchanan; New York: Dover, 1961).

3 Again, the classic statement is due to von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig:

Hinrich, 1900); English translation: *What is Christianity?* (transl. by Thomas Bailey Saunders) (New York: Harper, 1957). Cf. the devastating criticism of this concept in Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1906—later editions under the title *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung I-II*); English translation: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (3rd. ed.; London: Black, 1954).

4 Perhaps the most prominent spokesman for this position is Allan Brockway, director of the WCC's Committee on the Church and the Jewish People 1979-1988. See, for example, his article in *Current Dialogue* 1986, issue 10, pp. 9-12.

Scriptures signify, seeing also that you have acquired the name of Christians from him. But as for us [Jews], who are [already, by the Torah] worshippers of God...—we do not need to confess him or worship him.<sup>5</sup>

If I am not completely mistaken, many Jewish believers share the view that a significant development took place between the Jewish Messiah Jesus they find in the Gospels, and the rather un-Jewish Saviour of the Gentiles they find in the creeds. But they are unhappy about this change. They think Jesus, or rather the picture of him, was transformed in the process to such an extent that he has become alienated from his own people. He became what he was not, and what he was, was lost. That—they would add—is why the Saviour of the creeds is not a Messiah we can present to our Jewish friends. They would never recognize him as the Messiah of Israel, and rightly so.

This view is supported not only by modern groups of Jewish believers who emphatically identify themselves as new Ebionites.<sup>6</sup> It finds echo among many rather mainstream Jewish believers who cannot suppress a persistent uneasiness about the Greek terminology and the philosophically sounding terms of the creeds.

With this, I have more or less out-

lined the context in which I want to set the discourse contained in the rest of this paper. I shall first of all briefly summarise my argument: I want to challenge the common presupposition in all the points of view referred to above, namely that there is a radical difference between the Gospel portrait of Jesus and that contained in the creeds. In my view, the Apostolic Creed embodies a Messianic portrait of Jesus that is strikingly Jewish, and in line with that contained in the Synoptic Gospels. Next, I want to argue that the Nicene Creed has no other Christology than the one contained in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, and in some important passages in the Pauline letters, and that this Christology has a solid biblical and Jewish basis.

I thus want to contend that both Christologies, the 'Synoptic' of the Apostolic Creed, and the 'Johannine' of the Nicene Creed, though different, are Jewish. This also means that I will argue that our picture of Judaism and Jewishness at the time of the New Testament needs to be broadened.<sup>7</sup> Judaism at that time could comprise a wider plethora of Messianic models than became the case later.

## II The Christology of the Apostles' Creed

The exact date and provenance of this creed is not known, but there is general

<sup>5</sup> Translation according to Arthur Lukyn Williams, *Justin Martyr: The Dialogue with Trypho* 64:1 (London: S.P.C.K., 1930), p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> On the web one can find several homepages of Ebionite groups, like Bet Emet Ministries, The Ebionite Jewish Community, Sons Aumen Israel, and others.

<sup>7</sup> In general, see my two books *Incarnation: Myth or Fact?* (Concordia Scholarship; St. Louis: Concordia, 1991); and *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), esp. pp. 35-39 and 301-338.

agreement among scholars that we should not be very far off the mark if we say that in its present form it was fixed in writing around AD 600 in the south-west of France, and that it was a daughter creed of the much older creed used in the Christian community at Rome, probably already in the third century A.D.<sup>8</sup> This famous Old Roman Creed reads like this in the second article:

- And [I believe] in *Christos Iesus* His only Son, our Lord,  
 (1) Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
 (2a) Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,  
 (2b) on the third day rose again from the dead,  
 ascended to heaven,  
 sits at the right hand of the Father,  
 whence He will come to judge the living and the dead.<sup>9</sup>

The original language of this creed is Greek, and I have left the words for Christ Jesus untranslated as they stand in the Greek text. This is because I am not certain the best way to render them in English is by saying 'Christ Jesus'. In Greek, *Christos* means 'Anointed,' and is a wooden translation

into Greek of Hebrew *mashiach* and Aramaic *meshicha*. In this creed, therefore, *Christos* could well be understood to be a title rather than a second name for Jesus. (When translating, you normally translate a title, but not a name. A name is only transliterated. Rendering *maschiach/meshicha* as *christos* in Greek thus means you treat the word as a title, not a name. But when the Greek word was rendered in Latin texts, it was no longer translated into its Latin equivalent, *unctus*, but was only transliterated: *Christus*. This means: the word was now perceived to be a name, not a title. From Latin this name passed into the vernacular European languages as *Christus*, *Christ*, *Kristus*, *Krist*, etc.)

Accordingly, the best way to translate the words *Christos Iesus* in the Old Roman creed is very likely 'Messiah Jesus' or 'The Anointed Jesus'. From the very beginning, *christos* was understood to be the *title* of the end-time king of Israel, the Anointed One. And the general rule is that when *Christos* is put *before* the name Jesus, it often still retains its meaning as a title, even in later texts.

So far, this has to remain an attractive hypothesis, but let us see if there are more messianic characteristics of this old creed. Many have observed the striking fact that this article of the creed leaves many interesting things out. There is no explicit statement about the pre-existence of Jesus before he was born by Mary; there is in fact no explicit statement about his divinity at all. Concerning his human life, the creed is silent about his preaching and teaching, and also, more surprisingly, has nothing to say about his healings and his fight against the evil powers.

<sup>8</sup> The classic monograph on the Apostles' Creed and on the Nicene Creed, and on early creeds in general, is John N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd or later editions; 3rd ed. London: Longman, 1972). On the Apostles' Creed, the most recent extensive study is Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> This and the following translations of early Christian creeds are taken from Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

Born by Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, on the third day risen from the dead, ascended to heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father, coming to judge the living and the dead: whatever this summary might be, it is clearly no ordinary biography, no summation of an ordinary, not even an extraordinary, human life. Even an extraordinary human life is characterized by what happens between birth and death, but in Jesus' case it seems to be exactly the opposite: only his birth and death receive any attention!

But let us assume, for a moment, that the intention of the creed was not to tell the story of the life of Jesus, but to proclaim him as the Messiah. What would be most important about the Messiah? Basically two facts: *firstly* his birth as a member of the house of David, and *second* his enthronement as the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of God. And precisely these two points are the dominating centres of the creed! We have to understand the creed's statements about the resurrection of Jesus, his ascension and heavenly enthronement at the right hand of the Father as the story of his enthronement as King—as the creed's way of telling how Jesus was enthroned as the Messiah.

If we do so, we recognize in the creed exactly the same structure as in one of the oldest summaries of the gospel ever written, Romans 1:3f:

- ... the gospel concerning God's Son,  
 (1) who was of David's seed according to the flesh,  
 (2) but *was made Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of holiness, *by his resurrection from the dead*: Jesus Messiah, our Lord.<sup>10</sup>

What Paul is saying here, in essence, is that the Davidic descendant, Jesus, was made Son of God, that is: *was enthroned as the Messiah by his resurrection from the dead* (and in this, the ascension and enthronement at God's right hand are implied).

Once we have recognized this twofold structure of the creed, in agreement with Romans 1:3f., we also observe that the judgement of the living and the dead is the last and crowning expression of the reign of the Messiah, and that his suffering and death are, so to speak, the necessary point of departure for his resurrection and ascension. Before he could ascend, he had to descend. Before he could rise, he had to die.

This structure in the understanding of the Messianic career of Jesus is very clearly spelled out in some other texts which also have good chances of representing some of the oldest samples of Christian preaching that we have: the first speeches of Peter in Acts. In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter refers to David in the following words: 'He was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne' (Acts 2:30). And how did God fulfil this promise? By raising Jesus from the dead!

By the raising of Jesus from the dead and exalting him to heaven, enthroning him at the Father's right hand, Jesus was enthroned as the Davidic Messiah promised to David by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7:12 'I will *raise up* your offspring... and I will

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10 My own translation.

establish his kingdom.'<sup>11</sup>). In this prophecy, says Peter, 'he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah' (Acts 2:31). In Peter's understanding, Jesus has now been enthroned, and in his imminent appearance he will establish his Messianic reign, fulfilling all promises given to God's people:

Repent, and turn to God... that he may send the Messiah who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.... Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days (Acts 3:19-24 NIV, slightly modified).

It is clear from this that the traditional Jewish objection against Jesus being the Messiah—that he did not fulfil the Messiah's task before he died—is widely off the mark, in Peter's perspective. Peter would agree that Jesus' mission during his life on earth, before the last Passover, should not be seen as fulfilling the Messianic task; it was rather a preparation for it.<sup>12</sup> Jesus entered his Messianic office by dying

and rising again and ascending to his heavenly throne. In Peter's speeches in Acts, and also in Jesus' teaching after his resurrection (according to Luke), the death of Jesus is seen as almost only a necessary transition that made it possible for him to rise from the dead, Acts 2:23-24; 3:18.

Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and *then* enter his glory? (Luke 24:26, cf. also 24:46-47).

It was, I suppose, only after some time that the disciples of Jesus were able to understand that the death of Jesus was an integral part of the total event of the enthronement of their Messiah, and that his death on the cross was a saving event in itself, with its own significance. They found the clue to this, as Jesus had done before them, in Isaiah 53.

We have seen how Peter in these speeches, and Paul in Romans 1:3f, both emphasize the Davidic descent of the Messiah, and we know that the early Church was convinced that not only was Jesus' adoptive father Joseph a son of David, but his mother in the flesh, Mary, was also of David's seed.<sup>13</sup> So now we are in a position to see how entirely biblical the second article of

11 On verbs for 'raising up' in messianic texts being understood to imply the Messiah's rising from the dead, see D.C. Duling, 'The Promises to David and their Entrance into Christianity: Nailing Down a Likely Hypothesis', *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973/74), pp. 55-77.

12 In this Peter would probably be in line with Jesus' own understanding. His baptism by John was not his enthronement as the Messiah, but rather his *designation* as the Messiah-to-be. Cf. the extensive argument for this view in Ragnar Leivestad, *Jesus in His Own Perspec-*

*tive: An Examination of His Sayings, Actions, and Eschatological Titles* (transl. by David E. Aune; Minneapolis: Augsburg 1987).

13 This is emphatically affirmed already in Ignatius' creed-like formulas around A.D. 110: '... conceived by Mary according to God's plan, of the seed of David...', *Ephes.* 18.2; '... who was of the stock of David, who was from Mary...', *Trall.* 9; '... he was truly of David's stock after the flesh... begotten truly of the Virgin...', *Smyrn.* 1.1-2.

the Apostolic Creed is. Jesus was born of Mary; he was a son of David as well through her as through his adoptive father Joseph. He entered his Messianic reign by dying and rising on the third day and ascending to heaven and being enthroned at God's right hand, where he now reigns as Messiah and will complete the Messianic task at his return when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

### III The Christology of the Nicene Creed.

Perhaps I succeeded in convincing some of you that the Christology of the Apostles' Creed is much more Jewish than would appear at first sight. My task now is probably more difficult: I shall try to convince you that the Christology of the Nicene Creed is also Jewish.

Let me begin by saying a few words about its age and provenance. I said earlier that the Apostles' Creed derives from a local creed in Rome which can be dated to around the middle of the third century AD. The Nicene Creed likewise derives from a much older creed that may have been used in the land of Israel during the third century. We know one example of such a creed; it was the one on which Eusebius of Caesarea was baptized in his childhood or youth, probably in the 260s or 270s. Its second article runs like this:

And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the Logos of God,  
God from God,  
light from light,  
life from life,  
Son only begotten,

first-begotten before all creation,  
begotten before all ages from the Father,  
through whom [i.e. the Son] all things came into being,  
who because of our salvation was incarnate,  
and dwelt among men,  
and suffered,  
and rose again on the third day,  
and ascended to the Father,  
and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

At the famous council at Nicaea in AD 325, another local creed, very similar to this, and possibly the creed of Jerusalem, was adopted by the council as its creed, with only some few precisions being made in the text of the creed itself.<sup>14</sup> The metaphorical expressions, 'God from God, light from light' and 'begotten from the Father, only-begotten' were made clear by adding that they mean the Son is 'of the same stuff' (or of the same substance—Greek: *homousios*) as the Father (as a ray of light from the sun is 'of the same light-stuff' as the sun itself: light from light, or as a brook from a source is of the same stuff as the source from which it flows: water from water; or a tree is of the same stuff as the root from which it grows: wood from wood.)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On the council and its creed-making there is an overwhelming amount of scholarly literature. See, for an authoritative overview, Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, chs. VI-VIII. As an introduction to more recent discussions, see Skarsaune, 'A Neglected Detail in the Creed of Nicaea (325),' in *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987), pp. 34-54.

<sup>15</sup> These three metaphors (light from light, river from source, tree from root) were to



This 'of the same stuff' concept also applies when a human father begets a son, but not when he makes a statue: the son, *because begotten*, is of the same stuff as the father: man from man. But the statue, *because made*, is of a different stuff from its maker. It was therefore also added in the creed that begotten means begotten, not created, not made. The resultant creed of AD 325, second article, runs like this:

And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God,  
begotten from the Father as only-begotten,  
*that is, from the substance of the Father,*  
God from God,  
light from light,  
*true God from true God,*  
*begotten not made,*  
*of one substance with the Father,*  
through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth,  
who because of us men and because of our salvation  
came down and became incarnate, becoming man,  
suffered  
and rose again on the third day,  
ascended to the heavens,  
will come to judge the living and the dead.

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become commonplaces in the works of the Fathers from Justin onwards. Tertullian says these metaphors are taught us by the Holy Spirit—obviously in Scripture. As I am going to point out below, all three metaphors are indeed biblical. The introduction of the term 'substance' (essence, stuff) is meant only to clarify the import of these metaphors.

As you will understand, I have printed the additions made at Nicaea in italics. The Fathers at the council would have argued strongly that these additions did nothing else than make explicit the more metaphorical language of the older creed, and I shall here only state that I think they were absolutely right. Some argument for this view will come as we proceed. In AD 381 in Constantinople, this creed of AD 325 was reaffirmed, with only minor polishing of style in the second article, and some interpolations from the Old Roman Creed (printed below in bold characters), possibly to make it truly ecumenical. It is this creed from AD 381 we know as the Nicene Creed. Again I quote only the second article:

And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the onlybegotten Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
light from light,  
true God from true God,  
*begotten not made,*  
*of one substance with the Father*  
through whom all things came into existence,  
who because of us men and because of our salvation  
came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate **from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary**  
and became man,  
and **was crucified** for us under Pontius Pilate,  
and suffered  
**and was buried,**  
and rose again on the third day  
according to the Scriptures  
and ascended to heaven,  
**and sits at the right hand of the**

**Father,**  
and will come again with glory to  
judge living and dead,  
of whose kingdom there will be no  
end.

There can hardly be any doubt: the question of whether this creed is biblical, depends on the question of whether the shorter creed behind it is biblical, e.g. the one quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea. I therefore suggest we turn to this somewhat simpler creed in the following. I here repeat its text, but insert the primary biblical references for each of the clauses which this creed has extra, compared with the Apostles' Creed:

And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus  
Christ, (1 Cor. 8:6)  
the Logos of God, (John 1:1f.)  
God from God, (John 1:1)  
light from light, (Wis. 7:26)  
life from life, (John 5:21, 26)  
Son only begotten, (John 1:14,18;  
3:16,18)  
first-begotten before all creation,  
(Col. 1:15; Prov. 8:22)  
begotten before all ages from the  
Father, (Prov. 8:23 Septuagint)  
through whom [i.e. the Son] all  
things came into being,  
(1 Cor. 8:6; John 1:3; Col. 1:16;  
Heb. 1:2; Gen. 1:1; Prov.  
8:22,30; Wis. 7:22)  
who because of our salvation was  
incarnate, (John 1:14, Sir. 24:8)  
and dwelt among men, (Baruch  
3:38)  
and suffered,  
and rose again on the third day,  
and ascended to the Father,  
and will come again in glory to judge  
the living and the dead.

It is easy to see that this creed is

based on some New Testament passages and some Old Testament passages (including some from the Jewish Apocrypha). The New Testament passages are the following:

For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things [were made], and for whom we [live],

and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom all things [were made]*, and through whom we [live] (1 Cor. 8:6 NIV, modified).

He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn before all creation*. For *by him all things were created*; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.... *all things were created by him and for him*. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:15-17 NIV, modified).

In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and *the Logos was God*. He was with God in the beginning. *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*. In him was *life* and that life was the *light* of men.... The Logos *became flesh* and *pitched his tent* among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the *Only begotten*, who *came from the Father*, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-4,14 NIV, modified).

In these last days God has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and *through whom he made the universe*. The Son is *the radiance of God's glory* and the *exact image of his being*, *sustaining all things by his powerful word*. After he had provid-

ed purification for sins [through his death], he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 1:2-3 NIV, modified).

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, *the origin of God's creation* (Rev. 3:14 NIV, modified).

Not only can most terms in the creed be recognized in these passages, but some of them exhibit the same total structure, having the same story-line as the creed. So there is no doubt that the second article of the creed is biblical in the sense that each and every one of its sayings can be seen to have support in New Testament texts. But then—some would argue—our initial question whether any of this can be called Jewish, is not answered. We have to pose it anew, this time with reference to New Testament texts and New Testament Christology. Is this Christology Jewish?

Let me say it at once and quite bluntly. When looking for the Old Testament and Jewish background of this Christology, one should not begin by looking at the Messianic prophecies of the Bible. Instead, one should look in the biblical and apocryphal texts with the following question in mind: Where in these texts do I find sayings about an 'X' of which it is said: God *created the world by/through/with the help of X*? One needs only pose this question, and every Bible reader will know the answer: sayings of this kind are not made about the Messiah, the king of David's seed, but about God's Wisdom personified. Let us review some of the most important passages. I italicise the words and phrases most relevant to the New Testament passages and the creed:

*By Wisdom* the Lord laid the earth's foundation... (Prov. 3:19 NIV).

The Lord *begat* me as the *Beginning* of his ways, before his deeds of old. I was formed at the first, *before the earth*.<sup>16</sup> When there were no depths I was born,... before the mountains... before the hills *I was begotten*.... When he set for the sea its limit... then was I beside him as his *craftsman*... (Prov. 8:22-30, my own translation).

Wisdom... is a pure *emanation of the glory* of the Almighty... for she is *the radiance of the eternal light*, the spotless mirror of the power of God, *the image of his goodness*. And she, who is one, can do all things, and renews everything... (Wis 7:25-27 NAB, modified).

Now *with you is Wisdom*, who knows your works and *was present when you made the world* (Wis 9:9 NAB).

[Wisdom says:] From the mouth of the Most High I came forth, and mistlike covered the earth... I sought a resting place,... then the Creator of all gave me his command... saying: *Pitch your tent* in Jacob... *In the holy tent* I ministered before him, and in Zion I fixed my abode (Sir. 24:3-10 NAB, modified).

Here we meet God's Wisdom spoken of as if it were a person outside God, yet at the same time clearly being

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<sup>16</sup> The Septuagint here reads *pro tou aiononos*, an expression which the creed takes over and intensifies by saying the Son was begotten of the Father *pro panto ton aionoon*, 'before all the worlds/ages', or, a little more freely translated: 'before any world was created'.

conceived of as God's own wisdom. Wisdom is part of God, and therefore divine, and assists him in creating the world. We also hear, in Sirach 24, of a kind of incarnation of this preexistent Wisdom, and the verb used for Wisdom's dwelling on earth is the same as the one used in John 1:14: Wisdom *pitched its tent* on Zion—clearly a reference to the tent of meeting and the functionally equivalent temple on Zion.

There is every reason to believe that within second Temple Judaism a strong need was felt to clearly identify this divine Wisdom, so as not to make it a threat to God's unity. The solution was to identify it with God's Word (so Philo), or the Torah (so Sirach and the Rabbis). The result was a transformation of the concept of the Torah: from now on, the Torah was thought to be preexistent before creation, and to be the tool with which, or the plan according to which, the world was created.<sup>17</sup>

Proverbs 8:22-31 became an important text concerning the Torah, resulting in the concept that the word *Beginning* in Genesis 1:1 was identified as being the Torah. This is based on a simple *gezera shawa* combination of Genesis 1:1 and Proverbs 8:22: the *reshit* of Genesis 1:1 is the same as the *reshit* of

Proverbs 8:22, and the latter is obviously Wisdom. Wisdom being Torah, this results in two possible readings of Genesis 1:1: either 'By Wisdom God created...', this is the reading of two Targums; or 'By the Torah God created...', this is the reading of the main rabbinical commentary on Genesis 1:1, *Genesis Rabba*.<sup>18</sup> This midrash also combines this with Wisdom/Torah, calling itself God's *craftsman* or *master builder* in Proverbs 8:30, and weaves all of this together in the following well-known midrash:

The Torah declares: 'I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He' [cf. Prov. 8:30: 'I was with him as a master worker' (Hebrew: *'amon*)]. In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, 'By 'The Beginning' God created' [Gen. 1:1], 'The Beginning' referring to the Torah, as in the verse, 'The Lord made me The Beginning of His way' [Prov. 8:22].<sup>19</sup>

This specific midrash is anonymous, and could be too late to be of interest to us. Basically the same midrash is preserved in Philo, how-

<sup>17</sup> For this and the following, see W. Schencke, *Die Chokma (Sophia) in der jüdischen Hypostasenspekulation* (Skrifter utg. av Det Norske Videnskapsakademi II, 1912; Nr. 6; Christiania 1913); K. Schubert, 'Einige Beobachtungen zum Verständnis des Logosbegriffes im früh-rabbinischen Schrifttum', *Judaica* 9 (1953), pp. 65-80; Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie des hellenistischen und palästinensischen Judentums* (Texte und Untersuchungen 97; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), pp. 181-330.

<sup>18</sup> See Gary Anderson, 'The Interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the Targums', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 21-29.

ever, and Rabbi Akiva seems to hint at it when he says: 'Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the precious instrument... *by which the world was created*' (*Mishnah Aboth* 3:14).<sup>20</sup> The position accorded to the Wisdom-Torah in such texts as these prompted the Rabbis to call the Torah 'God's daughter' (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 101a; *Leviticus Rabba* 20:10 etc.).

Jews who believed in Jesus, however, identified this Wisdom with Jesus, God's Son. This explains why Jesus, in texts which speak of him in this role, is not so much portrayed as the Messiah as he is portrayed as the Torah in person. He is Wisdom incarnate. In him, the Wisdom/Word with which God created the world, became flesh, became a flesh and blood human being.<sup>21</sup> In the synoptic Gospels it is Jesus himself who frequently enters this role of God's Wisdom in person,<sup>22</sup>

in John it is the evangelist who often portrays Jesus as the substitute of the Torah, and not only in the prologue to the Gospel.<sup>23</sup>

My contention is that the Christology of the Nicene Creed is a spelling out of this very Jewish Wisdom Christology. But if it turns out that the Wisdom Christology of this creed is Jewish enough, how messianic is it? Has this anything to do with the Jewish Messiah?

That is a question not easy to answer. The reason is simple: If there were Jewish texts that made a connection between pre-existent Wisdom and the Messiah, these texts would be suppressed within mainstream Judaism in the early Christian era, precisely because they provided building materials for early Christology. The early Church, for its part, betrays great uncertainty with regard to the contents and status of such texts. The result is that only a part of the Jewish literature from this period is preserved. But in what has been preserved, there are indications that a connection was indeed made (within second Temple Judaism) between Wisdom and the Messiah. This is most clearly expressed in the so-called Similitudes of the Ethiopic book of Enoch (1 En 37-71). Here I must content myself with this brief reference, the theme is fasci-

19 Translation according to H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (London: Soncino, 1939), p. 1.

20 Cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages—Their Concepts and Beliefs I-II* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 198-202; 776-777.

21 As mentioned in note 15, three metaphors constantly recur in the Fathers when they want to describe the emergence of the Son out of the Father: light from light, tree from root, and river from source (giving rise to the 'x from x' formulas and the 'of the same substance' formula). All three metaphors are used about Wisdom's relationship to, or going out from, God, in the Bible and the Apocrypha: Light from light: Wis. 7:26; tree from root: Prov. 3:18; flowing from God as source: Bar. 3:12. All three metaphors are present in Sir. 24.

22 The limitations of this paper don't allow me to enter the question of how Jesus himself acted and spoke in the role of Wisdom in person. See my book *Incarnation*, pp. 33-38; Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrim-*

*age of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Martin Hengel, 'Jesus as Messianic Teacher of Wisdom and the Beginnings of Christology', in the same author, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 73-117.

23 See especially Raymond E. Brown's commentary on John in the Anchor Bible series.

nating and in need of further research.<sup>24</sup>

To those who perceive the Christology of the Nicene creed as very Hellenistic or Greek, I have one basic challenge: how do you then explain that all Greek writers we know of, reacted with an instinctive disgust to the most obvious implication of the Nicene Creed, namely that it portrayed a God who suffered in his Son, of one essence with him? If there was one theological dogma shared by all educated Greek men and women, it was the impassibility of God or the divine nature.<sup>25</sup> Let us listen for a while to an eloquent opponent of Christianity, Celsus the philosopher, ca. AD 175, making this specific point:

God is good and beautiful and happy, and exists in the most beautiful state. If then He comes down to men, He must undergo change, a change from good to bad, from beautiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune, and from what is best to what is most wicked. Who would choose a change like this? It is the nature only of a mortal being to undergo change and remolding, whereas it is the nature of an immortal being to remain the same

without alteration. Accordingly, God could not be capable of undergoing this change (rendered by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4.14).

Either God really does change, as they [the Christians] say, into a mortal body; and it has already been said that this is an impossibility. Or He does not change, but makes those who see Him think He does so, and leads them astray, and tells lies (*Contra Celsum* 4.18)!

Jews and Christians: no God or child of God either has come down or would have come down [from heaven] (*Contra Celsum* 5.2)!<sup>26</sup>

Not only did critics of Christianity react this way, but all the early Fathers of the church felt this difficulty themselves, because they were used to thinking about God in Greek terms.<sup>27</sup> I shall never forget how a modern Jew saw this point very clearly, and turned it into an argument for the Jewishness

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the literature of the two preceeding notes, see also Gottfried Schimanowski, *Weisheit und Messias: Die jüdischen Voraussetzungen der urchristlichen Präexistenzchristologie* (WUNT 2, 17; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985); and William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> See Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), esp. pp. 111-114.

<sup>26</sup> These three quotes rendered according to the translation in Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum, Translated with an Introduction & Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 192f; 195 and 264.

<sup>27</sup> The best example, perhaps, is Tertullian. To him the suffering of God's Son, consubstantial with the Father, is so offensive that he can say: 'Surely these things [human emotions and suffering] could not have been believed, even about the Son of God, had they not been given us in Scripture; possibly they could not have been believed of the Father, even if they had been given in Scripture!' (*Adv. Prax.*, 16.13, translation according to *ANF* 3: p. 612, modified). Tertullian is able, however, to turn this offensiveness of the incarnation into an apologetic argument for its credibility: the incarnation is something so offensive we could simply not have invented it.

of the Christian dogma of the incarnation and suffering of God's Son. In a televised interview on Norwegian National Television Pinchas Lapide<sup>28</sup> said the following:

I used to think that becoming incarnate was impossible to God. But recently I have come to the conclusion that it is unjewish to say that this is something the God of the Bible cannot do, that he cannot come that close. I have had second thoughts about the incarnation...

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28 Norwegian Television April 1978.

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