

Humanist in Canada

Spring 1994 (#108)

THE MAKING OF THE MESSIAH: Christianity and Resentment

by Robert Sheaffer

Prometheus Books, Buffalo NY 1991

192 pp. index, \$20.95(US)

Reviewed by BOB LANE

Almost everyone knows the official line: Jesus was born of the virgin Mary; was crucified, dead and buried; on the third day he rose again from the dead and became the man/god for a new religion which in a short time replaced the Pantheon of the Roman Empire with the three gods in one God of Christianity. Immaculate conception, virgin birth, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension—all of these terms are part of the official line of Christianity. Sheaffer's chapter titles provide an indication of what to expect in this book: 1. Immaculate Fornication? . . . 3. The Making of the Messiah, Part One: The Cruci-fiction, 4. The Making of the Messiah, Part Two: The "Virgin Birth" (p.7). The scare quotes tell the story here.

Using biblical and non-biblical texts (primarily *Toldoth Jeshu*) Sheaffer argues that Mary, while betrothed to John (not Joseph), meets a handsome warrior named Pandera who seduces and impregnates her. The offspring of this "immaculate fornication" is Jesus, who will be ostracized as a mamzer. ("Mamzer" translates into English as "bastard" but is a much more specific term meaning "the offspring of parents who could not possibly become married" most likely because of adultery or incest.) This would result in a Jesus who was despised by his community and an outcast in every way. Growing up in such a way, as an outsider, Jesus learns to use the "Ineffable Name" as a way of performing miracles and soon has gathered the "insurgents and wrongdoers of Israel" and is declaring himself the Messiah.

Sheaffer explains the miracles of Jesus as tricks of a magician and the deceptions of a con-artist. He is a regular writer for *The Skeptical Inquirer* and employs the same standards of evidence that would be required in the investigation of putative miracles today. Thus, reports of miraculous events are looked at with a skeptical eye following the good advice of David Hume who suggested that it is more probable that the witnesses to violation miracles are deceived or deceitful than it is that the miracle actually occurred.

None of these re-readings of the story are particularly original—opponents of Christianity have pointed to the inconsistencies and shortcomings of the texts for centuries (and largely without changing any believer's belief). And they have pointed to the lack of confirming evidence in non-biblical written forms, and to the suspension of disbelief that is required to buy the story of the man-god, Jesus. Why is this? Why do so many continue to believe and even, following Tertullian ("I believe because it is absurd."), make the absurdity of the story its confirmation?

In answering these questions Sheaffer does have some original things to say. He argues that the attraction of the new faith was exactly because it was a perfect place for the resentment and envy of those members of society who were not in power, who were the outsiders without education, political power or wealth. Hatred of tolerance and hatred of the educated and freethinkers in society, sharpened by resentment, became the driving force for the new religion. Religion then becomes the formal structure by which this envy control is channeled into power.

Sheaffer's analysis of *ressentiment* includes a challenge for all humanists. He writes, "Perhaps we can now identify that elusive reason for the failure of secular Humanism to establish itself as a viable life-stance for the millions: Humanism offers absolutely nothing in the way of envy control. In fact, by its frequent alliance with socialist and feminist *ressentiment*, Humanism sometimes actually fans the flames of envy, thereby placing strains on the personal lives of those who embrace it . . . for those who are inclined toward envious feelings and behaviour, Humanism as it now stands offers absolutely nothing to discourage invidious comparisons. In fact, it tends to encourage them. . . . For this reason, Humanism as a social doctrine will likely always remain of marginal significance, limited primarily to the childless, to rootless cosmopolitans, to angry, highly educated but low- income radicals—in short, to those who have no reason to fear being envied." (p.178-9)