



## Misanthropic Messiahs: *Timon of Athens* and *Dune* – The Role of Christ-like Leaders

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*Abstract:* This article discusses the religious imagery found in *Timon of Athens* and *Dune*, both well-known works. On the surface, it may seem that these works have very little connection. However, a closer examination offers an abundance of religious imagery from both works. The main characters in *Timon of Athens* and *Dune* – Timon and Paul Atreides, respectively – act as reverse Christ figures that are sometimes analogous to the Biblical Christ, but often serve as the antithesis to Christ as represented in Biblical narratives. The attributes and life episodes of Christ can be inverted to identify, examine, and analyse characters who can be considered anti-messiahs, and to aid in understanding the themes that the authors of these characters aim to express.

*Keywords:* *Dune*, *Timon of Athens*, religious, messianic structure

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### Introduction

Throughout Shakespeare's plays, religious imagery abounds. One of the more interesting plays where this occurs is *Timon of Athens*. The religious imagery in this play, which is centred on Timon, serves as a compliment to the action of the play, strengthening the misanthropic ideals of both Timon and the people around him. Timon serves as a Christ figure within the play. This is a popular convention of Shakespeare's time: representing the author's religion or belief system through their literary or dramatic characters and works. Timon has many of the same attributes that a Christ-like literary figure would have. However, Shakespeare breaks convention by making Timon a reverse Christ figure, a person who spreads death and disease instead of love and healing. This is evidenced by several scenes throughout the play that solidify the idea of Timon as an anti-messiah who wishes harm and destruction on his fellow man. Timon's rise and fall as a messiah – albeit one of doom, instead of a messiah of redemption – is typical of a religious structure that creates examples and

leaders of its characters. The reader can track Timon's trajectory using a religious tragic arrangement that follows a pattern of rise and fall, during which reverse-messiah attributes manifest themselves. There are contemporary connections to this representation of Timon as a reverse Christ as well. For example, Frank Herbert's character Paul Atreides is a messianic figure: one who uses his power to create a fanatic following that consumes him. Neither Timon nor Paul wanted their role: Timon loves giving and helping people, but when abandoned by friends becomes misanthropic, and Paul is forced into his role of messiah by his father's death and his own exile. This paper will connect the role of messianic/Christ figures in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and Frank Herbert's *Dune* based on their respective central characters' role in hating or subsuming humanity.

The religious messianic structure is used within both *Timon* and *Dune* to highlight the ills that society forces a person to do. Both Timon and Paul are controlled by societal rules; Shakespeare and Herbert regard these rules with scorn. The religious structure serves as a model for the society in which the characters live: the "collapse of society seems imminent because it has become thoroughly degenerate" (Draper 195). Timon's society is characterised by the accrual of wealth and the collection of gifts. Shakespeare uses the messianic structure, with "Christ theologically and ideologically present" and as "the definitive metaphor" (Streete 56). However, Shakespeare subverts the messianic figure by including reverse morals to show how the love of wealth or power debases and degrades humans, especially after they have depended on it for too long. Timon's rise as an anti-messianic figure and his eventual downfall are made more poignant by the magnification that the Christian structure creates: Timon is "analogous to Christ within the Christian scheme" (Knight 297),<sup>1</sup> following the same pattern that Christ did. Frank Herbert's *Dune* operates in much the same way. Paul's fall from grace and eventual return to power are given new meanings because of the focus that the specific Christian form provides. The form is rigid, allowing the author to create characters that are inflexible, unmoving examples of leaders who spread death and disease instead of healing and redemption; the characters are caught in their anti-messianic fates. Morrison states that in Shakespeare, and by extension Herbert, "everything runs back to character and that character is fate – that what a man is, determines everything" (48). Much as Christ's character and messianic fate was determined by his birth and heavenly parent, so too are those of the characters in *Timon of Athens* and *Dune* decided by external influences: power, wealth, or betrayal. The reader can follow Timon's and Paul's trajectories based on the experiences that Christ had, but their experiences are informed by hate, loneliness, and a loss of wealth, rather than love, friendship, and a spurning of wealth. Both characters follow the same path as Jesus Christ, but in so doing, spread contradictory emotions and take contradictory actions.

There is currently a turn toward the messianic in critical theory and philosophy. Bradley and Fletcher discuss the theoretical trend toward the messianic in their article "Introduction: On a Newly Arisen Tone in Philosophy". They assert that the messianic structure represents "a new way of thinking our time, our now" (186). As such, it is necessary to investigate the appearance of messianic structures in literature, past and present. *Timon of Athens* and *Dune* are disparate literatures, hardly related, yet they both represent facets of the messianic structure. This structure, according to Tyson Lewis, is "not simply waiting for a Messiah to come to save human history; rather, the messianic is ... the completion of humanity's self-realization in a future temporality" (239). At this point, a brief discussion of the role of messianic structure in literature and critical analysis becomes necessary. The messianic narrative structure is one that appears throughout many forms of literature, both religious and agnostic. The typical messianic structure revolves around a central character who becomes a leader/savior to a group of people; the character is a harbinger and creator of progress and near-permanent change. The development and transformation brought about

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<sup>1</sup> See also Knight's book *The Wheel of Fire*. He discusses more of Timon's hateful attributes as related to Christianity.

by a typical messianic character is positive. The messiah influences other characters and groups to do good, help humanity, and sacrifice themselves for an overarching purpose, a purpose that allows individuals to recognise their own positive potential. This influence for positive is intrinsic to the messiah. Beare notes in his article, “It Gets Better ... All In Good Time: Messianic Rhetoric and A Political Theology of Social Control”, that “there is an inherent messianicity in the way [the messiah’s] message suggests a mode of being ... with an orientation toward an imagined better future” (357). The typical messiah offers an affirmative message, a message of positive activism, a message of hope and optimism. A narrative that follows this messianic structure is the narrative of Christ. Christ is used as the basis for comparison, as his messianic narrative will be familiar to most. What is suggested in the following pages is the reverse of the typical messiah/Christ narrative where the messiah brings good to their followers and the world. The messiahs in *Timon of Athens* and *Dune* create change and influence characters, but their message is one of doom, destruction, and negativity. As such, they are anti-messiahs: characters that conform to the messianic path and structure, but with inverse results. What follows is an attempt to further discuss how these anti-messiahs function within a narrative structure.

### **The Christian Structure and Anti-Messianic Path within *Timon of Athens***

The tragic Christian structure within *Timon* allows the character of Timon to rise as a reverse messiah to the people. The play begins with the main character on the good side of fortune. Timon is a rich nobleman who gives gifts and feasts freely, without worrying about his expenses. People say of him:

Plutus, the god of gold,  
Is but his steward. No meed but he repays  
sevenfold above itself; no gift to him  
but breeds the giver a return exceeding  
all use of quittance. (1.1.289–92)

At this moment, Timon is still a good person, willing to help his fellow humans in times of need, giving freely of all he has. His generosity is aligned with the Christian religious structure of a giving and kind person. However, Shakespeare – never satisfied with convention – tantalizes the reader with shadows of the original structure while at the same time giving it his own twist. Mallin writes that in Shakespeare, the “strangest figure of Christ by far must be among the worst, the most gratuitous, whose resemblance to the redeemer has not taste of ... sacrifice or salvation” (48). Therefore, Timon, unlike Christ – whose poverty allowed him to be generous to the common people and do good for them – Timon’s fortunate and wealthy position allows him to have generosity towards the poor and rich alike. Timon is a patron of the arts, giving to poor artists when they need his help. He also aids his wealthy friends in times of need, and even gives to them just for his own pleasure. However, this fortunate position will not allow Timon to become a fully anti-messianic character. A reversal of fortune is needed that will bring out the “worst” in Timon, and the Christian religious structure allows for this change in fortune.

The prosperity and destiny of Timon changes for the worse, leading him down the dark path of an anti-messiah. His generous nature and ignorance lead to his downfall, and “initially Timon seems immune to ... [change] and secure in his position as benefactor” (Bailey 389). However, Timon has given away most of his treasure to his so-called friends in spurts of blind openhandedness, and disregarded the bills that have been piling up. When confronted by three collectors, Timon is surprised, and brushes them off, saying “[g]o to my steward” (2.2.22), “repair to me next morning” (2.2.29), and give “me breath/ ... /I’ll wait upon you instantly” (2.2.37–39). His ignorance and unwillingness to listen to Flavius – who has previously tried to warn him, saying,

“Vouchsafe me a word; it does concern you near” (1.2.177) – creates a critical moment that starts Timon on his downward spiral. Timon soon asks his friends for help, but they betray him. Like Christ, who was betrayed by Judas and denied by Peter, Timon cannot find help in the arms of his friends, and this leads to his descent into full reverse-messiah mode. His so-called friend Lucullus tells Flaminius – who was sent asking for monetary assistance – that he will have no part in lending money: “Thy lord’s a bountiful/gentleman; but thou art wise, and thou know’st/ ... that this is no time to lend money, especially on bare friendship” (3.1.40–43). Timon is also told by another friend, who is jealous of being the last person asked – “Who bates mine honor shall not know my coin” (3.3.28). These friends, at a time of most desperate need, find excuses not to help Timon, betraying his trust. Christ also experienced the pain of betrayal and refutation by his disciples and friends. Judas betrayed Christ to the Pharisees, and Peter denied Christ three times. Jesus remained loving toward his disciples even after these sinful, evil actions. Timon also experiences this sort of betrayal and denial, but reacts in an opposite manner; he begins to hate and despise the people who will not support him. He calls them “mouth-friends” (3.6.88), and states that they will henceforth “hated be/of Timon, man, and humanity” (105). Timon’s reaction to betrayal, a “hatred of life in general” (Frye 179), is opposed to that of Christ’s. Shakespeare created Timon so that his “basic error [which is the reverse to that of Christ] consists in focusing entirely upon one side of man’s nature while ignoring the other, so that he is totally lacking in balance” (204). Shakespeare’s ability to subvert the traditional Christian story of the self-sacrificing, all-loving Christ figure allows for a more complex tale.<sup>2</sup> Timon, through his anti-messianic attributes, highlights the corruption of both the individual and the community that dependence on money or power can bring about.

Using the religious structure, the reader begins to see a dichotomy between the messages that Christ and Timon preach. Both of them use many of the same methods – instruction, sermons, and disciples – but their messages are quite different, each seeking an opposing goal. Christ, the example of a true Messiah, “preaches love: love universal” (Knight 71), forgiveness, and kindness, both to the masses and to his disciples. Timon, on the other hand, delivers substantially more caustic and evil declarations. The reader sees this hate delivered in directives given to the people who come to him, especially Alcibiades and the prostitutes. Timon, in typical anti-messianic fashion, subverts Christ’s methods and uses them for his own destructive purposes. This is never more clearly exemplified than when Timon is speaking to the prostitutes. He exhorts them to “Consumptions sow/In hollow bones of man; strike their sharp shins/and mar men’s spurring” (4.3.152–54). This is the tamest of Timon’s instructions to the prostitutes. He continues his commands:

Hoar the flamen  
That scolds against the quality of flesh  
and not believes himself. Down with the nose,  
down with it flat; take the bridge quite away. (4.3.157–60)

Timon is instructing the prostitutes to give the race of men venereal disease, with his “misanthropy ... implied in his giving” (Jackson 47). He completes his instruction with a command that sums up his anti-messianic leadership: “Plague all/That your activity may defeat and quell/The source of all erection” (4.3.164–66). These commands and requests are clearly contrary to the teachings and lifestyle of Jesus Christ. Where Christ heals, Timon destroys. By subverting Christ’s methods and teachings, Shakespeare shows the reader the power that one individual can have, and how that power can be used for hostile purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Soellner, in his book *Timon of Athens: Shakespeare’s Pessimistic Tragedy*, argues that Timon is a hero because of his misanthropy, and Shakespeare meant for him to be viewed as such. This is a contrasting perspective to this paper.

Timon's anti-messianic aspects continue to be noticed as his servant Flavius<sup>3</sup> and former friend/harbinger Apemantus come to visit him in his wilderness home. Timon preaches sermons of hate and vitriol towards both of these men, who had cared for him or tried to warn him of impending doom in his previous life. Apemantus comes bearing food for Timon. Timon responds with strings of insults: "A madman so long, now a fool" (4.3.223), "Would thou wert clean enough to spit upon" (4.3.364), "Thou tedious rogue" (4.3.375). Timon has nothing but hate for the people who come to him and offer help. This venomous agitation is continued when Flavius arrives at Timon's wild domicile. Timon says to Flavius, "Away! What art thou?" (4.3.477). Flavius is distraught at this treatment and asks if Timon has forgotten him. Timon responds with "I have forgot all men;/Then, if thou grant'st thou'rt a man, I have forgot thee" (4.3.480). Timon refuses to even countenance someone who once showed him love. These hateful spewings are perfect opposites to the love, kindness, and forgiveness that Christ preaches to the people who come seeking him. Timon and Christ share one last dichotomous relationship. Christ, in the ultimate example of self-sacrifice and love, allows himself to be crucified to save the world from humankind's sinful actions. Timon, staying true to the anti-messianic attributes he has exhibited throughout the play, kills himself.<sup>4</sup> Suicide represents Timon's pinnacle as anti-messiah. He retreats into his cave to be killed by the sea: alone, friendless, and hateful. His concluding moments show that he continues to hate the human race: he states "whoso please/to stop affliction ... /come hither ... /and hang himself" (5.1.208–11). Even Timon's final words are full of vitriol and evil: "What is amiss, plague and infection mend!/Graves only be men's works and death their gain" (5.1.220–21). With these words, Timon seals his fate as an anti-messiah, a character who is diametrically opposed to Christ and his example. Timon has followed the same path as Christ and used some of the same methods of instruction; however, Timon has used his position as a leader – an anti-messiah – to harm and destroy, instead of heal and protect.

### Anti-Messianic Attributes of Paul Atrides in Frank Herbert's *Dune*

Much as Timon can be compared to and contrasted with Christ, Paul Atrides from Frank Herbert's *Dune* can be compared to Timon using the same Christian religious structure. At the beginning of *Dune*, Paul is in a fortunate, prosperous place. He lives in a happy household that loves and adores him, he is wealthy, and he is heir to a title and kingdom. Paul's life and seeming innocence are described by Halleck, his weapons trainer: Paul is "the well-trained fruit tree ... full of well-trained feelings and abilities ... all bearing for someone else to pick" (Herbert 35). However, the "someone else" is not a person in the case of Paul, but a destiny that uses his "feelings and abilities" to foster in him anti-messiah attributes that will influence the multitudes. At this point in the book, Paul is willing to help people; he treats everyone with respect and kindness. The Duke – Paul's father – sees the potential that Paul has to be a wise and beneficent ruler; he comments: "He'll wear the title well" (127) and "what a catch [Paul] would make" (127), and even tells Paul, "You've ... matured lately, Son" (83). The Duke recognises that Paul has great potential and could be a good ruler. However, fate and a similar messianic narrative structure to *Timon of Athens* will not allow this to happen.

Eventually Paul's prosperity and pampered life change, just as Timon's position as a wealthy individual changes. The change is not for the better. The family is sent to a distant desert planet – Arrakis – that was previously owned by the mortal enemies of the Atrides family, the Harkonnens. The first night on the planet, Paul is almost assassinated:

<sup>3</sup> Ching and Termizi look at the relationship between Flavius and Timon more closely, seeing it as representative of the Elizabethan master-servant bond.

<sup>4</sup> Pierce has an interesting discussion of Timon's psychological features as they relate to the tragic form in his essay "Tragedy and *Timon of Athens*".

Paul slipped out of bed, headed for the bookcase door that opened into the closet. He stopped at a sound behind him, turned.... From behind the headboard slipped a tiny hunter-seeker .... Paul recognized it at once – a common assassination weapon that every child of royal blood learned about at an early age. (66)

Even though Paul survives this attempt on his life, his conditions only get worse. The reader learns that the Atreides family was left with substandard equipment and large deficit that they will not be able to make up for several years. A report given to the Duke states that “half the crawlers are operable ... everything the Harkonnens left us is ready to break down and fall apart. We’ll be lucky if a fourth of [the equipment] still work[s] six months from now” (86). Even though the family is in a desperate situation at this moment, nothing prepares Paul for the final blow that destroys his fortunes. The Harkonnens mount a counterattack against the planet. A traitor resides in the midst of the Atreides family, and betrays them, just as Timon was betrayed. The family’s doctor, Yueh, has provided information to the Harkonnens. This enables them to kill the Duke and capture Paul and his mother, leaving them in the desert to die. This is the moment where Paul’s fall of fortunes align with Timon’s: they both are betrayed and lost to the wilderness.

Like Timon, Paul begins preaching hate and destruction; his destructive attributes even cause him to kill a man. In the desert wilderness, Paul has time to think about what has happened to him and the path he has been set on. He thinks to himself, “I’m a monster ... A freak” (191). Paul feels that the way he has been brought up has forced him into a dishonorable path; he doesn’t feel comfortable with his anti-messiah status, yet still accepts it. He recognizes “his own terrible purpose – the pressure of his life spreading outward” (193). Paul sees the influence that he will have over his peoples and understands he will be an anti-messiah. Paul wants revenge for what the Harkonnens have done to his family. He states “I’ll take full payment for them all one day” (222). Unlike Christ, who forgave his enemies, Paul wishes to destroy them. The reader also sees Paul’s anti-messianic attributes when he kills someone for the first time, in single combat. Paul “thrust upwards to where Jamis’ chest was descending – then away to watch the man crumple. Jamis fell like a limp rag, face down, gasped once and turned his face toward Paul, then lay still on the rock floor” (297). After Paul’s victory over this man, he has a moment where he enjoys the “killing of a man in clear superiority of mind and muscle” (297). Paul spreads death and destruction; he relishes in the devastation that he causes.

Paul shows his final cruelties when he mounts a counterattack on the Harkonnens. He raises an army of desert peoples and executes an elaborate destruction of the Harkonnen invaders. The Fremen, the people who fight for Paul – or Muad’ib, as he begins to be called when the Fremen recognise him as prophet and bringer of doom – are willing to go to any length to serve him, and Paul is willing to exploit their loyalty. The Baron Harkonnen states that Paul’s “people scream his name as they leap into battle. The women throw their babies at us and hurl themselves onto our knives to open a wedge for their men to attack us. They have no ... decency” (446). Khalid Baheyeldin places Paul within an Islamic messianic context to better understand the character’s influence on the Fremen. He styles Paul as “the Mahdi (‘The Rightly Guided One’) ... an all human Messianic figure, who comes to fill the world with justice after much of the opposite”, a role that grants him access to power that he would not otherwise have (Mahdi). The Mahdi, in both *Dune* and Islam, is a messiah who leads the people toward greatness. However, Paul’s role as anti-messiah leads not only to Fremen victory, but also to Fremen destruction. Julia List has written of Paul’s control and ruthlessness: Success “requires exploiting the faith of his followers” and a willingness “to use his followers’ faith in him as the ‘Mahdi’ [or Muad’ib] to succeed in his vendetta” (28). Paul’s anti-messianic attributes spread to the Fremen, just as Timon spread his hatred and desire for destruction to the prostitutes. After the victory that Paul gains by destroying the Harkonnens, he is placed in an even greater position of power: he marries the Emperor’s

daughter. Unlike Christ and Timon, however, Paul's death is not a literal one, but a death of the last shred of humanity that he may have had. Paul "sentences [the Emperor to his] prison planet" (472) and takes his role as leader of the Empire. Paul offers to his subjects "an always imminent new world order ... [and] enduring freedom ... a kind of demonic parody ... of the messianic voice" (Bradley and Fletcher 187). Paul's days as a simple child have disappeared, died, and he is now become a god to the people upon which he has forced his anti-messianic rule. The old Paul is dead, and Muad'dib reigns supreme.

## Conclusion

The pattern and life of Christ can be used as an example to examine Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, and in turn, Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Christ's rise as a Messiah, his teachings of love, and the final sacrifice that he makes inform both *Timon of Athens* and *Dune*. The main characters of each literary work follow the same trajectory that Christ follows in his lifetime; however, Timon and Paul are anti-messiahs, displaying characteristics that are diametrically opposed to the teachings and example of Christ. Where Christ preaches a message of love and forgiveness, Timon and Paul spread messages of destruction and revenge. Timon and Paul both have followings of individuals who can be considered disciples. Timon's disciples are the prostitutes, commanded to spread disease and death among the human race. Paul has a race of wild desert people following his anti-messianic leadership; they are willing to do anything to please Paul and will destroy any who oppose him. Eventually, like Christ, Timon and Paul die. Christ's death was one of self-sacrifice and healing for the human race. Timon, on the other, is selfish even to last, committing suicide in order to be away from the humans he hates so much, wishing ill on humankind to the last. Paul's death is more subtle, a death of the innocent, childlike spirit that he used to have, signaling his ascension to full anti-messianic power. At the end of *Dune*, Paul fully embraces who he has become – an anti-messiah who spreads death to whoever and whatever he commands. Overall, the religious Christian structure, specifically the structure of the life of Christ, gives a new interpretation to *Timon of Athens* and *Dune*. This interpretation allows the reader to have a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the separate main characters, and creates interesting connections between religion, Shakespeare, and contemporary works.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cox's article "Was Shakespeare a Christian, and If So, What Kind of Christian Was He?" discusses what form of Christianity Shakespeare adhered to. In a longer discussion of messianic figures, this would be extremely useful in placing Shakespeare, and by extension, Timon, in a religious context.

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