

The One foretold

WHY JESUS IS THE LONG-ANTICIPATED MESSIAH.

Bob Mendelsohn

Ask Jewish people about their belief in a personal *Messiah*, and you will be met with an array of images from ultra-orthodox Jewish people circle-dancing in fur hats and long coats to people who reply dismissively, "If he (the Messiah) were going to come, he should have come long ago. It's too late now."

The idea of a Messiah is historically Jewish. However, it is remote to most Jews in Australia today. Seventy years ago, the idea of a messianic hope was wrapped up in anti-Hitler rhetoric. Hope of a coming Messiah became the hope of general salvation from the death camps. It also became mingled with hopes of the creation of the land of Israel.

Today, there is an ongoing dispute within Judaism over the meaning of "messiah". For some within traditional Judaism, the Messiah is seen as an "anointed one" (the literal translation of the word "messiah"), descended through the line of King David, who will gather the Jews back into the land of Israel and usher in an era of peace.

Since about 1880, liberal Jews have equated the coming of the messianic age to a new, stable era of world peace. However, most of them do not believe



THESE FOLLOWERS WERE SO CLOSE... HOWEVER, THEY WERE WRONG ON THE CRITICAL POINT – IT WAS NOT THE RABBI FROM BROOKLYN.

that such an era will be associated with the sole rule of a personal Messiah.

A new development in Jewish messianism occurred in 1994. A rabbi died in Brooklyn, New York. That's not exactly news, as there are half a million Jewish people who live in that borough of New York City – many of whom are rabbis. And each year many rabbis die. However, 1994 was different. Menachem Mendel Schneerson was the leader of the ultra-Orthodox sect known as the Lubavitcher chassidim, and some of his followers claimed, and continue to claim, that he was the Messiah.

When he died that summer, tens of thousands of his followers gathered in New York to honour him and to await his resurrection, believing that he would rise from the dead within four days. Why? The rabbis teach that the spirit of a man hovers over a corpse for three days (Genesis Kabbah 100:7) and on the fourth day, the spirit dissipates. So there, at his grave, throngs of people waited in anticipation of his rising, only to be disappointed, leaving with their heads hanging down on the fourth day.

These followers were so close. Yes, the Messiah would die! They were also right in another regard – the Messiah would rise from the dead before the

fourth day. However, they were wrong on the critical point – it was not the rabbi from Brooklyn.

Jacob Neusner, in his book, *Judaisms and Their Messiahs*, reminds us that in Jewish tradition, the term "messianism" historically refers to "a man who at the end of history, at the eschaton, will bring salvation to the Israel conceived by the social group addressed by the way of life and worldview of that Judaism". The Messiah would be anointed with holy anointing oil and would rule the Jewish people during the messianic age (the Hebrew word, *mashiach* – "anointed" – is the same as the Greek word *Christos*).

However, a difference has emerged between Jewish and Christian understandings of the Messiah. William Scott Green classifies "Jewish messianism as national, ethnic, political and material, while Christian messianism is universal, cosmopolitan, ethical and spiritual".

Many Jewish people have claimed to be the Messiah, or have allowed others to tout them as such. They include:

Simon of Peraea, a contemporary of Y'shua (Jesus), a slave of Herod the Great, who rebelled against and was killed by the Romans.

2) Theudas, who had 400 followers. He was killed and the 400 dispersed.

3) Menahem ben Judah, another Jesus contemporary, son of Judas of Galilee, who took part in a revolt against Agrippa II before being slain by a rival Zealot leader.

4) Vespasian, c.70, according to Josephus.

5) Simon bar Kosiba (about 135 CE), led a Jewish revolt before being defeated in the Second Jewish-Roman War. Rabbi Akiba called him 'Bar Kochba' as a reference to his being Messiah (Numbers 24.17).

6) Moses of Crete (about 470), who convinced the Jews of Crete to attempt

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to walk into the sea to return to Israel, and disappeared after that disaster!

7) Serene (around 720), who claimed to be the Messiah and advocated expulsion of Muslims and relaxing various rabbinic laws. He was arrested and forced to recant.

8) Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), an Ottoman Jew who claimed to be the Messiah, but then converted to Islam. He still has followers today in present day Turkey and the former Ottoman Empire.

9) Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the chabad rabbi who tried to "prepare the way" for the Messiah. An unidentifiable number of his followers believe him to be the Messiah.

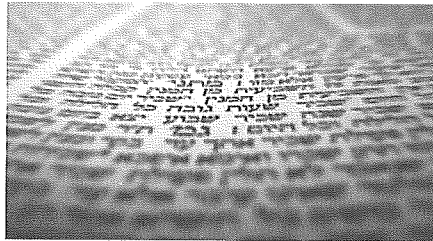
According to Green, "there are 38 times in the OT where the noun "mashiach" is used. It applies twice to the patriarchs, six times to the high priest, once to Cyrus, and 29 times to the Israelite king, usually Saul or David."

Most Christians understand the mashiach, the future Israelite king, to be the Messiah, the Saviour Jesus. This is supported specifically in Psalm 2:2 where it states, "The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed." Another such reference to the Son of God, Y'shua (the original Aramaic name for Jesus), is found in Psalm 45, which is also quoted in the book of Hebrews, "You have loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows" (Ps. 45:7, Heb. 1:9). The picture painted here is one of anointing, mirrored by the actions of Y'shua's early ministry.

For example, this is evident in the first sermon Y'shua gave in the synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives, And freedom to prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1, Luke 4:18). The word "anointed" here is the word mashiach.

The most clear-cut biblical reference for a Messiah is found in Daniel. In chapter 9, verses 25 and 26 we read, "So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there will be seven weeks and 62 weeks; it will be built again, with plaza

and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the 62 weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined."



MANY REFERENCES IN THE TALMUD COUNTER THE ARGUMENT BY MODERN RABBIS THAT ISAIAH 53 IS ABOUT THE JEWISH PEOPLE.

Here we see the messianic timeline laid out that indicates the time of the death of Messiah ("cut off"). Maybe that's why so many rabbis don't allow their students to read Daniel 9 until they are 30 years old.

The most quoted biblical passage by Christians in support of the Messiahship of Jesus is Isaiah 53. While the word "messiah" is not used specifically, Jesus' life, ministry, healing, crucifixion and resurrection are foretold. Nevertheless, some rabbis will counter that this is simply a reference to the Jewish people. Rabbi David Rosen in the book, *The Christian and the Pharisee*, writes, "for me it is obvious that Isaiah 53 refers to the children of Israel". He continues, "our understanding of what Isaiah is saying is that if one is chosen by God... then all that is hostile to the godly and the goodly will be hostile to you!"

Mordecai ben Samuel gave a sermon in 18th century Poland, called Sha'ar ha'malek. In it he gives an eloquent apology for itinerant preachers and identifies them with the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. "Let no one say that these emissaries go forth to speak only because of the coins they will be given. Certainly not! ...Therefore God arranges things so that they will be economically afflicted. It is as the verse says, 'He is wounded because of our sins, crushed because of our iniquities' (Isa.

53.5). God crushes them so that they will go forth in their need and serve as the world's oars, bringing people toward the goal."

The Targum Jonathan by Jonathan ben Uzziel (an early translation of the Biblical text, somewhat like the Living Bible to modern Christians) reads Isaiah 53 as "Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper." While Rabbi DY Abarbanel did not agree with ben Uzziel, around 1500AD he wrote, "Jonathan b. Uzziel interpreted it in the Targum of the future Messiah, but this is also the opinion of our learned men in the majority of the midrashim."

Even the Zohar, a Jewish mystical book, which dates to about 100-200AD, makes certain statements which "have an obvious reference to the Isaiah passage". Arnold Fruchtenbaum says, "The Zohar in this quotation quotes from Isa. 53 and referred the passage to the Messiah himself. The passage further makes Israel distinct from the one referred to in the Isaiah passage."

There are many other references in the Talmud that are available to counter the argument by modern rabbis that Isaiah 53 is about the Jewish people. Despite what Jewish writers may say today, there is a strong tradition within Judaism that regards Isaiah 53 as messianic and which points to an individual who suffers for His people.

The point is that Messiah is foretold through the record of the Older Testament, and we would do well to listen, learn and believe all that the prophets have spoken. pp



Bob Mendelsohn is Australian director of *Jews for Jesus*.

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