

Jewish Teaching, Messiah

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This teaching from the Jewish point of view is presented by Grace Notes to provide context and comparison of Jewish ideas with Christian, in particular in relation to expositional teaching of the book of Acts and the life and epistles of Paul the Apostle. [Warren Doud]

Jewish Teaching: The Messiah (Moshiach)

From the website Judaism 101 [^1]

“I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the moshiach, and though he may tarry, still I await him every day.” Principle 12 of Rambam’s 13 Principles of Faith. [^2]

The Messianic Idea in Judaism

Belief in the eventual coming of the moshiach is a basic and fundamental part of traditional Judaism. It is part of Rambam’s 13 Principles of Faith, the minimum requirements of Jewish belief. In the She-moneh Esrei prayer, recited three times daily, we pray for all of the elements of the coming of the moshiach: ingathering of the exiles; restoration of the religious courts of justice; an end of wickedness, sin and heresy; reward to the righteous; rebuilding of Jerusalem; restoration of the line of King David; and restoration of Temple service.

Modern scholars suggest that the messianic concept was introduced later in the history of Judaism, during the age of the prophets. They note that the messianic concept is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). However, traditional Judaism maintains that the messianic idea has always been a part of Judaism.

The moshiach is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, because the Torah was written in terms that all people could understand, and the abstract concept of a distant, spiritual, future reward was be-

yond the comprehension of some people. However, the Torah contains several references to “the End of Days” (achareet ha-yameem), which is the time of the moshiach; thus, the concept of moshiach was known in the most ancient times.

The term “moshiach” literally means “the anointed one,” and refers to the ancient practice of anointing kings with oil when they took the throne. The moshiach is the one who will be anointed as king in the End of Days.

The word “moshiach” does not mean “savior.” The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept that has no basis in Jewish thought. Unfortunately, this Christian concept has become so deeply ingrained in the English word “messiah” that this English word can no longer be used to refer to the Jewish concept. The word “moshiach” will be used throughout this page.

The Moshiach

The moshiach will be a great political leader descended from King David (Jeremiah 23:5). The moshiach is often referred to as “moshiach ben David” (moshiach, son of David). He will be well-versed in Jewishlaw, and observant of its commandments. (Isaiah 11:2-5) He will be a charismatic leader, inspiring others to follow his example. He will be a great military leader, who will win battles for Israel. He will be a great judge, who makes righteous decisions (Jeremiah 33:15). But above all, he will be a human being, not a god, demi-god or other supernatural being.

It has been said that in every generation, a person is born with the potential to be the moshiach. If the time is right for the messianic age within that per-

son's lifetime, then that person will be the moshiach. But if that person dies before he completes the mission of the moshiach, then that person is not the moshiach.

When Will the Moshiach Come?

There is a wide variety of opinion on the subject of when the moshiach will come. Some of Judaism's greatest minds have cursed those who try to predict the time of the moshiach's coming, because errors in such predictions could cause people to lose faith in the messianic idea or in Judaism itself. This actually happened in the 17th century, when Shabbatai Tzvi claimed to be the moshiach. When Tzvi converted to Islam under threat of death, many Jews converted with him. Nevertheless, this prohibition has not stopped anyone from speculating about the time when the moshiach will come.

Although some scholars believed that G-d has set aside a specific date for the coming of the moshiach, most authority suggests that the conduct of mankind will determine the time of the moshiach's coming. In general, it is believed that the moshiach will come in a time when he is most needed (because the world is so sinful), or in a time when he is most deserved (because the world is so good).

For example, each of the following has been suggested as the time when the moshiach will come:

- if Israel repented a single day;
- if Israel observed a single Shabbat properly;
- if Israel observed two Shabbats in a row properly;
- in a generation that is totally innocent or totally guilty;
- in a generation that loses hope;
- in a generation where children are totally disrespectful towards their parents and elders;

What Will the Moshiach Do?

Before the time of the moshiach, there shall be war and suffering (Ezekiel 38:16) The moshiach will bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by bringing us back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem (Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5). He will establish a government in Israel that will be the center of all world government, both for Jews and gentiles (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:10; 42:1). He will rebuild the Temple and

re-establish its worship (Jeremiah 33:18). He will restore the religious court system of Israel and establish Jewish law as the law of the land (Jeremiah 33:15).

Olam Ha-Ba: The Messianic Age

The world after the messiah comes is often referred to in Jewish literature as Olam Ha-Ba (oh-LAHM hah-BAH), the World to Come. This term can cause some confusion, because it is also used to refer to a spiritual afterlife. In English, we commonly use the term "messianic age" to refer specifically to the time of the messiah. Olam Ha-Ba will be characterized by the peaceful co-existence of all people. (Isaiah 2:4) Hatred, intolerance and war will cease to exist.

Some authorities suggest that the laws of nature will change, so that predatory beasts will no longer seek prey and agriculture will bring forth supernatural abundance (Isaiah 11:6-11:9). Others, however, say that these statements are merely an allegory for peace and prosperity. All of the Jewish people will return from their exile among the nations to their home in Israel (Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5). The law of the Jubilee will be reinstated. In the Olam Ha-Ba, the whole world will recognize the Jewish G-d as the only true G-d, and the Jewish religion as the only true religion (Isaiah 2:3; 11:10; Micah 4:2-3; Zechariah 14:9). There will be no murder, robbery, competition or jealousy. There will be no sin (Zephaniah 3:13). Sacrifices will continue to be brought in the Temple, but these will be limited to thanksgiving offerings, because there will be no further need for expiatory offerings.

What About Jesus?

Jews do not believe that Jesus was the moshiach. Assuming that he existed, and assuming that the Christian scriptures are accurate in describing him (both matters that are debatable), he simply did not fulfill the mission of the moshiach as it is described in the biblical passages cited above. Jesus did not do any of the things that the scriptures said the messiah would do.

On the contrary, another Jew born about a century later came far closer to fulfilling the messianic ideal than Jesus did. His name was Shimeon ben Kosiba, known as Bar Kochba (son of a star), and he was a charismatic, brilliant, but brutal warlord. Rabbi Akiba, one of the greatest scholars in Jewish history, believed that Bar Kochba was the moshiach. Bar Kochba fought a war against the Roman

Empire, catching the Tenth Legion by surprise and retaking Jerusalem. He resumed sacrifices at the site of the Temple and made plans to rebuild the Temple. He established a provisional government and began to issue coins in its name. This is what the Jewish people were looking for in a moshiach; Jesus clearly does not fit into this mold.

Ultimately, however, the Roman Empire crushed his revolt and killed Bar Kochba. After his death, all acknowledged that he was not the moshiach. Throughout Jewish history, there have been many people who have claimed to be the moshiach, or whose followers have claimed that they were the moshiach: Shimeon Bar Kochba, Shabbatai Tzvi, Jesus, and many others too numerous to name. Leo Rosten reports some very entertaining accounts under the heading False Messiahs in his book, *The Joys of Yiddish*. But all of these people died without fulfilling the mission of the moshiach; therefore, none of them were the moshiach. The moshiach and the Olam Ha-Ba lie in the future, not in the past.

Biblical Passages Referring to the Moshiach

The following passages in the Jewish scriptures are the ones that Jews consider to be messianic in nature

or relating to the end of days. These are the ones that we rely upon in developing our messianic concept:

- Isaiah 2, 11, 42; 59:20
- Jeremiah 23, 30, 33; 48:47; 49:39
- Ezekiel 38:16
- Hosea 3:4-3:5
- Micah 4
- Zephaniah 3:9
- Zechariah 14:9
- Daniel 10:14