

Messianism...who is this Jesus anyway?

By Bob Mendelsohn

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Ask Jewish people about their belief in a personal *messiah*, and you will be met with images of ultra-orthodox Jewish people in fur hats and long coats, curls about the ears and circle dancing abound. Or you might be met with dismissal and “If he were going to come, he should have come long ago. Now it’s too late.”

The idea of a messiah is historically Jewish, but remote to most Jewish people, certainly in Australia in these days. 70 years ago, the idea of a messianic hope was wrapped in anti-Hitler rhetoric. Hope of a coming messiah was the hope of general salvation from the death camps. It became mingled with hopes of the creation of the land of Israel.

There is dispute with Judaism about messiah, as is true of most subjects. For some within traditional Judaism, the Messiah will be an anointed one (hence the literal translation: 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. Liberal Judaism has been teaching since about 1880 a messianic age when the world

would be at peace, but most of their people do not think there will be a personal messiah who will be the single leader of this era. Dr Rich Robinson, senior researcher at Jews for Jesus, says, “Messiah is a person who would come through the corridor of history and be our deliverer.”

In 1994 a rabbi died in Brooklyn. That’s not exactly news as there are half a million Jewish people who live in that borough of New York City. And many are rabbis. And each year many rabbis die. But 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 him to be the messiah.

When he died that summer, tens of thousands of his followers gathered in New York to honor him and to await his resurrection. They believed that he would rise from the dead. They believed it would be within four days. Why? The rabbis teach that the spirit of a man hovers over a corpse for three days. (Genesis Kabbah 100:7) On the fourth day the spirit dissipates. So there at his grave were the waiting throngs. And on the fourth day, they also left.

They were so close. Yes, the messiah would die. They were right; the messiah would rise from the dead before the 4th day. They were wrong; it was not a rabbi from Brooklyn.

What does history teach us?

Historically in Jewish tradition, the term *messianism* 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.” (*Judaisms and their messiahs*, edited by Jacob Neusner, Cambridge University Press, Boston, 1987, page ix) The messiah would be anointed (the word *mashiach* in Hebrew is the same as the Greek word *christos* (meaning *anointed*) with holy anointing oil and rule the Jewish people during the messianic age.

William Scott Green classifies “Jewish messianism as national, ethnic, political and material, and Christian messianism as universal, cosmopolitan, ethical and spiritual” (*Ibid.*, page 1) In the time of Philo (a contemporary of Y’shua), and his writings, the most extensive body of extant materials from the Hellenistic Jewish community outside the Land of Israel. “Nowhere in the corpus does Philo mention the term *messiah* and many have remarked that this absence reflects Philo’s lack of concern or interest in this important

idea.” (*Ibid.* Richard Hecht, *Philo and Messiah*, page 140). Hecht goes on to cite Harry Wolfson, a great Philo interpreter of the twentieth century. He “noted the paucity of discussion or even silence in the corpus about the Messiah. ...the solution found by Philo for the Jewish problem of his time was the revival of the old prophetic promises of the ultimate disappearance of the diaspora...he deals in great detail with what is known in Jewish tradition as the Messiah and the messianic age.”

False messiahs

There have been many Jewish people who claimed to be the messiah, or who allowed others to tout them as such. They include:

- 1) Simon of Peraea, a contemporary of Y’shua, 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 disbursed. (See Acts 5)
- 3) Menahem ben Judah another Jesus contemporary, son of Judas of Galilee, who partook in a revolt against Agrippa II before being slain by a rival Zealot leader (See Acts 5)
- 4) 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)

5) Moses of Crete (about 470) who convinced the Jews of Crete to attempt to walk into the sea to return to Israel; he disappeared after that disaster.

6) Serene (around 720) who claimed to be the Messiah and advocated expulsion of Muslims and relaxing various rabbinic laws before being arrested; he then recanted.

7) Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), an Ottoman Jew who claimed to be the Messiah, but then converted to Islam; still has followers today in the Donmeh.

8) Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), the chabad rabbi whose photos still adorn Jewish schools and bakeries. An unidentifiable number of his followers believe him to be the Messiah.

Biblical references

According to Green, “There are 38 times in the OT where the noun *mashiach* is used. It applies twice to the patriarchs, 6 times to the high priest, once to Cyrus, and 29 times to the Israelite king, usually Saul or David.” (*Ibid.* page 2)

Most Christians see the *mashiach*, the future Israelite king, specifically in Psalm 2, to be the Messiah, the Saviour Jesus. (The kings of the earth take their stand, And the rulers take

counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed) Psalm 45 is quoted in the book of Hebrews and is a reference to the Son of God, Y'shua. (Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; Therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows; Psalm 45.7, Hebrews 1.9) The picture is one of anointing, even as we saw early in Y'shua's ministry.

The first sermon Y'shua gave in the synagogue included "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me (מָשַׁח יְהוָה אֵלָי) 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' is the word *mashiach*.

The most clear-cut biblical reference 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 sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two 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.”

Here we see the messianic timeline laid out that indicates the time of the death of messiah (“cut off”) to be between the decree by Artaxerxes and the destruction of the 2nd temple which took place in 70 CE. (verse 26) The word authorizing the rebuilding of Jerusalem (verse 25) probably refers to the edict of Artaxerxes, in about 445 B.C.E.

Maybe that’s why so many rabbis don’t allow their students to read Daniel 9 until they are 30 years old. The messiah will be *cut off*; no wonder the Lubavitchers were not surprised when their messiah died in 1994.

Isaiah 53 and the controversy

The most quoted biblical passage by Christians in support of the Messiahship of Jesus is Isaiah 53. There we do not see the word messiah, but we see his life, ministry, healing, crucifixion and resurrection foretold. 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. “ (FaithWords, New York City, 2006, pg. 83) Rosen continues with “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!"
(*Ibid*, p 84)

Mordecai ben Samuel gave a sermon in 18th Century Poland, called Sha'ar ha'malek. In his sermon he eloquently gives an apology for itinerant preachers. "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." (*Jewish Preaching, 1200-1800*, by Marc Saperstein, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, page 424)

The Targum Jonathan by Jonathan ben Uzziel (an early translation of the biblical text, somewhat like the Living Bible to modern Christians) reads Isaiah 52.12 as "Behold my servant messiah shall prosper." Rabbi DY Abarbanel did not agree with ben Uzziel, however in his writing, about 1500 we read, "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 which dates to about 100-200 makes certain statements which “have an obvious reference to the Isaiah passage.” (Fruchtenbaum, Arnold, Jesus was a Jew, Broadman Press, Nashville, 1974, page 26-27). “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.”

The Talmudic references continue, the Genesis Rabbah midrash, so much is available to counter the argument by modern rabbis that Isaiah 53 is about the Jewish people. It ever used to refer to King Messiah, the real hope of the Jewish people, and the hope of the world.

Yes, messiah is a controversial subject in the Jewish world today. And yes, there is biblical evidence to show to a serious enquirer that Y’shua fulfills such biblical information. Would to God that we would continue to find more Jewish people who are willing to learn, and to learn from us, that their messiah has come and his name is Y’shua.

Bob grew up in the US as an Orthodox Jew and came to faith in Jesus in 1971. He has worked with Jews for Jesus since 1979, serving in California, New York City, DC and Chicago. In 1998, he moved to Sydney with his family. Bob lives in Sydney with his wife and youngest child, a daughter who attends Sydney University.