

IDENTIFYING THE MESSIAH - WHO? HOW?

By Mark Robinson

"The Messiah is dead!"
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As the word filtered throughout the community, denial was paramount in the minds of many of the believers. "It can't be! Just yesterday we were greeting him with, 'Long live our master, our teacher, our rabbi, the king messiah forever and ever.'" However, as the news became a reality it brought anguish, devastation and disillusionment.

Some of his followers insisted he would rise from the grave, and for weeks they kept a vigil by his gravesite expecting the resurrection of their Messiah. As long as five years after his death a number of his followers were still patiently waiting for his return.

Who was this individual whom many still fervently cling to as "the hope of Israel?" He was the revered leader of the Chabad Lubavitch movement: Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He was born in 1902 and died on June 12, 1994, at the age of 92, leaving a void in the lives of many of his followers that may never be satisfied.

The history of Israel is littered with "Messiahs" who left their followers leaderless and disillusioned. One of these was Shimon Bar Kochba who led an unsuccessful revolt against Rome from 132 - 135 A.D. and died at the baffle of Betar. He was acclaimed as the Messiah by Rabbi Akiba, the leading rabbi of the day. Another, David Alroy, proclaimed to the Jews of Babylon that he was the Messiah in 1147 A.D., but was later killed by his father-in-law. Shabbetai Zvi, born in Smyrna, Turkey, acquired thousands of followers throughout Europe by 1665. He was eventually imprisoned by the Turkish sultan, converted to Islam, and died in exile in 1676. These and many others join the Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, as failed messianic hopes. These false messiahs are indicative of the need for a careful analysis of anyone who might claim to be the Messiah.

After centuries of being misled, Israel truly needs an authoritative voice to speak to this issue. Even more, we are all in need of an impeccable source whereby we can substantiate the claims of the one asserting he is the Messiah. God has given us this source in His Word. The Jewish Bible contains many prophecies that allow us to make this determination.

Recognizing the Messiah

The specific time of the Messiah's coming is a major factor in His identification. The Bible reveals not only the time of His coming, but also how He could be recognized. For example:

1. The Messiah would come before 70 A.D.

"And after 62 weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary..." Daniel 9:26

The Hebrew prophet Daniel foretold with precise accuracy in verses 9:24-27 the time of the Messiah's coming. He stated that the city of Jerusalem and the Temple would be rebuilt, and the Messiah would come during this same time period -- the period of the SECOND Temple. It is interesting that his prophecy also told us that the second Temple would be destroyed after the coming of the Messiah, by the "people of the prince." This was accomplished in 70 A.D. when General Titus, the son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, led his people (the Roman armies) in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Among many Jewish references regarding the coming of the Messiah in the first century, one rabbi had this to say:

"The first century, however, especially the generation before the destruction [of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem], witnessed a remarkable outburst of messianic emotionalism. This is to be attributed, as we shall see, not to an intensification of Roman persecution but to the prevalent belief induced by the popular chronology of that day that... the Messiah was expected around the second quarter of the first century C.E..."¹

It is apparent the Messiah had to come before 70 A.D.

2. The prophet Micah told us the place of His birth.

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2

The ancient writings agree that this verse speaks about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. The Targum Jonathan, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Scriptures dating from approximately the second century C.E., says:

"And you, O Bethlehem Ephratah, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands of the house of Judah, from you shall come forth before Me the Messiah, to exercise dominion over Israel, he whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation."

3. Isaiah told us the manner of His birth.

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14

The Messiah would be born of a virgin. The Hebrew word used here for virgin is *almah*. *Almah* is used seven times in the Jewish Bible (Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Psalm 68:25; Proverbs 30:19; Song of Solomon 1:3, 6:8; and Isaiah 7:14) and always refers to a young woman who is a virgin. Even Rashi, the highly-revered French Talmudic scholar of the thirteenth century, believed this verse indicated a virgin birth. He said, "Behold the '*Almah*' shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel. This means that our Creator shall be with us. And this is the sign: the one who will conceive is a girl who never in her life had intercourse with any man. Upon this one shall the Holy Spirit have power."²

4. The Messiah would enter Jerusalem riding a donkey.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." Zechariah 9:9

5. The Messiah would be rejected and despised.

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Isaiah 53:3

This was not the expected reception of the Messiah, but the Biblical one.

6. The Messiah would suffer on our behalf.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53:4-5

It was because of our sins (transgressions) that the Messiah was stricken by God, and by the Messiah's punishment (stripes) we are forgiven.

7. The Messiah would die for our sins.

"He was taken from prison and from Judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cutoff out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of my people was he stricken." Isaiah 53:8

To be "cut off out of the land of the living" means to be killed. "For the transgression of my people" means he died for our sins (transgressions).

8. The Messiah would die by crucifixion

"For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet." Psalm 22:16

Crucifixion was not introduced until almost one thousand years after this prophecy by the Romans. Yet, "they pierced my hands and my feet" describes crucifixion.

9. The Messiah would be buried in a rich man's grave.

"And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." Isaiah 53:9

10. The Messiah would resurrect - rise from the grave.

"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand." Isaiah 53:10

To "prolong His days" after dying and being buried, means He would have to resurrect from the grave.

Actually, the entire fifty-third chapter of the Book of Isaiah is a detailed account of the life of the Messiah. Concerning this chapter, Rabbi Moshe Kohen ibn Crispin, of Cordova and afterwards Toledo, Spain (14th century), said:

"Those who for controversial reasons apply the prophecy of the suffering servant to Israel find it impossible to understand the true meaning of this prophecy, having forsaken the knowledge of our teachers, and inclined after the stubbornness of their own opinions. Their misinterpretation distorts the passage from its natural meaning, for it was given of God as a description of the Messiah, whereby, when any should claim to be the Messiah, to judge by the resemblance or nonresemblance to it whether he were the Messiah or no."³

What do you think?

There are literally hundreds of prophecies about the promised Messiah of Israel. We have looked at only a few of them. To an unbiased individual there can be only one person in all history that fulfills the messianic requirements.

He came before 70 A.D. and was born in Bethlehem.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem." Matthew 2:1

He was born of a virgin.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost... that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Matthew 1:18, 22-23

He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

"And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose *them*, and bring *them* unto me. And if any *man* say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set *him* thereon. And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed *them* in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed *is* he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee." Matthew 21:1-11

He was despised and rejected.

"He [Jesus] came unto his own, and his own received him not." John 1:11

He suffered and died for our sins.

"For Messiah also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit." 1 Peter 3:18

He was crucified

"And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots." Luke 23:33-34

He was buried in a rich man's grave

"Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand." John 19:40-42

He rose from the grave.

"And the Angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he goeth before you Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I told you." Matthew 28:5-7

Dear friend, look no further; you have found the Messiah. He is the only One in history who has fulfilled these, and many other messianic prophecies. He wants to be your Messiah and Savior if you will come to Him today as the One who died for your sins and rose from the grave.

"...and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21

ENDNOTES

1. Rabbi A.H. Silver, A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel, reprinted in 1978 by Peter Smith, pages 5-7. The Jewish community doesn't accept Jesus as Lord and thus uses C.E. (Common Era) in place of A.D. ("in the year of our Lord").
2. Rashi, Mikraoth Gedoloth, Isaiah 7:14
3. Driver & Nebauer, The Suffering Servant of Isaiah According to Jewish Tradition, pages. 114, 199ff.