

# Judaism and Messianism

## Is Judaism a Messianic Religion?

Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda

### Introduction

Judaism is the mother of the Messianic idea, but, unlike Christianity, is not a “messianic” religion. In the heart of the Jewish religion burns the consummate desire to serve the One and Only God, to observe God’s Torah and Mizvot and to mend the world under the One God’s Kingship [*tikun olam bemalkhut shadai*]. The religion of Judaism is committed to worship no other entity beside God, be it a natural power (like the Sun, moon, or Vulcan, the Roman god of fire), or any powerful hero (like Moses or any other sage or messiah). To worship “other deities” [*elohim aherim*], even in addition to God, is idolatry [*avoda zara*], proscribed in the Decalogue as the most harshly punishable offense against God. Jews are halakhically prohibited from engaging in and associating with any form of idolatry -- even from showing the slightest gesture (verbal or corporeal) of veneration towards any entity (concept or person) besides God. To do that, even just outwardly (while inwardly maintaining true faith in God alone) is deemed to be idolatrous conduct, a severe transgression requiring martyrdom: One should rather submit to death than participate in idolatry. This is why millions of Jews throughout the ages devotedly opted to let themselves be killed “*al kiddush Hashem*” (in Sanctification of God’s Name) than pronounce their “acceptance” of Jesus as the Christians constantly forced them to do. They would rather let their bodies be consumed by flames of fire, reciting the Shema -- in their loving of *Hashem Ehad* with all their life and being -- than contaminate their souls with any taint of idolatry. Venerating any person, whether a messiah or not, whether Jewish or not, is contemptible idolatry in Judaism.

Christianity is by far the only world religion in human history that is, by its own definition and self-understanding, “messianic.” The very names, “Christianity” for the religion, “Christ” for its central figure and object of worship, and “Christians” for their adherents, all betoken “messianism” -- “*Christos*” being the Greek rendition of the Hebrew word “*mashiah*” (the anointed one). The term “Christians” (in English from the Greek) means “messianics” in Hebrew. The term “Messianic Judaism” is an oxymoron. It means in the vernacular “Christian Judaism” -- a contradiction in terms, and an insult to the integrity of both religions. In sharp contrast to Christianity, Judaism is intrinsically non-messianic.

Purely and persistently monotheistic, repudiating any vestiges of paganism, rejecting any notions of divine corporeality, the Jewish religion, in its very core, abhors any claims of divinity for any object or person, besides the One God -- whether it be divine progeny, divine incarnation, or divine symbiosis. No hero is worshipped in Judaism -- be it the greatest prophet, like Moses our Teacher, or the most glorious Messiah, like King David, or his yet unknown offspring, anticipated by many to be the Messiah in the future age of full redemption. The Jewish religion vehemently resists any impulse of hero-worshipping, any craze of venerating any messiah.

## The Messianic Age and Eschatology

The Jewish concept of the Messianic Age [*Yemot Hamashiah*], Days of the Messiah, destined to emerge in the future as the ultimate stage in human history, is expressed by the Hebrew biblical idiom, *aharit hayamim*, "the last days." This Hebraic idea, however, is rendered in the Western world by the Greek expression "eschatology" (from *eskhatos*, last). Moreover, it is perceived through the lens of the Greek mind-set as referring to the doctrine and study of the preordained last events, particularly, the end of the world or humankind. This Western term assumes different meanings in different religions, cultures and traditions. In mainstream Christianity, the term refers to the belief and doctrine concerning the ultimate things, like the Second Coming, or the Last Judgment.

It is significant to point out the fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism in the definition of this term, and its conception. Though they both seem to draw (though in quite different ways) from the same sources, these two distinguished religions are fundamentally apart. Biblically, the concept is rooted in Jewish Scriptures [*Tanakh*, so-called by Christians, in bias, Old Testament). It is expressed and capsulated in the Hebrew phrase *aharit hayamim* in Torah and Neviim (Prophets) and in its Aramaic equivalent *kez hayamin* in Ketuvim (in the Apocalyptic Book of Daniel). In Christianity, this pivotal Hebrew/Aramaic idiom is perceived, literally, as "The End of Days" or "The Last Days" and conveys the notions of an unavoidable ultimate doom, catastrophic upheavals, holocausts and destruction, raptures of evilness and calamities -- all of which will put, once and for all, a violent and decisive end to human history and to the millennia of secular-mundane cultures and civilizations, as evolved throughout the ages. This "Last [or End of] Days" will bring about a post-historic reality, an unearthly rule: The Kingdom of Heaven. Then, "Christ" will have his "Second Coming" (since the "First" apparently failed to bring about the expected salvation), and will reign supreme in his glory, as all people (and Jews in particular) will become "believers" (namely Christians). This is a very happy vision for most Christians, as all competitors -- all other religions and non-Christian ideas and scientific theories -- will then be vanquished and vanish into the Messianic drain.

In Jewish tradition, however, the biblical phrases *aharit hayamim* and *kez hayamin* are comprehended as referring to the future (near or distant) within the frame of human history -- national and universal.. These phrases are understood as "the days to come" or "the future days" - - within a progressive view on the evolution and betterment of this world. Even taken literally, as "The End of Days" or "The Last Days," they do not convey the ultimatum sense of beyond reality or its annihilation, nor transcendence above history or its negation, nor the deprecation and/or eradication of this world, but rather the end of the wrong things within the world in its present state -- its elevation to better conditions, materially and spiritually.

Eschatological ideas and beliefs play an important -- but not central -- role in Judaism. The concepts of God's Kingship, "the world to come," the Messiah and the messianic era, the Day of Judgment, and the visions of a perfected future are basic concerns in biblical and rabbinic Judaism. But how striking is the difference! While in Christianity the focus is exclusively on one specific "messiah" (Christ), in Judaism there is no focus at all on messiah in general nor on any messiah in particular. The focus in Judaism has rather a threefold direction: God, Torah, Israel (People/Land).

In Christianity history is viewed throughout in mythological-eschatological terms: History is essentially the history of God. God in Christianity, as in all other Pagan religions of the West, has an evolutionary history/story -- Birth, Death and Rebirth -- Past, Present and Future. The future of God has already begun, in Christianity, with the appearance of Christ; the end of history is near; the end time is therefore filled with danger and salvation, faith and unfaith, Christ and Antichrist, and will be consummated through the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of the world, and its salvation through a new creation. In Judaism, God has no history. God is eternal and everlasting, above genealogy and history. God is forever *Melekh* (Sovereign: *Hashem Melekh! Hashem Malakh! Hashem Yimlokh!* Forever and Ever!). God is/was/will always be the Ruler! Judaism therefore does not deal with the history/genealogy of any God, nor the past/present/future of any God, nor the Birth/Death/Rebirth of any God or any "Son of God" -- for the true One God of Israel is above and beyond all such pagan notions. Judaism, inspired by, and in worship of The One God -- focuses on human history, on the betterment of this world.

### **"The Son of Man" -- A Monotheistic Concept and a Messianic Blunder**

This ancient Hebraic-Biblical idiom, "son of man," originally aiming to guard the humble humanity of an exalted hero -- a prophet or a messiah -- and ward off pagan temptations of venerating or deifying him, became torturously disfigured by Christianity.

The now popular phrase stems originally from Daniel (7:13). Jews since antiquity, probably as early as the third century BCE, interpreted Daniel's apocalyptic dream of the four evil beasts (chapter 7) "messianically", as a visionary projection of Israel's historical chain of ongoing subjugation to oppressive regimes, ending in its future redemption: Proceeding the appalling reign of terror over the world, and over the Jewish state/people, of the "evil beasts," denoting four successive evil empires (generally perceived as the Babylonian [*Bavel*], Persian [*Paras*], Greek [*Yavan*], Roman [*Romi, Edom*] -- there will be an enduring world dominion of a human ruler. In Daniel's words (7:13), "I saw in the night vision, as if appearing through the sky's clouds, one who looks like a son of man [*bar enash*]." He will command the respect and obedience of "all the peoples, nations, and languages." Clearly, the emphasis of this apocalyptic idiom, *ke-var enash*, is that this future liberating ruler will be rather human, unlike his preceding beastly, "evil" rulers. This Danielian visionary figure of "son of man" became already in early Hellenistic Judaism identified with the expected messiah. This can be seen from the Septuagint on the Pentateuch (the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made by "seventy" [or 72] Jewish scholar in Hellenistic Egypt, in the third century BCE; it was sponsored by King Ptolemy II).

The Septuagint, in what may rightly be considered the first messianic interpretation of a biblical verse, translates the word "*shevet*" [scepter, staff; taken as reference to a messianic ruler], in Balaam verse (Numbers 24:17), as "a man" (a mortal). This Greek translation, apparently relying on Daniel's title "son of man" for the messiah, undoubtedly aims, in context, to dispel any pagan notions -- that may quite easily appeal to and seduce the Hellenistic mind -- that the messiah is in any way more than just a mortal human being, and not a god or demigod. The Septuagintic designation of the Messiah as "man" demonstrates, however, that the concept of "son of man" is originally Jewish and it already existed in the early third century BCE.

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (who lived during the last century of the Second Temple days), refrained from referring explicitly to the eschatological hopes of Israel. Nonetheless, Philo mentions the hope of the coming of the Messiah in connection with this Greek interpretation of the biblical verse. Though the messianic concepts at that time of the Second Temple were quite varied and manifold, and sometimes supernatural qualities were attributed to a messiah, however one Jewish doctrine was crystal clear and indisputable, that the messiah or messiahs were always no more (and no less) than human beings.

The depiction of “son of man” -- in Hebrew, *ve-ata ben-adam*, “you, son of man” or, “you, descendant of Adam” (as God frontally addresses prophet Ezekiel); and in Aramaic, *bar enash*, (as Daniel envisions/describes the emergent non-beastly ruler) -- as designation for a prophet or a messiah, is not superfluous. Pristinely it has a drastic and dramatic educational purpose: To eliminate any pagan temptations to ascribe to the messiah any form of divinity. Even when the prevailing political and psychological conditions at the time did not always allow the people to completely abandon notions of supernatural aspects of an envisioned, utopian, messiah, he was insistently viewed in Judaism, however, as an agent of God, and never as a god or a “son” of God (or a “Savior” in the Christian sense). The title “son of man” used to depict heroes, a prophet or a messiah, is rather humbling; it is intended to humanize them, to de-mythologize their image, to abolish their potential apotheosis.

It is historically and theologically remarkable, as well as ironic, that Christianity, on the one hand, derived the messianic idea and the concept of son of man from Judaism but, on the other hand, twisted its meaning in the opposite direction. Christianity took the skeleton form Judaism but infused it with pagan spirit. The epithet “son of man” that Jesus is said to have applied to himself (actually, he just quoted Daniel), is understood in Christianity as an arrogation to himself divine or super-human qualities. The Son of Man paradoxically became Son of God.

Daniel’s visionary dream of the four beasts (4 evil empires), culminating with the ultimate appearance of “the son of man” -- the just redeemer -- instilled a sense of anticipation and hope in the hearts of the Jewish readers of book -- a determinant factor for Jewish survival throughout two millennia of bloody Christian hegemony. This conception enabled Jews to view great historical and political transformations—the fall and rise of empires and kingdoms, or revolutions and counterrevolutions — as the harbingers of the messianic kingdom. The fourth (and last) beast has often been identified in Jewish sources with the oppressive rule of the Holy Roman Empire (or Christendom), that began to crumble and collapse at the start of the nineteenth century (via Napoleon). The expectant “son of man” to follow the demise of all the evil empires and their reign of terror -- is the messiah figure, the person expected to physically lead the messianic movement.

The messiah figure is historically viewed in two completely different ways, Jewish and Christian: Jews, in contrast to Christianity, see messiah as a human figure and not as a god or part of any Deity. In Jewish view the messiah is an earthly ruler, a political-spiritual leader, a national king, and not an object of religious adoration. Most importantly, the messiah’s roll is to act in this world (rather than celestially) as an effective liberator and redeemer of this world -- to bring about a new and better society, devoid of oppression and deprivation and free from political or religious persecution.

Judaism, unlike Christianity, does not perceive the messiah as just a spiritual or super-natural "Savior" transforming (or re-birthing) souls of individuals who "accept" him as such. For the true messiah, when (and if) he eventually comes, it will be his one and only awaited ("first") coming. From the vantage point of Judaism, to believe that any person who died, leaving the world for two millennia in its current state of upheaval, could be considered, even most remotely, a Christ (*Cristos*, "messiah") -- is profoundly disturbing and offensive. Such a messianic claim, shortchanging the sublime Hebraic vision of complete redemption, is an insult to all victims and survivors of persecutions and holocausts throughout the ages.

### **A Messiah or Two Messiahs? -- Mashiah ben David and Mashiah ben Yosef**

In rabbinic thought, as expressed in talmudic and midrashic sources, the messiah is the king who will redeem and rule Israel at the climax of human history and the instrument by which the kingdom of God will be established. While Tanakh stresses the nature of the age called the "end of days," the rabbis focus as well on the person of their regent, who gives the messianic age (*yemot ha-mashi'ah*) its very name. "Messiah" (*mashi'ah*) means "annointed" and in Tanakh can refer either to a king or a priest. The *aggadah* restricts the term to the eschatological king, who is also called *malka meshiha* ("king messiah") in the Targums, *ben David* ("son of David"), and *mashi'ah ben David* ("messiah, son of David"). The messiah was expected to attain for Israel the idyllic blessings of the prophets; he was to defeat the enemies of Israel, restore the people to the Land, reconcile them with God, and introduce a period of spiritual and physical bliss. He was to be prophet, warrior, judge, king, and teacher of Torah.

A secondary messianic figure in Rabbinical Aggadic-Midrashic imagination is the messiah son of (namely, of the tribe of) Joseph (or Ephraim), whose coming precedes that of the messiah, son of David, and who will die in combat with the enemies of God and Israel. Some scholars claim that this figure is described in pre-Christian apocalyptic and apocryphal works. However, the first unambiguous mentions of this doctrine occur in tannaitic passages of uncertain date (Talmud Bavli, Sukka 52a) and in the Targum (Pseudo-Jonathan, Exodus 40:11). The function of this secondary messiah is unclear. Messiah ben Joseph has been seen as the symbolic embodiment of the reunification with the ten tribes of Israel, as the Samaritan Messiah, and as a figure whose martial character and death testify to the impact of the abortive revolt under Bar Kokhba upon the Jewish imagination.

The prophetic books do not mention a messiah person, nor do they identify him. The rabbis agree he is of Davidic lineage (based on Hosea 3:5 and Jeremiah 30:9). Some expected a resurrected David, and others a messiah named David. Hezekiah, king of Judah, was a potential messiah: Yohanan ben Zakkai announced the "coming" of Hezekiah in what may be seen as a messianically oriented deathbed declaration. The name Menahem ben Hezekiah, which may refer to an anti-Roman patriot rebel or may simply be symbolic of "comfort," is also found. The messianic "name" is sometimes meant descriptively, as when Yose ha-Galili said that the messiah's name is *Shalom* ("peace"). The early sources do not mention a "suffering Messiah." In the Targum to Isaiah 53:3-6, suffering is the historical lot of the people. The toils of a messiah are those of constructive achievement.

The Talmudic mention of Messiah's suffering that atones for Israel (Sanhedrin 98b); is not necessarily a "messianic" concept. The vicarious atonement of all righteous, by their sad demise or torment, is a general Aggadic theme.

The rabbinic aggadic sources add poetic flourish to the figure of messiah as man in spectacular strikes. Thus, he may come either riding a donkey, in subdued fashion (Zechariah 9:9), or triumphantly riding the clouds (Daniel 7:13). Akiva's acknowledgment of the rebel leader Bar Kokhva as the messiah dramatically illustrates the Jewish perception of messiah as fully human. Akiva also declared, in mystical style, that the Messiah would occupy a throne alongside God -- as a man! The talmudic source that attributes immortality to messiah (Sukka 52a), and the later Midrashim that depict the messiah among the immortals of Paradise -- do admit his total humanity. The messiah does not displace either God or Torah in rabbinic thought. The coming of a Messiah is not crucial in Jewish faith. Rabbi Hillel (fourth century) declared that the Messiah will never come (since he was already "consumed" in the days of Hezekiah), though he doubtless expected Israel's redemption. The Midrash declares that the ultimate author of redemption is not messiah but God, and God's kingship is stressed in liturgy (Midrash Tehilim to 31:1; 36:1; 107:1).

The term Messianism is derived from the Hebrew word *mashiah* ("anointed"). Christianity took it from the Jews. But it took from the Jews this bare concept, without its concurrent core and background concepts of God-Torah-People. It worships a Trinitarian Godhead, in addition [*beshituf*] to the One God. It worships Christ as Messiah and thus became a Messianic religion. But Judaism has never been and will never be a Messianic religion. In Judaism there is anticipation for redemption and a variety of interpretations of the concept of Messiah (whether it is a human protagonist in the drama of redemption, whether it is the process-event of redemption, whether it is instant or progressive, and so on. But Judaism does not worship a Messiah. Judaism is firm in its believe that so far the Messiah did not yet come. Some scholars even thought a Messiah will never come. Some believed Bar Kokhva to be a Messiah that "failed" (*kozev*), and that the 10 tribes were lost forever, never to be redeemed and ingathered. Many persisted that the only difference between the anticipated Messianic age and the present is political freedom from the subjugation to foreign regimes. The Jewishness of a Jew does not depend on a/the Messiah. Whoever he is or will be, does not matter. At any rate, a Messiah is not an object of worship in Judaism. We only adore and pray to God. Ultimately, we must fulfill our human duties, and it is God's role to fulfill his divine promises. We draw our comfort from the Messianic promises, but our strength, inspiration and direction we draw from God. We worship God alone, not any Messiah. We really do not and should not care about Messiah -- who he is, what is his role, if and when he will come, and so on -- but about the *geula* -- the ultimate redemption. We care about redemption, not about one of its possible facilitators. We are all the beneficiaries and vehicles of Redemption.