

# MESSIAH



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*Messiah*

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Back to Basics

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## Who Is the Messiah?

While traveling in Israel awhile back, I had an interesting conversation with one of our tour guides. As with many guides in Israel, this man's knowledge of the land and biblical history was phenomenal. (He actually knew the New Testament better than many Christians!)

At one point in the conversation, I opened my Bible and read Isaiah 53 without telling him the reference. When I finished, I questioned him as to who he thought the writer was talking about. He replied, "He was talking about Jesus, of course. Anybody would know that." I then asked where he thought I was reading from. He answered, "From Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, certainly." When I told him that I had read from Isaiah the prophet, our guide was astounded and said, "No! Show me that!" He couldn't believe it.

The majority of religious Jews today, like my tour guide, are unaware of what their own Scriptures say concerning the Messiah. This lack of knowledge has led many to reject Christ. In the next few pages, I want to lay out the case for Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel in hope that some, having weighed the evidence, will embrace Him as the only One in history who faithfully fulfills that description.

## Hanukkah 2,000 Years Ago

*Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the [Messiah], tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe ..."*

—John 10:22–25

The question posed by the Jewish leaders is the question for seekers of all ages: Is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah? To answer this, we will need to look at several things. First, the meaning of the word *Messiah*; second, the scriptural expectation of the Messiah, concentrating specifically on the Jews' anticipation of the Messiah during Jesus' time, as well as the messianic expectation among Jews today; and finally, the scriptural portrait of the Messiah.

## Messiah

What is the meaning of the word "Messiah"? We hear the word frequently in sermons; we sometimes even hear people referred to as having a "messiah complex"; we will also occasionally hear of a "messianic

age” that is coming. But many of us may not fully understand the actual meaning of the word.

The basic meaning of Messiah is “an anointed one.” In the Old Testament, the term was used to describe three different categories of people. First, it described priests and kings because they were anointed with oil at God’s command. Second, it referred to the prophets because they were anointed with God’s Spirit as His chosen messengers. The third and primary reference is to One who would come in the fullness of God’s power to deliver the people of Israel from their enemies and to establish the universal reign of righteousness from Jerusalem.

When we read the New Testament, we generally find the word *Christ* instead of Messiah to describe the Anointed One because the New Testament was translated from Greek, not from Hebrew. Had it been translated from Hebrew, we would read Joshua Messiah rather than Jesus Christ.

## **Scriptural Expectations**

Throughout their history, the Jews anticipated that the Messiah would come, according to God’s promise, as their deliverer. God used the Hebrew prophets to paint a picture of the Messiah so that

people would be able to identify Him when He arrived. Let's take a look at that picture.

The first thing we learn about the Messiah is that He is a descendant of Abraham. God told Abraham in Genesis 22:18, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

As time passed, the revelation became more detailed, and we learn that the Messiah was to come from the tribe of Judah. If you recall, Abraham had a son named Isaac; Isaac had a son named Jacob; and Jacob had twelve sons. Jacob's fourth son was named Judah, and according to Genesis 49:10, Shiloh (Messiah) comes from Judah and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.

As we delve deeper into the Scriptures, we learn that the Messiah was to be a descendant of King David. In 2 Samuel 7:12–13 God, speaking to David, says, "I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, ... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Later the exact location of the Messiah's birth was given by the prophet Micah: "But you, Bethlehem ... out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel ..." (Micah 5:2). Prophesying about the same time as Micah, Isaiah declared the Messiah

would be miraculously born of a virgin. He wrote, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

In Daniel’s prophecy, we are told that the Messiah would be cut off—literally, that He would be executed—and that this would occur before the destruction of the second temple. We read in Daniel 9:26, “Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.” We learn from Isaiah 53 that the Messiah would suffer and die as a sacrifice for the sins of Israel and the world. Verses 8 and 10 of Isaiah 53 say: “For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken ... Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin. ...”

We are told in Hosea 13:14 that the Messiah would rise from the dead. It says, “O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction!” And we read in Isaiah 9:7 that He will reign in righteousness forever, and that “of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.”

These and many other passages give a detailed

portrait of the Messiah. If this is the case why did the Jewish leaders reject Jesus? Tragically, at the time of Jesus, Judaism had undergone a major transformation and was no longer the religious system that God had given to Moses. Instead, it had been greatly altered through the influence of the rabbis. In fact, because of the rabbinical revision of Judaism, certain aspects of the Messiah's ministry were no longer seen as necessary. For example, under the rabbinical system the sacrifices were seen as more cosmetic than actually expiating sin. With this new understanding, Messiah dying as a sacrifice for sins would be completely senseless. Therefore, the rabbis overlooked this aspect of the Messiah's mission and emphasized the only thing they believed they needed the Messiah to do: kick out the Romans and set them up as rulers!

According to Rabbi David Rosen, the Jews of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to bring an end to foreign oppression, to gather the Jewish exiles, and to establish an era of universal peace. In other words, they were looking for a political leader who would free them from their long history of oppression and bondage and fulfill God's promises to the nation.

The rabbis who questioned Jesus in John 10 also envisioned the Messiah as the embodiment of



all they held sacred. According to their view, the Messiah would meticulously uphold the written law and their oral tradition. As custodians of the law, they perceived themselves—as did the majority of the people—to be the most righteous and holy men of the nation, so in their minds, the Messiah would have been a glorified version of themselves.

Among all these misperceptions are scriptural passages that, at first glance, appear to be inconsistent with the more common Jewish concepts of the day. Some of the rabbis wrestled with these things, trying to make sense of them, and their confusion comes out in many of their rabbinic commentaries. For example, we read in Zechariah 9 about the Messiah coming humbly upon a donkey, but in Daniel chapter 7 it is declared that the Son of Man will come in the clouds of heaven. The rabbis read these different passages and thought, “What does this mean, and how could it say this here and say something different there?” One rabbi concluded that God was saying that if the people were undeserving, the Messiah would come in humiliation upon a donkey, but if they were deserving and righteous, He would come in power and glory.

The Scriptures seemed to reveal that Messiah would suffer, experience affliction, and possibly even

die. But how could this be reconciled with the promise of an everlasting kingdom? As a result, the rabbis developed a two-Messiah theory: One they referred to as Messiah ben [son of] Joseph, the other, Messiah ben [son of] David.

Messiah ben Joseph was also known as the Suffering Messiah. Yet he would not suffer in the way predicted by Isaiah—rejected by Israel and dying as an atonement for their sins — but rather He would be slain in battle fighting Israel’s physical enemies. The [later] second Messiah, Son of David, would come, and as some rabbis suggested, resurrect the Messiah, the son of Joseph. Regardless of whether or not He raised Messiah ben Joseph, Messiah, Son of David, would establish the worldwide kingdom of God.

To further complicate matters, many biblical passages that the ancient rabbis considered to be messianic have not been considered so since around the twelfth century AD. If you ask today’s rabbis, “How do you reconcile that some of your ancient and most revered rabbis understood certain portions of Scripture as messianic, but you no longer accept that interpretation today?” They simply will answer, “We base our final conclusion on majority consensus.” In other words, their logic is that the

majority of rabbis do not believe those passages to be messianic, so they dismiss the fact that previous generations of rabbis *did* consider them so.

Which brings us to the next question: What is the messianic expectation among the Jewish people today?

### Three World Views

The Jewish world is divided in its religious views and practices. Basically, there are three divisions of Judaism: reformed, conservative, and orthodox (which includes ultra-orthodox Judaism).

Essentially, reformed Jews are humanists who expect humanity to usher in utopia. They reject the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and they reject the miraculous elements of the Bible, writing it off as mythology. They do maintain a Jewish culture, but their worldview is purely humanistic.

Conservative Jews are inclined to be more traditional in their religious beliefs than their reformed brethren, but they are clearly not orthodox. Conservative Jews look for their people to lead the way into a messianic age of universal peace and prosperity.

Neither reformed nor conservative Jews believe

the Messiah to be an actual person; rather they believe in a messianic ideal, an ideal age that will be ushered in through the collective efforts of humanity.

Orthodox Jews hold to very distinct beliefs about the Messiah. First, the Messiah will be a man like Moses—but *not* the Son of God. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses said to the children of Israel, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. ... And the LORD said to me: ‘I ... will put My words in His mouth’” (15, 18). Based upon these statements, orthodox Jews are looking for a Messiah who is a man like Moses, not the divine Son of God. He is not supernatural, not born of a virgin, not connected to God in any special way, and He’s definitely not God incarnate. Yet, they expect this man to bring peace and prosperity to Israel and ultimately to the world.

If you ask an orthodox Israeli Jew, “How will you identify this man? How will you know that He’s actually the One?” most of them will answer, “We will know the Messiah because He will help us to rebuild our temple.” This second belief is the *essential* criteria they have for identifying the Messiah in modern times. As for scriptural criteria, orthodox Jews dismiss that as being irrelevant. Because they

have consistently refused to use scriptural criteria, the Jews have on many occasions over the centuries put their hope in false messiahs.

Let me give just two quick examples: In 135 AD—about sixty or seventy years after the time of Jesus—there arose a man in Israel who claimed to be the Messiah that had come to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression. He was called Bar Kochba (son of a Star); his rebellion against Rome is known historically as the Bar Kochba revolt. Of course, those who believed in Jesus knew Bar Kochba was not the Messiah and did not follow him, but most of the Jews inhabiting the land at the time embraced Bar Kochba as the Messiah and followed him in his revolt against Rome. Ultimately, the revolt was crushed and the Jews were once again expelled out of the land.

In 1993 as I was driving through Jerusalem, all throughout the city I saw banners that proclaimed: “Messiah is coming.” The expectation was that ninety-one-year-old Rabbi Schneerson would publicly announce that he was the Messiah. Schneerson died the next year to the dismay of his followers. Ironically, some of them claimed that he would rise from the dead!

The point is things haven't changed in two thousand years. The Jews' expectation of the Messiah is not based on the Scriptures; instead, they're simply looking for someone who will solve their social and political problems. This is what they really wanted when Jesus came and this is what they want today; they rejected Him then and they are still rejecting Him today.

### **Is Jesus the Messiah?**

The first thing we must ask is: does Jesus meet the scriptural criteria?

The answer is a resounding yes! In fact, He's the only One who did, and He met it in a way that would be impossible to do today. This is another reason why the scriptural criteria are largely ignored by present-day Jews.

According to the Scriptures, the Messiah must be a descendent of David.

*“Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.”*

—Jeremiah 23:5

Even today, orthodox Jews agree that the Messiah

must be a descendant of David. But the reality is nobody on earth can prove that they are descended from David. They might *claim* to be descended from David, but there is no way to prove whether or not those claims are true.

Second, the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem.

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting.”*

–Micah 5:2

A Messiah born in Bethlehem is a massive problem today since Bethlehem is no longer a Jewish city. Bethlehem is presently an Arab city under the control of the Palestinian Authority.

There is also the prophecy of Messiah’s entrance into Jerusalem upon a donkey.

*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

–Zechariah 9:9

This prophecy tells us that this would have had to occur at a time in history when people rode on donkeys or horseback and when riding into a city as a king on a donkey would be considered an act of humiliation. In King David's time, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey or mule (which was the case with Solomon) was not shameful; by the time of the Roman occupation, however, a king riding on a donkey would have been considered utterly degrading.

The one point that finalizes the Jewish dilemma and reveals that Jesus is the only One who meets the scriptural criteria for Messiah is that Messiah had to come before the dispersion of Judah and before the destruction of the second temple. In Genesis 49:10, as Jacob prophesied over his sons, he said regarding Judah, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah ... until Shiloh comes." The ancient rabbis agreed that Shiloh refers to the Messiah. Jacob specifically prophesied that Judah would still exist as an identifiable nation when the Messiah arrived. During the days of Jesus, Judah was all that remained of the once-great kingdom of Israel. The rest of the nation had been dispersed in 721 BC when the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom and led Israel into captivity to Assyria, from which they never formally returned.



Later, in 586 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah was taken in captivity to Babylon, but a remnant returned seventy years later, and Judah again became an identifiable nation and remained so until the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. It is important to note that Daniel prophesied during the Babylonian exile that Messiah would come, that He would be cut off, and “the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary” (Daniel 9:24–26).

Amazingly, the ancient rabbis believed the Messiah would come at the very time that Jesus came. You would think at some point someone would connect the dots and realize that the Messiah did come exactly when He was prophesied to come [and that it’s time to get a new theology!].

Jesus not only met the scriptural criteria, but He *said* He was the Messiah, and He said it numerous times. When the Samaritan woman said, “I know that Messiah is coming ... He will tell us all things.” Jesus answered her, “I who speak to you am He” (John 4:25–26). When the Pharisees said, “How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe” (John 10:24–25). Jesus responded to the messianic title “Son of David,” as

well as affirming to John the Baptist that He was the “Coming One.”

The point that stands out above all else is that He testified under oath before the high priest that He was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. I find it absolutely amazing that Jesus stood before the Jewish high priest and the Sanhedrin and declared himself to be the Messiah, something no other person had ever done!

As the high priest questioned Him, Jesus stood silently while false accusations were made against Him. Finally, to compel Jesus to answer, the high priest said, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” (Matthew 26:63). Jesus answered, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). (Note, the Son of Man is another messianic title found in Daniel 7.)

## **Everlasting Righteousness and Peace**

One of the major reasons Jews reject Jesus as Messiah is because of their belief that Messiah will usher in an everlasting kingdom of peace. According to the rabbis Jesus didn’t do that, therefore He cannot possibly be the Messiah. Jesus did, however,

usher in an era of righteousness and peace for people on a personal level and will in the future bring about an everlasting universal peace. Down through the ages millions upon millions have known the righteousness and peace that comes through faith in the Lord Jesus, many of them Jews.

I was recently skimming through a book written by a Jewish believer in Jesus. In the book, the author told the story of being at Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park (where you can literally stand on your soapbox and preach anything you want) sometime in the late sixties or early seventies. He related that while he was passing through the park, there was a man at Speakers' Corner who was standing on a ladder boldly proclaiming his atheism. The atheist was mocking and ridiculing the Christian faith, and he said that it was a "fact" that even the Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Essentially, his argument was that if the Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, then nobody else should believe He is the Messiah. He also claimed that no Jews had ever believed in Jesus.

The author was standing in the crowd listening to this man when he suddenly interrupted and said, "Sir, excuse me, can I come up on your ladder?" The atheist said, "What? What do you mean 'come up

on my ladder?” The Jewish man answered, “Yes, I’d like to climb up on your ladder.” The atheist said, “There’s no room up here. Why do you want to come up here?” The Jewish man answered, “I want to come up there to show that you’re mistaken, because I am a Jew, I believe in Jesus, and I believe that He is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. I just thought that other people ought to see someone that you say doesn’t exist.”

The atheist came down from his ladder, and the Jewish man climbed up, and as he was speaking with the crowd, another man in the crowd spoke up and asked, “Sir, do you have another ladder?” The atheist responded, “No, why do you need another ladder?” The man said, “Because I’m also a Jew who believes in Jesus, and so is my wife, and we’d like to come up there with our friend and show you that you’re not only mistaken once, but twice.” What a great story!

The point is that even though much of the Jewish nation rejected the messianic claims of Jesus, many Jews have received Him—especially in the early days of the church—and many are receiving Him today.

## **The Suffering Servant**

Every year the Scriptures are read, in their

entirety, in the synagogue. Yet one chapter of Scripture the rabbis will not allow—Isaiah 53. The reason Isaiah 53 is excluded from the annual reading is the rabbis fear that someone hearing it might be inclined to believe that it is speaking of Jesus. Of course the New Testament applies Isaiah 53 to Jesus several times, and even the ancient rabbis believed Isaiah 53 to be messianic. It wasn't until the eleventh century that the famous rabbinical scholar Rashi developed a new perspective, which has held sway ever since and is the standard rabbinic interpretation. That new perspective essentially states that Isaiah 53 was not a messianic prophecy but a prophecy of the Jewish people and their suffering.

The Jewish people certainly have suffered. It's one of the great tragedies of history. Sadly, they have suffered mercilessly at the hands of so-called Christians. Nevertheless, Isaiah 53 is not speaking of the sufferings of the Jewish people and can only be misconstrued if one completely ignores the details of the text. Rashi's justification for this new interpretation was based on chapter 53 being a continuation of the Servant Song that begins in Isaiah 49. In that passage, the prophet speaks of the servant as Israel, hence, the interpretation of Isaiah 53 being Israel. Yet, if you read Isaiah 49 carefully, you will

discover that while the servant is named Israel, the task of the servant who is named Israel is to bring Israel back to God.

“Israel” was the name given to Jacob, which literally means “governed by God.” In Isaiah 49, the person who embodies the ideal of what Israel was intended to be can only be the Messiah because He was truly governed by God.

To reiterate, the ancient rabbis saw these passages as messianic, but modern rabbis refuse to see the messianic implications. Anyone who is willing to take it at face value, however, must conclude that modern rabbis are mistaken. As Jesus said to the Jewish religious leaders of his day, “I told you, and you do not believe” (John 10:25). So the problem is not a lack of evidence; the problem is simply a refusal to believe. When it comes to denying faith in Jesus Christ, it’s never what people purport it to be. People often say, “Christianity is not intellectual enough for me—I’m too smart for that.” But it’s never an intellectual problem; it’s a problem of the will. It’s a problem of not wanting to submit to the authority of someone else. It’s a problem of sin and not wanting to turn away from sin. But for those who are willing to believe, the evidence is clear, and it is available to everyone.

## Conclusion

As we look at the big picture, Jesus of Nazareth is the only Man in history who meets the messianic criteria. Since there are no other candidates from the past and no possibility in the future for anyone to meet the scriptural criteria, we can honestly conclude that if Jesus is not the Messiah, there is no Messiah, and any Jew waiting for the Messiah is waiting in vain.

I will conclude with the question of John the Baptist to Jesus and the response he received:

*“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” ... “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”*

—Luke 7:20, 22–23