

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Unraveling The Messianic Mystery



A Google search of the word Messiah generates 81 million results and many opinions concerning his identity. In Hebrew the word for Messiah is “moshiach-משיח” and means “anointed.” This word can refer to various anointed objects and individuals (e.g., the altar, kings, priests, and prophets) consecrated for holy service.

In Judaism, “the Messiah” is the ultimate anointed Jewish king who will usher in a messianic age. This belief originated in Judaism. The Jewish prophets spoke about him, and Jewish people have yearned for his arrival more than any other. Consequently, it makes sense that the Jews are the

most qualified people to identify the Messiah.

Although other religions usurped the messianic idea and changed the Messiah from a human redeemer to a God who dies for the sins of mankind, Judaism rejects these changes and considers them non-biblical.

The book of Ezekiel contains one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the Messiah.

“My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. Thus, they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time.

I will make an everlasting covenant of peace with them, and I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place My Sanctuary among them forever. My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And when My Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel.” (Ezekiel 37:24-28).

Christians should note that despite being the best place to do so, Ezekiel does not mention that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, die for our sins, or come a second time. These beliefs are excluded because they are non-biblical ideas based on misinterpreted texts.

There is however, a striking similarity between Ezekiel’s prophecy and Maimonides’s ruling on the Messiah (*Laws of Kings 11, and commentary to Sanhedrin 10 - Principle of Faith 12*).

Therefore, Judaism believes the Messiah must fulfill the following criteria.

1. He must be **Jewish**. (*Deuteronomy 17:15, Numbers 24:17*).
2. He must be from the tribe of **Yehudah** (*Genesis 49:10*) and a direct male descendent of King **David** and King **Solomon** (*I Chronicles 17:11 & 22:10, Psalm 89:29-38, Jeremiah 33:17, II Samuel 7:12-16, II Chronicles 7:18*).

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3. He must **gather the Jewish people** exiles to Israel (*Isaiah 11:12 and 27:12-13*).
4. He must **rebuild the Temple** in Jerusalem as the focus of divine service (*Micah 4:1*).
5. He will instruct the Jewish people to **adhere to the Torah** faithfully (*Isaiah 2:3*).
6. He will establish **world peace** (*Isaiah 2:4, Isaiah 11:6, Micah 4:3*).
7. He will **influence the entire world to acknowledge and serve one G-d** (*Isaiah 11:9, Isaiah 40:5, Zephaniah 3:9*).

This list contains both requirements and proofs of the Messiah's identity. The ultimate proof that the Messiah has arrived is when the prophetic changes to the world are fulfilled, something only one unique individual can accomplish. Although being Jewish and having a specific genealogy are messianic requirements, they are not proof since more than one individual can fulfill them. For example, most Jews today are from the tribe of Yehudah, and this alone does not make someone the Messiah.

The source that the Messiah must be a descendant of Yehudah is in this week's Torah portion Vayechi (*Genesis 47:28-50:26*). Yaacov's blesses his son Yehudah and says, "*The scepter (of leadership) will not depart from Yehudah until Shiloh arrives*" (*Genesis 49:10*). Shiloh is an accepted reference to the Messiah and this verse, together with Numbers 1:18, establishes that the privilege of leadership is the sole purview of male descendants of the tribe of Yehudah.

Missionaries misinterpret the words "until Shiloh comes" and claim it means the scepter of rulership will depart from Yehudah once the Messiah comes. Since there is presently no one ruling over Israel from Yehudah, they argue that this proves the Messiah (Jesus) already arrived.

In addition to being grammatically incorrect, their argument is wrong for an apparent reason. Immediately after the Maccabees' victory over the Greeks, rulership from the tribe of Yehudah temporarily ceased and was replaced by Maccabean kings from the tribe of Levi. According to the missionary logic, the Messiah's arrival should have preceded this event, which took place more than 160 years before Jesus.

Obviously, the term "until" does not mean that Yehudah's ascendancy to the throne will end when the Messiah comes. It means that although there will be interruptions, descendants of Yehudah will always retain the exclusive right to leadership, up to and including the Messiah.

To be king carried great responsibilities, including righteous behavior and dedication to serving God. Additionally, they must demonstrate leadership qualities and show concern for others. Yehudah exemplified these traits, and in his merit, his descendants were designated to be the legitimate leaders of Israel. These Jewish kings, including the coming Messiah, are not worshiped; rather, they guide the Jewish nation to serve God with pure devotion.

May we merit to witness the fulfillment of the messianic promises speedily in our days.

Shabbat Shalom,

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