

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Solving 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 [משיח—*moshiach*], and it means “anointed.” Therefore, this word can refer to various anointed individuals and objects (e.g., kings, priests, prophets, and the Altar) 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 the Jewish bible. The Jewish prophets spoke about him, and Jewish people, more than any other, have yearned for his arrival. Consequently, it makes sense that the Jews are the most qualified people to identify the messiah.

Other religions usurped the messianic idea and changed the messiah from a human redeemer to a God who died for the sins of mankind. Judaism rejects these changes and considers them non-biblical.

The qualifications of the messiah are not a mystery. 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.*

Jews are the most qualified people to identify the messiah.

*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).*

It is noteworthy that despite being the best place to do so, Ezekiel does not mention that the messiah will be born in Bethlehem, be divine, 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). 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 **Judah** (*Genesis 49:10*) and a direct male descendent of King **David** (I Chronicles 17:11).
3. He must **gather the Jewish people** [exiles] to the land of Israel (Isaiah 11:12).
4. He must **rebuild the Temple** in Jerusalem as the focus of Divine service (Micah 4:1).

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5. He will instruct the Jewish people to faithfully **adhere to the Torah** (Isaiah 2:3).
6. He will establish **world peace** (Isaiah 2:4)
7. He will **influence the entire world to acknowledge and serve one God** (Isaiah 11:9).

This list contains both proofs and requirements of the messiah's identity. Proofs are the fulfillment of transformative messianic prophecies, such as bringing world peace, that only one unique individual can accomplish. Conversely, the lack of world peace is proof that the messiah has not yet arrived.

However, requirements, such as being Jewish and being a descendant of Judah, could possibly be fulfilled by multiple individuals.

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

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

In addition to being grammatically incorrect, their argument is wrong for another apparent reason. Immediately after the Maccabees' victory over the Greeks, rulership from the tribe of Judah temporarily ceased and was replaced by the Maccabean kings who were 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.

Jewish kings, including the coming messiah, are not worshiped.

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

To be king carries great responsibilities, including righteous behavior and dedication to serving God. Additionally, a king must demonstrate leadership qualities and show concern for others. Judah 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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