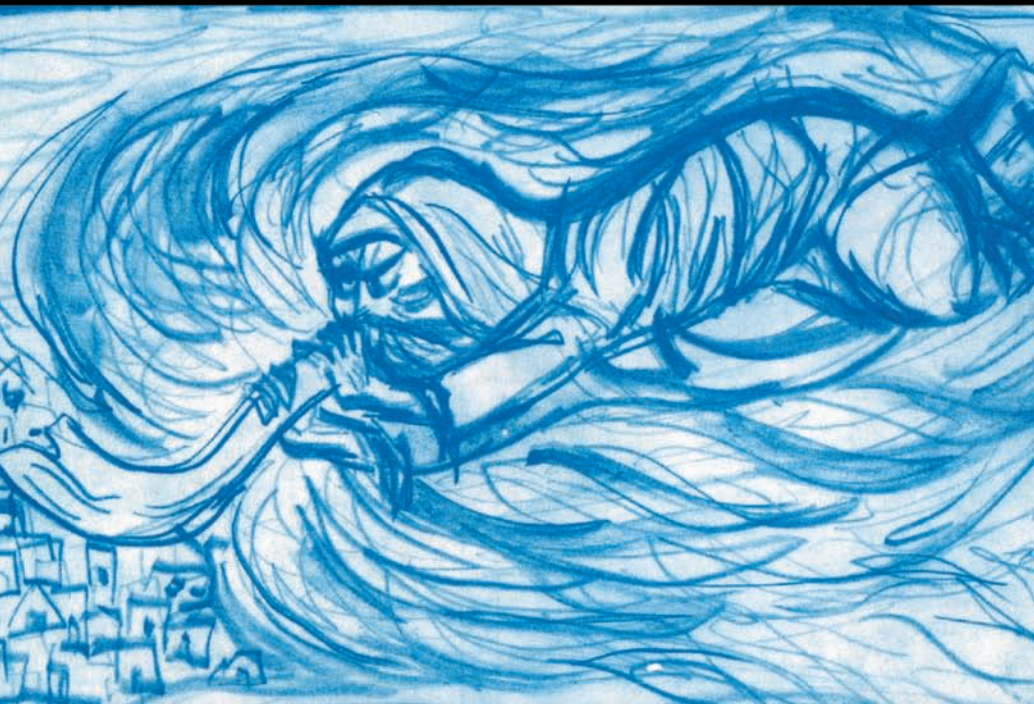




4

# Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



# The Messiah I

*why?*

## *What is Truth?*

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

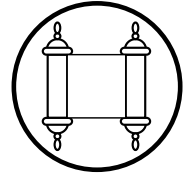
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## BIBLE STUDY – Lesson # 4\*

### The Messiah I (Why and How?)



notes

#### *Hope in the Dust*

The end of the 20th century has witnessed the collapse of the great political ideologies and utopias of progress. After Auschwitz and the fall of Marxism, amidst the repetitive threat of moral and economic confusion, the only apparent wisdom left to men and women is hopelessness.

The Prophet Jeremiah embodies this paradox in a dramatic gesture as he puts his mouth in the dust and expects to find hope there: *Let him bury his face in the dust. There might still be hope for him* (Lamentations 3:29).

Yet, the Hebrew prophet was not insane. If he could dare to hope and wait for something better, in spite of the tragic reality of the present, it is because his hope was founded on a long and solid experience of fulfilled promises. But what if a prophet says peace will come? Only if it comes true will he be recognized as one who has been truly sent by the Lord (Jeremiah 28:9).

Indeed, Biblical hope is not just made of “spiritual” emotions, or theological or mystical thinking; it implies the objective reality of an event in history. This is why the first expression of hope ever recorded in human history was the hope of the Messiah. Out of the 39 occurrences of the Messiah (from the Hebrew *mashiah*), 30 concern a king; 15 of those refer to David or a Davidic king; and 9 of those 15 apply to the ideal universal king who will come in the future to save Israel and the world (1 Samuel 2:10, 35; Psalms 2:2; 20:6; 28:8; 84:9; Habakkuk 3:13;

Daniel 9:25-26).

Only the expectation of cosmic redemption as a concrete and real event in history will enable us to wait and hope, even if, and especially if, our mouth is in the dust.

*\* Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*

### **1. Why the need for a Messiah?**

*But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die (Genesis 2:17).*

- Death is our lot and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves

*The Lord God drove him out and then placed cherubim on the east side of the Garden of Eden. He also placed a flaming sword there. It flashed back and forth. The cherubim and the sword guarded the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).*

- The belief in the coming of the Messiah is central to Jewish faith. See Maimonides' 12<sup>th</sup> article of faith (*Yigdal*): "He will send at last His Messiah to redeem those who hope and wait the end." Note that

this article became the “Martyrs Hymn” (*Ani Maamin*) during the Nazi Holocaust.

- The Messianic hope is the most ancient hope of Israel. See Genesis 49: 10 where the blessing of Judah by Jacob speaks of the coming of the *Shilo* (the Messiah) The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, as long as men come to Shiloh; and unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be (JPS). See also Numbers 24: 17 where the Star represents the coming of the Messiah. It is interesting to note that the Star of David (the Magen David) which has become the emblem of Israel is the symbol of the messianic hope.

## 2. **What was God’s first promise to mankind?**

*“I will put hatred between you and the woman. Your children and her children will be enemies. Her son will crush your head. And you will crush his heel”* (Genesis 3:15).

- The struggle with evil (*yetser ha-ra*) will cease thanks to the advent of the Messiah for “then the Holy One Blessed be He will kill evil” (*Sukkah* 52a).

**3. Who is represented by the “seed” of the woman in Genesis 3:15?**

*The Lord says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your control” (Psalm 110:1).*

**4. What clues suggest that the “seed” of the woman in Genesis 3:15 represents an individual?**

*Adam made love to his wife again. She gave birth to a son and named him Seth. She said, “God has given me another child. The child will take the place of Abel, because Cain killed him” (Genesis 4:25).*

- The “he” is the subject of the verb “crush.” The ancient rabbis of the Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Hebrew scriptures) translated this word in the Greek *autos* which is only used for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular.
- Furthermore, the fact that Gen 3:15 and Gen. 4:25 share common wording (“seed”;

“appoint”/ “place”; “woman”) shows a particular connection between the two passages which suggests that just as the “seed” of Gen. 4:25 refers to an individual (Seth), likewise Gen 3:15 refers also to an individual.

## 5. What is represented by the Serpent?

*At that time the Lord will punish Leviathan with His sword. His great, powerful and deadly sword will punish the serpent that glides through the sea. He will kill that twisting sea monster (Isaiah 27:1).*

*The great dragon was thrown down to the earth, and his angels with him. The dragon is that old serpent called the devil, or Satan. He leads the whole world down the wrong path (Revelation 12:9).*

- According to *Baba Bathra* (16a), the Serpent, Satan, and *yetser ha-ra* represent the same power of evil.

## 6. What mechanism of salvation is suggested through the imagery of the fight in Genesis 3:15?

*The Lord God made clothes out of animal skins for Adam and his wife to wear (Genesis 3:21).*

- The first death (sacrifice) occurred as a result of sin
- The “play on word” regarding *shuf* (crush/attack) and the imagery of the foot being bruised as it crushes the head, suggests that the death of the serpent implies the “sacrifice” of this individual who will die as he delivers us from evil.

**7. What mechanism of salvation is suggested through the imagery of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?**

*The Lord says, “It was my plan to crush Him and cause Him to suffer. I made His life a guilt offering to pay for sin. But He will see all of His children after Him. In fact, He will continue to live. My plan will be brought about through Him. After He suffers, He will see the light that leads to life. And He will be satisfied (Isaiah 53:10, 11).*

- On Isaiah 53:4, “What is the name of the Messiah? . . . Our sages said: ‘The Leper is his name, according to the School of Rabbi, for it is said, ‘He has borne our diseases and he has borne our sufferings, and we have considered him as a leper, smitten by God and humbled’”” (Talmud *b. Sanhedrin* 98b).



**8. What mechanism of salvation is suggested through the ritual of sacrifice?**

*“In that way the priest will pay for any of the sins the person has committed. And he will be forgiven. The rest of the offering will belong to the priest. It is the same as in the case of the grain offering”* (Leviticus 5: 13).

- On the connection between sacrifices and the Messiah: speaking of the sacrifices, “R. Eleazar said in the name of R. Josei: ‘It is a *halakha* [a traditional law] regarding the Messiah” (Zebahim 44b, Sanhedrin 51b).
- “Why is the Holy Temple called Lebanon (the white)? Because it whitens the sins of Israel” (Yoma, 39).

**9. Who is the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?**

*But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us* (Isaiah 53:5).

- On Isaiah 53:5, “R. Huna said in the name of R. Akha: ‘All the sufferings have been divided in three portions: one for the ancient generations

and fathers, one for the generation of apostasy, and one for the King Messiah, for it is said: Isaiah 53:5, “He was wounded for our sins” (Midrash *Shemuel* 16:1).

- This servant cannot be Israel; indeed from Isaiah 49:5-6 on, the servant is no longer Israel and is in fact described as someone distinct from Israel who will gather Israel to God. See also Isaiah 50:10 where the prophet addresses Israel in the second person plural and makes a clear distinction between Israel and the servant who parallels the Lord: “*Does anyone among you have respect for the Lord? Does anyone obey the message of the Lord’s servant?*” This distinction is also implied in the fact that this servant is supposed to be crushed for our (Israel’s) iniquities.

**10. From what tribe and family of Israel should the Messiah come?**

*“Bethlehem, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago” (Micah 5:2).*

*Instead, they will serve me. And they will serve David their king. I will raise him up for them...* (Jeremiah 30:9).



notes

- “R. Judah said in the name of Rab: ‘One day the Holy Blessed be He will raise another David; for it is said in Jeremiah 30:9, “They will serve the Lord their God and David their king whom I will raise up for them” (Talmud *b. Sanhedrin* 98b).

#### **11. What kind of relation will this Messiah entertain with God?**

*The Spirit of the Lord will rest on that Branch. He will help him to be wise and understanding. He will help him make wise plans and carry them out. He will help him know the Lord and have respect for him* (Isaiah 11:2).

- “Genesis 1:2: ‘The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters’ indicates that the Spirit of Messiah King was present, as written in Isaiah 11:2, ‘The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 2:4).

**12. What clues in Isaiah 53 help identify the Suffering Servant?**

- The word “seed” (*zera*) in Isaiah 53:10 usually refers to the Davidic posterity. (See Is. 41:8; 43:5; 44:3; 45:19, 25, etc.)
- The technical expression “hidden of face” (*hester panim*) in 53:3 is systematically associated with God in the book of Isaiah. (See Is. 56:8; 65:15; 50:6, etc.)
- The coming of the servant is identified as the disclosure of the Lord’s saving power (53:1).

**13. How does the Bible suggest the supernatural nature of the Messiah?**

*“Bethlehem, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago” (Micah 5:2). (cf. Jeremiah 23:5-6)*

On Jeremiah 23:5-6, “The Messiah will have the name of the Holy Blessed be He ... for it is said in

Jeremiah 23:6, ‘This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord is our righteousness’” (Talmud *b. Baba Bathra* 75b).

- On Micah 5: “And you Bethlehem Ephrata which has been too small to be counted among the thousands of the house of Judah, from you will come out the Messiah who will rule on Israel and whose name has been pronounced since eternity” (Targum of Jonathan).

#### 14. How does the Bible suggest the supernatural birth of the Messiah?

*The Lord himself will give you a miraculous sign. The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And He will be called Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).*

- “The Redeemer that I shall bring forth one day will be without father, as it has been said: Behold a man whose name is seed and he shall germinate by his own means even as Isaiah has said: He rose up before him even as a seed, as a shoot that comes forth from dry land. . . . And it is of him that the Scripture says: ‘Behold, this day have I begotten thee’” (*Bereshith*

**15. What will be the scope of the rule of the Messiah?**

*“But then I will purify what all of the nations say. And they will use their words to worship me. They will serve me together (Zephaniah 3:9).*

- Zephaniah 3:9: ““Then I will give to the peoples a pure language that they may call on the name of the Lord (YHWH), to serve Him with one accord’; the name of the Lord (YHWH), this is nothing else but the King Messiah” (*Bereshith Rabbati* 41:44).

**C**an we be Jewish and believe in Jesus? Can we be Christians and reject the Jewish roots of Jesus?

Since the schism which divided Judaism, producing the church and the synagogue, Jesus has become the Messiah venerated by Christians and abhorred by Jews. Christians accuse Jews of rejecting him while Jews accuse Christians of forging him. The very name of Jesus has become synonymous with blasphemy and betrayal. Jesus could not be the Messiah simply because he was the Messiah of the Christians.

But are these accusations and assumptions really justified? Are Christians correct when they accuse Jews of rejecting and even killing Jesus? Are Jews right when they assume that Jesus is the Messiah *only* for the Christians? Today, we do not dare address such divisive and confrontational issues. To be sure, these questions have been abused and distorted in phony Jewish-Christian dialogues. Yet this should not prevent us from probing the evidence, for it may lead to interesting and quite surprising conclusions.

### *A Recognized Messiah*

**A**ccording to the Gospels and the New Testament book of Acts, when Jesus came into Galilee and Judea,

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Doukhan "Jesus, a Jewish Messiah?" *Shabbar Shalom*, April 1997, 17-21.

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 311.

he was listened to, acclaimed and followed by Jewish crowds. *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit. News about Him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him* (Luke 4:14-15). *Jesus left that place and went into the area of Judea and across the Jordan River. Again crowds of people came to Him. As usual, He taught them* (Mark 10:1). *...all the people were paying close attention to His words* (Luke 19:48). Jesus' popularity lasted until the very end. Just prior to that fateful Passover when Jesus was taken away, Luke reports as a final note, forever marking the memory of His passage in Israel: *All the people came to the temple early in the morning. They wanted to hear Jesus speak* (Luke 21:38). Jesus' popularity was such that his trial was held expeditiously, and at night (Matthew 26:31; 27:1).

After Jesus' death the book of Acts talks about the presence of numerous disciples. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 disciples could be counted in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41), then later the number would swell to 5,000 men plus women and children (Acts 4:4). Shortly thereafter, the book notes that: *More and more men and women believed in the Lord. They joined the other believers* (Acts 5:14). The term "multitudes" is used to designate those that came "from the towns around Jerusalem" (Acts 5:16). Later, the book of Acts notes again that "the number of believers in Jerusalem grew quickly" (Acts 6:7).



Based upon the figures given in the book of Acts and other historical information, scholars estimate that at the time of Stephen's death the number of Jewish converts to the Christian faith was around 25,000.<sup>2</sup> Even after Stephen's stoning and the ensuing persecution, the number never ceased to increase. The story of Acts is regularly punctuated by the same recurrent observation, noting the always increasing success of the gospel among Jews (Acts 8:5-12; 9:31, 35, 43; 11:20-21; 14:1; 16:5; 19:9, 20, etc.). At the end of Acts, the brethren of Jerusalem were glad to count in Palestine that "thousands of Jews have become believers" (21:20). We know that the Greek word "myriad" used here actually means 10,000. Therefore, we can very easily estimate that the number of Christian Jews had exceeded at least three times 10,000. This represents more than half the number of inhabitants of Jerusalem at that time. This signifies that the great majority of Jews (and in certain places their totality) had recognized Jesus as their Messiah.

We can therefore say that Christians who contend the Jews failed to recognize Jesus, *as well as*, Jews who think they have reason to reject Him, *are both wrong*. The historian Jules Isaac comments, "With rare exceptions, wherever Jesus went the Jewish people took him to their hearts, as the Gospels testify. Did they, at a given moment, suddenly turn against him? This is a notion

<sup>3</sup> Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

which has yet to be proved.”<sup>3</sup> Later in his demonstration, Jules Isaac concludes: “The Gospels give us good reason to doubt that this [the rejection of Jesus by the Jews] ever happened.”<sup>4</sup>

### *A Predicted Messiah*

**A**ctually, this Jewish welcome should not be surprising. Since the beginning, the Gospels present Jesus’ coming as the ultimate fulfillment of the lasting hope of Israel.

First, *the time was ripe*. In Jesus’ time, there was strong expectation for a Messiah. This is known not only through the testimony of the Gospels and the historians of the time but also through the Dead Sea Scrolls, which show that Jews oppressed under the Roman yoke were expecting the Messiah to come soon.

By consulting the Scriptures, particularly the prophecy of the 70 weeks found in Daniel 9, they could easily conclude that the time had come.<sup>5</sup> This passage in Daniel is the only one which speaks directly and absolutely about the Messiah, and also indicates chronologically when he should come. ... *There will be seven ‘weeks.’ Then there will be 62 ‘weeks.’ The seven ‘weeks’ will begin when an order is given to rebuild Jerusalem and make it like new again (Daniel 9:25).*

<sup>5</sup> This Jewish consciousness of the plenitude of time is most powerfully exhibited by the Essenes. See William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation, Daniel and Revelation* Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), pp. 89-93.

Two landmarks are given here which allow us to situate this event in history:

1. The word that announces the reconstruction of Jerusalem. This refers to Artaxerxes' decree in 457 B.C.E. This was the third and last of such decrees (following those of Cyrus and Darius, see Ezra 6:14). This decree was the decisive one and the only one to be followed by a blessing (Ezra 7:27-28).
  
2. The subsequent time period of 69 weeks (7 plus 62) which, in the prophetic context of Daniel and according to the most authoritative and ancient Jewish interpretations like those of Saadia Gaon, Rashi, and even Ibn Ezra,<sup>6</sup> must be understood as weeks of years. This period of time comes out to be 69 times 7 equals 483 years.

This means that the coming of the Messiah was predicted to occur 483 years after 457 B.C.E. which brings us to the 27th year of our era. It is superfluous to remind ourselves that this date coincides with the appearance on history's stage of Jesus of Nazareth as he began his messianic ministry to the people of Israel (Luke 3:21-23). This is also the year when Jesus introduces himself as the anointed Messiah, the one that fulfills the prophecy:

*Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. On the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue as*

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<sup>6</sup> Miqraoth Gdoloth, ad loc.

*He usually did. And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. He unrolled it and found the right place. There it is written, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me to tell the good news to poor people. He has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners. He has sent me so that the blind will see again. He wants me to free those who are beaten down. And He has sent me to announce the year when He will set His people free." Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. He gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were staring at Him. He began by saying to them, "Today this passage of Scripture is coming true as you listen" (Luke 4:16-21).*

Jesus here identifies himself as the Messiah, long awaited by all. His numerous miracles, his exemplary and extraordinary life, his exaltation of the *Torah*, and his teaching so deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, confirm it. This is the response that he gave to John's disciples when they came to him in order to inquire whether he was indeed the Messiah announced by the prophets: *Jesus replied, "Go back to John. Report to him what you hear and see. Blind people receive sight. Disabled people walk. Those who have skin diseases are healed. Deaf people hear. Those who are dead are raised to life. And the good news is preached to those who are poor..."* (Matthew 11:4, 5).

Even Jesus' *death* carried a special meaning; it was understood in relation to the sacrifices offered on the altar of the Temple. Indeed, this interpretation was already indicated in the promise in the first pages of Genesis. In the very heart of the curse that follows the fall of Adam and Eve, God sows a word of hope. Someone born from the seed of the woman would crush the head of the Serpent, the archetype of evil, while being at the same time hit at the heel (Genesis 3:15).

The principle of salvation through sacrifice is here suggested. It is not an accident that right after the curse, God makes this symbol concrete through clothes of skin (Genesis 3:21). In a dramatic gesture, God comes down and Himself cuts garments for Adam and Eve. For that purpose, God does not choose linen or cotton or another vegetative material. He chooses the animal. This choice implies the death of an animal, the first death, the first sacrifice designed to relieve Adam and Eve from their feeling of shame and help them survive before God and themselves. The function of this sacrifice was to point to the future event of messianic salvation.

It would be an error to attempt to interpret Israel's sacrifices from a magical perspective. They were *not* a simple ritual gesture meant to appease an angry God. We are also in the wrong if we attempt to interpret them from a psychoanalytical perspective, as a transference device allowing repressed violence to be expressed.

<sup>7</sup> Toledot haemunah hayisraelit, vol. 3, book 1, p. 80 (cf. pp. 443, 444).

In Biblical thinking, the salvation process does not move upwards from the human sphere to the divine, but on the contrary downwards from God to mankind. In that perspective, the institution of the sacrifices should be understood along the lines of Yehezkel Kauffman's, as a symbol of the divine movement towards humans, of the *hesed* (grace) of God.<sup>7</sup> Hebrew thought is events-centered. In the Bible, the sacrifices are part of the covenant ceremony through which God binds Himself for the future and promises hope (Genesis 8: 20-22; Genesis 15; Exodus 12:22, 23). The sacrifice therefore is neither magical nor psychological in nature but is a sign announcing an event to come. Hope in Hebrew is essentially of a historical nature.

It is therefore not surprising that Isaiah 53 uses a reference to the Levite sacrifice in order to describe the coming of the Messiah, savior of Israel and humanity: *He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. . . . But the servant was pierced because we had sinned . . . He was led away like a sheep to be killed . . . I made His life a guilt offering to pay for sin . . . He will be punished for their sins* (Isaiah 53:4-7, 10, 11).

A passage in the Midrash<sup>8</sup> alludes to a tradition whereby, because of Isaiah 53: 4, the Messiah was to call himself a leper: "The masters [Rabbana] have said that the leper of the school of the Rabbi . . .

<sup>8</sup> Midrash(im) is a written interpretation and discussion of the laws, customs and rituals of Jewish life mentioned in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible).

<sup>9</sup> Sanhedrin 98b.

is his name, for it has been said: ‘He has borne our diseases and he has borne our sufferings, and we have considered him as a leper, smitten by God and humbled.’”<sup>9</sup> A characteristic invocation in the Midrash refers to this same text: “Messiah of our justice [*Mashiach Tsidkenu*], though we are Thy forebears, Thou art greater than we because Thou didst bear the burden of our children’s sins, and our great oppressions have fallen upon Thee. . . . Among the peoples of the world Thou didst bring only derision and mockery to Israel. . . . Thy skin did shrink, and Thy body did become dry as wood; Thine eyes were hollowed by fasting, and Thy strength became like fragmented pottery-all that came to pass because of the sins of our children.”<sup>10</sup>

We can also recognize a similar correlation in the wording of the prophecy of the 70 weeks which links the coming of the Messiah and the atonement of sin (Daniel 9: 24). This process was directly tied into the ritual of the sacrifices (Leviticus 4-7; 17:11). This connection has also been understood by the rabbis of the Talmud:<sup>11</sup> “R. Eleazar in the name of R. Josei referred to it as a *halakah*, a rule or principle. Even in Jewish tradition the sacrifices have been interpreted as an allusion to the Messiah.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore Christians were very much within a Jewish framework when they identified Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, their Messiah

<sup>10</sup> Pesiqta Rabbati, Pisqa 37.

<sup>11</sup> The Talmud is a collection of ancient rabbinic laws, commentaries, and traditions related to the Torah.

<sup>12</sup> Zebahim 44b, Sanhedrin 51b.

as: “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7; Apocalypse 5:6, 9; Hebrews 9:28; etc.).

He had come in the fullness of time and in the appropriate manner as was announced by the prophecy and symbolized by the sacrifices at the Temple. It is noteworthy that this is the only Messiah of history who so consistently has been related to the prophetic statements of the Hebrew Bible concerning the Messiah. Jewish scholar Schonfield boldly recognizes: “It is needful to emphasize that neither before nor since Jesus has there been anyone whose experiences from first to last have been so pin-pointed as tallying with what were held to be prophetic intimations concerning the Messiah.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth was recognized by many Jews, maybe even the majority of his contemporary Jews, as the Messiah they had been awaiting. Certainly this historical fact does not prove in an absolute manner his messianic identity, but it does show that the events which had occurred won the Jewish people over.

### *A Messiah Who Has Survived*

**T**here were a great number of Messiahs in Israel’s history. From Bar-Kokhba to Shabbathai Tzevi, and nowadays to Rabbi Schneerson, a multitude of Messiahs drew crowds to themselves. Yet history does not retain them as Messiahs anymore. Each movement was a short-lived

<sup>13</sup> H. J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot. A New Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus* (New York: Bernard Geis, 1966), p. 36; quoted in Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984), p. 248, n. 93.



flame which did not extend its light beyond its space and time. The fact that Jesus is the only Jewish Messiah that we still talk about, the only one to have exceeded the frontiers of space and time, constitutes an interesting fact which merits consideration. We can recall here the point made by the Pharisee Raban Gamaliel, disciple of the great Hillel, who made reference to the Messiahs of his time in order to set a quality standard: *...If their plans and actions are only human, they will fail. But if their plans come from God, you won't be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God* (Acts 5:38, 39). Gamaliel called upon an old rabbinical principle, traces of which can also be found in a proverb pronounced by Johanan, a sandal maker of the twelfth century: "Any community that is inspired from heaven will establish itself but what is not inspired from heaven will not."<sup>14</sup>

To the question we asked at the beginning, whether a Jew could believe in Jesus as the Messiah, we can therefore without reservation answer with a yes. This can be said for at least three reasons:

1. Jesus was recognized as the Messiah by the majority of Jews of his time.
2. Jesus' identity as the Messiah is based upon holy Scriptures and fits Jewish tradition perfectly.
3. Jesus is the only Jewish Messiah to have survived and outgrown his respective space and time.

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<sup>14</sup> Pirqe Aboth IV:14.

The belief in Jesus as the Messiah is therefore *not* incompatible with the Jewish identity. The reason for His rejection during the better part of the past 2,000 years is therefore to be sought outside Judaism and more precisely in Christianity. According to Jules Isaac, it is the rejection of *the law* by Christians which prompted the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. “The Jewish rejection of Christ was triggered by the Christian rejection of the Law. . . . The rejection of the Law was enough. To ask of the Jewish people that they accept this rejection . . . was like asking them to tear out their heart. History records no example of such a collective suicide.”<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Albert Memmi suggests that the Jewish resistance to the Christian message is a natural reaction to Christian anti-Semitism:

I was telling to my school comrades the story of a Jesus that betrayed his people and his religion . . . But also I had just received, because of him, a serious beating in a small church situated in a mountain town. For 2,000 years Jesus has represented for Jews the continual pretext of a continual

<sup>15</sup> Jules Isaac, *Genèse de l'Antisémitisme* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1956), p. 147; as translated in Jacques Doukhan, *Drinking at the Sources: An appeal to the Jew and the Christian to Note Their Common Beginnings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1981), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Memmi, *La libération du juif* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1972), p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

beating they received, a drubbing in which they often found death.<sup>16</sup> . . . When you are oppressed you cannot completely accept the customs and values of your oppressor, unless you abandon all pride and trample upon your own heart. And this rejection may occur despite the fact that those customs and values may be beautiful in themselves and even superior to one's own.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Christianity, whose goal was to witness for the Messiah to the world and primarily to the Jews, has become, by abandoning the law and rejecting the Jews, the main obstacle to its acceptance. Furthermore, by rejecting the law and oppressing the Jewish nation in the name of Jesus, Christianity has sacrificed a great deal of its own identity.

If we can be Jewish and accept Jesus, how can we be Christian and reject the very roots which nourished Jesus? Paradoxically, with regards to Jesus, it is not so much the Jewish identity which should be questioned as the Christian identity.

א

רֹאֵנִי וְלֹא עַתָּה  
אֲשׁוּרֶנּוּ וְלֹא קָרוֹב  
דֶּרֶךְ מִיַּעֲקֹב  
יֵהָרֵם מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

במדבר כד, יז

2

*"I see Him, but not now;  
I behold Him, but not near;  
A Star shall come out of Jacob;  
A Scepter shall rise out of Israel."*

Numbers 24:17, NKJV