

Old Rabbinical Interpretations of Messianic Prophecy

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Jewish expectation of the Messiah is based on the Bible (TANACH) and the rabbinical tradition. However, the tradition of interpretation changed over time – et al with the aim of distinguishing the Jewish understanding of the Bible as much as possible from the Christian interpretation. Anti-Semitism in Christianity is one cause of this change – e.g. Replacement Theology and the Inquisition in Spain.

To demonstrate this change, I quote Rabbi Moses Alshekh (Safed, 16th century), who wrote about Isaiah 53: “Our ancient Sages have preserved for us the witness of tradition that this refers to the Messiah. For this reason, we too, following them, should consider the subject of this prophecy to be David, the Messiah, who will appear in this way.”

In Jewish literature, however, the suffering servant from Isaiah 53 has been understood since the Middle Ages in Europe and everywhere later to be the people of Israel. This article is intended to lead interested readers to some of the ancient roots of the Jewish understanding of the Bible.

In the Middle Ages, a large part of Jewish literature was censored with the aim of enlarging the difference between Jewish and Christian Bible interpretation. However, since the old Jewish literature is enormous, this censorship could not be carried out completely. Therefore, among the writings of ancient and highly respected Jewish scholars, individual statements about messianic prophecies have been preserved that show an astonishing agreement with Christian ideas. Christian scholars have carried out much research on ancient texts and published their results in specialist books. A compilation of these rabbinical ideas was published by the Lutheran theologian Risto Santala. Many quotes are taken from this book, which also gives the exact references. (Risto Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament in the light of the rabbinic scriptures*, Keren Ahvah Meshihit (1992), ISBN-10: 9654470020).

Salvation by the suffering Messiah

The first messianic promise was made by God right after the Fall: *I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel* (Gen.3,15).

According to the Aramaic Targum tradition, this verse is a messianic prophecy. Two things are indicated in this promise: on the one hand, the victory of the woman's descendants over the serpent (and thus over sin), and on the other hand, his suffering from death due to the snake bite. Accordingly, the Messiah is seen not only as the savior from Israel's enemies in this world, but also as *“the Lord our righteousness”* (Jer. 23,6).

In the midrash there is a statement: “This is his name, by which he will be called: The Lord our righteousness”. This thought about the Messiah is derived from Jer.23, 6 and 33,16, where God promises the house of David to raise up a righteous sprout *“and his name will be: The Lord our righteousness.”* Rabbi Shmuel Ben Nahman (ca.260 AC.) and Abba Bar Kahana (ca.300 AC) concluded that “this is the name of the Messiah.”

As early as 300 BC, Rabbi Yitshak compared the Messiah with Moses and called him the Last Savior: Just as a first Savior was, a last one will be. Just as the First Savior (Moses) said (Exodus 4,20) that he took his wife and sons and put them on a donkey, the Last Savior is said to be humble and ride a donkey (Zech.9, 9).

It is clear from the chapter Isaiah 53 that saving the people of Israel from their sins cost the life of the Savior: *He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. 9 And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.*

Nevertheless – as mentioned in the introduction – the suffering servant from Isa. 53 is seen as the people of Israel. This was not the case until the 16th century AC, as the above quotation from Rabbi Moses Aleshkh shows. His view is also shared by Rabbi Elia de Vivas (also Safed 16th century): "Thus the Messiah suffered on account of our sins, and was wounded; He who does not wish the Messiah to be wounded for our transgressions may choose himself to suffer and carry his own sins."

According to the Targum, Isa. 52,13 speaks of the Messiah: "My servant, the Messiah, will act wisely". The other verses are related to the people of Israel.

According to a widespread Jewish tradition, besides the King Messiah or Messiah Ben David there is the Suffering Messiah or Messiah Ben Joseph. According to Christian understanding, however, the Messiah is a single person who appears twice in world history, the first time as the suffering servant of God and savior from sins and the second time as the King Messiah in the kingdom of peace. A hint in this direction follows from the use of the same name for the King Messiah in Isa.11 and for the Suffering Servant in Isa.53: *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD ...And in that day there shall be a **root (sheres)** of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious (Isa.11,1-2+10).*

*For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a **root (sheres)** out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not (Isa.53,2-3).*

The origin of Messiah

Some passages in the Bible speak of the eternal origin of the Messiah (Isa.9,11, Mich.5,1). Nonetheless, about 2000 years ago the expectation of the Messiah was focused on a human being, as the example of Bar Kochbar (135 AD) shows. We want to consider a few exceptions to this common opinion. The first example is a commentary on Psalm 72,17 from the Midrash: "for it is written: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, and he will judge the needy with righteousness' " (Isa. 11,4). The whole psalm, the Midrash says, is "praise to the Messiah-King". Verse 17 in the Hebrew reads, "before the sun was, his name was Yinnôn", which means 'may it sprout' -- one of the OT names meaning a 'shoot', as in the

verse from Isaiah. The Midrash also understands this name as being assigned to the Messiah "before the creation of the world".

RaSHI (Rabbi Solomon Ben Yitshak 12th century, Worms) explains Micha 5:1 as follows: **from you shall emerge for Me: the Messiah, son of David, and so Scripture says (Ps. 118,22): "The stone the builders had rejected became a cornerstone"; and his origin is from of old: "Before the sun his name is Yinnon" (Ps. 72,17).**

In these two quotes "Yinnon" (sprout) is used as the name of the King Messiah. In the previous section it was pointed out that the suffering servant from Isa.53.2 is termed similarly.

Rabbi David Qimhi goes a step further in his interpretation of Micah 5: 1 and says: It will be said in the Messianic age that his 'origins are from old, from ancient times'; 'from Bethlehem' means that he will be of the house of David, because there is a long period of time between David and the Messiah-King; and he is El (God), which is how he is 'from old, from ancient times'

To conclude this topic, the Midrash is quoted again and cites various Bible passages in the interpretation of Ps.110,1: "The decree is that of the prophets, because Isa. 52,13 says 'My servant will prosper' and Isa. 42,1 adds 'Here is my servant whom I uphold'; It is the decree of the Psalms, as Ps.110,1 says 'The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand', and Ps.2,7 says 'He said to me; You are my son'; and also elsewhere it is written (Dan.7,13), 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds'. The LORD said 'You are my son'. The decrees are those of the king, the king of kings, that this would be done to the Messiah-King.

Israel and the Christians are waiting for the Messiah

The difference between Jewish and Christian Messiah hope is often expressed in such a way that Israel is waiting for the coming Messiah, whereas Christians are waiting for the second coming of the Messiah. But an old prayer to Yom Kippur (Great Day of Atonement) by Rabbi Eliaz Ha-Qalirar from the prayer book for the feast days ("Mahzor Rabbah") also contains the request that the Messiah wants to come back: „Messiah our Righteousness is departed from us: horror hath seized us, and we have none to justify us. He hath borne the yoke of our iniquities, and our transgression, and was wounded because of our transgression. He beareth our sins on his shoulder, that he may find pardon for our iniquities. We shall be healed by his wound, at the time that the Eternal will create him (the Messiah) as a new creature. O bring him up from the circle of the earth. Raise him up from the land of Seir, to assemble us on Mount Lebanon, a second time by the power of Yinnon.”

(Seir is a secret name for Rome and Lebanon indicates the Temple.)

A particularly moving prophecy about how the people of Israel will recognize their Messiah is in Zech.12,10. The words contained therein: "They will look at me whom they pierced" refer to the Messiah Ben Joseph according to RaSHI, RaDaQ and Ibn Esra in accordance with the Talmud (Sukka 52b). Rabbi Moshe Alshekh (quoted from A. M'Cauley, Rabbi David Kimchi's Commentary upon the Prophecies of Zechariah, James Duncan, London, 1837, p. 163) writes to Zech.12,10: "I will do yet a third thing, and that is, that e they shall look unto me, for they shall lift up their eyes unto me in perfect repentance, when they see him whom they pierced, that is

Messiah, the son of Joseph; for our rabbies, of blessed memory, have said, that he will take upon himself all the guilt of Israel, and shall then be slain in the war to make an atonement, in such a manner, that it shall be accounted as if Israel had pierced him, for on account of their sin he has died; and therefore, in order that it may be reckoned to them as a perfect atonement, they will repent, and look to the blessed One, saying that there is none beside Him to forgive those that mourn on account of him who died for their sin: this is the meaning of ' They shall look upon me.'.

Here Rabbi Moshe Alshekh, who is called the saint (Hakadosh), interprets the atonement of the servant of God in Isaiah 53 as the suffering of the Messiah Ben Joseph. In contrast, according to the prevailing opinion in Judaism today, the people of Israel are the suffering servant of God.

David Flusser was a professor of early Christianity and Judaism at the University of Jerusalem and died in 2000. He believed in a personal Messiah and used to say that the citizens of Jerusalem will meet the Messiah when he comes to Jerusalem and ask him: "Are you here for the first time? "

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