

# Could Second Temple Judaism Have Anticipated Yeshua as Messiah?

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*The following has been excerpted from the forthcoming publication Salvation on the Line, Volume III: The Messiahship of Yeshua*

Today, the main expectations of Orthodox Jews regarding the arrival of the Messiah are that the Messiah will (1) rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, (2) regather the exiles of Israel to the Promised Land, and (3) reign in peace over the Earth. In reviewing the recorded actions of Yeshua of Nazareth in the Apostolic Scriptures, religious Jews have decided that He could not be the Messiah. **Is it so impossible for Yeshua of Nazareth to be the Messiah?** Luke 24:26-27 actually invites the skeptic to consider the relationship of Yeshua of Nazareth to the Tanach Scriptures: “Was it not necessary for Messiah to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them the things written about Himself in all the Scriptures” (TLV). What are some of the factors that we need to consider, not only involving Israel’s restoration, but whether or not Second Temple Judaism could have actually anticipated the arrival of a figure like Yeshua as the Messiah.

A frequent dismissal of Yeshua as the Messiah concerns the Divinity of Yeshua—as Yeshua did indeed claim “I am the Father are one” (John 10:30) and “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM” (John 8:58, PME). What eventually condemned Yeshua to death is how He told the Sanhedrin, “You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless I tell you, from now on you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER [Psalm 110:1], and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN [Daniel 7:13]” (Matthew 26:64, PME). Yeshua made a direct appeal to the Daniel 7:13-14 theophany of the figure of the Son of Man brought before the Ancient of Days—the Son of Man being a Divine figure afforded supreme authority and universal worship: “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (NIV). While Yeshua’s Divinity is principally based on His relationship to God proper, with Yeshua integrated into the Divine Identity of the LORD or YHWH often by Tanach intertextuality (i.e. Philippians 2:5-11; Isaiah 45:23)—the Messiah as a co-regent of God proper, is witnessed in various strata of Second Temple Jewish literature (*1 Enoch* 48:8-10; 49:2-3; 52:4). The broad world of Second Temple Judaism included speculations

about the Messiah, which at the very least approached Him as an eminently powerful supernatural being.

Many religious Jews today dismiss the Messiahship of Yeshua on the basis that God would never accept a human sacrifice as a form of atonement. It should go without saying that the death of Yeshua is not modeled after the sort of human sacrifice witnessed by Ancient Israel's Canaanite neighbors, where children would be burned before Molech.<sup>1</sup> The narrative of John 11:50 specifies that Yeshua's death concerns "that one man die for the people" (TLV), by necessity requiring us to recognize that there has certainly been discussion in Second Temple Judaism, and immediately thereafter, involving the death of a human person somehow providing atonement or restitution for a situation seen in Israel.

In the Tanach itself, it is seen that the burial of Saul and Jonathan, enacted some favorable response from God:

"And they buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in Zela, in the territory of Benjamin, in the tomb of his father Kish. And when all that the king had commanded was done, God responded to the plea of the land thereafter" (2 Samuel 21:14, NJPS).

The dramatic scene of the Maccabean martyrs of the Second Century B.C.E., certainly does demonstrate how the death of faithful Jews was believed to provide some degree of purification for the sins of apostasy being committed by others:

"Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs" (4 Maccabees 6:28-29, RSV).

"And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted" (4 Maccabees 17:22, RSV).

The Maccabees themselves viewed their death for Judaism and the Torah along the lines of the Patriarch Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) willfully offering himself to die:

"[A]nd another reminded them, 'Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion'" (4 Maccabees 13:12, RSV).

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-4; 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35.

"For his sake also our father Abraham was zealous to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation; and when Isaac saw his father's hand wielding a sword and descending upon him, he did not cower" (4 Maccabees 16:20, RSV).

It is safe to recognize that the death of Yeshua of Nazareth was viewed by His First Century Jewish followers, at least partially along the lines of ancient Jewish martyrs dying for a righteous cause (cf. Romans 5:7-8).

In the Mishnah and Talmud, compiled after the destruction of the Second Temple, discussions about death of human beings, providing some sort of atonement or restitution for Israel, is surely witnessed. The Mishnah includes the thought that the death of Achan for his sin provided a sufficient personal atonement for him to be permitted a place in the world to come:

"For so we find concerning Achan, to whom Joshua said *My son, I pray you, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and confess to him, [and tell me now what you have done: hide it not from me.] And Achan answered Joshua and said, Truly have I sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and thus and thus I have done* (Josh. 7:19). And how do we know that his confession achieved atonement for him. For it is said, *And Joshua said, Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day* (Josh. 7:25)—*This day the Lord will trouble you, but you will not be troubled in the world to come*" (m. *Sanhedrin* 6:2).<sup>2</sup>

Both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds speak of how the death of figures in Ancient Israel, such as Miriam or Aaron, could provide for a degree of atonement for the community:

"Said R. Ammi, 'How come the story of the death of Miriam is situated adjacent to the passage that deals with the burning of the red cow? It is to teach you that just as the ashes of the red cow effect atonement, so the death of the righteous effects atonement.' Said R. Eleazar, 'How come the story of the death of Aaron is situated adjacent to the passage on the priestly garments [Num. 20:26, 28]? It is to teach you that just as the priest's garments serve to effect atonement, so the death of the righteous effects atonement'" (b. *Moed Qatan* 28a).<sup>3</sup>

"Said R. Hiyya bar Ba, 'The sons of Aaron died on the first day of Nisan. And why is their death called to mind in connection with the Day of Atonement? It is to indicate to you that just as the Day of Atonement effects expiation for Israel, so the death of the righteous effects atonement for

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 594.

<sup>3</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

Israel.' Said R. Ba bar Binah, 'Why did the Scripture place the story of the death of Miriam side by side with the story of the burning of the red cow? It is to teach you that just as the dirt of the red cow [mixed with water] effects atonement for Israel, so the death of the righteous effects atonement for Israel'" (y.Yoma 2:1).<sup>4</sup>

The death of Yeshua of Nazareth is nowhere in the Apostolic Writings modeled after any sort of pagan human sacrifice, but instead would be better understood from the framework of righteous and godly persons in Israel, having died to affect some sort of atonement for the people. It is witnessed that there are discussions in Jewish literature how the death of various human beings, provided for some degree of spiritual restitution.

A lesser option, frequently witnessed among religious Jews dismissing the Messiahship of Yeshua, is the thought that the Tanach is silent on the idea of a suffering Messiah. Perhaps Yeshua of Nazareth was not executed per the dimensions of pagan human sacrifice, but Yeshua is concluded to have been a failure of a Messiah having died at the hands of Rome rather than being triumphant against Rome. So, did Judaism at all anticipate the Messiah to suffer and/or die?

From the Tanach Scriptures, those who believe that a suffering Messiah was to be anticipated, would appeal to how the shedding of blood is required for atonement of sin (Leviticus 11:17; 16:15-17), connecting it to how the Servant will be crushed by the Lord (Isaiah 51:10-11). Unlike how the death or martyrdom of other figures in Israel's history would provide a degree of atonement or restitution for the community, the death of Yeshua is believed to be **the single sacrifice that provides atonement for all human transgression** (Hebrews 2:16-18; 9:11-15, 22, 28; 10:1-4, 10-14). While it is common to hear religious Jews today conclude that the Messiah will be a victorious figure defeating Israel's enemies, ancient Jewish discussions of the Messiah do include the death of the Messiah as some component of his arrival. 4 Ezra 7:28-29 in the Apocrypha reflects the view that the Messiah will reign four hundred years, and then die:

"For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. And after these years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath" (4 Ezra 7:28-29, RSV).

More compelling to be certain, and working from the framework of the Messiah Son of Joseph being a servant, is the opinion that this Messiah

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<sup>4</sup> *The Jerusalem Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. PDF-compatible MS Windows and Mac OS. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009. CD-ROM.

would be a victorious warrior who would be killed. This Talmudic discussion invokes Zechariah 12:10 (cf. John 19:37) no less:

"[With regard to 'And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart' (Zec. 12:12),] *What was the reason for the mourning [to which reference is made in Zechariah's statement]? R. Dosa and rabbis differed on this matter. One said, 'It is on account of the Messiah, the son of Joseph, who was killed.'* *And the other said, 'It is on account of the evil inclination, which was killed.'* *Now in the view of him who said, 'It is on account of the Messiah, the son of Joseph, who was killed,' we can make sense of the following verse of Scripture: And they shall look on me because they have thrust him through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for his only son' (Zec. 12:10)" (b.Sukkah 52a).<sup>5</sup>*

Orthodox Judaism today understandably anticipates the Messiah to come and rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, but how much of this is an actual feature of the Prophets? The Prophets explicitly anticipate the Messianic Age to be preceded by and/or involve: the regathering of the exiles (Isaiah 11:10-11), an abolition of war (Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9), the nations of Planet Earth coming to Zion and participating in Israel's restoration (Isaiah 19:16-25; 42:1-7; 49:5-7), and the restoration of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 33:10-11). Each of these themes, to various degrees, are addressed in the writings of Yeshua's Apostles.

Yeshua of Nazareth actually arrived on the scene during the standing and operation of the Second Temple, and the Prophets of Israel actually spoke during the standing of either the First or Second Temples. It is to be recognized how Ezekiel chs. 44-46 speaks of a future prince coming to the Temple, which is often viewed with Messianic overtones. Zechariah 6:12-13 does speak of the Branch building the Temple, and occupying both a priestly and kingly role. Yet nothing is specifically communicated about how the Temple is reconstructed, whether it is reconstructed before or subsequent to the Messiah's arrival. As is typical in prophecy, much is left open. Some interpreters<sup>6</sup> direct the Messianic significance of the Temple, in more of a spiritual direction as representative of a cleansed, corporate people of God.<sup>7</sup> Malachi 1:11, among other passages, might be offered to represent a Temple-style of adoration for Israel's God inaugurated by the activity of the Messiah: "For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to

<sup>5</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

<sup>6</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 3: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), pp 170-179.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ezekiel 36:24-28; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1; 1 Peter 2:4-5.

My name; for My name is honored among the nations – said the LORD of Hosts” (NJPS). That the Temple features in association with the activity of the Messiah is clear enough, but whether the Messiah must rebuild the Temple is open to discussion.

Much more serious than the factors involving the Temple, is the expectation that the arrival of the Messiah would inaugurate an era of worldwide peace and tranquility. Aryeh Kaplan is forthright in his conclusion,

“The first task of the Messiah is to redeem Israel from exile and servitude. In doing so he will also redeem the entire world from evil. Oppression, suffering, war and all forms of godlessness will be abolished. Mankind will thus be perfected, and man’s sins against G-d, as well as his transgression against fellow man, will be eliminated. All forms of warfare and strife between nations will also vanish in the Messianic age.”<sup>8</sup>

Much of what he has just communicated is represented in the traditional *Amidah* prayer:

“We therefore hope in thee, O Lord our God, that we may speedily behold the glory of thy might, when thou wilt remove the abominations from the earth, and heathendom will be utterly destroyed, when the world will be perfected under the kingdom of the Almighty, and all the children of flesh will call upon thy Name, when thou wilt turn unto thyself all the evil-doers upon earth. Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto thee every knee must bow, every tongue must swear allegiance. Before thee, O Lord our God, let them bow and worship; and unto thy glorious Name let them give honour; let them all accept the yoke of thy kingdom, and do thou reign over them speedily, and for ever and ever. For the kingdom is thine, and to all eternity thou wilt reign in glory; as it is written in thy Torah, THE LORD SHALL REIGN FOR EVER AND EVER [Exodus 15:18]. And it is said, AND THE LORD SHALL BE KING OVER ALL THE EARTH: IN THAT DAY SHALL THE LORD BE ONE, AND HIS NAME ONE [Zechariah 14:9].”<sup>9</sup>

The most avid Believers in Yeshua of Nazareth, as the anticipated Messiah, have to objectively recognize that His arrival in the First Century did not bring a cessation of war and conflict on Planet Earth. *Is the lack of peace on Earth today decisive evidence against Yeshua of Nazareth being the Messiah?* A huge stress of the Apostolic Writings, employing the Tanach’s Messianic expectations and various thoughts in Second Temple Judaism, is that the Messiah functions in a dual role of suffering, as well as

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<sup>8</sup> Aryeh Kaplan, *The Real Messiah? A Jewish Response to Missionaries* (New York: National Conference of Synagogue Youth/Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, 1985), 28.

<sup>9</sup> J.H. Hertz, ed. *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), 211.

establishing His Kingdom. Isaiah 49:7, for example, depicts a despised servant, who will yet be universally recognized as supreme: "Thus said HASHEM, the Redeemer of Israel and their Holy One, to the despised soul, to the one loathed by nations, to the servant of rulers: Kings will see [you] and arise; officers will prostrate themselves, because HASHEM, Who is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, Who has chosen you" (ATS).

That the initiation of the Messianic Age of total peace and tranquility may be a transitionary process, is something which has to be considered. A mainstay of Second Temple Jewish thought is that "the Most High has made not one world but two" (4 Ezra 7:50, RSV), the two ages. Concurrent with this, Paul communicates in Galatians 1:4 that the work of Yeshua was "to rescue us from this present evil age" (TLV). Within Apostolic thought, the resurrection of Yeshua of Nazareth from the dead (Romans 1:4) was believed to introduce the powers and realities of the future age to come, into the present evil age. While Planet Earth may find itself in the present evil age of war and injustice, Yeshua's supernatural work enables His followers to be regarded as people of the future age to come, individually participating in its realities of peace and righteousness now, with it to be fully culminated in the future—most notably the general resurrection of the dead (Daniel 12:1-2). Yeshua's followers today are to experience the *shalom* and tranquility that is to one day be universally manifested. Yeshua's followers, for example, experience in their individual selves (Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17) the New Covenant realities that corporate Israel will fully experience in the future (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Jewish anti-missionaries, who oppose the Messiahship of Yeshua of Nazareth, will commonly conclude that the early Christians invented the idea of a "Second Coming," where Messianic expectations not accomplished by Yeshua in the First Century C.E. are pawned off on some future event—mainly the goals of total cessation of war and world peace. As Norman Asher puts it, "Missionaries respond with their 'second coming' theory, which asserts that Jesus will accomplish everything when he comes 'next time,'"<sup>10</sup> and it is often concluded among Jewish examiners today that the idea of the "Second Coming" is absent from the Tanach. Yet, much of this involves one's presuppositions, and ultimately comes down to interpretation. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* entry for the Second Coming notes a few factors:

"The second coming is a topic of progressive revelation. While there are allusions in the OT to the second coming, they are not clear and explicit, and

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<sup>10</sup> Norman, Asher. *Twenty-Six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus* (Los Angeles: Black White and Read Publishing, 2007), 74.

consequently the Jewish rabbis found the messianic references apparently contradictory. On the one hand, they seemed to depict the coming of the Messiah as triumphant and powerful. On the other hand, this Messiah appeared as the suffering servant (Isa. 53, etc.). What were actually two comings had been collapsed into one...<sup>11</sup>

Protestant theologians will often just conclude that the Second Coming was not something fully revealed in the Tanach, and could only be known via the principle of "In many and various ways long ago, God spoke to *our* ancestors by the prophets" (Hebrews 1:1, PME). What is not convenient for Jewish anti-missionaries to ignore, is how the concept of the Second Coming of Yeshua of Nazareth—to defeat His enemies, restore Israel's Kingdom, and oversee a Messianic Age of cessation of war and peace on Earth—was indeed birthed out of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism. The figure of the Messiah was to be a major catalyst of change, for both Israel and the nations. But was this change supposed to be primarily political, or was this change supposed to be instead spiritual and eschatological? Was this change supposed to mainly concern the restoration of Israel's autonomy, or instead inaugurate the restoration of the Edenic world lost at the beginning of human history? The *Dictionary of New Testament Background* indicates how Second Temple Judaism included ideas of what it labels as both restorative and utopian Messianism:

"During the Second Temple period there were at least two main types of Jewish messianism, restorative and utopian messianism. Restorative messianism anticipated the restoration of the Davidic monarchy and centered on an expectation of the improvement and perfection of the present world through natural development (*Pss. Sol.* 17) and modeled on an idealized historical period; the memory of the past is projected into the future. Utopian messianism anticipated a future era which would surpass everything previously known. Jewish messianism tended to focus, not on the restoration of a dynasty, but on a single messianic king sent by God to restore the fortunes of Israel. However, as a theocratic symbol, the Messiah is dispensable, since a Messiah is not invariably part of all Jewish eschatological expectation. No such figure, for example, plays a role in the eschatological scenarios of Joel, Isaiah 24-27, Daniel, Sirach, *Jubilees*, the *Testament of Moses*, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, 1 *Enoch* 1-36 (the Book of the Watchers), 90-104 (the Epistle of Enoch), 2 *Enoch*."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Second Coming of Christ," in Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp 1080-1081.

<sup>12</sup> D.E. Aune, T.J. Geddert, and C.A. Evans, "Apocalypticism," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 49-50.

With ideas of the Messiah being a political ruler, or being the initiator of some idealized world lost millennia ago, it is hardly a surprise to see the teachings of Yeshua of Nazareth and the theology of His early followers, find a median place within such opinions and speculation. And within a spectrum of thought from the Messiah being one who would principally restore Israel's autonomy, to being the initiator of an Edenic idealism, a theology of a return by a Second Coming would have emerged via the Jewish view of the two ages. The entry on "Apocalypticism" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* further concludes,

"There is little consistency in Jewish apocalyptic regarding the arrival of the kingdom of God. It was conceptualized by some as the arrival of an eternal kingdom, but by others as a temporary messianic kingdom which would be succeeded by an eternal kingdom (see 1 Cor 15:24). The conception of a temporary messianic kingdom which would function as a transition between the present evil age and the age to come, between monarchy and theocracy, solved the problem of how the transition from the Messiah to the reign of God (where such a conception is present) might be conceived. In Jewish apocalyptic though generally, the kingdom of God is more centrally important than the figure of a Messiah. A messianic interregnum, therefore, functions as an anticipation of the perfect and eternal theocratic state which will exist when primordial conditions are reinstated forever. This interim kingdom was expected to be transitional since it is depicted as combining some of the characteristics of this age with those of the age to come. In Christian apocalypticism this anticipation of a temporary messianic kingdom is clearly reflected in Revelation 20:4-6, and according to some scholars is also reflected in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. The expectation of a future temporary messianic kingdom is found in only three early Jewish apocalypses, the Apocalypse of Weeks, or *1 Enoch* 91:12-17, 93:1-10 (written c. A.D. 90), and *2 Baruch* 29:3-30:1; 40:1-4; 72:2-74:3 (written c. A.D. 110)."

Planet Earth is presently not experiencing the time when "Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; they shall never again know war" (Micah 4:3, NJPS). This is something that restorative Messianism would have expected. The essential spiritual reality represented by this word, however, is something which followers of Yeshua believe is accessible today, in the hearts of His own—not too unlike utopian Messianism. Yet, being people of the future age to come in the present evil age, such a reality that is present in the lives of Yeshua's followers, will be a global reality at some point in the future. The idea of a Second Coming is something that can be said to be a product of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism.

While there are many details to be explored within the context of passages from the Tanach, it is fair enough to say that Yeshua being regarded as the Messiah by many First Century Jews, was something that took place in conjunction with a number of the extant theological opinions and discussions.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.