



Judaism & Challenges

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RASNET CONFERENCE 2024

OVERVIEW
CASE STUDY

Overview of Challenges to Judaism

- **Political challenge:** two small ethnic nations, Israel and Judea, sandwiched between great powers, Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia, threatened with exile and dispersion; later domination by foreign powers (Greece, then Rome), leading to...
- **Sociological challenge:** threat of disappearance through intermarriage, physical dispersal (Diaspora), leading to...
- **Theological challenge:** threat of loss of unique religious values through assimilation to other religious cultures

Responses to Challenges

- **Redefine** political sovereignty in theological terms, as an anticipated but indefinitely postponed return to the Land, symbolised by the Messiah.
- **Prohibit** intermarriage, legally institute Jewish identity through the maternal line; *in the interim*, replace a notion of nationhood with the idea of peoplehood (“the Jewish People”, “this people Israel” [Leo Baeck]).
- *In the interim*, **standardise** the liturgy and the festival calendar, shift the focus from the physical Sanctuary (the Temple in Jerusalem) to a sacred writing, the Torah, which acts as a “portable Sanctuary” that accompanies the people wherever they dwell during their time in exile.
- *Finally*, **return** to the Land and re-establish “Jerusalem rebuilt” as the sacred centre of Jewish existence.

The Messiah as Challenge

► Figure of Messiah as religious symbol

- ❖ Activist model of the Messianic Ideal
- ❖ Passivist Model of the Messiah

► The Messianic Age

Readily Available Resources

- ▶ www.encyclopedia.com, article on Jewish messianism by R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, with excellent bibliography (1987)
- ▶ www.britannica.com, article on Eschatology [ideas about the “end of time”] by Richard Landes; also see the articles on Messianism, afterlife.
- ▶ www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org, article on Messiah by Joseph Telushkin, an excerpt from his encyclopaedic book *Jewish Literacy* (HarperCollins, 1991)
- ▶ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971; reprinted a number of times by various publishers). See Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman, *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Indiana University Press, 2015) for a series of essays that expand on Scholem’s themes.