RASNET Workshop 14 March 2024

The Messiah Dilemma:
A Challenge to Judaism

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Challenges to Judaism

1. **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…
2. **Sociological challenge**: threat of disappearance through intermarriage, physical dispersal (Diaspora), leading to…
3. **Theological challenge**: threat of loss of unique religious values through assimilation to other religious cultures

Responses to challenges

1. Redefine political sovereignty in theological terms, as an anticipated but indefinitely postponed return to the Land, symbolised by the Messiah.
2. 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]).
3. *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.
4. *Finally*, return to the Land and re-establish "Jerusalem rebuilt" as the sacred centre of Jewish existence.

The Messiah as challenge

1. Once the figure of the Messiah was adopted as a religious symbol, it became the focus of historical and theological speculation, hermeneutical expansion (dynamic interpretations of Scripture), the theme of prayer, and reification (made concrete or objectified) in actual persons.

2. **Messiah = *mashiach*, "anointed one"**, originally referring to the anointing of kings and priests, who are given roles of divine service (see in the Bible, Zechariah 3-4). In Isaiah and elsewhere the *Mashiach* is identified with a future sovereign in the lineage of King David, who first unified the original twelve tribes of Israel into a single kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital city and sacred centre.
3. In Isaiah 45:1 the term *mashiach* is applied to Cyrus II, the Persian king who permitted the Jewish exiles to return to Judea after the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple in Jerusalem; in this way, as *mashiach*, he is incorporated into a pattern of "sacred history" that finds God's presence hidden within and driving historical events.
4. Events surrounding the Seleucid Greek King Antiochus IV and the Maccabean rebellion, ca.165-162 BCE, gave rise to an association of the figure of the Messiah with **apocalyptic end-of-history ideas**, e.g., in the biblical Book of Daniel; a cataclysm is expected to precede the establishment of the Kingdom of God, identified in rabbinic thought as "the birth pangs of the Messiah."
5. These shifts in meaning from the historical "anointed king or priest" to the radical theological "**proclaimer of the Kingdom of God**" (appearing during or after a period of cataclysmic upheaval) set the scene for the appearance of several Messianic claimants over the oppressive Roman period in Judea. These included Jesus of Nazareth. **The claims of Jesus's followers to the title Christos (Messiah) split the Jewish community over time**, and to this day confounds those Jews who do not see God's promise of salvation fulfilled through the figure of Jesus. The claim that Jesus is Messiah has generated its own challenges for the Jewish people. Much of the Christian-Jewish debate through the period of the Spanish Inquisition (e.g., the notorious Barcelona Disputation of 1263) was devoted to this topic.
6. The great 2nd century rabbi Akiva believed that the military commander Bar Kosiba who led a failed rebellion against Roman hegemony in Judea ca. 112-115 CE was the *mashiach* and, on a play on his name, called him **Bar Kochba** ("star-born"). Both Bar Kochba and Akiva perished in the rebellion, which however became the basis for the **activist model of the Messianic ideal** over the two millennia of exile (Jewish Diaspora) that followed the Bar Kochba rebellion.
7. Contrary to the activist model, the **passivist model of the Messiah**, adopted mostly by those who follow Judaism's strict legal norms, placed total reliance on God to initiate the coming of God's Kingdom. **God's Kingdom will be marked by the ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel, restoration of the Davidic monarchy and the rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, all of which will lead to a time of peace when nature (Creation) will be refashioned so that "the wolf will lay down with the lamb"** (as the prophet Isaiah puts it). The person of the Messiah plays no active role in the realisation of this vision but simply marks its happening. The passivist model is captured in several blessings which are included in the central prayer of Jewish worship, called *HaT'filah* ("Prayer" par excellence) or *Amidah* ("Standing Prayer"), which is recited three times daily.

8. A good example of the passivist approach is found in Maimonides' description of the final "**days of the Messiah**", when the world will appear as it does now but all will live in peace and have the leisure to devote themselves to the endless study of Torah. Maimonides included a belief in the coming of the Messiah as Principle 12 of his "13 Principles of the Jewish Faith", which are included in all traditional prayerbooks; but he is careful to note that the coming of the Messiah is not marked by any supernatural signs or wonders.
9. The passivist interpretation is in part a reaction to the appearance of **Messianic claimants through Jewish history**, mainly at times when there were grave political or social threats to the stability of Jewish society, e.g., in the Yemen under Muslim rule in the 12th century (Maimonides wrote a letter to the Jews of Yemen warning them against following one such Messianic claimant), and in the period of Christian oppression in Poland-Lithuania in the 16th century (the Jewish world of the time was rocked by the **Messianic pretender Shabbatai Tzvi**, who was ultimately offered the choice of conversion to Islam or death by the Ottoman sultan – he chose conversion, and a remnant of his followers still exist in Turkey). The failure of each of these successive messianic movements re-traumatised the Jewish community and led segments of the community to withdraw further into themselves and away from the non-Jewish societies in which they were embedded (the story of "Fiddler on the Roof" vividly depicts this process).
10. In keeping with the progressive understanding of history that typified the Liberalism of the 19th century, **Reform Judaism replaced the idea of the Messiah as a person with a notion of "the messianic age"**. This notion of a "messianic age" (rather than a quasi-divine Messianic figure with superpowers) fit the activist depiction of history that was so important to Liberal humanism, and human beings were to play a divinely sanctioned role in bringing it about. The modern Jewish concern with "mending (or repairing) the world" (*tikkun olam*) as a religious duty (*mitzvah*) reflects this view that the community needs to act "as God's partner" in bringing about a messianic age.
11. A similar idea motivated some of the early Zionist thinkers, not only the small cohort of religious believers but also the predominant number of secular activists. **Theodor Herzl in the late 1800s restored the original political dimension to messianic thinking** by linking Jewish survival in the face of pervasive anti-Semitism directly to the restoration of Jewish self-determination and sovereignty in the Land of Israel. To the dismay of many Messianic passivists, the first Chief Rabbi under the British Mandate, **Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook**, worked side by side along the kibbutz farmers in his belief that they were carrying out the messianic ideal by revitalising the holy land, even though they were entirely secular.
12. In a similar manner, the 7th leader of the Lubavich Chasidic dynasty (often referred to as "Chabad"), Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, encouraged his followers to engage with secular Jews in order to bring them back into Judaism. He taught that when every Jew keeps the commandments of Torah and is loyal to God, the Messiah will come to redeem all humanity. Some of his followers

identified him as the Messiah and await his return from the grave when the kingdom of God is established. Other Jews, including many who are Orthodox, see this claim as nonsensical or even heretical.

13. In 1959 the German-Israeli scholar **Gershom Scholem wrote a highly influential monograph called "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism"** which identified two trends in messianic thinking, the **utopian** (a radical reconfiguration of society through human activism, leading to a "new creation" as exemplified by life in a reborn Israel) and the **restorative** (a return, or retreat, to the state of nature as found in the Garden of Eden, and as exemplified in normative Jewish practice by the observance of the Sabbath). He argued that these trends represent alternative responses to **the challenge of living in the Diaspora with its irremediable anti-Semitism.**

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.