

Why the Jews Reject Jesus and What it Means

The Jewish people cannot and do not accept that Jesus Christ is their messiah. He may have been a good man, a prophet, a miracle worker, a healer, an observant Jew, or all of these, but they continue to insist that he was not their messiah. Many reasons are usually given for this rejection, but there is one reason that has persisted from the times of Jesus himself and therefore presents itself as the main reason: it is simply that Jesus did not accomplish what the Jewish people expected their messiah to accomplish.¹ He simply did not do the task expected of him. And since nobody else has been able to fulfil their messianic expectations since then, the Jews are still waiting. This takes us to the question of what exactly do the Jewish people expect their messiah to do.

The most precise and authoritative answer to this question was formulated, for the orthodox Jews at least, by Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, or Rambam, in the form of a religious law: “King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty. He will rebuild the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the ancient laws will be reinstated in his days; sacrifices will again be offered; the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will again be observed in accordance with the commandments set forth in the Law.” (The *Code of Maimonides* or *Mishneh Torah*, Book 14: Book of Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, ch. XI). This outline of the Messiah’s task is further clarified by Maimonides, to help faithful Jews distinguish possible candidates from the real one: “If there arise a king from the House of David who meditates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments, as did his ancestor David, observes the precepts prescribed in the Written and Oral Law, prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and to repair its breaches, and fights the battles of the Lord, it may be assumed that he is the Messiah. If he does these things and succeeds, rebuilds the sanctuary on its site, and gathers all the dispersed of Israel, he is beyond all doubt the Messiah. He will prepare the whole world to serve the Lord with one accord...” (ibid.).

The messianic profile outlined by Maimonides is very ancient. Important elements of his description can be found in the existing text of chapter 53 in the Aramaic Targum of Jonathan to the Prophet Isaiah, which has been dated to the first part of the second century AD, less than one hundred years after the advent of Jesus Christ (Christ is the term for ‘messiah’ in Greek).² Furthermore, literary studies leave no doubt that the dominant form of messianic expectation among the Jews, from the first century before Christ up to the suppression of the second Jewish revolt in 135 AD, was indeed for a triumphant militant messiah.³ In the New Testament Gospels, Christ resisted the temptation to rule over an earthly kingdom (Mt 4,8-10; Lk 4,5-8); later he shows he was aware of the popular messianic expectation and actively avoided embracing it (Jn 6,15). Until the end of his life, he was also extremely reluctant to expose his own messianic identity to the public (Mk 9,29-30; Mt 16,16.20; Jn 7,3-11;10,24; Mk 14,60-62). The difference between Christ’s own messianic

¹ E.g.: <http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm> : “Jews do not believe that Jesus was the mashiach. Assuming that he existed, and assuming that the Christian scriptures are accurate in describing him (both matters that are debatable), he simply did not fulfill the mission of the mashiach as it is described in the biblical passages cited above. Jesus did not do any of the things that the scriptures said the messiah would do”. (Accessed 28.12.12).

² It is curious that this particular passage, known as a description of the mission of “Suffering Servant”, should, in the Aramaic Targum, have become a profile of the Davidic warrior messiah whom the Jews were still awaiting. The Aramaic text is believed to have been modified in this way in the years leading up to the second Jewish revolt against the Romans in 132 AD and may even have been instrumental in preparing for it. Some important 20th century scholars have argued that it was modified as a reaction against the Christian interpretation of this passage, which adheres much more closely to the original Hebrew text.

³ cf. *The Scepter and the Star*, Collins, 52-78; citing the *Psalms of Solomon*, passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls, *4Ezra* and *2Baruch*, among other works: “This concept of the Davidic messiah as the warrior king who would destroy the enemies of Israel and institute an era of unending peace constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era” (ibid. 78).

identity and the popular messianic expectation can be summed up by his declaration before Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18,36), whereas clearly the Jews were, and still are, expecting a messiah whose kingdom is ‘of this world’.

Quoting the Rabbis, Maimonides states: “The sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers (B.San 91b)” (The *Code of Maimonides* or *Mishneh Torah*, Book 14: Book of Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, ch. XII), which is another way of saying that for the Jews the messiah’s kingdom will be ‘of the world’, though not subservient to it in any way. For the same reasons, Maimonides stresses the ordinariness of the person of the messiah: “Do not think that King Messiah will have to perform signs and wonders, bring anything new into being, revive the dead, or do similar things. It is not so” (The *Code of Maimonides* or *Mishneh Torah*, Book 14: Book of Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, ch. XI). Interestingly enough, Maimonides justifies this position by reference to Rabbi Akiba, the “great sage”, and “all the wise men of his generation”, and to their support for the messianic uprising of Bar Kochba against the Romans in 132 AD. Instead of questioning the premises on which R. Akiba and the sages based their support of Bar Kochba, and their recognition of him as messiah even without “a sign or token”, Maimonides simply ascribes his failure to personal sin. To posterity, it appears that the messianic expectation for a warrior messiah was correct, but that Bar Kochba was simply not righteous enough.

In the Middle Ages, the ordinariness of Maimonides’ messiah and the messianic age was disputed by Ra’avad, or Rabbi Abraham Ben David of Provence. Ra’avad contended that miracles would happen in the messianic age, in accordance with a literal understanding of scriptural passages, and that Bar Kochba was put to death by the Sages precisely because he failed to demonstrate any miraculous powers (cf. B.T. San 93b). The dispute has been settled in Maimonides’ favour by attributing Bar Kochba’s death to the Romans, while at the same time proposing that the this-worldly character of the messianic age, codified by Maimonides, is just the starting point of a process which will ultimately transform into ‘the age to come’, when prophecies of miracles and wonders will be fulfilled in a literal way.⁴

However, the objections raised by Ra’avad, and others, evoke the deeper spiritual and theological differences that separate the natural, albeit very gifted, militaristic messianic leader of the Jews and the openly supernatural but unarmed messiah of Christians. One might suggest that Jesus Christ was not only aware of these differences, but that precisely because of them he actively resisted the temptation to establish a kingdom ‘of this world’. Stated simply, Christ and his followers seem to have understood that the evil in ‘this world’ makes it radically, and irredeemably, opposed to the realization of God’s kingdom in its midst. In order to establish God’s rule in the world, the messiah first had to deliver it from the grip of this ‘radical evil’ or, in the language of the New Testament, from the ‘devil and his angels’. This was a supernatural task that required a supernatural solution and, what is more, it had to be done before God’s kingdom could make any real progress ‘in the world’.

The solution involved the disclosure of the truth about God. This Good News, or Gospel, actually awakened people spiritually to God’s eternal love for mankind through the forgiveness of their sin. In a very real sense the devil was duped, for if he ever knew that Christ’s Passion and death would become the source of forgiveness and divine reconciliation for humankind, he would never have brought it about. Instead, by killing Christ, the devil secured his own defeat. Far from being the failure it appeared, Christ’s death, and subsequent risen life, did indeed promote God’s kingdom in the world. This is a mystery that can be experienced, but not reasoned, for it touches the part of the human soul that is spiritually in union with other souls, especially through love and suffering.

⁴ cf. “Essay: Two Periods within the Era of Redemption”, accessed on 28.12.12 at http://www.moshiachonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=140&Itemid=106 .

Christ's understanding of reality differs mainly from that of the Jewish Sages, for whom Maimonides speaks, in its awareness that the spiritual dimension of life is the highest and therefore the most important of all. It follows that, for Christ and Christians, the messiah must be master of the spiritual world, and above the angels, before he can hope to be the Lord of this world. Similarly, the messiah's act of redemption must begin in the spiritual world and then progress to embrace the physical world. In contrast to the Jewish view, the Christian view is that redemption proceeds through the internal, spiritual and moral regeneration of individuals, which then becomes an external and physical reality. This understanding of the messiah as a heavenly and cosmic saviour figure was not unknown in first century Judaism and is especially associated with the Danielic "Son of Man" tradition⁵ (Dan 7,13-14): "...Jewish ideas of messianism were not uniform. There was a dominant notion of a Davidic messiah, as the king who would restore the kingdom of Israel, which was part of the common Judaism around the turn of the era. There were also, however, minor messianic strands, which envisaged a priestly messiah, or an anointed prophet or a heavenly Son of Man. Christian messianism drew heavily on some of the minor strands (prophet, Son of Man) and eventually developed them into a doctrine of Christology that was remote from its Jewish origins".⁶

Orthodox Jewish theology understands evil as "the dark side of God", and therefore in some sense "good". The fact that in the New Testament, the God of Christians is light and "in Him there is no darkness at all" (1Jn 1,5) alerts us again to the fundamental difference between the Christian and Jewish views about evil, and therefore about redemption. The difference can be explained by Scripture. In the Old Testament, before Christ, the devil was an archangel in heaven (e.g., Job 1-2, Zech 3,1-5) where he performed a divine function. In many ways, Judaism continues to see the devil and his angels in this exalted position, as loyal servants of God whose task is to test men's faith.⁷ However, with the coming of Christ and his elevation to the throne of God, far above the angels (Heb 1,4), the devil suffered a defeat and was "cast down" from heaven together with his angels (Lk 10,18; Jn 12,31; Rev 12,9). It appears that the devil, as an archangel, was deeply envious of the divine authority granted to Christ and, through him, to other members of the human race (Rev 2,26-28; 3,21). He therefore refused to serve Christ and his people, as the faithful angels were pleased to do (Mt 4,11; 26,53; Heb 1,14). As a result of their rebellion, the devil and his angels lost their place in heaven (Rev 12, 7-9). In simple terms, this means that a significant part of the spiritual world has refused to recognize the divine authority granted to Christ and his people, in fulfilment of God's plan for mankind. The rebellious forces are intent on continuing their rebellion on earth, where they influence large numbers of individuals to oppose God's will and his people. These individuals are either ignorant of Christ's divine authority or have rejected it completely. Rejection of Christ's divine status puts one on the same side as the rebellious devil and his angels (cf. Jn 22,22-23), which ultimately means rejecting the plan or will of God for mankind. By persisting in the desire for an alternative messiah, who brings a merely political redemption, Jewish orthodoxy places itself firmly in this camp. The tragic implication is that the long-awaited messianic expectation of the Jews, as affirmed and formulated by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*, is liable to manipulation and exploitation by the same "radical evil" that brought about the Passion and death of Jesus Christ and continues to reject his divinity. In brief, the messiah awaited by the Jews is well-placed to become the 'Antichrist' of Christian tradition, the ultimate embodiment of that same rebellious and evil spirit that opposes the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁸

⁵ cf. *Scepter and Star*, Collins, 212, 236; citing the *Similitudes of Enoch*, 4Ezra, *Sibylline Oracles* 5.

⁶ *Scepter and Star*, Collins, 237.

⁷ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979; 161-165.

⁸ From the Christian point of view, the orthodox Jewish understanding of evil seriously underestimates its grave and corrupting influence on the human soul and this underestimation leads directly to a concept of redemption that is relatively superficial. It is tempting to suggest that the tragic lesson of the Shoah, or holocaust, is to alert the Jewish people and their leaders to the presence of this 'radical evil' in the world. It is not God who caused

This takes us on to consider the present situation. As outlined above, the messiah of Jewish expectation is an ordinary national leader who restores full national and political sovereignty to the Jewish people. Most important of all, though, he enables them to return to the full performance of their religious obligations through the rebuilding of their temple in its place and the reinstatement of the Old Covenant. Not surprisingly, the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), the immigration of Jews from all over the world and the conquest of the Temple-Mount and East Jerusalem (1967) are all interpreted as necessary preparations for the imminent coming of their messiah and redemption. The final obstacle in the realization of this plan is the Muslim presence on the Temple Mount: there can be no new temple ‘in its place’ for as long as the Muslims are occupying that site.

However, when the time comes, the situation can change very quickly. The next regional war, especially if accompanied by an invasion of Israel’s territory by radical Islamic militia, will not only lend itself to interpretation by the Jews as the pre-messianic war of Gog and Magog (cf. Ezek 38–39), but a victory for Israel in that war would be the occasion for removing the Islamic presence from the Temple Mount and building the third temple. The leader who directs the defeat of Israel’s enemies, rescues that country from the threat to its existence and then orders the building of the third temple as a monument of victory, would be in an excellent position to be proclaimed the messiah of the Jews. The possibility of harnessing the ancient and revered messianic office to powerful military force and using it to dominate the world, in order to solve its manifold problems by coercion, is a temptation that few world leaders could refuse. And yet it will be a sham—a diabolical manipulation of the things of God (cf. Rev 13). There is only one further observation to make: the radical Islamic forces in the Middle East are already well-advanced in their preparations for a war of annihilation against the State of Israel.

As a postscript, it should be said that, even among Christians, it is understood that Christ will fulfil the role of triumphant warrior messiah, but not until the very end of history, when he will come from heaven, in a spiritual Second Coming, to defeat his diabolical rivals at the battle of Harmagedon. The main description of this Second coming of Christ is in the Book of Revelation (Rev 19,11-21). In that same book, prior to his Second Coming, Christ is represented in his risen, heavenly life as both the high priest and the sacrifice in a liturgy for Atonement⁹ (cf. Heb 7,26-28), thus fulfilling another aspect of the traditional messianic expectation that the Jews have so far ignored—that of the ‘priestly messiah’.¹⁰

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these terrible afflictions, but the ‘radical evil’ that Jewish orthodoxy has overlooked in its very physical and this-worldly view of redemption.

⁹ John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan; 2003; 17-79 (Part I).

¹⁰ *Scepter and Star*, Collins, 79-109. The Gospels have already presented Christ as the anointed prophet and the heavenly ‘Son of Man’, see above.