



The Messianic Secret¹

OVER THE LAST 2,000 years, world Jewry has been repeatedly disillusioned over false “Messiahs” like Bar Kokhba (132-135 CE) and Shabbetai Tzevi (b.1626 – d.1676). However, today there is resurgent hope for the coming of the true Messiah (“Mashiach”/“Moshiach”). Much of this interest has been kindled by the Chabad movement (“Chabad” = “Ch-ochmoh” [Wisdom], “B-inoh” [Understanding], “D-aas” [Knowledge]), founded in the 18th century by Rabbi Schneur Zalman in Lubavitch, White Russia. Under the dynamic leadership of its seventh leader, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, Chabad Lubavitch has evolved into the largest Jewish educational and social service organization in the world today, with over 2,000 centers.²

Chabad Judaism’s concept of the Messiah (Mashiach), however,

does not mean “savior.” The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins . . . has no basis in Jewish thought. . . .

Jews [therefore] do not believe that Jesus was the mashiach. . . . [H]e simply did not fulfill the mission of the mashiach as it is described in the biblical passages . . . Jesus did not do any of the things that the scriptures said the messiah would do.³

At the same time, Chabad is committed to

belief in the coming of Mashiach and the Messianic redemption . . . [as] one of the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith. Every Jew must believe that Mashiach will arise and restore the Kingdom of David to its original state and sovereignty, rebuild the Bet Hamikdash (Holy Temple of Jerusalem), gather the dispersed of Israel, and in his days all the laws of the Torah shall be reinstated as they had been aforesaid.⁴

Historic Judaism and the Messiah

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that their return from Babylonian Exile under the decree of the Persian emperor, Cyrus I, was the first step toward the Messianic event. In fact, “this Persian messiah of God invaded Babylonia for the primary purpose of liberating God’s special people [Isaiah 45:1].”⁵ Yet God’s people remained in subjection — first to Persia, then to Greece and the Hasmoneans, and finally to Rome. As Ezra himself said, “For we are slaves: yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem” (Ezra 9:9, NRSV).

During the Second Temple era, Judaism continued to ponder future Messianic events. With the emergence of sectarianism during the Hasmonean era, it was believed that the Messianic developments would embrace both heavenly and earthly events:

1. These events would occur in the Temple, since the Temple “formed the centre not only of the physical world but also of the entire cosmos, so that, in being YHWH’s dwelling-place, it was the spot where heaven and earth met.”⁶

2. The Messianic events would involve the return of YHWH to mankind (male and female) as a single, human person — a lowly, humble, poor man returning to Zion (and the Temple), riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).^{7,8}

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3. These events also would involve the repentant return (“teshuvah” = returning to God) of “exiled” mankind to YHWH.^{9,10} For the Essenes this involved leaving Jerusalem, repudiating the existing Temple and its services, and retreating into the desert to live ascetic and celibate lives. For the Sadducees this meant remaining in Jerusalem, continuing their worship in the existing Temple, and obeying the Written Torah in the belief that Roman rule was preliminary to the Messianic event. For the Pharisees or “separatists,” repentance meant fervent submission to both the Written and Oral Torahs and obedience to all the Laws of Moses, since they, as Pharisees, constituted the priesthood of all believers (Exodus 19:6). For the Zealots and Sicarii, repentance involved inciting violent revolution, overthrowing Roman domination, and forcibly restoring Jewish sovereignty. Finally, for Hellenistic, Diaspora Judaism, their repentant response to God involved the appropriate, spiritual use of virtuous reason in the tradition of Greek Stoicism.^{11,12}

4. The “return” of YHWH and of Israel would bring the restoration of the Davidic kingship, the Aaronic priesthood and the Mosaic prophetic office. Restoration would usher in universal awareness, knowledge and worship of God together with obedience to and reverence of the Torah. It also would bring universal prosperity, peace and harmony, justice with freedom from sin, evil, predation and disease, and finally resurrection from the dead.^{13,14}

However, fulfillment of these Messianic events was apparently complicated by three “refinements” of Jewish understanding:

1. Judaism no longer believed that YHWH was an anthropomorphic person who personally and covenantally engaged them as he had the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. YHWH had now “become” an incorporeal, intangible and invisible essence.^{15,16} How could such a God actually *return* to the Temple and to mankind?

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2. Judaism no longer believed that human beings were created as “living souls” (Genesis 2:7). Rather, they *possessed* immortal, incorporeal souls that had dwelt in a heavenly Garden of Eden and then emanated downward from heaven through three intermediate levels (“Atzilut,” “Briyah,” “Yetzirah”) until they reached the earth and became confined to the “lifeless mass” or “corpses” of human bodies.¹⁷

3. Although the incorporeal soul was liberated at death after an embodied lifetime on earth and was eventually reunited in Paradise with the incorporeal God in heaven, the body itself was consigned to death and the grave — at least until the resurrection.¹⁸ The soul, therefore, became “exiled” from the body and the body from the soul.

The gulf between an exalted, incorporeal divine essence and a subordinate, remote and dying Creation complicated their return to each other in the Temple and to their mutual inheritance. Out of this theological impasse emerged the concept of Messiah as an agent, instrument or representative to act for and on behalf of both God and man. This agential figure would be fully human but endowed with a heavenly spirit to prepare him for his mission. Thus, the Essenes and Zealots believed that Messiah would receive the royal or Davidic spirit to restore the kingdom. The Essenes and Sadducees believed that Messiah would receive the Aaronic (Zadokite) spirit essential to restore the priesthood. The Pharisees believed that Messiah would receive the still higher Mosaic spirit in order to restore the prophetic office (see Deuteronomy 18:15, 18). Philo and other Hellenistic Jews apparently believed that Messiah would receive the “Logos” spirit to restore the full observance of Torah or Law.^{19,20}

The Coming of the Messiah

Then, while first-century Judaism was preoccupied with its Messianic expectations, the Messianic secret actually occurred. It occurred in the coming of an itinerant teacher, preacher, philosopher and healer — a man born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1), “called out of Egypt” (Matthew 2:19-21), raised in Nazareth of Galilee (Matthew 2:23), and apparently employed as a carpenter (Matthew 13:55). He was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan (Matthew 3:13-16), and here he received the Spirit (Matthew 3:16) and began to recruit 12 disciples (John 1:37-42). Over a period of just one to three

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years (ca. 30 CE), he and his disciples journeyed throughout Galilee, and somewhat through Judea, preaching sermons, speaking parables, telling stories, and working miracles. Whatever else constituted his words and actions, they emphatically disclosed the primal gifts of the Jews — human democracy, individuality, relationality, freedom and responsibility, historicity, innovation, education, justice, and compassionate selfhood.²¹

Finally, this man and his disciples made their last journey to Jerusalem (Matthew 20:17, 18). Rumors had already circulated that this itinerant philosopher, teacher and miracle-worker was the promised Messiah — the Anointed One (John 1:41). Among the climactic events of his ministry, this preacher rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and thus manifested himself as King of the Jews (Matthew 21:2-10; cf. Zechariah 9:9). According to Matthew, he then strode into the Temple,

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overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the “central bank of Judaism,” and thereby “cleansed the Temple” (Matthew 21:12, 13). He thus brought himself and his followers to crisis. The Jews who had Messianic expectations for themselves were outraged at his brash intrusion of the sacred precincts. They claimed that he had declared, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58; cf. 15:29). Soon the Romans were offended as well. In view of the multicultural tinderbox of Palestine, it is not surprising that repressive actions were immediately taken. Acting together, the leaders of the Jewish sects and the Roman officials had this Messianic “impostor” apprehended, tried, convicted on the explicit charges of blasphemy and treason, and executed by crucifixion in accordance with the justice of the times (Matthew 26:47 – 27:50).²² Nor is it surprising that he was denied, betrayed and forsaken by his closest friends and followers (Matthew 26:21-25, 47-50, 56, 69-75).

Only two secret followers — Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57-60) and Nicodemus (John 19:39, 40) — had the courage to claim the body of Jesus and to grant him an honorable burial. However, to the astonishment of everyone, less than three days later reports were circulated that his tomb was empty and that the burial stone had, in fact, been rolled away (Matthew 28:2; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2, 3; John 20:1). Even more astonishing, Roman guards secretly claimed that they had seen a risen and living Jesus (Matthew 28:11-15). Some followers of Jesus reported that they had met him in the cemetery garden (Matthew 28:9, 10; Mark 16:9, 10; John 20:14-17). Others said that they had encountered him on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12, 13; Luke 24:13-31). Others reported seeing him at least once in the upper room where they had recently eaten the Seder or Passover meal together (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:33-49; John 20:19-23, 26-31). Still others had met with him in Galilee beside the sea and upon the mountain (Matthew 28:16, 17; John 21:1-25; 1 Corinthians 15:4-7). Forty days after his resurrection, a number declared that they had witnessed his ascension to heaven from the Mount of

Olives (Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:2-10). In response to his final request, the disciples of Jesus remained in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). Just 10 days later, on the day of Pentecost, they too were baptized by the Spirit and spoke in various tongues to a multitude of pilgrims (Acts 2:1-12).

Who Was the Messiah?

Against the claims of sectarian Judaism, the disciples unitedly agreed that Jesus had been the/a Messiah — the/an Anointed One — the/a Christ. But if he was not the fulfillment of the Essenes' expectation of a royal Messiah who would literally restore the Davidic kingdom, who was he? If he was not the fulfillment of the Sadducees' priestly Messiah who would literally reinstitute the Aaronic priesthood, who was he? If he was not the literal realization of the Pharisees' promised Mosaic prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18), who was he? If he was not the visible manifestation of Philo's archetypal "Logos," who was he? Finally, if Jesus fulfilled none of these Messianic expectations and, furthermore, had not even restored the Temple as the meeting place of heaven and earth, who in fact was he? It should not be surprising that John the Baptist's own disciples should inquire, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3, RSV).

In view of subsequent developments in Judaism, Christianity and the world, it is now appropriate to begin dispelling nearly 2,000 years of misunderstanding:

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1. Contrary to Jewish beliefs, the Messianic age will never merely involve the literal restoration of a Temple. It will not involve the reinstitution of a former Davidic kingdom, a former Aaronic priesthood or a former Mosaic prophetic office, nor will it involve the universal exaltation of an inaugural Torah Law.

2. Contrary to Christian beliefs, the Messianic age was never limited to a sacrificial blood-atonement for sins by a divine-human substitute.

3. Contrary to Gnostic beliefs, the Messianic age was never meant to deliver divinity from the fallen Creation of the human body.

The truth is that there is just One God — YHWH. The One God has intentionally engaged in various metaphoric manifestations or revelations to and for mankind. He manifested himself as the Spirit who "moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). He came to "Adam" and "Eve" in the Garden as the Creator and then as the Judge (Genesis 2:7, 21, 22; 3:14ff). He sat, ate and talked with Abraham as a fellow nomad (Genesis 18:1-33). He wrestled all night with Jacob as an assumed rival (Genesis 32:24-32). He appeared to Moses as a flame in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). To the children of Israel he appeared as a volcanic earthquake (Exodus 19:16-18). He came to Elijah as "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). He was present to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the burning fiery furnace as the "Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). He manifested himself to the Assyrians besieging Jerusalem as the avenging Angel (2 Kings 19:33-35). On other occasions he referred to himself with such metaphors as Father, Suffering Servant, Shekinah

Presence and Wisdom. It should not be surprising, then, that he should manifest himself actually, personally and humanly as the Messianic One.

. . . [But a]s he trod this [Messianic] road, Jesus was conscious of a deeper vocation even than that of Messiah. Israel's greatest hope was that YHWH, her God, would return to her in person, coming to Zion as judge and redeemer. In Jesus' last great journey to Jerusalem, in his action in the Temple and the Upper Room, he dramatically symbolized that return. It looks as though he intended to enact and embody that which, in Israel's scriptures, YHWH had said he would do in person. There could be no greater claim; yet the claim, though stupendous, only made sense within, could only be made from within, the context of the first-century Jewish world that bounded all Jesus' thoughts and actions. He went to his death believing that the hopes and fears of Israel and the world would thereby be drawn together once and for all. This would be the great event, the culmination of Israel's history, the redemption, the new exodus. This was how the kingdom would come. . . . [Thus,] Jesus believed he had to go the incredibly risky route of acting and speaking in such a way as to imply that he was embodying the judging and saving action of YHWH himself . . . [that he] was indeed the embodiment of the one God of Jewish monotheism.²³

Paradoxically — and almost inexplicably — only Jesus' most bitter opponents recognized his claim to be the human embodiment of YHWH. Jesus' first and closest followers never recognized his true identity. With this in mind, our task is to examine the profound truths heretofore concealed in the Messianic secret. As someone has observed, “. . . [T]he presence of the extraordinary in the familiar . . . [has been] too great a strain on . . . [our] preconceptions.”²⁴

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Endnotes

1. The essence of the [Messianic] secret is that people do indeed see and hear but do not understand.” — Dan O. Via, *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 106.
2. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Chabad,” at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chabad.
3. “Mashiach: The Messiah,” at www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm.
4. Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet, “Moshiach 101: The Belief in Mashiach,” at www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/100898/jewish/Belief-in-Mashiach.htm.
5. Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 173; see also pp. 167, 172, 174, 175.
6. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 206.
7. See “Vayishlach: On a Cloud or On a Donkey?” at www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/92265/jewish/Vayishlach-On-a-Cloud-or-On-a-Donkey.htm.
8. “He [Jesus] was not content to announce that YHWH was returning to Zion. He intended to enact, symbolize and personify that climactic event. . . . Behind the riddle of Jesus' own coming to Jerusalem as Messiah there lay a deeper meaning. Jesus was announcing, and embodying, the return of YHWH to Zion.” — Wright, *Victory of God*, pp. 615, 642.
9. See Schochet, “Belief in Mashiach.”

10. See Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 93.
11. See “Builders of the Wall,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.5).
12. See “Neither Greek nor Jew,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.6).
13. See Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet, “Moshiach 101: The Messianic Era,” at www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1069795/jewish/The-Messianic-Era.htm.
14. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), 2:408-410.
15. See “The Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith,” at www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/332555/jewish/Maimonides-13-Principles-of-Faith.htm.
16. See Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1, *The Antiquity* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1982), pp. 93, 118.
17. See “Principles of Jewish Faith.”
18. See *ibid*.
19. See “Builders of the Wall.”
20. See “Neither Greek nor Jew.”
21. See “The ‘World of the Journey,’” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.3).
22. Paradoxically, the only ones who recognized that Jesus Christ claimed to be YHWH were those who belonged to the religious and political power structures. Under Judaic law the charge of blasphemy could only be issued for the “misuse of the holy divine name, YHWH (Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:5).” — Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 125; see also Wright, *Victory of God*, pp. 526f, 550, 643f, 647f. Since YHWH was King of kings, above all Caesars, the charge of blasphemy against Jesus was extended to that of treason before the Roman tribunal.
23. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 180, 182.
24. Via, *Revelation of God*, p. 106.

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