

The Concept of the Messiah in Second Temple Judaism

In modern rabbinical Judaism, there is extensive denial that Yeshua fulfilled the prophesied role of the Messiah. In fact, many passages that are considered to be Messianic in nature by Christians are considered to have no relevance whatsoever to the Messiah in Judaism. That is why it is imperative to understand how the Jewish sages during the second temple period, prior to the birth of Yeshua, interpreted those passages.

Messianic Interpretation in the Targums

The Targums were translations of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) from Hebrew into Aramaic because that was the common language of the Jewish people during second temple period, beginning well before the birth of Yeshua.

The two most influential Targumists were Jonathan ben Uzziel and Onkelos. Jonathan was a student of Hillel the Elder, who taught between 30 B.C. and 10 A.D. Thus Jonathan's translation and interpretation reflects the perspective during the period before Yeshua began His ministry around 30 A.D. Onkelos wrote his Targum after the days of Yeshua, but His writings were based on much earlier interpretations that were held during the time of Ezra the Scribe (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3a*).

The Targums were like amplified translations in which the writer added words and phrases to help the reader understand the passage. They did that in order to inform an audience that had lost, not only familiarity with the Hebrew language, but the meaning behind the Hebrew terms. So, if it was considered to be a Messianic prophecy, they would explicitly state it as such. Examples of their writings include:

Targum Jonathan, Genesis 49:10

“Kings shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor scribes teaching the Torah, from his children's children until the time of the coming of the King Messiah, to whom belongs the kingdom, and to whom all the dominions of the earth shall be obedient. How beautiful is the King Messiah, who is to arise from the house of Judah.”

Targum Onkelos, Genesis 49:10

“The rod of the ruler will not depart from the house of Judah, nor a law-enforcer from between his feet nor a scribe from his children's children forever, until Shiloh—the Messiah—comes; for his is the kingship, and to him shall be an assembly of nations who will listen.”

Note: The insertion of the words “King Messiah” and “the Messiah” demonstrate the common understanding among the Jewish people of the second temple period that Genesis 49:10 was a Messianic prophecy revealing how the Messiah's arrival was linked to the end of the line of rulers from Judah (which actually occurred in 6 A.D.), thus making Him the final king.

Targum Onkelos, Numbers 24:17

“A king shall come from Jacob, and will be anointed the Messiah out of Israel.”

Targum Jonathan, Isaiah 9:5 (6)

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and he has taken the law upon himself to keep it. His name is called from before Him who is wonderful in counsel, the mighty God who lives in eternity — the Messiah whose peace shall be great upon us in his days.”

Targum Jonathan, Isaiah 52:13

“Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be high, and increase, and be exceeding strong.”

Note: This verse is a preamble to Isaiah 53, which goes on to describe Him doing the will of the Lord by bearing the sins of people.

Conclusion: Many of the key passages of the *Tanakh* that are considered to be Messianic in nature according to Christian understanding, but are denied as such in modern rabbinical Judaism, were explicitly identified as being Messianic in the second temple period.

The Interpretation of Isaiah 53

Virtually all teachings in rabbinical Judaism today state that Isaiah 53 is speaking about the historical sufferings of Israel instead of an individual Messiah. However, that interpretation was not postulated until the 11th century A.D. by the rabbis Eben-Ezra and Rashi. That view arose from their perspective that Christianity was in error, and thus there was a need for an alternative interpretation. But the problem with this view is that it is historical revisionism, originating 1700 years after Isaiah recorded his message.

Prior to these rabbis of the Middle Ages, the common view was that the Servant of Isaiah 53 was the Messiah. That is reflected in the Targum cited above, as well as in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 98; Sotah 14*), and other ancient rabbinical writings (*Midrash Rabbah 5:1, Midrash Tanhuma; Midrash Kohen; Yalkut Shimoni 4*). Nowhere in those writings will you find the attribution of Isaiah 53 to the people of Israel. There only make references to the Messiah

Moreover, Israel has never been fully innocent or bore the sins of the nations in atonement. Yet that is a perspective that persists today in Judaism because of the refusal to see Isaiah 53 as a description of Yeshua, even though the text fits Him perfectly.