

Two Messiahs – I know Jesus, but who is Messiah ben Joseph?

"Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." (Luke 24:12)

Did you know that a resurrected Messiah is not only a Christian belief? It is also very Jewish!

When Rabbis studied Zechariah 12:10–12 and realized that the Messiah must die, many of them were left baffled. They wondered: *How could a triumphant Messiah Son of David die?*

Some Rabbis solved the dilemma by creating two Messiahs:

Messiah ben Joseph, according to Rabbis, is the suffering redeemer that the Hebrew prophets often spoke of – someone who would battle the enemies of Israel and prepare the way for Messiah ben David.

Messiah ben David is expected to establish a blissful utopia on earth, known as the Messianic Kingdom (Isaiah 2:4, 9:1–7, 11:6–9).

What makes this dilemma even more confusing is that the Rabbis of the late second Temple period believed that **Messiah ben David** would be a warrior as well.

A 20th century Jewish scholar put it this way:

"Under the charismatic leadership of the second Messiah, Messiah ben David, the great wars will continue. God fights the battles of His Messiah and the ultimate victory comes to pass."

How do these ideas apply to Believers in Yeshua as the Messiah?

By looking more closely at this second **Messiah ben Joseph** in Rabbinic thought, we can better understand what the Jewish People expect of Messiah and whether or not there really are two Messiahs as many Rabbis claim, or just one Messiah who fulfills both roles, as Christians claim.

To understand who this **Messiah ben Joseph** is supposed to be and do, we'll start with the life of his forefather, Joseph.

Dreams of Grandeur, Plots of Murder

A riches to rags to riches story in Genesis 39–50 has provided Rabbis with the imagery needed to draw the idea of the suffering servant they have named **Messiah son of Joseph**.

Joseph had dreams of grandeur given to him by God Himself. He would be exalted above his brothers, and they would be humbled before him. His brothers despise him for this.

They plot to kill him but, instead, sell him into slavery in Egypt where he rises to the glory of the second in command of all Egypt. Only Pharaoh, who is called the sun and the moon, their god, was greater.

Not recognizing Joseph in the palace of Pharaoh, his brothers all bow to him, begging to buy food to save their family from a severe famine.

Joseph not only saves the lives of his family, but also neighboring nations affected by the famine. In doing this, the nations around Egypt bow down to Joseph as well.

This sounds a lot like what a Messiah would do – save the nations.

But **Messiah ben Joseph** is known for his suffering, and Joseph did suffer greatly.

For the Joy Set before Him, He Endured . . .

When Joseph reveals his dreams of grandeur to his brothers, they throw him into a pit while they plot to kill him and, in a sense, they succeeded. After selling him as a slave, they bloody his coat and show it to their father Jacob, implying that Joseph had been ravaged by beasts and died.

Joseph also suffers imprisonment for a crime he didn't commit, and he endures the emotional pain of not seeing his father or youngest brother, whom he loved greatly.

For the next two decades, Joseph endures an intense spiritual battle.

He needs to get a God's eye view of the rejection he has suffered and forgive his brothers.

He also has to battle within himself to remain faithful to God through the injustices and temptations he faced, while at the same time growing in favor with God and man.

After 22 years of separation, Joseph encounters his brothers and must now decide how he will react – in revenge or in *chesed*, which is God's kind of loving kindness – a covenantal commitment for another's well-being that endures sin and betrayal and shows compassion and mercy.

We are reminded of what this kind of love is. In all **26 verses of Psalm 136** we see it: *"Give thanks to Yehovah, for He is good; His loving kindness [chesd'oh] endures forever."*

While Joseph suffered emotionally and spiritually, in Judaism it is understood that **Messiah ben Joseph**, who is the descendant of Joseph, will suffer death.

This understanding fits into the Rabbinic teaching called Ma'aseh Avot Siman l'Banim, which means What our fathers did, our sons also.

Rabbis teach that some of what our Avot (Fathers) experienced (such as Joseph), one of their descendants (such as **Messiah ben Joseph**) may also experience in some way, physically and/or in moral character.

Let's consider more ways that Joseph's experiences foreshadow the Messiah's experiences as well as his identity and purpose.

Like Joseph, Messiah Would Suffer

While Joseph suffered spiritually, Rabbis point to the prophets who write about the physical death of God's suffering servant. A rare few refer to the Prophet Isaiah:

"Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains he carried; Whereas we did esteem him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded because of our transgressions, He was crushed because of our iniquities: The chastisement of our welfare was upon him, And with his stripes we were healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5, JPS)

However, when talking about the suffering servant, most Rabbis refer to the Prophet Zechariah. He writes that in the last days, after God wages war against the nations who come against Jerusalem: the people of Israel will mourn for one they have pierced:

"They will look on me, because they have pierced him, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son." (**Zechariah 12:10**)

There is much discussion about who this pierced one is and who the people of Israel are mourning for.

As we look at Rabbinic writings, we are told that he is Messiah ben Joseph, who dies in the battle of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38-39; Talmud (Sukkah 52a).

Though he is killed, it is not the end of this Messiah. He will be resurrected!

Resurrection of Messiah According to Rabbis

Christians often think that Jewish people reject the idea that Messiah would be resurrected. But it is an ancient belief that persists to this very day.

In the Canadian Jewish News on January 17, 2002, we read:

"Our long-awaited messiah and redeemer arrived! Most Jews failed to recognize that he was the messiah, but we, his disciples, did. Tragically, he died before completing the redemptive process. But he will soon be resurrected and will continue and complete his messianic tasks."

This newspaper article records the ideas and thoughts held by a Hassidic sect of Jewish people called Lubavitch, who believe that their Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson was and is the Messiah.

Upon his death in 1994, his disciples immediately proclaimed that he would rise again. At first, this resurrection was to take place in three days.

Soon after his death, they launched a worldwide multimillion dollar campaign with full-page newspaper ads declaring their faith in his Messiahship. That campaign continues today on buses and billboards throughout Israel and Jewish communities worldwide.

This idea of a resurrected Messiah is not new.

As far back as AD 590–630, a Jewish apocalyptic book was written in the style of Ezekiel and Daniel called Zerubbabel. In it, Messiah ben Joseph (called Nehemiah ben Hushiel in this book) dies in battle with the King of Edom (Armilus). However, Messiah Ben David arrives soon after and raises him from the dead.²

Rabbis believe that Messiah ben Joseph will fight in the great battle against Gog and Magog described in Ezekiel 38–39, and that he will die defending Israel against her enemies, only to be raised by Messiah ben David.

Why do ancient and modern Rabbis alike think that Messiah will be raised from the grave?

Resurrection of Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures

Rabbis have not made up the idea that Messiah will be raised from the dead.

They refer to Scriptures such as Psalm 16:10: “For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.”

As well, the Talmud says that when Messiah ben David sees Messiah ben Joseph slain, he will ask the Lord of the Universe for ben Joseph to receive “the gift of life.”

The Lord then answers that “your father David has already prophesied this concerning you” when David wrote, “He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—length of days, for ever and ever.” (Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 52a; Psalm 21:4, v. 5 in the Hebrew Bible)

Yeshua Fulfilled the Role of Messiah ben Joseph

While the Jewish community is expecting Messiah ben Joseph to be raised from the dead at some future time by Messiah ben David, Christians believe both of these Messiahs are one and the same.

If we follow the Rabbinic teaching of Ma’aseh Avot Siman l’Banim that says, What our fathers did, our sons also, we find striking parallels between Joseph and Yeshua that no other Messianic figure can claim for himself:

Despised and Sold

Joseph was despised by his Hebrew brothers (sons of Jacob, named Israel) and sold to Egypt for silver. Yeshua was despised by the Jewish leaders: Pharisees, Sadducees and the Sanhedrin and sold for silver.

Considered Dead

Joseph was cut off by his brothers and considered dead by the family.

Yeshua was rejected and cut off by the Jewish leaders and was dead, lying in a tomb for three days.

Brought Salvation to the Nations

Joseph was raised to the height of power and authority, second in command only to Pharaoh. As a result of Joseph’s wise management of the resources under his control, many nations attached themselves to Egypt to be saved.

As Joseph states to his brothers after they buried his father Jacob (Israel),

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20)

Yeshua was given all authority to rule God’s Kingdom in heaven and on earth.

As a result, today 2.1 billion people claim to be Christians. Many have attached themselves to Yeshua (Jesus) to be saved and personally know Him and His Father in Heaven.

“For this reason Christ died and returned to life, so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.” (Romans 14:9; see also Matthew 28:18; John 1:12, 3:35)

Resurrected

Joseph was freed from his prison sentence to life in the palace by Pharaoh.

Yeshua was freed from death and the tomb by God.

Why Don't Rabbis Accept Yeshua as Messiah?

Even though the lives of Joseph and Yeshua parallel in so many Messianic ways, Rabbis don't believe Yeshua can be this Messiah who is the son of Joseph because they say He didn't complete the required To Do list of the Messiah, that messianic task list, which has been compiled from various Talmudic references, says that Messiah will do the following:

Prepare the world for the coming of Messiah, Son of David. (Numbers 24:17–19):

- ¹⁷ I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
¹⁸ Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
¹⁹ And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion
and destroy the survivors of cities!”

Gather Israel from all corners of the world to build the Temple or at least make provisions for **Messiah Son of David** to enter the Temple. (Zechariah 6:13; Ezekiel 41–48; Mishneh Torah Hilchot Melachim)

Battle with the wicked nations of the world, the enemies of Israel, especially Esau, Edom, Gog and Magog. (Obadiah 1:18–21; Talmud Mas. Sotah 42a)

Die in the battle but be resurrected (see earlier discussion)

Since the rebirth of Israel in 1948, over 3.2 million olim (immigrants) have made Aliyah (immigrated) to Promised Land. Nearly half (more than 6 million) of the world's Jewish population now lives in Israel. (Jewish Virtual Library)

After **Messiah ben Joseph** resurrects, **Messiah ben David** will come to finish off the tasks appointed to the Messiah. According to Rabbis over the centuries, those tasks include the following:

- Rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem
- Restore the Jews to the Law
- Defeat the Enemies of Israel
- Defeat evil and bring about world peace

Since Yeshua (Jesus) did not complete these tasks, most Rabbis reject Him as a candidate for Messiahship.

You, like the Rabbis, may question why Yeshua didn't fulfill all the Rabbinic requirements of Messiah ben Joseph. The answer is quite simple.

First, the Rabbis who were deciding what messiah would and would not do, were against Yeshua being Messiah.

Rabbis began recording their opinions and debates about Messiah and other topics from AD 10–200 in what would become the Talmud.

But the idea of the suffering **Messiah ben Joseph** likely started later.

In a famous second century debate titled Dialogue with Trypho, we read a conversation about Yeshua as the Messiah.

In the dialogue, the Jewish Trypho (who is thought to be a Rabbi from the central Israeli town of Yavneh) simply cannot reconcile that a Messiah who is supposed to be glorified would become cursed on a tree, as is written in Deuteronomy 21:22–23:

"When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession."

Neither Trypho nor the Christian Justin Martyr mentions **Messiah ben Joseph** in their dialogue; instead, Trypho looks forward to the coming of Messiah.

This leads some scholars to believe that the idea of this second **Messiah (ben Joseph)** began to be fleshed out as commentators added their ideas of Messiah over the next 200–400 years.

Second, notice that the Rabbis don't mention the defeat of sin in their task list, which is the primary purpose of Yeshua, even going back to the first Messianic prophecy of a redeemer who would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

From a translation at the time of Yeshua called Targum Yonatan we read:

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between the seed of thy son, and the seed of her sons; and it shall be when the sons of the woman keep the commandments of the law, they will be prepared to smite thee upon thy head; but when they forsake the commandments of the law, thou wilt be ready to wound them in their heel.

"Nevertheless for them there shall be a medicine, but for thee there will be no medicine; and they shall make a remedy for the heel in the days of the King Meshiha." (Genesis 3:15, PJE)

The Rabbis who wrote their task lists either didn't believe Messiah came to deal with sin, or they refused to voice this idea for fear that Yeshua could be Messiah.

Moreover, the tasks that should be included in these lists are still disputed even within Rabbinic literature.

What if the Rabbis have misinterpreted the Scriptures?

What if there is only one Messiah, who has already come once to fulfill some of the tasks and will come again to finish the job?

"He was wounded because of our transgressions, He was crushed because of our iniquities: The chastisement of our welfare was upon him, And with his stripes we were healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

Yeshua: One Messiah, One Task List

When we let Scripture interpret Scripture, one Messiah with one task list appears. *Some of those tasks have already been fulfilled by Yeshua (whose name means Salvation):*

- He was the suffering servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12; 1 Peter 2:22–25; Romans 5:6–8; Philippians 2:6–11)
- He defeated sin by His death and resurrection (Isaiah 53; 1 John 3:8; Hebrews 2:14–15)

And Yeshua will come again to complete His final Messianic duties:

- He will defeat Israel's enemies (Zechariah 9–12; Revelation 20)
- He will set up the Messianic age (Isaiah 2:4, 9:1–7, 11:6–9; Revelation 20:4–6)

Throughout this Messianic prophecy series, we are looking at the many duties Messiah is to perform and prophecies He is to fulfill, but those listed above are His primary purposes.

Did We Miss It?

Over 100,000 Jews and two billion non-Jews today have accepted that Messiah has come and is coming again.

Some Jews from ancient days believe the time for Messiah has come and gone. Rabbi Hillel who lived at the time of Yeshua said, *"There shall be no Messiah for Israel because they have already enjoyed him in the days of Hezekiah."*

Hillel thought that King Hezekiah was the Messiah.

"May God forgive him [Hillel for saying so]," said a Rabbi named Joseph.

This Rabbi Joseph, a contemporary of Rav Hillel, who lived during the time of Yeshua (Jesus) stated that the Messiah is still to come and will arrive as Zechariah prophesies, riding on a donkey!

"Now, when did Hezekiah flourish? During the first Temple. Yet Zechariah prophesied that in the days of the second [Temple], proclaimed, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout, O daughter of Jerusalem, behold, thy king cometh unto thee! he is just, and having salvation, lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.'" (Sanhedrin 99a)

But millions more Jewish People are still looking, praying three times a day the following prayer:

"Speedily cause the offspring of your servant David to flourish, and let him be exalted by your saving power, for we wait all day long for your salvation. Blessed are you, O Lord, who causes salvation to flourish." (Excerpt of the Amidah, or Standing Prayer)

Why do so many Jews reject Yeshua as this Servant of David?

Part of the answer could be in the confusion that arises with two Messiahs and two task lists compiled through rigorous debate by Rabbis over many centuries.

We at Bibles For Israel believe that when we let Scripture interpret Scripture (from Genesis through Revelation), **we see a picture of one task list for one Messiah that is quite different from the two task lists of the Rabbis.**

Perhaps when we have finished our current series searching these Messianic prophecies, more Jewish People will be *"explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead"* as Rabbi Paul in the New Testament did, and say, *"This Yeshua I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah."* (Acts 17:3)

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