

Predictions of Messiah's Coming in Jewish Literature

by Paul Sumner

For centuries, Jewish scholars have predicted the date of the arrival of Messiah and the Messianic Era. Using Scripture and contemporary historical situations as guides, these spiritual leaders sought to interpret the times and pinpoint when the ancient Hope of Israel would finally dawn. Some of their proposed dates correspond to significant persons or events.

1) Earliest Calculations

Hebrew Bible

Daniel says he read the pre-exilic prophecies of Jeremiah about “the term of Jerusalem’s desolation” (her time in Babylonian exile; 9:2). After a prayer of repentance, “the man Gabriel” appeared to Daniel in a vision during *minchah* and gave him “understanding” about Jeremiah’s prophecies:

(24) Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city until the measure of transgression is filled and that of sin complete, until iniquity is expiated, and eternal righteousness ushered in; and prophetic vision ratified, and the Holy of Holies anointed.

(25) You must know and understand: From the issuance of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the [time of the] anointed leader (*mashiach nagid*) is seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it will be rebuilt, square and moat, but in a time of distress. (26) And after those sixty-two weeks, the anointed one (*mashiach*) will disappear and vanish [literally, be cut off and have nothing, *יִכָּרֵת מְשִׁיחַ וְאֵין לוֹ*].

The army of the leader who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary, but its end will come through a flood. Desolation is decreed until the end of war. (27) During one week he will make a firm covenant with many. For half a week he will put a stop to

the sacrifice and the meal offering. At the corner [of the altar] will be an appalling abomination until the decreed destruction will be poured down upon the appalling thing.

(Dan 9:24-27, *Tanakh*, Jewish Pub. Soc., 1985)

Marking time in weeks of years (7-year periods) became a common method for delineating divine events in history.

Qumran

The apocalyptic-minded Jewish priests who lived at the settlement of Qumran avidly studied Daniel as a source of prophetic insight. (Fragments of several copies of Daniel have been found among the Dead Sea biblical scrolls.)

The Qumran priests also combed through the Pseudepigrapha text *Jubilees*, one of their favorite books. Dating to 140 BCE, *Jubilees* expands on the 7-year schema of Daniel and marks out historical events in 49-year (7x7, jubilee) intervals. Its author believed God often did great things for his people in the 50th year following a jubilee; surely God will do so in the future.

Using Daniel 9:24-27 and *Jubilees*, the Qumran priests apparently calculated that redemption would come by the hand of Messiah during the window of time **3 BCE** and **AD/CE 2**. (Roger Beckwith, “Daniel and the Date of Messiah’s Coming,” in *Revue de Qumran* 10 [no. 40, 1981]: 523-25.)

The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 97b) also employs jubilee dating: “The world shall exist not less than eighty-five jubilees [4250 years], and in the last jubilee the son of David will come.” [The year 2009 is the year 5769/70 on the Jewish calendar.]

[See “[Messianic Texts at Qumran](#)” and “[Armageddon and the Death of Messiah](#).”]

New Testament

There is no date set in the NT when Yeshua will return to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6) or bring the “times of refreshing” (Acts 3:19). When asked for dates, he steadfastly refused to satisfy his disciples’ curiosity. He said he himself didn’t know the day or hour—only the Father knows (Matthew 24:36). He did outline “signs” to watch for, but no date. “It is not for you to know,” he said (Acts 1:7).

2) Rabbinic Calculations

For centuries after the era of Yeshua and the fall of Jerusalem in 70, the elders of Israel continued to speculate about the messianic times. In the list of projected dates that

follows, note how many teachers said the *Mashiach*, Anointed One, would come during or close to their own lifetime.

This suggests their prophetic readings and date-settings were given to encourage their own generation and instill enduring anticipation. (This has also been a motive of many Christian date-setters who believe we are in the Last Days.)

The following data come primarily from Abba Hillel Silver’s study *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel (From the First through the Seventeenth Centuries)* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1959).

Authority or Document	Date of Authority/Text	Predicted Year of Messiah’s Arrival
Period 70–175 AD/CE		
Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai	1st cent.	circa 80
Rabbi Akiva (declared Bar Kochba to be messiah)	50–135	135
Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah	2d cent.	140
Rabbi Jose ben Halafta, the Galilean	2d cent.	130
<i>Seder Olam Rabbah</i>	2d cent.	242 or 473
Period 175–500		
Rabbi Judah the Prince (redactor of the <i>Mishnah</i>)	Circa 135–220	435
Rabbi Hanina	3d cent.	470
Rabbi Judah	3d cent.	440–490
Islamic Period (7th–9th cent.)		
<i>Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer</i>	Edited in 8th cent.	Around 650
<i>Book of Elijah</i>	Edited in 7th cent.	650–700
<i>Revelations of Simeon ben Yohai</i>	Ca. 750	Soon after 750
<i>Midrash of The Ten Kings</i>	Edited in 8th cent.	Soon after 750
<i>Prayer of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai</i>	Edited in 8th cent.	Soon after 750
<i>The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba</i>	—	926
<i>The Story of Daniel</i>	Final redaction 9–10 cent.	940
<i>Book of Zerubbabel</i>	Earliest edition 629–636	1058
Saadia Gaon	882–42	968
Salmon ben Yeroham	Contemporary of Saadia	968
Karaites	8th cent.	968
Benjamin ben Moses Nahawendi	9th cent.	1358

Era of the Crusades (11–12th cent.)

Solomon ibn Gabirol	11th cent.	1058
Hananeel ben Hushiel	11th cent.	1218
Joseph ben Isaac Bekor Shor	12th cent	1403
Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi)	1040–1105	1352 or 1478
Judah haLevi	1080–1141	1068 or 1130
Abraham bar Hiyya	d. 1136	1136, 1230, 1358, 1448
Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) (RaMBaM)	1135–1204	1216

Middle Ages (1200–1450)

Nachmanides (RaMBaN)	1194–1268	1400
Isaac ben Judah haLevi	13th cent.	1383 or 1403
Abraham Abulafia	1240–ca. 1291	1284
<i>Zohar</i> (book of mysticism)	Final redaction 1290	1300, 1306, 1400, 1648
<i>Sefer haTenuma</i>	13th cent.	1240 or 1430
Levi ben Gershon	1288–1344	1358
Bahya ben Asher	d. 1340	1218 or 1358 or 1403
Joshua ibn Shoeib	14th cent.	Between 1240–1440
Abraham ben Alexander	13th cent.	1329
Levi ben Abraham	1240–ca. 1315	1345
Simeon ben Zemah Duran	1361–1444	1850

16th Century [Era of Protestant Reformation]

Isaac Arbabanel	1447–1508	1503 or 1591 latest
Abraham haLevi	—	1530
Solomon Molko	1500–1532	1540
Mordechai ben Judah Dato	1527–1585	1575
Isaac Luria (father of <i>Kabbalah</i>)	1534–1572	1575
Naphtali Herz ben Jacob Elhanan	—	1575 or 1648
Eliezer Ashkenazi ben Eli Rofe	d. 1568	1594
Gedalia ibn Yahya	1515–c1587	1598
David ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra	1479–1589	1540–1640
Joseph ben David ibn Yahya	1494–1539	1931 *
Samuel ben Judah Velerio	—	1868

17th Century

Hayyim Vital (self-proclaimed messiah)	1542—1620	His lifetime
Isaiah Horowitz	1555–1630	1648
Yom Tov Lipmann Heller	1579–1654	1648
Shabbetai Cohen	1622–1662	1648
Joseph Sambari	—	1648
Isaac Cohen	—	1713–14, 1633, 1673
Nathan Nata Spira	ca. 1584–1633	1725
Shabbetai Zvi (self-proclaimed messiah)	1626–1676	1665, his lifetime

3) Modern Era

Rabbinic predictions seem to end soon after Shabbetai Zvi recanted his messianic claims and converted to Islam in 1666. Jewish sails collapsed when the fickle winds of prophecy abandoned them.

Trying to assuage their disillusioned flocks, many rabbis resorted to the Talmudic injunction: "All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds." They warned, "May the spirits of those who attempt to determine the Time [of Messiah's coming] expire!" (*Sanhedrin* 97b).

Date setting essentially stopped. But the horrors of the 20th century brought change.

Various Habad leaders appealed to the authority of Maimonides (1135–1204) to reopen the messianic topic. In his *Igeret Teiman* (Letter to Jews in Yemen, ca. 1172), he said the ancient prohibition in *Sanh.* 97b against calculating the "footsteps of Messiah" [*iqvot meshicha*] was only for a limited time and no longer applied to the "present" era. (He himself predicted 1216 as the day of Messiah's arrival.)

Yet later on Maimonides decided to quell messianic fervor with a caution: "One should not try to determine the appointed Time [*haqitzin*]. . . . [Study of commentaries on this subject] will neither bring fear nor love [of God]."¹

Kabbalists and mystics were undeterred. They said Mashiach's footsteps can be heard today; we should listen for them. But in the absence of clear messianic footfalls, some admitted that the predicted times of Mashiach "were in fact actualized...in spiritual dimensions not perceived on the manifest level of our reality" (*Kuntres Perush Hamilot*, 27, 15b).² That is, messianic realities exist but are unperceived by most.

¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim U'Milchamoteihem* [The Laws of the Kings and Their Wars], chap. 12, halachah 2.

² Quoted by Jacob Schochet, *Mashiach: The Principle of Mashiach and the Messianic Era in Jewish Law and Tradition* (2d ed., New York/Toronto: S.I.E., 1991), p. 43.

Messianic Precursor: The Tzaddik

Kabbalistic tradition says that in every generation there is a *potential* messiah who towers over his contemporaries.

He is the *tzaddik*—the great saint. If his era is G-d's appointed era, and if all conditions are met, then the soul of Mashiach will descend into this *tzaddik* and he will be announced as *the* Messiah. His coronation is contingent on the level of righteousness among the Jewish people. If Israel is not ready to receive him that era's messiah-tzaddik will not be revealed.³

The Messiah from Brooklyn?

In the 1980s and 90s, ultra-orthodox Lubavitch followers of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson of Brooklyn, New York, secretly believed him to be that towering figure, the messianic Tzaddik in our time.

A January 29, 1994 ad in *The Jerusalem Post* read: "The Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson is the King Moshiach. Now is the time to accept his kingship."⁴

Publically Rabbi Schneerson did not accept the title, but some say he did so among his followers. Rabbi Shmuel Butman wrote in *The Jewish Press*: "The Rebbe gave . . . clear indications that he considered himself Moshiach in works that he personally prepared for publication."⁵

After Rabbi Schneerson died in June, 1994, many disciples explained that his generation was not worthy of this messiah, so he did not announce his calling.

Others refused to lose faith. Two years after Rabbi Schneerson's death, an ad in the *New York Times* read: "Long live our Master, Teacher, and Rebbe, King Moshiach forever

³ See arguments for and against this idea in *Sanhedrin* 98a. In *Genesis Rabbah* 1, 3 R. Joshua ben Levi says Messiah's coming depends on the merits or the deeds of Israel. Cited by Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), p. 683.

⁴ Quoted in *The Death of Messiah*, ed. Kai Kjør Hansen (Baltimore: Lederer, 1994), p. 15.

⁵ "Can the Rebbe Still Be Moshiach?" *The Jewish Press* (Jan. 27, 1995), p. 61.

and ever!" Below the photo of Schneerson is the caption: "King Moshiach."⁶

Ironically this fervent proclamation about the Lubavitcher Rebbe follows a failed prophecy he uttered in 1991.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the release of Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel, then the seemingly miraculous protection of Israel during Saddam Hussein's SCUD missile attacks in the Gulf War in early 1991, Rabbi Schneerson was convinced "the time of redemption has arrived." He said, "We are standing on the verge of the beginning of redemption. . . . This is the year [1991] of the revelation of King Messiah."⁷

In March, 1992, Rabbi Schneerson suffered a major stroke. His followers refused to admit he was wrong about the messianic arrival. In desperation they began a campaign whose slogan was: "Prepare for the Coming of the Messiah Menachem Mendel." Two years later he died.

This public messianic "debacle" divided the Jewish community. It even split the Habad movement: disillusionment and denial followed. But it put the issue of Messiah before the Jewish people in ways not seen for centuries.

Discussing the Undiscussable

In 1979, Raphael Patai published *The Messiah Texts*, an extensive compendium of Jewish thought on subjects such as the Messiah, Gog and Magog, the Antichrist, the Last Judgment, and the Resurrection.

Patai said he wanted to remove the veil of silence and censorship about this subject that has existed for centuries among Jews. He especially targeted the attitudes of modern Jewish writers whose "disillusionment with traditional religion and its values" prompted them to engage in "literary

⁶ *New York Times* (Sunday, Mar. 31, 1996), p. 37.

⁷ Quoted by Rachel Elior, "The Lubavitch Messianic Resurgence: The Historical and Mystical Background 1939–1996," in P. Schäfer & M. Cohen, eds., *Toward the Millennium* (E. J. Brill: 1998), 383–408, esp. p. 396.

debunking of the Messiah."⁸

Changes in Israel

Increasing numbers of Israeli thinkers are changing their minds about Messiah and even Yeshua—in dramatic ways.

In an April 5, 2004 article in the Israeli daily paper *Yediot Aharonot*, Meir Shalev told Jewish readers they should celebrate the death of Yeshua at Passover time. He said Yeshua is one of the most important Jews who ever lived for he influenced the whole world.

Shalev's piece, entitled "A Passover Sacrifice," boldly says Yeshua's return would be good for the Jewish people and for Christianity. Yeshua, he said, would reprimand the Jews for fossilizing the faith of their fathers. And he would "make right" the opulence and decadence of the churches.⁹

Shalev sees in Yeshua's prophesied Return both blessing and threat to us all. And in that, he sees what many professed Christians do not.

Messianic Contingency in the N.T.

Yeshua made an oft overlooked comment that parallels the principle in rabbinic literature that the Messiah would come when the nation of Israel was ready.

When Yeshua predicted the fall of the Temple and Jerusalem, he cited the text of Psalm 118:26a — *barukh haba beshem Adonai*, בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה — "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD."

⁸ Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), p. 275. Patai apparently based his work on the book by Moritz Zobel, *Gottes Gesalbter, Der Messias und de Messianische Zeit in Talmud und Midrash* (Berlin, 1938).

⁹ As reported at www.netivyah.org (prayer list for April 4, 2004).

Reports of other modern Jewish thinkers were given in Pinchas Lapide's 1979 book *Israelis, Jews and Jesus* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday). Lapide notes that Israelis, particularly the sabras, are more apt to look at Yeshua with open eyes.

Lapide wrote, "It took the free intellectual climate of independence before Jews could deal in such a relaxed fashion with a theme which pressure from the churches had long ago turned into a Jewish taboo" (p. 32).

Then Yeshua said, "From now on you shall not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD'" (Matthew 23:39).

In other words, the inhabitants of Jerusalem will see Yeshua again (in a later generation) when they can and do utter the messianic welcome of this Passover Hallel psalm. This is a contingent prophecy without a date.

In other passages, Yeshua said that even though "birth pangs" would precede his return, the actual event would be unexpected and sudden. "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even . . . the Son" (Matthew 24:8, 30, 36).

Releasing the Imprisoned Messiah

What the Lubavitchers, Patai, Shalev and other Israeli thinkers have striven to do is break apart the stone lid suppressing this surging subterranean messianic spring that once flowed freely across the minds and spirits of the people of Israel.

And it is Yeshua of Nazareth who can clarify what it means to be a *mashiach*, and free the Jewish people (again) to believe in God's Agent of Redemption, not only for Israel's sake but for the whole world.

- [Paul Sumner](#)

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