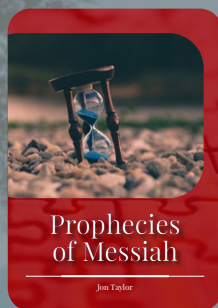
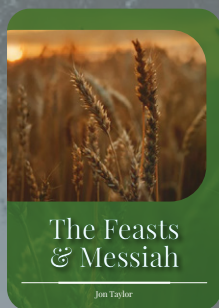
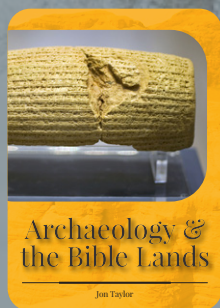
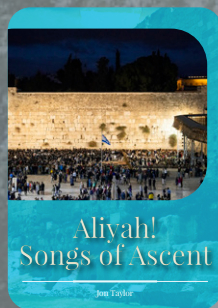
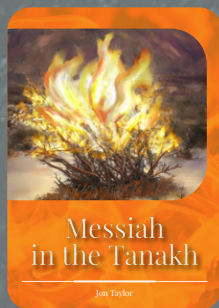
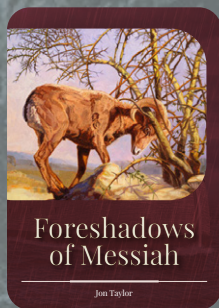
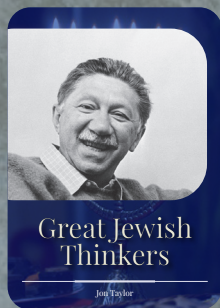




The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

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Other booklets in this series



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The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Introduction: The New Covenant – Jeremiah 31:31-37

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Thus says the Lord,
Who gives the sun for a light by day,
The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night,
Who disturbs the sea,
And its waves roar

(The Lord of hosts is His name):

“If those ordinances depart
From before Me, says the Lord,
Then the seed of Israel shall also cease
From being a nation before Me forever.”

Thus says the Lord:

“If heaven above can be measured,
And the foundations of the earth searched out beneath,
I will also cast off all the seed of Israel
For all that they have done, says the Lord.”¹

1. Jeremiah 31:31-37, The Bible, New King James Version

The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Matthew's Jewish Gospel About a Jewish Messiah

Each of the four gospel writers had a clear purpose for writing to a specific audience. Matthew's Gospel is written by a Jewish author about a Jewish Messiah and it is set in an unmistakably Jewish context. This helps us to understand why the New Testament (Covenant) commences in the way that it does. The immediate opening section begins with the genealogy of Jesus (Messiah), the Son of Abraham, the Son of David (Matthew 1:1). Why does it start with a long and detailed list of names? Because genealogies are linked with identity and when considering who Messiah is supposed to be, identity is crucially connected with lineage, history and prophecy.

Consider that even today, if you were to walk into a book and magazine store, it would not be unusual to see half a dozen or more magazines devoted to ancestry. People also commonly access websites or seek professional assistance to discover either their family tree or something via their DNA.

Hence, in the very first verse of the New Testament (Brit Hadasha), we discover that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Son of both David and Abraham. The Lord made covenants with both of these great patriarchs. Through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). 'The Son of David' was a Messianic title and David's kingdom would be established forever through his lineage (2 Samuel 7:16).

Matthew shows prophecies of Messiah fulfilled

From the outset, Matthew enables the reader to recognise who Messiah is, by citing a whole unbroken chain of Messianic prophecies and carefully noting their fulfilment. The first seventeen verses chart the genealogy of Jesus through David and Abraham which are essential in establishing Messianic credentials.

Matthew often states something has been fulfilled or quotes the passage or prophet to make his points perfectly clear. In Matthew 1:22-23 he mentions the virgin birth as spoken by the Lord through the prophet and that His name shall be called Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Then in Matthew 2:5-6 when the Magi are seeking the King of the Jews, the chief priests and scribes quote Micah 5:2 (Micah 5:1 in Tanakh), which states that the One to rule Israel will come from the town of Bethlehem Ephrathah, from the tribe of Judah. This small village is located approximately 5 miles south of Jerusalem and Judah is one of the twelve tribes which narrows down the potential list of Messianic candidates.

Next, to escape the massacre of the innocents, Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt according to the prophet (Hosea 11:1). Great suffering and slaughter of the young children occurred fulfilling the words of Jeremiah (Matthew 2:17-18; Jeremiah 31:15). Joseph and his family then returned and settled in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23; Isaiah 9:1-6). Isaiah foretold that Messiah would be preceded by a messenger to prepare the way (Isaiah 40:3) and this is exactly what happened through John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1). So far, we have seen from His miraculous birth to the commencement of His ministry, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Scriptures.

The Gospels represent and detail different aspects of who Messiah is. Matthew portrays Jesus as the King, Mark the Servant, Luke demonstrates His humanity, whilst John reveals His deity. The wise men journeyed from the East following His star in the hope of finding 'the King of the Jews' (Matthew 2:2). In order to establish a kingdom you need to appoint a king. Jesus promised His disciples that when the Son of Man (another Messianic title) sits on the throne of His glory, they would also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He rode on a colt, the foal of a donkey. This might appear strange to typical expectations of grandeur, though not to those who welcomed Him, or to the Scriptures themselves. Matthew quoted Zechariah 9:9: "Tell the daughter of Zion, behold your King is coming to you, lowly and sitting on the foal of a donkey." (Matthew 21:5)

“

Tell the daughter of Zion, behold your King is coming to you,
lowly and sitting on the foal of a donkey.

Matthew 21:5

”

When the Romans crucified someone, it was common practise to nail a sign with their charge or the accusation written against them. What could they accuse Messiah of? Amazingly the accusation written against Him was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin: "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Matthew 27:37)

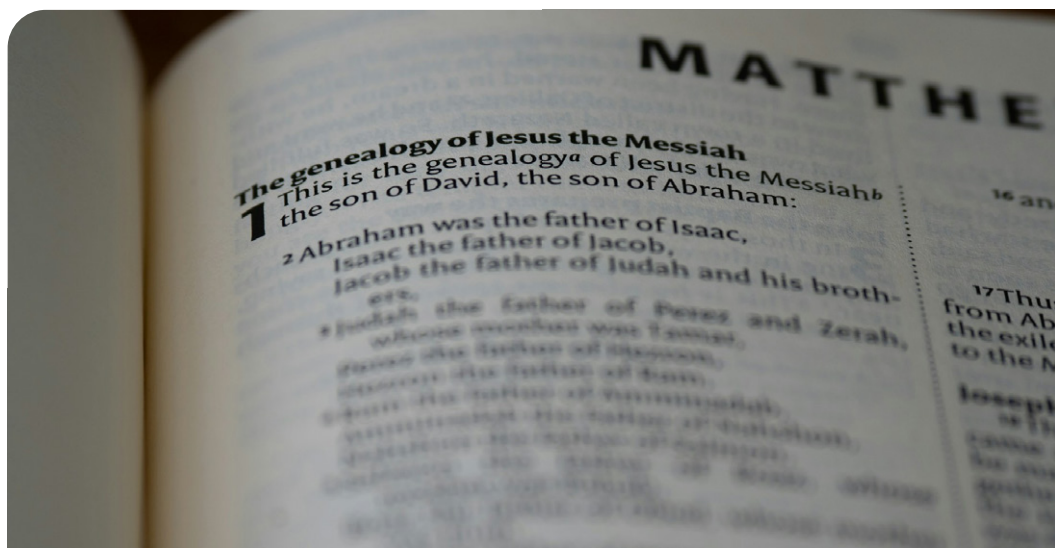
Until this day, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is not included in the regular synagogue readings, though it is worthy of our attention since it is part of the Scriptures. This passage foretells the exact details of how Messiah would give Himself as a sacrifice and make atonement for our sins and thereby reconcile us with God. Like the Passover Lamb, Jesus was crucified at Passover. He is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

Matthew mentions the mocking that Jesus endured in fulfilment of prophecy (Matthew 27:29, 31; c.f. Isaiah 53:3, 7).

Matthew carefully notes the robbers crucified with Him according to the Scriptures (Matthew 27:38; Isaiah 53:9).

Matthew records that He yielded up His spirit (Matthew 27:50; Isaiah 53:12).

Matthew mentions some, though not of all, the moving and specific events listed in Isaiah 53. Messiah would have a unique birth, life, death and resurrection. His resurrection is the guarantee of eternal life for the believer in Messiah. For those who turn to Him, trust Him, obey and follow Him, they can have assurance of salvation and atonement for their sins, not through their works of righteousness, but by His grace through faith in Him.



The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea

Become Disciples of Jesus the Messiah

John's Gospel and Matthew's Gospel are of particular interest from a Jewish perspective. Whereas Matthew explains precisely how Yeshua (Jesus) fulfilled prophecy, John's Gospel includes seven miracles (Messiah is supposed to be able to perform miracles, cf. Isaiah 35:5-6) and seven famous 'I AM' statements, drawing the reader's attention to Yeshua, as the Son of God and Messiah (cf. Exodus 3:14). Nicodemus' journey to faith can be followed by examining John chapters 3, 7 and 19. Nicodemus is accompanied by Joseph of Arimathea at the burial of Jesus in John 19.

Nicodemus meets Jesus in John 3

What insight does the study of ancient history contribute concerning Nicodemus? We know that he was a Pharisee, ruler of the Jews and the teacher of Israel. Nicodemus is mentioned twice in Josephus¹ and a few times in the Talmud where he is portrayed as a man of great wealth.² This is significant and concurs with John 19 when Nicodemus brought 100lbs of myrrh and aloes to Jesus' burial.

Nicodemus visited Jesus at night. No doubt they were both busy men, especially since it was Pesach (Passover). Moreover, it was likely that Nicodemus was afraid of being seen by others from the Sanhedrin; similarly, this can sometimes still be the case today.

Nicodemus respectfully addressed Yeshua as Rabbi and solidified that pronouncement by recognising that His 'signs' were from God. The Talmud does not deny that Jesus performed miracles but does oppose His claim to be the Messiah.³ Nicodemus stated that 'we' know that His signs are from God. Hence this may well have included Joseph of Arimathea in view of their actions in John 19 and possibly others.

Jesus explained to Nicodemus that he must be born again. He needed to be regenerated, in other words, born of the Spirit. Nicodemus was baffled and was thinking of being reborn within the context of his setting. This included proselyte conversion, being crowned king, baptism, repentance, having a bar mitzvah, marriage, rabbinical ordination and becoming the head of a seminary.⁴ So after exploring all those options, what was meant in this context by being born again?

Jesus compared the wind with the Spirit of God, which has a similar meaning and serves as an excellent illustration. No one can see the wind, though its effects are obvious by what it does. Similarly, we cannot see the Holy Spirit, though we can recognise an unmistakable change in a person's life. Nicodemus would likely have seen the disciples and how the Spirit worked in their lives.

Nicodemus knew that God was with Jesus and he was keenly interested, so he sought further clarification. How can one accurately comprehend passages from the New Testament? One must commence from the Tanakh – The Old Testament. Jesus began with Moses, the great prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:15-22, Moses spoke of a greater Prophet like him. I am not sure if Nicodemus realised at that stage that he was actually conversing with the Prophet like Moses. Now Jesus drew his attention to when the children of Israel were bitten by serpents and had to gaze at the bronze serpent on the pole to be healed. Now they would need to look to the Son of Man who would also be lifted up when He was crucified. It is imperative to look to Jesus and be saved, but how? Because we are born of flesh and naturally sin, we are spiritually dead and have to be reborn (born from above). God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son and whoever believes in Him shall not perish but receive eternal life (John 3:16). This requires more than mere, intellectual assent since you need to turn from your sins, trust in Him as Lord and Saviour and ask for His help to do that.

Nicodemus speaks up for Yeshua in John 7

In his three appearances in John's Gospel, we see Nicodemus' journey move towards and culminate in faith in God. In a fascinating way, Nicodemus goes to Jesus in John 3, sides with him in John 7 and believes in Him in John 19. In John 3, Nicodemus and Jesus were discussing the new birth at Passover. The passage in John 7:40-52 is set at the Feast of Tabernacles. In John 7:40, some identified Him as 'the Prophet'. They recognised Jesus as the Prophet like Moses. Others wondered whether Messiah would come from Galilee and quoted Micah 5:2 (Micah 5:1 in the Tanakh, cf. John 7:42). The Scriptures confirmed that He would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah from the Tribe of Judah but in addition, He would dwell in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2).

Notice Nicodemus raised the principle of considering someone innocent before proven guilty which is an honourable principle of our Judeo-Christian heritage and legal system. Nicodemus was accused of siding with Jesus and those from Galilee and the claim that no prophet would come from Galilee was reiterated in John 7:52. They were mistaken and if they had read the opening verses of Isaiah 9 it would have pointed them to Jesus as Messiah.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are disciples at Messiah's burial

In this last window on Nicodemus' life, the season is Passover yet again. Significantly, Joseph of Arimathea believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Today there are an increasing number of Jewish people coming to faith in Messiah although they face opposition. Nicodemus then brought around 100lbs of myrrh and aloes (John 19:39). That is an enormous, costly amount! This speaks of what Yeshua meant to Nicodemus. They buried Him and Nicodemus had also come to faith in Jesus as Messiah. If you have read the account of the woman with the alabaster flask of fragrant oil, that too was a costly quantity pointing to His burial (John 12:1-8).

Jesus was buried with the rich (Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy) and they were fulfilling Isaiah 53:9. Again, Nicodemus' costly gift agrees with the Talmud and Josephus concerning his wealth. Notice He was buried in the garden in a new tomb where no one was laid. Not only was Jesus' resurrection predicted in Psalm 16:10, "You shall not allow Your Holy One to see corruption", yet even the body of Messiah did not come into contact with that which was corrupted.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were understandably afraid, yet despite that, they were searching for Messiah and found Him. The same is true today. There is a great cost and possibility of being disowned by friends and family. But, if we seek Him, we will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13). Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles point towards Messiah at His first coming and His glorious return. Nicodemus was a real historical figure who came to faith when He met the Teacher of Israel. Have you found Messiah? Are you ready for when Messiah returns? Are you trusting in Him?

Joseph of Arimathea was a man of wealth, a member of the Sanhedrin, a disciple of Yeshua (Jesus) who was waiting for the kingdom of God. He was a good and just man from Arimathea, approximately 15-20 miles north of Jerusalem, and he was known as a 'secret believer' (John 19:38). Nonetheless, he took courage and his actions demonstrated the clear unmistakable outworking of his genuine faith. Could it be the case that there are people like Joseph of Arimathea around today?

Notice evening came and it was the preparation day, so the Sabbath was drawing near. Joseph of Arimathea needed access to the body of Yeshua quickly, so that he could bury Him and then rest on the Sabbath. Joseph of Arimathea was accompanied by Nicodemus who first came to Jesus at night (John 3:1-21) and was asked if he was one of Yeshua's followers in John 7:45-52. They returned with spices and fragrant oils. Today Jewish funerals still usually occur soon after the death of a loved one and are held neither on the Sabbath nor on Jewish holidays.

The body of Yeshua

It is easy to overlook the importance of Joseph requesting Messiah's body. Consider the timing. Joseph's request would render him ceremonially defiled during Passover. By asking Pilate for His body, he was identifying himself as a follower of Yeshua. This is a bold step of faith for both Joseph and Nicodemus and something that believers in Him must do.

Joseph took the body of Jesus and they wrapped Him in linen and laid him in a new tomb, hewn out of the rock. A large stone was rolled across the door of the tomb. No one had laid there before. When Yeshua was born, Mary's womb was a new vessel in which Jesus grew. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt upon which no one had ridden. Even in His death, Yeshua lay uncorrupted in a new tomb where no one had laid before.

A 'secret' believer

We would do well to consider what 'type' of secret believer Joseph of Arimathea was. At the scene of the crucifixion, other than John, Mary and a few of the women, most of the disciples were afraid and stood far off. However, the minute that he asked to bury the body of Jesus, it was irrevocably clear that Joseph was identifying himself as a dedicated follower and simultaneously exposing himself to being expelled from the Sanhedrin, persecution and potential violence.

Today there can still be a cost for those who come to faith in Yeshua as Messiah. Being misunderstood and excluded from friends, family, financial security and the immediate community are all real prospects. There is inevitably a great cost involved for every believer who trusts in the Lord. Yet there is also an eternal reward and assurance for every believer. But it would be foolish to try and hold on to what we cannot keep, and much wiser to give that up, so that we might gain what can never be taken away.

Joseph of Arimathea plays a part in fulfilling prophecy from the Tanakh

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 speaks of Messiah. Until Rashi, most Jewish commentary said this passage spoke of Messiah, rather than Israel. Isaiah 53:9 tells us, "And they made His grave with the wicked, but with the rich at His death". The context here is clearly speaking of an individual not a nation. Usually, a crucified body would normally be disposed of and even eaten by wild creatures. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy and provided the tomb thereby fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

But there is also David's prophecy of the resurrection of Messiah in Psalm 16:10: "You shall not allow Your holy One to see corruption." Joseph cared for His body. His tomb had never been used and the body of Yeshua was wrapped in clean linen. Joseph of Arimathea therefore played an integral part in fulfilling two vital prophecies.

Trusting in Yeshua the Messiah in today's world

Let us put this in today's context. Many Jewish people have come to trust in Yeshua both in Messianic fellowships in Israel and throughout the world. Joseph and Nicodemus were both obviously Jewish, yet Joseph came secretly for fear of his countrymen and Nicodemus came at night. Maybe you want to know who Yeshua really is and you have never read the Brit Hadasha (New Testament) and people have told you that it is antisemitic. If you read it for yourself, you will discover it was written by Jewish authors about a Jewish Messiah in whom there is salvation.



1. The New Complete Works of Josephus, Translated by William Wiston & Commentary by Paul Maier (Kregel, 1999; Grand Rapids), Jewish Antiquities, Book 14, Chp3:2, p457, The Jewish War, Book 2, Chp18,10:451, p761
2. Greg Denham, Nicodemus: A Conversation that Changed the World <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/nicodemus-a-conversation-that-changed-the-world/>
3. <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/did-jesus-use-magic-and-sorcery/>
4. You must be born again, <https://www.hadavar.org/getting-to-know-god/you-must-be-born-again/>

The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

The Jewish Setting of John's Gospel

When we consider the Jewish setting of John's Gospel, it helps us to understand John's purpose for writing. John wrote that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in His name (John 20:30-31). In his era, various groups represented a range of Jewish interests including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians and Zealots. Geographically there was also the Judeans, Galileans and the Samaritans. Much like today, many of these groups had differing Messianic hopes and expectations.

John commenced his Gospel by grounding it in the context of a literal creation from Genesis 1. He explains that Jesus the Messiah existed from eternity past, He was in the beginning with God and created everything, and that Jesus gives life and light (John 1:1-5). John the Baptist was the witness of the true Light and importantly he was the messenger preparing the way for the Messiah as foretold in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. John the Baptist emphatically declared that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Abraham obediently took Isaac and prepared to sacrifice him, though the Lord provided a ram as a substitute in place of Isaac. Isaac is a type – in other words a foreshadow or picture – of Messiah. The Lord Jesus willingly gave His own life to make atonement for sin and to reconcile us to God. It is of course no coincidence that Jesus was crucified at Passover.

Nathanael, one of Jesus' 'talmidim' (disciples) recognised Him for who He was, since Jesus saw him under the fig tree before He arrived and his response was, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). Though Jesus had seen Nathanael under the fig tree, He assured him that he would see far greater things, "even heaven opening and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (John 1:51). Yeshua was speaking of Jacob's ladder, and He would later explain that He is the Son of Man and the only way to the Father (John 14:6).

The feasts of the Lord feature prominently throughout John's Gospel. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, the Teacher of Israel, it was during Passover (John 2:23ff). In John 7 through to John 9, the setting is the Feast of Tabernacles. Amongst the great water ceremony and giant menorahs lighting Jerusalem, Jesus said that He gives living water (John 7:38) and is the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5). In John 10:22 when Jesus walked in Solomon's porch, that event happened at Hanukkah. In John 12 when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with costly perfume, that occurred six days before Passover.

The Last Supper coincided with Passover, which is confirmed by the other Gospel accounts. Jesus rose from the grave on the Feast of Firstfruits. He was uniquely sinless and the Feast of Unleavened bread (leaven almost always represents sin) pointed to that also. All the feasts point toward His first coming and second coming. Also, the context of communion is actually rooted in the Passover.

There are seven miracles mentioned in John's Gospel. The performing of miracles was and is important to prove His identity as Messiah, since Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah who would enable the lame to walk, blind to see and deaf to hear (Isaiah 35:5-6). In addition, Jesus turned water into wine, walked on water, multiplied food and rose from the grave which is the greatest miracle and was also foretold by King David (Psalm 16:10).

There are seven I AM statements in John's Gospel. Remember that God revealed Himself to Moses instructing him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt sent by "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Jesus claimed I am the bread of life, light of the world, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life and the vine. In John 5, John 8 and John 10 there were certain Jews that tried to kill Jesus since they claimed that he was blaspheming by calling God His Father, making Himself equal with God.

We must be careful here and consider the Jewish context as set out in the opening paragraph. Let us remember that Yeshua (Jesus) was Jewish, His disciples were Jewish and the setting was Jewish with various groups represented. The fact that some Jewish people wanted to kill Him does not mean that all the Jewish groups and individuals did. This Gospel confirms that salvation is of the Jews, that Yeshua (Jesus) was buried in the custom of the Jews and that Jesus was the King of the Jews.

It is vital to remember that some Jewish people believed and trusted in Jesus as the Messiah, and some did not. If we fail to recognise that, we are in danger of understanding John's Gospel as an anti-Semitic text, though it is anything but! When Jesus fed the five thousand, some acknowledged Him as truly the Prophet like Moses (John 6:14; c.f. Deuteronomy 18:15-22). At Tabernacles when some sought to harm him, many of the others believed in Him (John 7:30-31). When Jesus invited people to come to Him to drink from His life-giving water, again many from the crowd were convinced that He was that same Prophet (John 7:37-40). Some said this is the Messiah whilst others questioned whether Messiah would come from Galilee (John 7:40-41). Isaiah 9:1-7 clearly speaks of Messiah from Galilee. There was obviously divided opinion.

When Jesus was buried, Joseph of Arimathea (a prominent council member) asked for the body of Jesus and took it to his unused tomb and Nicodemus (the teacher of Israel) brought a great quantity of myrrh for embalming. This signifies what Jesus meant to them and demonstrates that learned and notable leaders came to faith and trusted in Him.

When Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to His disciples, He greeted them three times saying "Shalom Alachem" (peace be with you – John 20:19, 21, 26). Messiah is supposed to bring peace. At His first coming, Jesus through His sacrifice brought peace with God by giving Himself to make atonement for our sin and to satisfy the wrath of God. When He returns, He will come as the Prince of Peace and will return to the place He departed from, the Mount of Olives, and will reign as King Messiah in His Messianic Kingdom. The peace that He gives is a lasting peace and something that only Messiah can bring. Do you have peace with God and have you asked Messiah to forgive your sins?



The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Gamaliel's Advice and How We Will Know

When Messiah Comes – Acts 5:33-42

Gamaliel is a fascinating historical figure and the insight he offers opens up the question, 'how will you recognise Messiah when He comes?' In his era, there were two noteworthy schools of interpretation, the school of Shammai which was stricter and more legalistic, and the school of Hillel, which was more liberal, though well within the parameters of Orthodox Judaism.

Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel and he was one of the few rabbis of his time permitting students to read Greek literature.¹ He even allowed his disciples to greet pagans on their feast days² and today his influence opens up a bridge for meaningful dialogue. He is mentioned in Acts 5:34 and 22:3 and in the Talmud. In 'My Jewish Learning', both of the Acts references are cited.³ In Early Church writings, The Clementine Recognitions (1:65) state that he was a secret believer⁴ (possibly akin to Nicodemus), though there isn't sufficient evidence to substantiate that claim. His name means 'reward of God'.⁵ His father might have been the Simeon that took Jesus in his arms⁶ and it is likely that he would have known Nicodemus.

In Acts 5:33-42, it is clearly evident that he is greatly respected by the Sanhedrin and the majority of them would have been Sadducees who denied angels and the resurrection of the dead, and only esteemed the Torah, not the rest of the Tanakh (Old Testament). Gamaliel was also revered by others; Onkelos, the author of the Targum is said to have given 70 pounds of perfume in his honour at his funeral.⁷ That speaks of what Gamaliel meant to him and how he valued his life. He was the most noted rabbi of his time and he died eighteen years before the temple was destroyed. It was said that when he died the glory of the law ceased, and purity and abstinence died.⁸

He was the first to be called 'Rabban' (our master, our great one) which is a greater title than the usual designation 'Rabbi', meaning (my great one).⁹ Today, the great works of Jewish commentators are considered such as Rambam, Ramban, Ralbag and Rashi. These names are prefixed with R for Rabbi and are acrostics for the likes of Maimonides, Nachmanides, Levi Ben Gershon and Solomon Ben Isaac. One Messianic Scholar asked the question, "what about Raybad?" By that he meant Rabbi Yeshua Ben David. So Gamaliel was not only around at the time but is a helpful connecting point to consider Yeshua (Jesus).

The apostle Paul described himself as being raised at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). In Acts 5:33-42 Gamaliel intervenes preventing the apostles from being killed. Of course almost all those apostles would have been Jewish, though that is hugely significant in terms of Jewish-Christian relations especially when Matthew 27:25 is misused as a blanket designation and examined out of the immediate context and has been misappropriated and used insidiously against Jewish people from all walks of life for two millennia. If Gamaliel had considered his student's claim further, he might have become another Paul.

The meeting of the Council

Picture the scene. The apostles have been imprisoned for preaching and have been freed by an angel and have returned only to preach in the temple again. Hence the council were furious and plotted for them to be killed. In contrast, Gamaliel wisely counsels them to put the apostles outside for a while. This is the equivalent of counting to ten before taking hasty action that might be regrettable soon afterwards. We are now privy to the Sanhedrin; Gamaliel stands up and has their undivided attention.

Gamaliel recalls that notable leaders claiming to be Messiah or who led insurrections have been around previously. He cites two examples. Firstly, Theudas (not the one mentioned in Josephus¹⁰ although there are similarities).¹¹ Secondly, there was Judas of Galilee. He is mentioned in Josephus and his account agrees with Luke's account.

It is at this point that we are introduced to the Gamaliel principle. Leave them alone. If this movement is from men, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, be wary lest you find yourself trying to inadvertently fight God! If we were present, it would be tempting to heap generous praise and give a standing ovation; however, let us assess the situation more thoughtfully. This is not necessarily an opinion sympathetic with the apostles' cause, but it demonstrates an awareness and trust in the sovereignty of God.¹² We could say the argument is an apologetic, though the logic is not watertight. Other religions, movements and cults have grown and flourished but through violent and questionable means, and that certainly is not evidence of the Lord's blessing. Gamaliel might have had Psalm 2 in mind in the context of the futility of fighting against the Lord and His anointed.¹³

Other Messianic claims

There has been a track record of people claiming to be Messiah throughout the ages and convincing many. For the sake of brevity, only a few of the more well-known ones will be mentioned here. During the Bar Kochba revolt in AD 132-135, Rabbi Akiva believed Simon Bar Kochba to be the Messiah. This caused great controversy and division between Jews, Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians. Tragically at the same time Justin Martyr wrote his dialogue with Trypho the Jew, which caused incalculable damage.

Many others claimed to be the Messiah over the centuries. Fast forward one and a half millennia to the time of Shabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) who had a following. Nathan 'the prophet' convinced him that he was the Messiah and Zevi, under duress, even eventually converted to Islam.¹⁴ He was born in Smyrna, Turkey and this occurred shortly after the Cossacks butchered 300,000 Jewish people in Ukraine.¹⁵ Needless to say it should be noted they were desperate to be delivered from their awful plight and persecution.

In the last century some believed Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson to be the Messiah. He was born in Russia, lived much of his life in New York and passed away in 1994. Some hoped that he would be resurrected. There was an interesting article about his influence in the December 2018 issue of Israel Today. He was the 7th leader of the Lubavites and is still considered one of the most phenomenal Jewish personalities of our era.¹⁶

Asking meaningful questions

Sometimes questions are more useful and thought-provoking than detailed responses. Consider the following series of questions:

- Zevi was born in Turkey and Schneerson in Russia, but where do the Scriptures say Messiah will be born?
- How will we know when Messiah comes? (The response is often, 'You will know!')
- How do we know that and what prophecies can help us know for certain?
- What will Messiah do? (Messiah will bring peace.)
- How will Messiah bring peace? (There will be no war.)
- How will we recognise Messiah apart from the others who have claimed to have been Messiah?

Why is asking questions so useful, as well as answering questions with another question? Asking questions forces people to think rather than regurgitating their own opinions. In the Gospels, Jesus asked questions in a masterful way and at times responded to a question with another question.

How will you know when Messiah comes? Doesn't the Bible state that He will be born in Bethlehem, from the tribe of Judah and the line of David? Will not Messiah speak in parables, perform miracles and make atonement? Could Yeshua (Jesus) be the Messiah? Will not Messiah fulfil prophecy and be like Moses?

For those who deny the resurrection of the body and a literal Messiah, but look forward to a Messianic Age, how can there be a time of peace on earth without the Peacemaker? How can you have a kingdom without the King?

Being witnesses

Despite the fact that the Sanhedrin consented to Gamaliel's verdict, they still beat the apostles and tried to silence them. Amazingly, they rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer and they taught and preached daily in the temple and houses. Similarly today, Messianic believers still face persecution and misunderstanding from all sides, although others are much more supportive of them when they recognise God's plan for Israel and the nations.

Before Gamaliel spoke in the Sanhedrin, the apostles made it known that they were witnesses. After they were beaten and warned, they still witnessed. We must be witnesses also, and salt and light in this world. At Passover and in recognition of Gamaliel's advice, mention is made of the Passover sacrifice, bitter herbs and the unleavened bread.¹⁷ Not only does this remind us of the bitter lives and the Lord's mighty deliverance and redemption at Pesach; it more gloriously points to Yeshua, the sinless Lamb of God who through His sacrifice made atonement for our sins. Messiah has already come and is coming again. Are you ready for when He comes and are you trusting in Him?

1. Phillips Brooks, <https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/brooks/gamaliel.htm>

2. Ibid.

3. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/rabban-gamaliel/>

4. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Moody Press, Chicago; 1985), p388

5. Ibid, p388

6. Ralph V Harvey <https://www.rabbangamaliel.org/rabbangamaliel.pdf> p7

7. Joseph Benson, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/5-34.htm>

8. J. Anderson, *Acts What the Bible Teaches* (John Ritchie Ltd, Kilmarnock, 2003), p72-73

9. David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc, Clarksville; 1992), p237

10. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, Nashville; 2005), p1445

11. John Walvoord & Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Victor, USA; 1983), p366

12. Stern, p238

13. Anderson, p73

14. Matt Plen, *Who was Shabbetia Zevi?* <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbetai-zevi/>

15. Ibid.

16. *Israel Today*, (December 2018, No.228), p4-5

17. Ceil & Moishe Rosen, *Christ in the Passover* (Moody Publishers, Chicago; 2006), p62

The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Eight Reasons Why God Has a Plan and a Purpose For Israel – Romans 11

Romans Chapter 11 is a pivotal chapter for understanding God's plan of salvation for Jewish people and Gentiles. Sadly, some hold the opinion that the church has somehow replaced Israel and is the 'New Israel' or 'True Israel', known as 'replacement theology' or in academia, 'supersessionism'. Nevertheless, neither of the terms 'New Israel' nor 'True Israel' are contained in Scripture. Paul consistently uses the term 'Jew' eleven times in Romans in contrast with 'Gentiles' or 'Greeks' and 'Israel' appears in no less than twelve occasions and specifically within Romans 9-11.¹ Thus Paul asks and responds to critical questions regarding Jewish people, Gentiles and salvation and quotes extensively from the Tanakh (Old Testament) to present his watertight case.

Covenant relationship

Paul's opening question in Romans 11:1a, "I say then, has God cast away His people?" is actually a rhetorical question. The fact that Israel is referred to as God's people draws the reader's attention to Deuteronomy 7:7-9 and 14:2, which demonstrates that God chose Israel not because Israel was more numerous than other peoples, but because God loved Israel and is faithful to keep His covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant was an everlasting covenant including the land designated as an everlasting possession (Genesis 17:7-9), which would continue through Isaac and Jacob and beyond (Genesis 17:19; 28:13-14).

Paul

Paul responds to his rhetorical question with an emphatic response, "Certainly not!" He immediately adds, "For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Benjamin." (Romans 11:1b). The implication is obvious since if Paul who came to faith in Yeshua (Jesus) as Messiah has not been cut off, then clearly his countrymen may also come to believe themselves.

The remnant

Paul's case is strengthened further as he recounts Elijah pleading before God, considering himself the only one left after the prophets had been killed; in response to him, the Lord confirmed He had reserved for Himself seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal (Romans 11:2-4; c.f. 1 Kings 19:10-18). Paul commented that in his time too, there was a remnant according to the election of grace. It might appear that there are not many Jewish believers following Jesus the Messiah, but since the re-establishment of Israel as a Nation State on May 14th 1948, there has been a significant increase in believers and messianic congregations in Israel, and also in other parts of the world. This remnant is according to the election of grace which is predicated by God.

Salvation given to Gentiles to provoke Israel to discover the same

The next question is answered with a similar emphatic response and then explains that God purposefully gave salvation to Gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy. "I say then, have they stumbled that they might fall? Certainly not! But through their fall to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles." (Romans 11:11)

For the most part, Gentiles have done anything but provoke Israel to jealousy! Consider war, forced conversions, boycotting of goods and services, enforcement of clothing, restriction of residential locations and expulsion from various lands. More recently however, there is a growing number of Gentiles who love Israel and the Jewish people and who want to bless them and to bring them to Messiah.

The Gentiles might be reached

But how does this all come about? Israel is described as the olive tree and the branches were broken off for a time that the Gentile branches might be grafted in. It is unusual to graft a wild olive tree into a cultivated tree. This might not appear to be the means that a logical gardener would employ; however the decaying wild olive was sometimes grafted into the fruitful one, enabling it to flourish and yield fruit.²



And so all Israel shall be saved

Paul explains that a temporary and partial blindness has come to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25). Then, "... all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). This is neither describing all Jewish people that ever lived, nor the church being saved. It is nonetheless describing a great ingathering of Jewish souls which will result in Israel's national salvation in the last days.

This is rooted in prophecy and further relates to God's faithfulness to keep His covenant promise with Israel. "The deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Romans 11:27; c.f. Isaiah 59:20-21; 27:9).

Election endures

Paul explains further that Israel is beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:28b-29). Jeremiah 31:31-37 speaks of a new covenant with Israel and that if the sun, moon, stars, sea and waves were to cease from their ordinances then the seed of Israel would cease from being a nation. The implication is two-fold. God is faithful to Israel and keeps His covenant promises. If God were to break His covenant with Israel, then why could He not break His covenant with Gentiles also?

Receiving mercy

Though Israel was at once disobedient, through the mercy shown, they may obtain mercy (Romans 11:31-32). Considering the tremendous magnitude and intricacy of God's plan for Jewish and Gentile people, Paul responds by praising God with gratitude, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33)

1. David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary (Jewish New Testament Publications, Clarksville; 1992), p420
2. Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry Concise Commentary (Moody Press, Chicago), p861

The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

A Greater Commonwealth – Ephesians 2:11–22

It is a pleasure to watch athletes from across the globe competing in a whole range of events in the Commonwealth Games. This friendly event encourages sportsmanship, fair play and equality, but there is a greater commonwealth mentioned in Scripture which brings real hope and unity through Messiah. The Peacemaker has brought peace with God and this is essential before we can have genuine and lasting peace with others.

A people without hope

In the Ancient World there were various distinctions such as Jew and Gentile, Greek or Barbarian and the status of being a Roman citizen. Paul was Jewish, circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews instructed by Gamaliel (Philippians 3:5-6; Acts 22:3) and was also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-28).

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul was writing to the congregation at Ephesus which was mainly comprised of Gentiles, although there was a small representation of Jewish people resident.¹ Gentiles were sometimes referred to as the ‘uncircumcision’ since they were not in a covenant relationship with God and did not bear the mark of that covenant that was established with Abraham. Paul explains the predicament of the Gentiles: firstly, they were without Messiah; secondly, they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel; thirdly, they were strangers from the covenants of promise; fourthly, they consequently had no hope; and fifthly, they were without God in the world.

Let us consider the best that the Greek world had to offer concerning an eternal hope. Epicurus and Aristotle did not believe in it, the Platonists thought the soul passed through perpetual changes, either happy or miserable and the Stoics considered the world to last no longer than the general burning up of matter.² Hence there was no secure future and no assurance beyond this life and the Greeks looked back on a golden age in their history rather than to future glory.³ This lack of hope was most evident in their view of death.⁴ In contrast, the Jewish folk had distinct ideas of God and immortality.⁵

David Stern asserts, "The New Covenant was given not to Gentiles but to Israel; Gentiles are foreigners to it except through faith, which, as Sha'ul points out, makes them full participants."⁶ Stern is correct since the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31 is with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Furthermore, "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Messiah is our peace

Those who were far off (Gentiles) and who believe in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah have been brought near through the blood of Messiah. In Ephesians 2:14-18, the word peace is mentioned three times. Jesus the Messiah has broken down the middle wall of separation and He is our peace. Walvoord and Zuck note that though Messiah was put to death, He has destroyed the spiritual enmity between Jewish people and Gentiles which means that Jewish and Gentile believers should have no hostility.⁷

The Bible speaks today. I have been blessed to visit Israel and attend a large meeting including Messianic Jews and Christian Arabs united through Messiah. Recently and sadly there have been problems between Russian and Ukrainian Jewish believers though we should all be one in Messiah. In some of the Messianic Congregations in Israel there are many people groups represented in the 'commonwealth of Israel'. Jesus the Messiah has created 'one new man' from the Jewish and Gentile peoples thus making peace. Just to clarify this does not mean that Jewish and Gentile believers are no longer ethnically Jewish and Gentile, but it does mean that they are united through Messiah who has brought that peace through His blood. Also the church does not inherit the blessings promised specifically to Israel.⁸

Even greater than the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile is the reconciliation between humans and God. Yeshua has made atonement as the sinless Son of God who takes away the sin of the world through His act of righteousness by the shedding of His blood. That is also the basis for genuine and lasting reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile people.

Through Jesus the Messiah, believers have access by the Holy Spirit to the Father. Justification by faith is available to all who would trust in Him. Maybe you are casting your minds back to the days of the Jerusalem Temple and the holy of holies and the division within the temple courts. On a shelf in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, there is an inscription from Herod's Temple in Greek marking Jerusalem's most sacred site where Gentiles should not venture.⁹ That division is no longer there, neither physically nor spiritually. Nonetheless, we must always remember that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is holy and that His presence is a tremendous privilege and should never be taken lightly.

The household of God

Paul continues in his letter to the Ephesians explaining that because of who Messiah is and what He has done, the believers are no longer strangers or foreigners but are now fellow citizens. Jesus the Messiah is the promised cornerstone of this household of God (Psalm 118:22). The foundation of that household were the apostles and prophets of whom most were Jewish, yet that whole building grows into a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:20-21).

Those who trust in the Lord are also built together for a dwelling place of God in the Holy Spirit. So through Jesus the Messiah there is a greater commonwealth, a greater genuine and lasting unity, a greater shalom and a greater household in the Lord. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1) And finally, "Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord His God" (Psalm 146:5).



1. J. Vernon McGee, Ephesians Thru The Bible Commentary Series (Thomas Nelson, 1991; Nashville), p81
2. Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary on the Whole Bible (Zondervan, 1961; Grand Rapids), p1285
3. Francis Foulkes, Ephesians Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1989; Leicester), p88
4. Ibid, p88
5. Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, p1285
6. David Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992; Clarksville), p583
7. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary The New Testament (Victor, 1983; USA), p626
8. Ibid, p627
9. Ilan Ben Zion, Ancient Temple Mount 'Warning' stone is 'closest thing we have to the Temple' 22 October 2015 The Times of Israel <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ancient-temple-mount-warning-stone-is-closest-thing-we-have-to-the-temple/>

The Jewish Setting of the New Covenant

Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, but how does that apply today? Which gospel was written by a Jewish author about a Jewish Messiah with a Jewish audience in mind? Why is John's Gospel good news for both Jewish and Gentile people? What does the New Testament say concerning Gamaliel who is also mentioned in Josephus and the Talmud? Have you ever considered the testimonies of Nicodemus the teacher of Israel and Joseph of Arimathea? Have you read God's plan for Israel in Romans Chapter 11 and how does Messiah bring lasting peace (shalom)?

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