

Chapter Five

Reinterpreting Messianic Prophecies

One of the many challenges in dialoguing with Jewish people who do not believe in Yeshua is what they have been taught regarding what the Scriptures declare about the Messiah.¹ The problem is that the rabbis have not been consistent or fair in their interpretations of many Messianic prophecies. Prior to the advent of Christianity, many rabbis correctly identified many Scriptural prophecies as pointing to Messiah. After leaders and apologists from within Christianity began to correctly assert these prophecies as pointing to and being fulfilled in Yeshua, the rabbis backpedaled and reversed course in many interpretations of Messianic prophecies. This was not done on the basis of solid scholarship but as a reactionary and defensive move². During the third and fourth centuries of the common era, much of the theology from both Christianity and Judaism can be characterized as “reactionary” in opposition to the “other side” and not based on careful scholarship. It is much like what we see

in today's hyper-partisan political diatribes from both sides of the spectrum. Truth is frequently a casualty of the war between men, whether theologians or politicians.

It is true historically that during the time of Yeshua and the oppression by the Roman authorities, many Jewish expectations regarding the Messiah were colored by their immediate situation and need for deliverance. These expectations were focused on the immediate return of the kingdom and deliverance from tyranny. Consequently, their focus and expectations were on their need for the promised deliverer, Messiah ben David, the conquering hero as described and prophesied in Daniel 7:13,14 and Zechariah 14:4 and others. We can empathize with suffering people longing for relief in our day as well. We too long for the return of Messiah and the establishment of righteous rule in our world. Come, Lord Yeshua!

The death of Yeshua on the cross seemed to contradict their expectations. They failed to understand the prophecies about Messiah that describe Him as Messiah ben Yosef, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

This apparent problem was addressed by the rabbis in several ways. First, some Messianic prophecies such as those in Isaiah 53 were reinterpreted to apply to Israel. The context argues strongly against such reasoning, but this interpretation is still prevalent today. Another theory posited that there are actually

two Messiahs, one as the suffering servant and the other as the returning conqueror! They could not or would not consider the concept of the same Messiah coming two different times for two different purposes as most of Christianity correctly asserts.

This long-standing theological polarization has resulted in several positions on issues, especially regarding Messianic prophecies, which have become “cemented” in people’s minds. It is a serious challenge to break through this level of bias. I believe it can only be done through the power of the Holy Spirit Who reveals truth.

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1. The word Messiah is from the Hebrew Mashiach and means “the anointed one” who was prophesied to redeem Israel.
 2. See the excellent book titled *What the Rabbis Know About the Messiah* by Rachmiel Frydland on Amazon.