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HAVURAH

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MESSIANIC PROPHECY

Are we using it
for all its worth?

ISAIAH, PEPPER, AND THE BEATLES

Jhan Moskowitz on
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INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL BROWN

His approach to using
messianic prophecy



*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:
The virgin will be with child and will give birth to
a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Messianic Prophecy

Are we using it for all it's worth?

by Aaron Abramson

"That's Jesus," he admitted, flashing me a 'you-got-me-there' kind of grin.

I had been studying Isaiah 53 with Uri, an Israeli now living in Manhattan's trendy Upper West Side. He had just uttered the very words I had hoped to hear! Carefully, he reread the passage in Hebrew and confirmed, "There cannot be any doubt—Isaiah is writing about Jesus."

I knew what would come next. We would talk a little more and Uri would accept Y'shua. But suddenly my bubble burst.

"It's interesting," he shrugged, "but I'm Jewish. And besides, look how Christians have treated the Jewish people."

"But ... you just said ..."

"I can't. I made a promise to my father before he died that I will never forsake being Jewish."

I have since encountered many other "Uri's." Even when messianic prophecy is presented appropriately and systematically, even when the facts are convincing, they remain unconvinced.

Messianic prophecy *can* make a powerful impression upon a reader under the right circumstances. But it does not serve as a one-size-fits-all case for the gospel.

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

As a new believer in Jesus, I pored through books that offered what I'll call the traditional approach to messianic prophecy. There was Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Gleason Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* and C. S. Lewis' popular *Mere Christianity*. They were powerful resources for me as I sought an impenetrable fortress of evidence that could deflect any objection.

What these authors all have in common is that their approach is systematic and logical, and depends upon facts to establish a case for Jesus as Messiah. It reflects the influence of the Enlightenment and modernism, whereby from about 1750 on, reason became the arbiter of truth. Religion was acknowledged only when proven reasonable. The "prove it" approach to prophecy that developed utilizes individual verses from the Old Testament to establish the messianic claims of the New Testament.

There is much to be said for this way of doing things. The traditional approach has brought the Tanach alive for Christians and has underscored the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Along the way, it gives us a better understanding of the person of Jesus. Yet it has weaknesses that we should consider.

First, in the traditional approach we can lose sight of the questions and concerns of the person we are addressing. For many, unbelief is not merely a consequence of missing the facts. It is quite often a result of who and what they value, particularly their associations and relationships. Pat, "easy"

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answers don't sit well with many of those processing spiritual questions. We may find ourselves spending time discussing the messianic claims of Jesus with people who are more interested in what Jesus said about war, or how the church has dealt with anti-Semitism. The traditional approach to understanding Messiah is sometimes applied to people as though they are blank slates wanting nothing more than to be presented with facts. But for many people, such "proof" may be tangential or even irrelevant to their concerns, which are often of a social or political nature.

A second weakness of the traditional approach is that it can sidetrack us with anti-missionary polemics. Our arguments have, on more than one occasion, given anti-missionaries ammunition to poke holes in our faith. I remember once getting bogged down in a discussion with a Jewish man over the mathematics of Daniel 9. He could not grasp the complex argument that the Messiah would be "cut off" during the 69th of Daniel's 70 weeks (which is not the only interpretation of Daniel's prophecy). Rather than drawing him closer to Y'shua, the detailed arguments and counter-arguments seemed to push him further away.

Third, we sometimes miss the context of the Old Testament passages. This is problematic on a number of levels. We can miss important theological implications of a passage if we only look at how it proves our messianic interpretation. In extreme cases, biblical texts can be boiled down beyond their natural meaning or simply taken out of context to make a case for Jesus. We need to be able to comment on the text without isolating it from its context. Jewish unbelievers, even those who are not well acquainted with the Bible, will be less likely to take our claims seriously if we are unable to interact critically and with some measure of understanding of the biblical text.

Is there a new alternative to the traditional approach? Actually, there is an old and very effective alternative. I believe there is much we can learn from the New Testament writers in this regard.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF MESSIANIC PROPHECY

The New Testament writers were intimately familiar with the Tanach as well as with the literary forms and styles of first-century Jewish writings. Their use of messianic prophecy was culturally relevant to their audience. One aspect of this

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is the fact that their readers were more biblically informed than are many believers today, and they understood *the larger context* of the passage in which a messianic prophecy was found. We need to engage that context too in order to properly understand the New Testament.

Learning from Matthew: Matthew and Isaiah

The Gospel of Matthew contains more quotations from the Tanach than any other gospel, including some commonly disputed texts. One such citation is found in Matthew 1:18-25, which relates the circumstances of the birth of Y'shua and his purpose in coming into the world. To anchor his account and bring it into perspective for his audience, the author quotes Isaiah 7:14.

We have often allowed Jewish skeptics to derail a discussion of this verse by focusing on the word *almah*, rendered "virgin" in most English translations. The argument over the virgin birth has become a prime example of how focusing on a single Hebrew term can obscure the rest of the discussion. There are good arguments that support the "virgin birth" interpretation. But focusing so narrowly complicates the conversation by leading to more questions than either Matthew or Isaiah is endeavoring to answer. Moreover, such an isolated discussion does not give an overall understanding

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ISAIAH, PEPPER AND THE BEATLES

Jhan Moskowitz on messianic prophecy

IMAGINE that I own a book publishing company, Pepper Publications. I contract with a cookbook author and tell her that she can include any recipes she wants. The only requirement is that she needs to include pepper in every recipe. There is a *filter* that requires pepper to be one of the ingredients throughout the book.

I believe the Holy Spirit superintended the canon—meaning the completed Bible as we have it—to be similar. By the time the canon was closed, there was a *messianic filter*. The entire canon of Scripture is messianic. Whoever closed the canon had a messianic hope and expressed it in the way the parts came together.

The same is true for individual authors like Isaiah. Consider Isaiah 7:14, the passage about the *almah*. Usually we focus on analyzing whether *almah* means *virgin* and whether there was a near fulfillment or a distant fulfillment or both. But that may not be the best way to approach the passage.

Think of a drawing of three stick men. The first one is Isaiah speaking, the second one is Isaiah writing, and the third is Isaiah editing his own words in order to give us the Book of Isaiah as we have it in our Bibles today. We don't know everything Isaiah said, and we don't even know everything he wrote because the Book of Isaiah is only a portion of that. Messianic prophecy is not the event of Isaiah speaking or writing. Isaiah may have originally said something in a particular context that is now lost to us, but *the context of the final Book of Isaiah is intentionally messianic*. Isaiah applied a messianic filter to everything he included in his final book.

Let me use an analogy from contemporary music. Imagine that I'm a DJ who plays nothing but the Beatles. I decide that I'm going to play Beatles songs in a way that allows me to make my own statements. The first hour will have a love theme, the second will be political, and so on. For the first hour, I filter just Beatle love songs. They may or may not have love titles, but now they all function as love songs to my wife. *I have put them together in such a way that there is a "love filter."*

Then we move on to the political hour. The lyrics come gently over the air: "Blackbird singing in the dead of night..." Is this about bird watching? No, *the fact that it is in the political section means that you have to interpret it through a "political filter."* And as it happens, the song is about Martin Luther King, Jr.

So why is Isaiah 7:14 messianic? Because it is part of that hour of radio playtime. Isaiah chapters 7-11 is a whole thematic hour of playing messianic songs, in which the context determines the meaning of the parts. Isaiah 7:14 is messianic *because it is in the Book of Isaiah, which was put together to be intentionally and deliberately messianic*. Nothing gets into Isaiah's final version of his words unless it includes pepper, which is to say, unless it gets through that messianic filter.

For more, listen to Jhan's complete series of Bible studies on Isaiah, available as downloadable MP3s at www.jewsforjesus.org/resources/audio

Four Questions for Dr. Michael Brown

Dr. Michael Brown is a Jewish believer in Jesus and a well-known apologist and author. For more, visit his web sites at www.icnministries.org and www.ilifetv.com/thinkitthru. We interviewed him to draw on his expertise in the area of messianic prophecy.

Havurah: In light of how the New Testament writers used messianic prophecy, how do you think we should be using it today?

MB: We should be following the lead of the New Testament writers. But we need to understand their method and their mindset. Sometimes they just quote verses in keeping with the Jewish interpretive styles of the day in order to illustrate a point, not necessarily to give the primary sense of the passage. But certainly in the messianic passages that are quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament writers are often looking at the larger context. For example, Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14. This can only be properly understood when you realize that Matthew was looking at Isaiah chapters 7-11 and its larger context of promises to David. If we think the New Testament writers are simply using the scriptures in an "atomistic" way, meaning that they just pulled verses out of context, we're going to misunderstand what they're doing and our apologetic witness will be weak. But if we understand the care with which they were looking at the text, with the insight they had from the Holy Spirit, then I think we'll find them to be excellent guides.

Havurah: Are there limitations to using messianic prophecy in our witness?

MB: When God saved me as a 16-year-old drug user, I couldn't have cared less about messianic prophecy because I couldn't have cared less about the concept of the Messiah. I was already a committed believer before I knew much about messianic prophecy. But if we are dealing with someone who genuinely wants to know who

the Messiah is according to the Scriptures, then messianic prophecy can play a powerful role. Obviously, every person is different.

Sometimes messianic prophecy is used in a superficial "statistical" way: Jesus fulfilled "x" number of prophecies, and the statistical probability of him doing that is such-and-such. That approach is actually fairly weak, and it's not how the New Testament authors did it. But there is a way to use messianic prophecy whereby we *can* demonstrate conclusively that the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures had to be Jesus. If the interest and the willingness are there, then there's great value in using messianic prophecy.

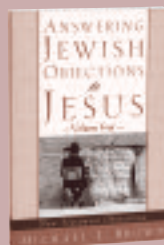
It's also powerful once people have come to the Lord. A lot of the apologetics I do is done primarily for people who are already believers, to strengthen them and help them in their walk so they don't get pulled away.

Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus

Michael has written some of the best material available on Jewish apologetics. Purchase his book series **Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus** at a special price, individually or as a set.

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Havurah: Have you found the approach of someone like Josh McDowell to be helpful?

MB: I appreciate the various apologists and teachers out there, but I've actually read very little of the popular type material. What I've read over the years is anti-missionary books, traditional Jewish commentaries, rabbinic literature, scholarly treatments of the Old Testament text. And out of that I formed my own view of the major principles for interpreting messianic prophecy. So my approach has ended up very differently. What's never done in the New Testament is that they just stack up a whole bunch of verses and say, "Look at these verses; we stacked them up, what's the chance of that happening by accident? See, this proves he is Messiah."

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The New Testament is more like looking at the bigger picture. If you look at a beautiful painting, you're not saying it's a beautiful painting because of fifteen qualities that all add up statistically to something. Instead, you're getting the overall picture.

Havurah: Is there a need for a different kind of apologetic that's more relevant to people in today's "postmodern" world?

MB: I've been following the Lord now for over thirty-six years and I've had intensive discussions with both traditional and secular Jews over most of that time. And through it all, I haven't really seen a need for a different approach.



Above: Dr. Michael Brown (right) in conversation

First of all, the power is in the gospel. Jews get saved the same way everybody else gets saved. If we are full of faith, if we speak the Word, if we walk in love, if we pray for people, if we share the good news with them, many will come to the Lord. The materials I've developed and used in public debates, in print, online, and in one-on-one witness, have been pretty consistent for many years, and they seem to bear the same fruit—if not more, as the years go on.

After one debate I had done, a messianic leader made a comment that people don't get saved through debates anymore because we're in the postmodern age, etc., etc. And I couldn't help but smile, because I actually see more fruit in terms of reports of people being touched and coming to the Lord through my books and materials.

To me the only real issue is using technology, improving what we do on the Internet, things like that. Otherwise, I see the same things working now as before, if we are sensitive to the Lord when putting forth His truth.

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of Isaiah's text. A more fruitful approach would be an attempt to grasp the broader intent of this passage.

In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet speaks of a child to be born named Immanuel. Some believe that the child refers to Ahaz's son Hezekiah. Others think it is Isaiah's own son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. A common interpretation is that there was a provisional fulfillment in Isaiah's day as well as a later messianic fulfillment.

To bring Isaiah's words about Immanuel into clearer focus, we must explore his overall depiction of this promised son. An examination of Isaiah 7:1-9:7 shows the full context to be the captivity and the redemption of Israel. The captivity is sealed with a sign, the birth of Immanuel. This child appears also in chapter 8, again in the context of judgment. Then in chapter 9 Isaiah gives us a third glimpse of this son (vv. 6-7), who sits upon David's throne as the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. It is within this broader context of one to come who will save Israel that Isaiah's statement in 7:14 finds its full meaning.

Matthew certainly does not ignore the fact that Miriam was a virgin, but his focus is on the significance of the names Y'shua and Immanuel, and on what this son would accomplish. His introduction of Immanuel, God with us, carries all the meaning of Isaiah's messianic son in 9:6, sent by none other than God Himself to save Israel. Like Isaiah's Immanuel, Y'shua will be involved in judgment as well as salvation. Such a reading of Matthew and Isaiah not only presents a stronger messianic picture, but a more holistic one. Isaiah 7:14 does not say less than in the traditional approach, but it may well say more.

What ultimately stands out is Jesus' humanity. As a human being, he can relate to suffering and despair.

examine them as “pictures within pictures” that show us something about God and His plans for us.

Matthew and Psalm 22

A second example comes from Psalm 22. Does this psalm depict the crucifixion of Y’shua? In Matthew 27:46, Jesus cries out in Aramaic, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Strikingly, these are the only words of Jesus recorded by Matthew during the hours of the crucifixion and they are an unmistakable citation of Psalm 22:1. That psalm depicts in dark and vivid strokes David’s fear for his life, his attackers and the destruction of his own body. The parallels to the crucifixion narrative in Matthew are easily recognized: the cry of abandonment (Psalm 22:1-2), the mockery (vv. 7-8) the physically violent experience (vv. 12-17), the marring of his hands and feet (v. 16), the casting of lots for his garments (v. 18).

As with the Isaiah passage, Jewish skeptics tend to focus on a single Hebrew term, *ka’ari*, in verse 16. Most Christian translations interpret the word as meaning *pierced*, while an ambiguity in the Hebrew allows for the standard Jewish translation *like a lion*. Though it is important to pursue the meaning of Hebrew terms—and a good case can be made for the rendering *pierced*—isolating this verse and the Hebrew word often proves to be needless, since either translation is sufficient to depict the suffering of this Davidic king.

Once we move beyond the focus on one term, we see that Psalm 22 seems to mirror the intense suffering described in Matthew 27. Many have also noted that verses 22-31, concluding the psalm and affirming God’s sovereign victory, are part of the backdrop to Jesus’ cry. Like the psalmist, Y’shua expected ultimate vindication. Jesus’ listeners and Matthew’s audience would have been familiar with this fuller context, hearing a note of ultimate hope in Jesus’ cry.

And yet Matthew does little to convey Jesus’ intentions about the meaning of Psalm 22. What ultimately stands out is Jesus’ humanity. As a human being, he can relate to suffering and despair. His discouragement and even frustration at God’s abandonment as he took on our sins is where this brutally honest and vulnerable depiction of our Lord’s crucifixion really grabs its readers.

CONCLUSION

Context is important. I lean toward a broader, contextual study of messianic prophecy as an approach that was culturally relevant to first-century readers and can be rewarding for us as well. Rather than presenting the prophecies as isolated verses that offer irrefutable proof of who Jesus is, I encourage unbelievers to examine them as “pictures within pictures” that show us something about God and His plans for us.

At the same time, the context of the person you are witnessing to is also important. No approach to messianic prophecy is going to move someone who is committed to unbelief for reasons that have little to do with Scripture. What can we do for the person who sees the Scriptures pointing to Y’shua, yet still walks away from him? If I were speaking to Uri today, I might ask him questions such as: Did he think his father wanted the best for him? Would his father want him to go on believing that Jewishness and Jesus are mutually exclusive if they really aren’t? Would his father want him to dismiss Y’shua if he knew that actually meant turning away from our promised Messiah? Sometimes the best thing we can do is to reflect back to a person their reasons for unbelief. While it is the Holy Spirit who creates a desire for God, we can help people to analyze their concerns honestly, and question the ultimate outcome of their choices.

Other Resources on Messianic Prophecy and the Use of the Old Testament in the New

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Brown, Michael L. *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 3: Messianic Prophecy Objections*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003.

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Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, reprint. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2006. See especially ch. 14, “The Old Testament in the New Testament.”

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for all the world?

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*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:
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This edition of *Havurah* focuses on messianic prophecy—a topic of perennial interest to Jewish believers both for the strengthening of our own faith as well as for our witness to others. Aaron Abramson's article explores different approaches to messianic prophecy, and an interview with Michael Brown gives insight based on his long experience in Jewish apologetics. Finally, Jhan Moskowitz illustrates, in his own inimitable style, how the Tanach is intentionally messianic. If these articles leave you wanting more, be sure to consult the additional resources listed in this edition. And as always, we welcome your feedback to havurah@jewsforjesus.org.

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