

## PART III

### *"The signs of the Messiah"*

#### **Did Jesus give something new in His teachings**

Nowadays there is a keen interest in the person of Jesus in Israel. The first one among Jewish scholars who opened this positive approach was **Constantin Brunner**. In 1921 he created the motto: *"Bring us back our Jesus!"* "Die Heimholung Jesu" does not, however, mean the same understanding, as we have. After his motto he claimed, that "our Messiah has equally little to do with the Christ of the Christianity as the constellation of the bear has to do with the beast in its name". In any case he opened the way for more unprejudiced and unbiased thinking.

The Jewish world has three main streams: the Orthodox, the Reformed and the secular one. According to a certain rabbi, the Orthodox group addresses God as "Lord of the Universe", the Reformed Jew approaches Him as "God our Father" and the secular man with the words "to whom it may concern!" For many in Israel, God is an idle and empty word.

Faith in Jesus the Messiah is reality. Therefore we must *"bring back our Lord"* and accept Him as our personal Savior. According to a certain liberal Christian theologian the "messianic bridge" between the Old and New Testament is "artificial in its nature" and must be rejected. Jesus however said: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." There was an important consultation in **Bossey**, near Geneva, in August 1982. Christian and Jewish scholars discussed there the significance of Judaism for the Church. And it was officially stated in the report that *"all of us have been impoverished by an understanding of the Bible that minimizes our Jewish roots"*. *"In the encounter with Judaism and the Jewish people, the church gains a fuller sense of its own biblical roots"*. That is the reason for my studies about the Jewish roots in our faith.

We are asking: **Did Jesus give something new in His teachings?** How do the best Jewish representatives feel about this problem? The president of the liberal Judaism **C.G. Montefiore** wrote in the beginning of the 30's an extensive commentary on the three first Gospels. He claimed that "the teaching of Jesus is characterized by the word; only one thing is needed! It is expressed in the paradoxical approach of the Gospel." "The teaching of Jesus which has had an enormous influence on the world, is more and something else than a loose scribble of doctrines. It is not a mere sum of its parts, it is a unity, a spirit! This spirit has distinctive marks of a genius. It is great, refreshing, heroic" - "if we should collect a small, handy book of the best Jewish phrases, we would not be able to achieve an equally valuable substitute as it; the unity, aroma, spirit and brilliance would be missing!" As the heart or core of the Gospel, Montefiore considered the words of Jesus, that he did not come "to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many".

The best example of **the impression** which the people got in listening to Jesus is in the 7th chapter of John the evangelist. The chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards, a kind of "shamashim", to arrest Jesus. The Lord then spoke for his audience: "If a man is thirsty, let him come **to me** and drink. Whosoever believes **in me**, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him!" The listeners were impressed of this warm pastoral care. When the guards were asked why they did not bring Jesus in, they answered: "Never a **man** spoke like this man", *"me-olam lo dibber ish ka-ish ha-ze!"* In another place we read that Jesus taught the people

"as one who had **authority**, and not as their teachers of the law." There lies the difference. The temple guards heard every day how the rabbis taught the people, and they were the best critics with regard to those sermons.

Never has a man spoken like Jesus. In **Deuteronomy 18** we read about the "Second Moses". According to the Aramaic Targum Jonathan, God will "raise up" this "Second Deliverer" "*de-ruach kudsha*" and "*be-ruach kudsha*", in the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Spirit. Verse 18 warns us, that "if anyone does not listen to **my words** that the prophet speaks **in my name**, **I myself** will call him to account". **Exodus 3:12** declares to Moses: "**I will be** with you. And this will be **the sign** to you that **it is I** who have sent you." And God said to Moses: "**I am** who **I am**. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: **I am** has sent me to You." The Rabbis scent that here is "**the sign of the last deliverance**" and it refers to the time when God will "heal" his people. According to the late chief rabbi of Sweden, prof. **Gottlieb Klein**, the so called "*Shem ha-mephorash*", the forbidden hidden name of God would be "*ana ho*" or "*ani hu*" - **I am him!** If anyone utters these words, he must be punished to death. Jesus used these words repeatedly not only to the high priest but also to his audience. And he was punished on the basis of "*gidduf*", blasphemy. Jesus did not speak like the other Jewish scholars.

According to the Talmud there is in **Jeremiah 23:6** a word which gives **one of the many cryptic names to the Messiah**. I remember a long discussion with Jewish orthodox young men in Jerusalem. We had argued about the nature of the Messiah. In the end I showed the word about the "righteous Branch of David", which is the promised Messiah also for the Jewish scholars. "*This is the name by which he will be called; the LORD Our Righteousness.*" - "We do not have it in the same way in our Tanach", the young men then insisted. It was very late, and therefore I said: "This is an exact copy of your Bible, go home and check it!" The following night the young "nicodemuses" came back and exclaimed on our doorsteps: "We have it the same way - the Messiah is God, the LORD." The above verse speaks of "*Adonai (Yehowa) Zidkenu!*" The same week one of these young men came to me very upset and said: "Jacob has seen Jesus!" "He was sitting in an armchair at home pondering about our discussions. All of a sudden he saw HIM and heard his voice saying; you are on the right path - go on the same way!" They had to abandon their contact with me and they began to gather together in their own homes.

### **And how did Jesus speak?**

"The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me." "I and the Father are one." "*I am* the way and the truth and the **life**; no-one comes to the Father except through me". "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." "The Scriptures testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have **life**." (**John 10:25, 10:30, 14:6, 14:9 and 5:40**) The Messiah is "the Prince of life, whom God has raised from the death". He proclaimed: "*I am* the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." (**Acts 3:15, Jn. 11:25**). "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you **rest**. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for *I am* gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." "**Peace** I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." "I have told you this so that **my joy** may be in you and that your joy may be complete - and no-one will take away your joy - I say these things, so that you may have the full measure of my joy in you." (**Mt.11:28-29, Jn. 15:29, 15:11, 16:22 and 17:13**). "*I am the light* of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." "Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." Even Paul heard on the road to Damascus the words that Jesus had come to open the eyes so that people "may turn from darkness to light" (**Jn. 78:12, 12:36, Acts**

**26:18**). We ought to radiate and spread the fragrance of this Gospel in our lives. We can not afford to be slack and careless in our daily walk. There is really "*a unity, aroma, spirit and brilliance*" in the message of Jesus. As a Jew, **Albert Einstein** has stated once in the Saturday Evening Post, that "*the bright appearance of Jesus had charmed him*" - he felt the presence of Jesus when he read the Gospel because "*his personality pulsates in every word!*"

Jesus said also: "*I am the true vine, remain in me!*" "*I am the good shepherd!*" "*I am the gate for the sheep - whoever enters the flock through me will be saved!*" "*You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world - if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.*" "*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven - anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*" (**Jn. 8:23-24, Mt. 10:32,38-39**). Jesus used the forbidden "*Shem ha-mephorash*" in all his statements. The well known prof. **David Hedegård**, an expert in Jewish prayer literature, once said: "The Gospel is what Jesus is and what he has done for us:"

According to **C.G. Montefiore** the message of Jesus is "*great, refreshing and heroic*" as we already heard. It has all the distinctive marks of Jewish thinking. But does he fill the scriptural requirements of the Messiah? In the Jewish exposition of **Exodus 3:12** we read of "*the sign of the last deliverance*" which will be fulfilled in the Messianic age. But what is this sign? In the revelation of God in the Burning Bush the word *anochi*, which God uses of himself, is given as an *ôth* or 'sign'. Small wonder that the Midrash sees here a reference to the Messiah: "And he said, 'I (*anochi*) will be with you' and 'This will be the sign to you' ; What do these words mean? Our Sages, blessed be their memory, say that, 'It is symbolic of the first deliverance, for with an *anochi* Israel came into Egypt, as it is said, 'I (*anochi*) will go with you into Egypt and with an *anochi* I will lead you back from there (**Gen. 46:4**)'. **It is also symbolic of the latter redemption**, as it is said, 'I (*anochi*) will heal you and [in the Messianic times] save you'." There are many things to be added for this impression that we get from the Gospels. Jesus was the Second Moses and the second deliverer. He gave the latter redemption. But what are the additional characteristics which we can find in Jesus as the Messiah?

### **The signs of the Messiah**

The Greek word *sign*, "*semeion*", means both a "wonder" and a "sign". In the Gospel of John it appears 14 times and is sometimes translated by two words - "miraculous signs". Its Hebrew equivalent "*oth*" also has these two meanings, wonder and sign. In **Matthew 12:38** the scribes asked: "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." In **16:1** the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by "asking him to show them a sign from heaven". In **John 4:48** Jesus said: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." In all these cases the people wanted **to test** whether he is the Messiah or not.

The word "*oth*" is used in Jewish literature also as a counterpart for a distinctive sign characterizing certain matters or persons. In some contexts the Rabbis speak of "*the signs of the Messiah*". If we ask how we can be convinced that Jesus is the Messiah we ought to study these "Messianic" signs.

### **The sign of Messiah's birth**

The birth of the Messiah was foretold in **Isaiah 7:10-14**: "Ask the Lord your God for a *sign* - therefore the Lord himself shall give you a *sign*: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and

shall call his name "Immanu El", "God with us". 200 years before Christ the Septuagint understood the Hebrew concept "*almah*" in Greek as "*parthenos*" as a "virgin". This is the sign! Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name "*Immanu El*", God with us." This was the first sign!

There is also an interesting passage in the Dead Sea Scrolls which speaks of "the Messiah whom God will beget", words taken from **Psalm 2:7**. Dr. **R. Gordis** states that this passage serves "as the most important source for the divine birth of Messiah". In **Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18**, in a prophecy which was used by Peter and Stephen (**Acts 3:22 and 7:37**) we read of a prophet "like Moses", "whom God will raise up" and he will speak in God's name. We noticed that the Aramaic Targum of Jonathan expounds it twice saying that "God will beget him by the Holy Spirit " (*de-ruach qudsha and be-ruach qudsha* ). That relates also to the birth of Messiah!

According to **Micah 5:2** the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem and his "goings forth have been from old, from everlasting". The Jewish commentator **RASHI** states that *he was already "before the stars and zodiacs" and "only God was before eternity"*. Jesus himself proclaimed that he was before the creation and before Abraham. **Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6** gives divine attributes to the Messiah, such as "Immanu El" or "the mighty God" and "everlasting Father". **Targum Jonathan** explains that *God "will call his name from ancient times" and that "the Messiah has eternal existence"*. No wonder that the shepherd heard: "This will be a *sign* to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (**Lk. 2:12**). Both the physician Luke and Matthew were stressing the fact that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

### **The sign of his approach**

We have discussed already about *the last Messianic deliverance*, that *in me* they are going to be healed and saved. The expression *in me* was here "*be-Anochi*". It was prohibited for a Jew to say in Hebrew "I am", "*ani hu*" or "*anochi hu*", as we saw. Only the Messiah is allowed to speak in the name of God and with His authority.

When Jesus spoke the words ""I am", "ani hu", he uttered a forbidden thing according to Rabbi **Gottlieb Klein** and **E. Stauffer**. It was a sign and token for some of his listeners. May I repeat what Jesus said: "*I am* the light of the world; *I am* the way, the truth and the life; *I am* the bread of life; *I am* the good shepherd; *I am* the true vine; no man comes unto the Father but by me; *I am* the resurrection and the life; before Abraham was born *I am*; you are from below, *I am* from above; if you do not believe that *I am* what *I am* you will die in your sins." Was this not a sign and token of the lordship of Jesus?

### **The sign of the Temple**

There was a certain timing for the first advent of the Messiah. He had to come before the destruction of the Temple. **John 2:18** speaks of this sign: "What *sign* have you to show us for doing this? Jesus answered them: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up - but he spoke of the temple of his body." In **Luke 19:41-44** we see how Jesus "drew near and saw the city, and he wept over it", because it was "hidden" from their eyes that there would be no "stone upon another" when the city would be destroyed. In the Old Testament there are five clear prophecies about these fateful things: **1 Kings 9:8, Jeremiah 9:11 and 26:18, Micah 3:12 and Daniel 9:26**. There is also evidence in the writings of **Josephus** that some people were worried about this possibility (Antiquities X,10-11 and Jewish War VI,5,3; see also Yomah 39,b). Jesus also saw this sign in advance.

## The sign of salvation

In the **Wisdom of Solomon** we find the concept of the "*sign of salvation*". In the **16th chapter** it tells of the "fiery serpents" which the Lord sent in the wilderness as follows: "And Thou hast given for them a *sign of salvation* to remind them of the ordinances of Thy will. And all those who looked up to Him remained alive, not because they looked up, but through Thy hand, our saving Lord". "Thou bringest down to Sheol and raisest up". These words are from the first century B. C. and they were known to the scribes in Jesus' own time. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus in **John 3:14**, he apparently raised the same question and took up "heavenly things". He said: "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." It is told in **2 Kings 18:4** that King Hezekiah "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, and it was called Nehushtan."

I was once in an Orthodox Jewish shop in Jerusalem called Nehushtan. The owner of the shop knew me, so I said that he had chosen a good name for his business. And I asked him whether he also knew what is written about this in the Wisdom of Solomon. Then I quoted the words of the sign of salvation. He probably knew the discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus, because he asked. "Do you know what is written about those serpents by RASHI", the famous Jewish scholar in medieval times? I did not, but I promised to look it up at home. And great was my surprise when I read the old man's message to me: "This is a derogatory saying and there is nothing but the serpent." I found, however, that this man began to think about the sign of salvation.

The **Aramaic Targum** explains this story by relating it to MEMRA, the "word" or "logos", which for some Rabbis also represents the Messiah. And it states: "Whoever *lifts his heart* to the Memra of God will remain alive." This story is also expounded in the Talmud in connection with salvation: "The serpent kills and the serpent revives; and when Israel looks up and *commits their hearts* to heavenly Father, they will be healed: if not, they will die." (Rosh ha-shanah 29,a). Jesus apparently knew the Wisdom of Solomon in his own time. And he wanted to show to Nicodemus that he had to suffer on the cross. That would be *the sign of salvation* ever after. And he also said: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM HE."

## The sign of resurrection

In **Matthew 12:38** we read: "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him: Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except *the sign of the prophet Jonah*. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

For a long time this was a riddle for scholars. But after the discovery of old **Midrash fragments in Cairo** we understand better the legitimate claim of Jesus. In these fragments we first read in **Genesis 42:18**: "On the *third day* Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live'." The Midrash relates it first to Abraham, who intended to offer his first-born son to God "on the third day"; then it proceeds to Moses, who received the Law "on the third day". Towards the end the fragment mentions the name Jonah, who was in the belly of the fish *till the third day*, and gives the following exposition: "*The third day for the resurrection*, because it is written 'after two days he will revive us, on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him' (**Hosea 6:2**)." This is a very interesting argument: the expression "*the third day*" was a rabbinical concept and a *sign* that God

himself is again acting according to his promises. The next verse in Hosea speaks about the LORD: "His going forth is sure as the dawn." The concept "LORD" (Yahwe) is in some sources a cryptic name for the Messiah. Our Lord Jesus promised to build up his bodily temple in three days. Indeed! According to the Rabbis *the Messiah has "the keys of resurrection in his hands"*. The Midrash tells that *"he will swallow death for ever"*. He will also *"revive the children of dust from the dead"*. No wonder that even the Book of Revelation knows that he is "the first and the last" and that *he has "the keys of Death and Hades" in his hands (Rev. 1:18)*.

### **The sign of opposition**

The famous Norwegian author **Henrik Ibsen** had a saying, "the minority is always right". The believer is often very alone and the enemy is his constant companion. In **Luke 2** we meet the "righteous and devout" old Simeon. He was looking for the "consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him". Simeon saw that the little child Jesus would be the Light of the Gentiles and "for glory to thy people Israel". But the child was also "set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and *for a sign that is spoken against*". This is the sign of opposition.

In **Isaiah 8:14** we read: "He will become a sanctuary, and *a stone of offence*, and a rock of stumbling". According to the Sages this is "the Messiah, son of David" (Sanhedrin 38,a). **Isaiah 8:14** adds as follows: "Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation: he who believes will not be in haste." Jesus himself saw that he would be a stone of offence, as we read in **Matthew 21:42-43**: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you." The words in **Matthew 8:11-12** also are very severe, "so harsh that Jesus hardly can have said so", claimed the well-known Jewish professor **David Flusser**. He honoured Jesus as a Jewish teacher and believed that "according to the facts Jesus must undoubtedly have risen from the dead".

These are the harsh words which Jesus said: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be thrown outside." There is, however, an even harsher word in the Talmud (Hagigah 5,b). These words are related to **Jeremiah 13:17**: "If you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive." "Rabbi **Samuel Ben Yitzhak** said: This is caused by their pride and Torah will be taken from them and given to the Gentiles."

For a Jew the Gospel is often a stumbling-block; Jesus is a "*sign* that will be spoken against". But this Messiah who was born in Bethlehem and whose origin is from of old will become, according to RASHI, "a cornerstone". And the Rabbis explain that "we cannot hasten it and it will not take place immediately but after many troubles".

We read in **Ephesians 2:20** that we are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone". **1 Peter 2:4** urges us to "come to him, *the living Stone*, rejected by men". This reminds me of the lesson which I learned in Bethlehem. I was walking there together with Rev. **George Kuttub**, a close friend, trying to use my modest Arabic. All of a sudden I heard the expression "dead stone" in Arabic. "Are there also living stones?", I asked. "Yes, there are", my friend answered. And he led me to a stonemason nearby. Then he gave *some characteristics of a living stone*, this time in English: "The stone is dead until it is brought to the mason, the master. In his hands it receives such a form that a) it fits in its own place, b) it carries

and supports other stones in the building and c) even if the house is pulled down, it is still fit for other constructions. This is a good example of a constructive Christian. If we are in the hands of our Master, he can always use us for his purpose, wherever we are. Hostility and opposition is the natural role for a Christian. Jesus, however, makes us into living stones.

### **The sign of the second advent**

The seventh sign which is to be found both in the New Testament and in Jewish literature refers to the advent of the Messiah in the latter days. The timing of his first coming was given in the 9th chapter of Daniel. Now we wait for his second advent "with the clouds of heaven". A well-known Talmudic passage claims that "if Israel is a debtor, the Messiah will come humble and riding on an ass (in order to atone for our sins), but if they are righteous, he will descend with the clouds of heaven."

According to **Matthew 24:3 and 30** the disciples of Jesus came to him on the Mount of Olives "privately, saying: 'Tell us when this will be and what will be the *sign of your coming* and of the close of the age?'" Jesus then told of many signs and said that after them "the powers of the heavens will be shaken, then will appear the *sign of the Son of man* in heaven" and he will come. Among the signs which he described was the fate of Israel and Jerusalem. The Holy City "will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled". (See **Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, 2 Thess. 2, 2 Tim. 3 and 2 Peter 3**.) In the Talmud also there is a long discussion about the "footsteps of thy anointed", the Messiah. In medieval literature these footsteps are called simply by the name "the signs of the Messiah".

According to Talmud there will then be "many diseases, pestilence and epidemics", "the whole world will be blood" and "the sun will turn into darkness and the moon into blood". "When the kingdoms are challenging each other, watch for the footsteps of the Messiah" - "the truth will be rare and the face of that generation will be as the face of a dog; boys will insult aged people and youngsters will feel no shame before their fathers. On whom are we then to lean on? On our Father in heaven alone - The Son of David will not come until Israel descends to the lowest degradation (*yeridah tachtonah*), he will not come until the last coin has finished from their pockets and *until Israel has lost its friends and supporters*". Of course, some of these things are from the Old Testament and some are reflections of old Christian sermons. According to the words of Jesus, he will return when the people of Israel is saying: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" That time might be already very near.

In an old Midrash there is a beautiful picture of the coming of Messiah the son of David: "*When you are descending to the lowest degradation, on that day I will save you - and as the rose blooms and opens its heart to the sun, so even you, when you repent and when you lift up your hearts to Me like the roses, on that day I will bring the Saviour to you!*"

Of course, these *signs* and "significant" tokens of the Messiah must be seen in their proper perspective. Flesh and blood cannot reveal the secret of the Messiah. But Jesus is still challenging us all: "What about you? Whom do you say that I am?" Only the Holy Spirit can reveal to us the lordship of Jesus. And then we are ready to admit together with the Samaritans in **John 4:42**, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard them ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world."