

Finding Jesus in the Old Testament

A rabbi explains how and why Scripture's theophanies offer more than just head knowledge about Christ

The book of Daniel describes one of the most dramatic appearances of the Son of God in the entire Old Testament. The passage in Daniel 3 tells of three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were sentenced to death for refusing to worship an idol that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon erected and commanded all his subjects to revere. The king was enraged that they had questioned his supreme authority and ordered that they be thrown into a furnace and it be heated to seven times its normal intensity. The fire became so hot that it killed the soldiers assigned to push them into the inferno.

But when the three were in the blaze, Daniel states: "Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.'

"'Look!' he answered, 'I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God'" (vv. 24-25).

What Nebuchadnezzar saw in the fire—the fourth man—was God in human form, Yeshua (Jesus). Many times I have been asked, "If Jesus is Messiah, why isn't there anything about Him in the Tanakh (the Jewish Old Testament)?" The answer is, there are many references to Yeshua in the Old Testament—throughout the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), the books of the prophets and the other Scriptures.

In fact, when I began to read the Bible with an open mind, I was astounded to discover that Yeshua is mentioned more than

150 times in the Old Testament. The apostle Paul even used the Tanakh to teach about Yeshua: “[The leaders of the Jews] arranged to meet Paul on a certain day. ... From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Acts 28:23, NIV).

Understanding the Scriptures—both the Old Testament and New Testament—is a matter of spiritual revelation. As Jesus Himself said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Mark 4:9, NKJV).

Everyone who reads the Scriptures, then, does so through either a lens of faith or a lens of doubt. If one reads the Tanakh with an open mind, he or she will see many references to Yeshua.

For example, the name *Yeshua* means “salvation” or “God saves.” His name signifies why He came into this world—to rescue us from the penalty we deserve because of our sins. Let’s take a look at a few times Yeshua’s name is mentioned in the Old Testament (with emphasis added):

- “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my *salvation*” (Ex. 15:2). In other words, “He has become my *Yeshua*.”
- “God be merciful to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us, that Your way may be known on earth, Your salvation [*Yeshua*] among all nations” (Ps. 67:1-2).
- “And it will be said ... ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. We will be glad and rejoice in His *salvation* [*Yeshua*]’ ” (Is. 25:9).

You see, Yeshua is much more than a name in the human sense, such as Jonathan, David or William. It is a description of His mission: to bring salvation to people everywhere.

Still I am often asked, “OK, but why didn’t the writers of Scripture tell us plainly, ‘The Messiah’s *name* will be

Yeshua'?"

My answer simply is: God does not work that way. Studying His Word is like working on a jigsaw puzzle. He gives us a piece of the complete picture here, another piece there, and so on. The evidence is all there, but we must do our part. He wants us to seek Him wholeheartedly, and when we do, we will find Him (see Deut. 4:29).

The Lord in Human Form

Finite human beings simply cannot understand the greatness or holiness of an infinite Creator. The only way we can even begin to comprehend God is to understand Him in finite terms.

This is where the concept of the Messiah comes in. Isaiah 53:1 asks, "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" In the context of this chapter, it is obvious that when Isaiah says "arm of the Lord," he is referring to Messiah. They are the same.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell of a number of occasions before the birth of Jesus when God revealed Himself in human form. Theologians refer to these instances as *theophanies*.

Theophany is Greek, meaning "God" (*theo*) and "to reveal oneself" (*phaneia*). As already mentioned, Daniel 3:24-25 is one of the Old Testament's most dramatic theophanies. But there are many others. Here are a few others among the more than 152 contained in the Old Testament:

The Son of Man. Four chapters later, the same "Son of God" figure who Nebuchadnezzar saw in the fire makes another appearance, this time to Daniel in a vision.

Daniel writes: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

“He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14, NIV).

Yeshua often used the title “Son of Man” when referring to Himself (see Matt. 20:18, 24:30, 44; Mark 10:45, 14:62; John 3:13). Obviously this Son of Man Daniel saw is divine, or He would not accept the worship of “nations and men of every language.”

The Mysterious King. The first theophany may be a bit controversial due to scholarly interpretation of the passage, but it is worth mentioning. In Genesis 14 the patriarch Abram (Abraham) has a mysterious encounter with King Melchizedek:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Gen. 14:18-20, NIV).

Abraham *tithed* to Melchizedek, which says a great deal about his regard for this man who was both a priest *and* a king (as we’ll see). Abraham is the paramount character in Judaism—the father of the Jewish people. And yet he pays homage to Melchizedek by giving him a tithe. He clearly recognizes that Melchizedek is greater than he is.

Centuries later, the psalmist tells us that Messiah is “a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Ps. 110:4). While this is a mysterious passage and there are differences of opinion about it, some Bible scholars believe that Melchizedek was God in human form.

In fact, the name Melchizedek comes from two Hebrew words: *melech*, which means “king,” and *Ts’dek*, which means

“righteous” or “righteousness.” Hence, “king of righteousness.” I believe this is the first Old Testament reference to Yeshua.

The Judge With a Warning. The next theophany takes place in Genesis 18. The “angel of the Lord” appears to Abraham along with two other angels, who all look like men, to warn the patriarch of His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham clearly understands that one of the men he is talking to is God Himself, for he refers to Him as “the judge of all the earth” (v. 25).

The Nameless Stranger. Another appearance of God in human form is found in Genesis 32, where Jacob, father of the 12 tribes of Israel, wrestles all night with a stranger. Jacob holds his own in the fight and then asks his foe for a blessing. The Bible tells us the stranger answered:

“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked, saying, ‘Tell me Your name, I pray.’ And He said, ‘Why is it that you ask about My name?’ And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: ‘For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved’” (vv. 28–30, NKJV).

Peniel means, “face of God.” The meaning of this story is that Jacob believed he had been face-to-face with God.

The Angel of the Lord. Judges 6 says that “the angel of the Lord” sat down under an oak tree and had a conversation with Gideon, a man chosen to rescue the Israelites from their oppressors, the Midianites. At first Gideon does not realize who the “angel of the Lord” is. When he discovers the truth, he thinks he is going to die.

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.’ So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord Is Peace” (Judg. 6:23-24).

God the Son. In the ninth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet talks about a "Son" who will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (see v. 6).

No devout Jew, and especially not a prophet like Isaiah, would refer to a mere human being as "Mighty God" or "Everlasting Father." This language would be blasphemous if it were not true.

Theophanies occurred, then, throughout the Old Testament. Perhaps their purpose was to begin to give human beings a glimpse of God in terms we could understand. If Jesus is indeed God in human form, then it follows that these theophanies were appearances of Him.

I am convinced that Yeshua HaMaschiach was God, who came to Earth in human form so that we might better relate to Him and understand Him.

Jesus and the Ancient Rabbis

In the years since I came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, I have heard from many rabbis who insist that I am misusing Old Testament Scriptures. They tell me I am stretching the meaning of some passages and finding references to a Messiah where they do not really exist. I also have been told that belief in the Messiah was never a central tenet of Judaism. Some make it sound as if the Messiah's arrival was not really that important.

I beg to differ. And Israel's ancient rabbis felt differently from modern rabbis about the importance of the Messiah. I know this because I have studied their words in the Targums.

The Targums are ancient paraphrases of Old Testament Scriptures. The oldest of them, Targum Onkelos, was completed about 60 years before the birth of Yeshua. And the newest, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, was finished by the end of the seventh century.

The Targums were written because most Jews could no longer understand or read Hebrew. In Yeshua's time, most of them spoke and wrote in Greek or Aramaic.

Here is Micah 5:2 as recorded in Targum Jonathan, which was completed less than 100 years after Yeshua lived:

"And you, O Bethlehem Ephrath, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands in the house of Judah, from you shall come forth before Me the Messiah, to exercise dominion over Israel, He whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation."

Consider Genesis 3:15, from Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, written in the seventh century:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between the offspring of your sons and the offspring of her sons; and it shall be that when the sons of the woman observe the commandments of the Torah, they will direct themselves to smite you on the head, but when they forsake the commandments of the Torah, you will direct yourself to bite them on the heel. However, there is a remedy for them, but no remedy for you. They are destined to make peace in the end, in the days of the King Messiah."

Here is Genesis 49:10 from Targum Onkelos:

"The transmission of dominion shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor the scribe from his children's children, forever, until the Messiah comes ... whom nations shall obey."

And the Babylonian Talmud, which was completed 500 years after Jesus, offers a commentary on Zechariah 12:10. The verse reads, "They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son."

The Targum asks, "What is the cause of the mourning?" and answers, "It is well according to him who explains that the cause is the slaying of Messiah, the son of Joseph."

Finally, the Sanhedrin tractate of the Babylonian Talmud goes as far as to suggest that the world was created for the sake of the Messiah.

It is obvious from these examples that belief in the Messiah and expectation of His coming was an important part of the faith of many ancient rabbis and their followers.

Jesus, From the Beginning

One more fascinating reference to the Messiah from the Old Testament goes back to the very beginning—when Adam and Eve hid from God after they sinned and heard Him walking in the Garden of Eden during the cool of the day (see Gen. 3).

The Bible goes on to record a face-to-face conversation between the first humans and their Lord and even says that God "made garments of skin for [them] and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21, NIV). (By the way, this is the first instance of blood being shed to deal with the consequences of sin.)

Targum Onkelos, which was completed within the first four centuries after Jesus lived, says that Adam and Eve heard the *Memra* of the Lord walking in the Garden. *Memra*, according to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, means "The Word."

It was only when I read the Gospel of John for the first time that I understood what this passage in Genesis is referring to.

John 1:1-3 explains, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him" (NKJV).

In verse 14 John explains further: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the

only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The Word, then, is not just a random statement of some minor aspect of God’s character. It is a person who is one with God yet has His own being. This person is Messiah, who walked with God in the Garden of Eden and later came to us in human form to save His people.

It always amazes me to see how the “puzzle pieces” God has scattered in His Word, including in the Old Testament, Scriptures come together to reveal the image of His Son and our Savior, Yeshua.

Jonathan Bernis *is president of Jewish Voice Ministries International. He is the founding rabbi of Congregation Shema Yisrael in Rochester, N.Y., and the Messianic Center of St. Petersburg, Russia. This article was adapted from his book, A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth (Chosen, a division of Baker Publishing Group). Copyright © 2011. Used by permission.*