

The Time of the Messiah

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The history of messianism in Judaism is the history of false and failed Messiahs. Some were earnest but wrong, others were clever pretenders. But there is also no complete agreement as to what the Messianic time, when it arrives, will bring. Some scholars are supernaturalists, believing that it will result in the overturning of nature. Others, most notably Maimonides, are more restrained in their vision.

Isaiah prophesies that the lion will lay down with the lamb (prompting Woody Allen's famous crack — the lion will lay down with the lamb, but one of them won't get much sleep). For Maimonides this prophecy, as with many others, is a metaphor, teaching that big nations and small nations will dwell in harmony.

Maimonides teaches that the Messianic time will be one of peace and seeking knowledge. The extravagant images of an overturned world have no place in his rationalistic scheme. He emphasizes that it will not be a time of vengeance or triumphalism or cruelty, but rather one of peace and seeking understanding. The great sage ends his description of the messianic age that concludes his code of law by predicting that at such a time, as Isaiah says, "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Is. Ch. I I)