

# Did God Reject the Sacrifices Because of Yeshua?

## A Response to Rabbi Singer

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An item recently came to our attention that it seemed beneficial to respond to. Rabbi Singer, a well-known anti-missionary, recently responded to a question regarding a proof that many Christian and Messianic teachers have recently begun using from the Talmud. The quote in question comes from b. Yoma 39b, and reads as follows (Neusner's translation):

Forty years before the destruction of the sanctuary, the lot did not come up in the right hand, and the thread of crimson never turned white, and the westernmost light never shone, and the doors of the courtyard would open by themselves, until Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai rebuked them. He said, "Temple, Temple, why will you yourself give the alarm [that you are going to be destroyed? You don't have to, because] I know that in the end you are destined to be destroyed. For Zechariah b. Eido has already prophesied concerning you: 'Open your doors, Lebanon, that fire may devour your cedars' (Zec. 11: 1)."

The "thread of crimson" refers to a tradition recorded in this same passage that when the Yom Kippur sacrifice was made, the goat for Azazel (the "scapegoat"; cf. Lev. 16 for the ceremony) would have a scarlet ribbon tied in its horns. If ADONAI accepted the sacrifice, the ribbon would miraculously turn white—as Rabbi Singer correctly points out, this sign points to Isa. 1:16-20:

"Wash yourselves clean! Get your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing evil, learn to do good! Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend orphans, plead for the widow. "Come now," says ADONAI, "let's talk this over together. **Even if your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow**; even if they are red as crimson, they will be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword"; for the mouth of ADONAI has spoken. (CJB, which is based on the JPS Tanakh)

As Rabbi Singer states, many Christians see this rejection of the Yom Kippur sacrifice for the forty years separating the Cross and the destruction of the Temple as proof "that God was no longer accepting animal sacrifices, and the Jewish people, therefore, needed to turn to Jesus as their only avenue for atonement . . . [and] that the sins of the Jews were not forgiven because they did not accept Jesus as their messiah."

## Using the Talmud

Rabbi Singer, of course, rejects this view outright. In fact, he spends two pages (as counted by MS Word) engaging in a type of “argument by outrage” that a Christian would dare to appeal to the Talmud for proof of their beliefs. He calls it a “schizophrenic technique” that on the one hand “evangelicals fervently insist that the written Bible alone is reliable and divinely inspired and often scornfully mock traditional Jews as practicing a ‘rabbinic Judaism,’” while on the other, “whenever missionaries feel the urge to advance their position by quoting from the *Talmud*, they undergo a spontaneous conversion . . .“

Since Rabbi Singer attacks the very idea of Christians referring to the Talmud at length before getting to the meat of the interpretation, let us take a moment and ask, “Is it really illegitimate to refer to the Talmud as *ahistorical source* without admitting its Divine inspiration?” Would Rabbi Singer consider it equally illegitimate for a Christian (or a Jew) to refer to the histories of Josephus, Eusebius, or Tacitus, since we also reject the idea that they are inspired? Does Rabbi Singer also reject referring to the books of the Maccabees in making a study of Hanukkah—or for that matter, referring to the Renewed Covenant (New Testament) or other Christian writings when making an argument against Yeshua? I somewhat doubt it. The energy he devotes to arousing the indignation of his traditional Jewish readers against Christian apologists is therefore misplaced, contributing nothing to the discussion but to further prejudice his audience.

Of course, Rabbi Singer is not attacking merely for the sake of attacking. Rather, he is seeking to defend his people against a Church whose predominant attitude is that Jews who come to believe in a Jewish Messiah should assimilate into the Church’s culture—which is distinctly Gentile. We share Rabbi Singer’s concern; it was never the intention of Yeshua or His original disciples that Jews should cease to keep the Torah or the traditions of their people. And that is why in these days the Holy One has brought about the advent of Messianic Judaism, so that the many Jews who are finding out that Yeshua is indeed the prophesied Messiah of Israel will have a synagogue which recognizes Him but which encourages them to remain Jews.

(Of course, there are many Messianic and Hebrew Root bodies who are more church than synagogue, and this must be acknowledged. However, there are also a growing number of us that have decided firmly to be synagogues—synagogues who believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, but synagogues nevertheless.)

The proper role of the Talmud within the Messianic Jewish community [continues to be a matter of some debate](#); however there are many of us who have a great deal of respect for the ancient sages, and while we do not necessarily grant the Talmud quite so high a place as in Orthodox Judaism, nevertheless we value it for its many nuggets of wisdom and for the historical insights it gives us as we discuss and debate our own *halakhah*.

Rabbi Singer’s ire is perfectly understandable, and we sympathize with him more than he knows, but it unfortunately leads him to engage in reflexive opposition rather than focusing on the more substantial arguments:

Citing the above statement, missionaries contend that the year the scarlet ribbon ceased to turn white coincides with the time that Jesus was crucified. They go on to insist that 40 years prior to the destruction of the second Temple corresponds to the year 30 C.E., which is approximately the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

Missionaries “contend” that the year the ribbon ceased to turn white coincides with the time Yeshua was crucified? They “go on to insist” that 40 years prior to the destruction of the Temple equals 30 CE? Why does Rabbi Singer require such qualifiers? The dates are not a matter of dispute, so why use language implying a valid uncertainty rather than simply arguing for coincidence without correspondence? It is just this sort of reaction *on both sides* that has led to twenty centuries of tragedy for our people.

The point here is not to make fun of Rabbi Singer, who is a very learned man with a great zeal for the Eternal One and his people. The point is to demonstrate that just as the Christian missionaries have an ideological axe to grind when they quote Yoma 39b without explanation or qualification, so does Rabbi Singer when he rejects the argument.

With that in mind, let us look into the actual passage in question. Rabbi Singer raises two valid objections to the common Christian argument from this passage: 1) That it ignores the context, which indicates a slow degradation rather than a sudden cessation, and 2) that even evangelicals expect a return to the sacrificial system based on Ezekiel 40-48, so the issue could not be that sacrifices were no longer valid. However, while these are valid objections, it is our opinion that they do not seriously afflict the apologetic value of this passage for the followers of Yeshua.

## The Context

Shim'on HaTzaddik (Simeon the Righteous) was the *Cohen HaGadol*, or High Priest, over Israel in the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE. He is one of the most famous figures in Jewish history, representing the high point of the Second Temple priesthood, when the Eternal One blessed the Temple and priesthood and the sacrifice was always accepted and always gave a good omen (the lot for ADONAI coming up in the right hand). It is no surprise, then, that the Talmud portrays a loss of this level of blessing after Shim'on HaTzaddik's death.

And indeed, such a view is *completely consistent with the NT view*. The authors of the Renewed Covenant Scriptures certainly did not regard everything in the Temple as in keeping with the Eternal One's intent up to the point that Yeshua HaMashiach was executed. We see, for example, Yeshua chasing out the moneychangers and merchants with a whip—twice (John 2:14-17, Mat. 21:12-13)! We also see the plot against Yeshua being motivated by fear (John 11:48) and jealousy (Mat. 27:18). In short, we see Jerusalem's leadership affected by the very “spiritual decay” and “self-destructive . . . interpersonal baseless hatred that was pervasive among the Jewish people during this difficult time” that Rabbi Singer sees.

Yet the Talmud does not speak of a gradually-decreasing glory in the Temple. It says only that after Shim'on HaTzaddik's death, sometimes the miracles associated with his life still happened, and sometimes they did not. But about 30 CE, something abruptly changed: Not only was the Yom Kippur sacrifice never again accepted (a “mere” withdrawal of a miraculous sign), but the

western light on the Menorah *actively* went out and the doors *actively* swung open. Josephus (*Wars*, 6.5.3) records other signs that happened as well. Though he does not record when they began, he mentions the doors of the sanctuary swinging open on their own, so we may surmise that he was referring to the same forty-year period.

What is the point of all this? The point is that it wasn't simply that the Eternal One had ceased to perform the miracles that He had in the days of Shim'on HaTzaddik—*He was actively performing miraculous signs as a warning call to Israel*, beginning 40 years before the Temple's destruction.

Why 40 years? What happened at that time that brought God's judgment to the tipping point? In the Torah, God tested and judged Israel for 40 years after they sinned by not going into the Land of His Promise, bringing about one generation's end so that another generation could enter that Promise. And while there were many sins that Israel committed on the way, *there was a final and specific sin that resulted in that judgment*: They did not trust the One who had Redeemed them in the face of the Anakim. What then was the specific sin among the many that caused God to reject Israel's sacrifices for forty years, culminating in the destruction of *that* generation?

## **Gratuitous Hatred and Yeshua's Death**

Let us consider the Talmud's answer. Yoma 9b seeks to explain why the Second Temple was destroyed, even though it had not fallen into the idolatry of the First Temple and the study of Torah was widespread in Israel:

But as to the second sanctuary, in which the people were engaged in Torah and practice of the commandments and acts of loving kindness, on what account was it destroyed? It was because of gratuitous hatred. That fact serves to teach you: gratuitous hatred weighs in the balance against the three cardinal sins of idolatry, fornication, and murder.

This brings to mind Yeshua's words on the eve of His crucifixion:

I command these things to you, that you may love one another. If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . . But this happened so that the word may be fulfilled which was written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.' (John 15:17-19, 25, citing Psa. 35:19, 69:4)

What if, we ask, the general rise of gratuitous hatred in Israel culminated and focused in a hatred of the One whom the God of Israel sent "to proclaim good news to the humble. . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to those who are bound; [and] to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Isa. 61:1-2)?

Even many traditional Jews are recognizing Yeshua as a great rabbi, if not (yet) the Messiah. Dr. Pinchas Lapide, an Orthodox scholar, for example writes,

Jesus was utterly true to the Torah, as I myself hope to be. I even suspect that Jesus was even more true to the Torah than I, an Orthodox Jew. (*The Resurrection of Jesus*)

Interestingly, Lapidé accepts the Resurrection as a historical fact, a true miracle of God, though he disagrees that this miracle proves Yeshua to be the Messiah of Israel. Likewise, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes of Yeshua,

The New Testament depiction of Jesus suggests that he was largely a law-abiding and highly nationalistic Jew, and a man with strong ethical concerns. Like many of Judaism's great rabbis, he saw love of neighbor as religion's central demand. Though many Christians are under the impression that he opposed Judaism's emphasis on law, in actuality he criticized anyone who advocated dropping it. . . .

[A]most no Jewish scholars now believe that Jesus intended to start a new religion. Were Jesus to return today, most Jews believe, he undoubtedly would feel more at home in a synagogue than a church. . . . Jesus generally practiced Pharisaic (rabbinic) Judaism. (*Jewish Literacy*, pp. 126, 128)

Jewish scholar Stephen M. Wylen writes,

It then becomes apparent that Jesus was in some ways an innovator who taught new ideas or extended old ideas into new territory, while in other ways Jesus followed the Jewish teachings of his times. Generally speaking, Jesus' teachings can be placed in the broad context of first century Judaism in its many manifestations. (*The Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 13)

Wylen goes on to surmise that Yeshua was put on trial and executed not because of any religious blasphemy, but because "Caiphas and Pilate believed Jesus either intended an insurrection, or else would be the cause of one," possibly because of his action in driving the money-lenders from the Temple (pp. 128f).

The conclusion of the historians: Jesus was killed by some Romans and some Jews, a conspiracy between the homegrown and imperial rulers of the country, in order to keep the peace during the Passover holiday. (ibid.)

Yet the Gospel accounts make it clear that Yeshua led no insurrection, even making an argument for paying taxes to Caesar (Mat. 22:21). Moreover, the Sadducees set up a crowd to call for the release of a known insurrectionist rather than see Pilate let Yeshua go (Mark 15:11), so clearly more than a concern for peace with Rome was at stake for them. Note that the "sympathetic" Pilate that many (such as Rabbi Telushkin) believe they see in the portrayal of Pilate in the NT doesn't match up with what we know from secular history—but a Pilate who realized that he was being used as the hatchet-man in what was essentially a religious dispute and as a result pushed back against the Sadducees' pressures *is* (cf. Mat. 27:18)!

The Mishnah (Makkot 1:10) tells us,

A sanhedrin which imposes the death penalty once in seven years is called murderous. R. Eleazar b. Azariah says, "Once in seventy years." R. Tarfon and R. Aqiba say, "If we were on a sanhedrin, no one would ever be put to death."

The Gemara of this passage goes on to describe the very great lengths the Sanhedron would go to in order to avoid a sentence of death, including finding every possible way of disqualifying the eyewitnesses (a parallel can be found in John 8:1-11, where Yeshua uses precisely this method). This distaste for the death penalty was greatly increased by the fact of the Roman occupation: It was considered incredibly shameful to turn a brother Jew over to pagans to be slain.

Now consider the hatred focused on this one man, a man who modern Jewish (and Christian) scholars are more and more recognizing taught from the Torah within the bounds of the traditional Judaism of His day—leaning, in fact, towards the teachings of Rabbi Hillel. What cause had Yeshua given the leaders of Israel to hate Him and call for His death, even handing Him over to the pagans? He taught repentance rather than revolution, the love of God and our fellow man, and never, ever taught anyone to practice idolatry or to abandon the Torah (per Deu. 13:1-5 [12:32-13:5]). Where He claimed to be the Messiah and Savior of Israel, He did so by His deeds rather than by His words—and his deeds were to raise the dead, heal the lepers, bring sight to those born blind, and cast out the deaf-mute spirits.

To slay one who brought about great weal to the Jewish public by the finger of God out of envy and fear would certainly qualify as “gratuitous hatred.”

## The End of Sacrifice?

On the other hand, Rabbi Singer is right and the Christian missionaries he contends with are wrong in one very important aspect: The rejection of the Yom Kippur sacrifice was by no means proof that God had “taken away” the sacrificial system or the Levitical priesthood. Aside from the prophecies of Ezekiel (which Messianics and many branches of Christianity widely acknowledge to refer to a future restoration of the Levitical priesthood), there are numerous proofs from the Scriptures—both in the Tanakh and the Renewed Covenant—that while the priesthood and Temple service were taken away as punishment for Israel’s sins, they were not simply discontinued for all time because of Yeshua’s ultimate Sacrifice on the Cross:

1. The descendants of Phinehas were given “the covenant of an **everlasting** priesthood” (Num. 25:13).
2. Jer. 33:15-22 states that just as “David shall never want a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel,” neither will “the priests the Levites want a man before me to . . . do sacrifice continually.” But where David’s promise is spoken of as a *singular* man, the Branch, the Messiah, the Levitical priests are spoken of in the plural in vv. 21-22. Hence, we who believe that the Messiah’s office is an eternal one must acknowledge that the Levitical priesthood is likewise eternal.
3. The disciples of Yeshua did not immediately break from the Temple; on the contrary, they went “[d]ay by day continuing with one mind in the Temple” (Acts 2:46, cf. 3:2). To worship in the Temple meant participating in the daily sacrifices; therefore, if they had truly believed that Yeshua’s Sacrifice ended and forbade all future sacrifices, they would have withdrawn from the Temple services as the Essenes, who merely saw the Temple as corrupt, did.

4. In Acts 21:18-26, we see Rabbi Sha'ul, the student of Gamaliel, better known to the world as the Apostle Paul, facing accusations that he was teaching Jewish believers in Yeshua to no longer circumcise their sons (i.e., raise them to be Jewish) and to no longer keep the Torah and the traditions. In order to refute that charge, he takes a voluntary Nazrite vow with four other Messianic Jews—note that these four were *already* under a vow, meaning that such things were not unusual in the Messiah's early Assembly—and to pay for the requisite sacrifices that were required to shave their heads. Clearly, they did not see a problem with continuing to make sacrifices even some thirty years after the Messiah's crucifixion.

However, while the rejection of the Yom Kippur sacrifice is not, as many Christians suppose, a sign that God had brought the Levitical priesthood to a permanent end, it does point us to an important aspect of the Messiah's mission. Psalm 110:4 speaks of one who would be like Melchizedek, both a king and a priest, and Zec. 6:12-13 tells us that the Branch, the Messiah, "will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices."

ADONAI slew Aaron's two sons for the sin of offering unauthorized fire (Lev. 10:1-2). If He did not accept an unauthorized form of worship from authorized priests, might we suppose that He would also reject an authorized sacrifice by an unauthorized priest, especially those who were complicit in rejecting and putting to death the king-priest that He had sent to call Israel to repentance and offer the true Atonement for their sins?

Likewise, God took away the sacrifice in the days of Jeremiah because the people had gone to other gods, resulting in hatred, murder, fornication, and injustice. Would He not also take away the sacrifice if Israel, following a corrupt leadership, rejected His Messiah, His very *Sh'khinah*, as King over them in order to curry favor with the kings of the pagans, as a result of and resulting in even more hatred, murder, fornication, and injustice?

Rabbi Singer makes another crucial error when he writes, "Isaiah loudly declares **that charity and acts of kindness alone atone for man's most grievous sins**, as he repeatedly and resoundingly trivializes the blood sacrificial system as an efficacious means for atonement" (emphasis mine). Isaiah says no such thing, nor could he, for "the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement" (Lev. 17:11). Just as the Renewed Covenant Scriptures cannot be interpreted in such a way that they override the Torah, neither can the prophets. Rather, the prophet is simply affirming the truth of Num. 15:26-30, that the sacrifices were useless to atone for those still actively sinning against God's commandments, for the sacrifices could only be offered for one who sinned unintentionally, out of ignorance or weakness, not those who sinned "with a high hand."

In other words, Isaiah didn't call for more sacrifices because the sacrifices were already being made; he was calling for repentance resulting in social justice so that the Blessed One would accept the sacrifices!

This Biblical truth, that it takes blood-sacrifice to atone for sin, has been set aside by the rabbis since the destruction of the Temple. However, the Torah is clear that unless the Eternal One

provides an atoning Sacrifice, our good deeds could never save us or atone for us, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isa. 64:6).

The issue was not that Israel continued to sacrifice in obedience to the Torah, but that they were not putting their trust in the correct Sacrifice, nor were they repenting of their sins—including the gratuitous hatred towards the One God had sent to them.

## Conclusion

There is no denying that the Talmud puts the final rejection of the Yom Kippur sacrifice at forty years before the fall of the Temple, and there is no denying that Yeshua was crucified at about that same time. The only subjects open to debate are how we interpret that correspondence: Was it simply coincidence, or was the God of Israel sending a message to His people?

We have seen that while the Talmud does indeed indicate a spiritual decline after the time of Shim'on HaTzaddik, it also marks a definite point at which God not only withdrew a miraculous sign, but in which He *sent* miraculous signs warning of His impending judgment. This definite point corresponds to the execution of Yeshua. It is not enough to just claim a coincidence; if not the rejection of the Messiah, exactly why did God choose that exact time to begin actively and consistently warning Israel of the impending judgment?

We have seen that the rabbinic explanation for the destruction of the Second Temple, that of gratuitous hatred, finds its focus and full measure on the gratuitous hatred Israel's leaders, the Sadducees in particular, held against Yeshua.

And we have seen that the reason the Yom Kippur sacrifice was rejected was not that God had discarded the sacrificial system *per se*, but that Israel had once again rejected her proper King—a King who is also a Priest—in favor of pagan lords.

Rabbi Singer is correct when he says that most Christians who latch onto Yoma 39b do so without an appreciation for its proper context, and that God's rejection of the Temple sacrifices because of Israel's sins does not mean that Yeshua's Sacrifice was meant to bring all others to an end. However, he does not even attempt to demonstrate what other event, if not the rejection of Yeshua, might have caused God to actively work against the Temple service circa 30 CE.

As much as we disagree with Rabbi Singer's treatment of Yoma 39b, we agree with his closing statements. We live in a day and age when the whole world seems to be gathering against the people of the God of Abraham, both Jew and Christian, and yet in so many quarters we continue to tear each other apart. As Messianic Hebrews, we repent of the hatred so many of our physical and spiritual ancestors have shown to our Jewish brothers and sisters in the past, and affirm again our love for and support of Israel. To that end, if any of our words to and/or about Rabbi Singer in this article have been unintentionally harsh, we beg the reader's forgiveness and understanding.



We also repent of the hatred that has so often flared between brothers and sisters in the Messiah, whether we call ourselves Messianics or Christians, and call for a renewed commitment to love, humility, righteousness, and charity as we struggle with the issues, both in and out of the Body, which are facing us in the 21

<sup>st</sup> Century.  
Shalom!