

## Theme 2C: Religious concepts and religious life – Beliefs about judgement, the Messiah and the afterlife

### Key words

**Messiah**

**Olam ha-ba**

### Key concepts

The idea of the Messiah is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, with the concept probably arising during the time of the prophets. However, it is usually understood as a term that refers specifically to a future leader of the Jewish people who will bring in a new age of freedom, justice, peace and goodwill, all of which will be established under the rule of God.

Isaiah 2:1-4 refers to a future new age when the Jewish people will return to Israel and the temple will be restored in Jerusalem. Some of the prophets go further in claiming that this future age will be associated with a human leader sent by God who will create a peaceful society (Isaiah 2:4).

Ideas about the Messianic Age differ within Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe in a personal Messiah who will come at the time of God's choosing, be a descendent of King David and will gather the Jews as a nation once more. They also believe that this personal Messiah will establish a new world order. Reform Jews believe in the Messianic era; however, they do not subscribe to the belief in the restoration of a Jewish state. Instead, they see their dispersion as a necessary thing in order to spread the monotheistic truth and morality all over the earth by being an example to others.

According to the book of Daniel, the arrival of God's kingdom will be preceded by a time of great trouble and those who have been faithful to God will be rescued from the hardship. There will be a Day of Judgement on which the dead will be resurrected; God will then judge each soul and determine where they will spend eternity (Daniel 12:2).

Olam ha-ba suggests that Jews believe that death is not the end of existence; however, there is very little to be found in the Torah relating to what they believe happens after a person dies. Reform Jews do not believe that there will be a resurrection of the dead (Pittsburgh Platform, paragraph 7), although belief in the immortality of the soul is accepted.

### Key quotes

'Anyone who does not believe in him (the Messiah) or does not await his coming not only denies the rest of the prophets, he denies Torah and (the prophecy) of Moses.' (Maimonides)

'... the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains.' (Isaiah 2:2)

'He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' (Isaiah 2:3)

'Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake some to everlasting life, others to shame and contempt.' (Daniel 12:2)

'I believe in resurrection when the body and soul will arise, and the bones will come to life again.' (Ben Solomon)

'Reform Judaism rejects the idea of bodily resurrection but accepts the view that the soul is immortal and that the spirit is divine.' (Pittsburgh Platform)

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key questions, arguments and debates

##### **Are Jewish beliefs about judgement and the afterlife relevant for Jews today?**

There is a lack of agreement between different Jewish groups about these issues. Perhaps it is more important to focus on living a good life than to worry about what might happen in the afterlife. If these concepts are found in the Jewish scriptures, then they must still be relevant for Jews today. Perhaps judgement has more relevance than a belief in the afterlife.

##### **Is the concept of the Messiah a serious religious belief for all Jews today?**

There is clearly uncertainty and debate about the Messiah, but this does not necessarily make it any less 'serious' as a religious belief. Orthodox Jews hold a fundamental belief in the concept of a personal Messiah. For Reform Jews, the establishment of God's kingdom will come as a result of human efforts.