

# Local rabbi explains Jewish views of messianism

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Jews have a "historically valid position" for rejecting Jesus as the messiah, a position not intended as "any way undermining or impugning or demeaning overall harmony of Christianity."

So said Rabbi Steven Jacobs, spiritual leader of Spring Hill Avenue Temple, in discussing messianism from a Jewish perspective in the latest dialogue involving approximately 100 Jews and Christians in the Mobile area. Earlier, messianism from a Christian perspective was discussed by Sister Theresa Bretthauer of the Holy Family Catholic Church staff.

Rabbi Jacobs noted a multiplicity of concepts of the messiah in the history of Israel was outlined by Sister Theresa.

The rabbi said, "The fact that no one concept is or has been dominant informs all of us that messianic speculation has not been an overarching preoccupation of the Jewish people either theologically or historically. During periods of darkest depression, of which there were far too many, such concerns came quite naturally to the fore."

The rabbi said none of the messianic concepts outlined by Sister Theresa "addresses itself to the so-called divine nature of the messiah. Whatever he is for the Jewish people, he is not God, for this would be akin to idolatry, both to and for the Jewish people."

Claims of "other-worldly peace supposedly expressed by Jesus and so poetically elaborated by Sister Theresa" are at odds with Jewish belief, said the rabbi.

He said the process that has become the essence of Jewish belief is that "we live in this world and thereby sanctify it and make it whole."

The rabbi said the Christians' use of pre-New Testament biblical texts to support the claims of Jesus as the messiah is at odds "with the continuous history of Jewish scriptural interpretation both before and after the events

of Jesus' life and death."

The speaker expressed his opposition to the Christians' term "Old Testament," which is "neither old nor incomplete nor out of date, but rather a current and continuing revelation of God to his covenanted people — at no time broken, at no time abrogated, at no time replaced."

Two strains of thinking about messianism are present in Judaism, according to the rabbi. The traditional view, largely identified with the Orthodox movement, centers around the belief in a personal messiah. The non-traditional, or modern, view, largely identified with the Reform movement, centers around a universalistic messianic age.

Rabbi Jacobs is a member of the Reform movement.

In talking about the belief in a personal messiah, the rabbi cited the "low point in the history of ancient Israel, the period of Roman oppression."

He said, "To the degree that Roman oppression weighed heavily upon the Jews, they responded by focusing their faith in the direction of a messianic leader who would redeem them from their Roman overlords."

However, according to the speaker, the idea of a superhuman, anointed leader or a Messiah with a capital 'M' who would be sent by God to intervene on behalf of Israel is "read back into the biblical books." The idea is a post-biblical development.

The rabbi said, "Throughout the history whenever times of oppression were particularly severe, the hopes in the messiah were kindled anew."

"Concomitant with the people's longing for the messiah was their desire to see the realization of his kingdom when the following activities specifically would take place, and there are seven: the return of the people of Israel to the land of Israel; the yoke of the foreign tyrant, originally Rome, would be broken; other nations guilty of defaming Israel would be conquered, annihilated or converted; the dawn of an era of universal peace would

arise; it would be for the Jewish people a time of national security and national justice; there would be pastoral harmony and prosperity; perhaps divine intervention would bring about political redemption."

Reform Jews believe the seven conditions needed for a personal messiah "were intentionally made difficult by the rabbis of the Jewish past," said Rabbi Jacobs. "My understanding is that the reason for it was quite simply that they were in the process independent of Christianity of rejecting the belief in a personal messiah and were ultimately evolving towards the process of a messianic age."

Jews who believe in the traditionalist view generally do not define details about the personal messiah, according to Rabbi Jacobs, perhaps one reason being that many persons have claimed falsely to be the messiah "throughout Israel's long-suffering history."

He continued, "Then too, on the other hand, perhaps why nontraditionalists have overtly rejected the notion of a personal messiah is the realization of suffering of which humanity is capable and of our ability to be deluded if our thoughts are too strongly attuned in this direction."

In talking about the evolution of the nontraditional view of messianism, Rabbi Jacobs discussed three Reform platforms adopted in this country, first in 1869, then in 1885 and finally in 1937.

"What we see interestingly enough in all three statements are two vitally important issues. There is the rejection overtly of Israel's nationalistic aspirations and with that a rejection of the desire to return to Palestine, and there is a covert — that is not stated — rejection of the belief in a personal messiah."

"Interestingly enough, in 1937 the Reform movement also recognized the validity of a return to Palestine for those who would so opt to travel that road."

According to the speaker, persons committed to the traditionalist view of Judaism accept that "the Jewish

people live in exile and that only exile is a precondition for the work of the messiah."

However, he said that as Jews began obtaining freedom in the Western world, the Reform Jews felt the necessity of discarding the idea of exile and a personal messiah "who would lead his people back to our own ancestral homeland. In the world in which we live if the Jewish people are free we are not in exile."

"Instead the aim was centered around, as it should be, a universalistic messianic age in which all humanity could partake of the bounties of God's munificence."

In talking about the modern age, the rabbi said, "In stark contrast to the mindless sterility of a technological utopia, Judaism continues to stand out, calling upon all people to act at all times with the realization that no one exists in a vacuum or on an island, that any and all actions taken by the peoples of the world, however insignificant or independent they are perceived, are interwoven with those taken by others."

"If we are to achieve the fulfillment of which we are capable, my tradition teaches that we must come to the understanding that we cannot do it alone, that we cannot in fact do anything alone."

He said, "Judaism teaches fundamentally that God, not the messiah, is the active force in the history of humanity."

"This is undeniable for the Jew who seeks the solution to his or her salvation, for it is only in this understanding do we conclude with a reawakening of the awareness that only through the act of partnership of God with humankind will the kingdom of heaven be brought to earth."

"To learn this law and to act accordingly is and has been historically the goal of Judaism and the Jewish people, co-partners with God in the bringing about of a messianic kingdom."