

Jews reconcile 2 messianic views, says teacher

(First of two stories)

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The Hebrew Bible presents two different views of messianic fulfillment that appear to be conflicting, but the two views have been reconciled by Jewish believers.

This idea was presented by Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski, research professor of Jewish theology and liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, in one of two lectures to Mobile area clergy at Spring Hill Avenue Temple. The talk was delivered at this year's Ministerial Institute, a program that is sponsored annually by the temple.

Petuchowski said the prophet Isaiah presented a messianic view that "looks forward to the latter days, the end of days, which will be a horizontal development on the plane of history. That is to say, miserable and bad as

contradict itself."

For awhile in ancient times, the professor said, the Hebrew people "would champion one view and without denying the other, tacitly ignore the other, so that during certain periods the messianic expectation was primarily this-worldly on the plane of Israel, whereas in other periods it was primarily a miraculous, divine intervention into the process of human history."

Some rabbis of the third century attempted to resolve the "inner dialectic" going on among the Hebrew people so that they could accept both Isaiah and Daniel, said the speaker.

Among examples he cited was a rabbinic view of the verse from Isaiah, "I the Lord will hasten it in its time," in which the verse receives the following interpretation: "If it (messianic fulfillment) is to be in its time, why does the verse say God will hasten it? If God will hasten it, why does the verse say it will happen in its time? . . . God says if Israel merits it, if Israel deserves it, 'I the Lord will hasten it.' If Israel does not deserve it then it will be in its predetermined time. . . There's no denial of Isaiah, and there's no denial of Daniel."

Thus messianism "as a cooperative effort of both God and man" was the harmonization undertaken by "rabbinic Judaism of the messianic vision of the pre-exilic prophets on the one hand and the apocalyptic vision of Daniel on the other."

This harmonization continued until the 19th century, according to the speaker, when the reconciled view "was challenged by two movements in modern Judaism, one of them being Reform Judaism and one being Zionism."

In 1885 Reform Jews in the United States adopted a platform that emphasized "the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect" as an approach to fulfilling the messianic hope "for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men."

Petuchowski said the Reform Jews had come from Germany "where at that time there were still restrictions, nasty restrictions, on the life of Jews. . . They had come into this great country with the freedom and the unlimited opportunity, and they felt that with the spread of education, with the spread of democracy, all the fondest dreams that our fathers cherished during centuries of their miserable ghetto existence were being fulfilled, not in some distant future but right here."

Reform Judaism placed emphasis on man's achievements and "represented a challenge to the traditional doctrine that messianic fulfillment is the work of both God and man before Judaism became the work of man wholly," said the speaker.

He continued, "The other challenge to traditional belief came from Zionism, which in effect argued we no longer wait for a messiah sent by God. We return to Palestine

things are now, they will become loving and just. Miserable as is the government now, it will be moving toward a more just and adequate government."

However, the book of Daniel in Hebrew Scripture presents a messianic view that "there's going to be no gradual evolution of human history on the plane of history, on the horizontal plane. There is going to be a sudden, miraculous, divine interference with the historical process, bringing the historical process to an abrupt end . . . and then talking in Daniel's imagery, someone like a human being, someone like a son of man descends from the clouds of heaven and establishes the kingdom of the saints of the most high, bringing an end to the kind of society that we now have."

These two views presented a problem for the ancient rabbis because "the Bible wasn't just any old piece of literature that you liked or disliked. The Bible was the word of God and, therefore, the Bible really can't

under our own steam. We rebuild the land ourselves and . . . we redeem ourselves."

Today, however, according to the professor, "we have all become somewhat more careful in our evaluation of man's power to lift himself up by his own bootstrap. . . Today we recognize that the spread of intellect did not bring about the messianic age. . . The power of intellect did indeed spread, but the universal concept of heart did not materialize, and when the universal culture of intellect runs away without being guided by the universal culture of heart we can get anything but the messianic era."

Thus, he said, "some of us in Reform Judaism have become a little more careful in evaluating man's power to pull himself up by his own bootstrap without the assistance of Almighty God."

Similarly, he said, "even the most enthusiastic Zionists who would like to use messianic terminology in connection with their state would not go further than to say that the state of Israel as presently established is the beginning of the process of redemption."

Hardly any Zionists would insist "that the little beleaguered, constantly endangered state of Israel is a messianically redeemed enclave in an unredeemed world. Indeed, I think we have all come to the realization that there ain't no such animal — that there cannot be a redeemed enclave in an unredeemed world. The redemption will have to be total and universal."

The speaker quoted a rabbinic statement from the third century, which he described as the best harmonization of Isaiah's and Daniel's views of messianism: "The son of David, the messianic title, will come only in a generation which is completely righteous or in a generation which is completely corrupt."

A messiah coming to a righteous generation simply would be "God's rubber stamp of approval." A messiah in a corrupt generation would come "to bail us out."

However, Petuchowski said, "you and I know there has never been a generation that considered itself completely righteous. . . or completely corrupt."

He continued, "Somehow human history moves on between these two extremes, and maybe that is why, at any rate from a Jewish point of view, the messiah has not yet come."

The speaker said the inner dialectic among Jews concerning messianism keeps a balance "not only between a generation that is totally righteous and a generation that is totally corrupt, but also a balance between a gradual evolution that we can accomplish by our own effort and a kind of historical fulfillment that comes about solely by divine miracles.

"So I suppose we'll go on until we reach the time that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."