

Together with Jews, We Wait for the Messiah.

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Advent is coming soon. It is a beautiful liturgical season for hope and peace. But this is also one of the seasons where Christians ridicule Jews for not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. They say how sad it is for them still waiting for the Messiah. This unholy chant needs to stop. Many Jews do not see Jesus as the Messiah with good reasons; partly it has to do with the Christian past; but it also has to do with the multiple possibilities in reading sacred texts.

Isaiah in Historical Context

The Book of Isaiah, especially the second half of Isaiah, was put together when ancient Israelites were exiled to Babylon. A new generation of young Israelites who had never seen their former homeland, adopted Babylonian worldviews and customs, compromised the teaching of the Torah, and began to feel “at home.” It was out of this context that Isaiah spoke. Isaiah speaks passionately one of the enduring themes in Jewish history and conviction: *God is Israel’s only Redeemer and God will raise up anointed leaders so that justice, peace, and safe return are accomplished.*

Building on the collective memory of Exodus, longing for liberation when Israel is in turmoil constitutes part of the Jewish cultural-religious heritage. This enduring theme of electing an anointed leader repeated itself many times in ancient Jewish history. The notion of an anointed one (that is what the word “Messiah” means) as championed by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah is a figure(s), or even images that are loaded with intertwining political, social, economic and religious implications. That is, the anointed one(s) actually took people back to their homeland, drove out foreign occupiers, exercised fair distribution of wealth, observed the Torah, and restored the land of Israel.

For Christians who read Jesus in Isaiah only, they ask: Who else can that person be? We have been fixated in limiting Isaiah sayings in one man only. But the textual evident does not warrant that. Hear what Isaiah says, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (53:7). How can it not be Jesus? Yes, Jesus fits! But was Jesus the only person in history who did not open his mouth when he faced persecution? Was Jesus the only person being slaughtered unjustly? Was Jesus the only person being rejected by authorities? Was Jesus the only person whom God knew before s/he was born? Apart from naming Jesus, we basically have no knowledge of alternatives. We cannot think of anyone else because we have been educated to think of no one else.

Reading Isaiah with Fresh Eyes

Read Isaiah again with the historical background in mind, particularly Chapter 40 and onward, and see how empowering it could be for people who lived under an oppressive rule and the possibility of never seeing home again. For more than four hundred years before Jesus was

born, the Jews returned to Palestine! The dream Isaiah talked about had been fulfilled. We must ask: What did the text mean to those Jews who returned to Palestine before Jesus? Do we want to say the text has no meaning to a people for countless generations? If you allow yourselves not to be limited by only one Christological reading, when you read the texts, try to appreciate the deep compassionate love of God to God's people everywhere whenever they were bombarded by exploitation, oppression, and homelessness. Imagine hearing prophets pronouncing God's hope to those people in suffering when suffering seems to be endless.

When Christians restrict the servant to Jesus alone, we rip the text from its exilic context of longing for real life deliverance and safe return home. We reduce the text to merely a forecast about a distant future. Was Isaiah predicting one future event that has very little to do with the immediate audience, or could Isaiah's sayings be understood in multiple circumstances? Did Isaiah mean one man or could Isaiah mean many spirit-filled leaders? If we know anything about the Hebrew language, could it even be a beautifully constructed poetic language of God's uncompromised care of God's people? In some instances, the identity of the Redeemer clearly is God the Creator (49:26). In other circumstances, the servant could also be an alternative term for the country Israel. Read the text, the whole text again and to see for yourself the multiple identities and possibilities for this redeemer-servant. The biblical evidence does not allow us to reduce this servant easily into a single reality.

On top of that, not all contemporary Jews are waiting for the Messiah. The "Messiah-talk" in the Gospels was the result of a distinctive political background of the first century. Away from that background, there is no burning desire for a Messiah. Isaiah cried out for a redeemer when the nation was in exile. First century Jews read Isaiah and cried out for a Messiah when they were under Roman occupation. Later centuries of Jews also cried out for a messiah when they were badly treated under Christian empires and ecclesial authorities. Isaiah functions like a "comfort text" whenever the people need deliverance. Isaiah could be talking about one man but not exclusively. No matter how much Christians think Jesus is the Messiah, we must resist the temptation of superimposing and confining a single interpretation onto the Hebrew texts as if the Christian reading is the only legitimate and possible reading.

Why many Jews refuse to see Jesus as the Messiah?

Isaiah 11 says when the redeemer comes: "The wolf shall live with the lamb..., and a little child shall lead them.... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain...." This beautiful scenario remains unfulfilled in Jesus' times and after Jesus' resurrection. Jews notice that.

The early church had hope that Jesus was the Messiah and they fervently believed it. They also believed that Jesus would return before their death, but many were deeply disappointed. The destruction of the Second Temple forty years after Jesus' resurrection further devastated them because the resurrected Jesus did not establish peace and justice as prescribed in Isaiah. Instead, the Jewish people experienced intense suffering and persecution. In addition, the

Jewish people have two thousand years of experience with Christianity where the powerful Christians and the powerless Jews lived side by side. When Jewish people look at that history, they could not fathom the idea that Jesus is the Messiah because they cannot fool themselves by saying they have experienced peace and justice. The cross to Christians is the symbol of love and forgiveness; but it is the symbol of hate and discrimination. To believe Jesus is the Messiah from the perspective of most Jews after the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust, and the knowledge of the past and present empire that have strong Christian tie is incredibly difficult. To them, Jesus could not be the messiah.

I ask you to keep confessing Jesus is the Messiah; he is the Christ, the Saviour and Lord. But reading Jesus in Isaiah represents only one option. I think reading Jesus in Isaiah makes sense. But reading Isaiah apart from Jesus also makes sense – it speaks of God's enduring love and care for God's people without overtly arguing who the anointed person or persons could be. As a firm believer of God's enduring love and unearned grace, God is allowed to surprise me anytime. Christians must stop ridiculing Jews for waiting for their Messiah but learn to walk with people who cannot and will not confess Jesus as the messiah. Christians have the right to insist the messiah has come. But Christianity also teaches the return of Jesus in an unexpected hour. Together with Jews, we are waiting for the coming of the messiah. *Come O Lord and lights our path.*