

An Introduction to Two Thousand Years of Jewish Evangelism

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**In October, 2002 Rev. John Ross delivered the following as a popular, requested lecture at the Maritime Reformed Institute meetings. Rev. Ross spent the last seventeen years as the executive secretary of Christian Witness to Israel before returning to the pastorate in November, 2002 at Greyfriars Free Church of Scotland, Inverness. He is also working on a Ph.D. thesis on the history of Jewish evangelism through Highland Theological College and has contributed several scholarly articles on this subject.*

1. JESUS AND THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

During his ministry on earth Jesus appointed that the Gospel was to be directed primarily to ordinary Jewish people, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; 15:24). His ministry was directed to the poor, the blind, the lame, the diseased, those who wept, those who were widowed, the demonised, the persecuted, the captives, the weary and heavy laden, those ignorant of the law, prostitutes, tax collectors, publicans and sinners. Many had lost their place in society through repression, exploitation or discrimination. At the same time they were the victims of circumstances and the perpetrators of unacceptable, immoral and unlawful practices and lifestyles. His encounters with such people (unlike the religious leaders) are consistently depicted in terms of messianic compassion (Mark. 1:42; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Matt. 14:14; 20:34) which was by no means sentimental and uncritical (Matt. 11:20), but included a clear call to repentance (Matt. 4:17; Mark. 1:15, 6:12; Luke 13:3,5).

Jesus enjoyed considerable popularity among the Galilean people, who, with a passion for sensationalism and material gain (John 6:26–27) would turn out in large numbers to witness his miracles and hear his teaching (Cf. Matt. 16:9–10, Mark 2:4; 5:27; Luke 5:1). In Jerusalem, too, great crowds heard him with delight (Mark 13:37) especially when his teaching consisted of criticism of the established teachers (Mark 13:37–40).

Jesus, sending his disciples to these “lost sheep” (Matt. 9:35–10:42), knew how fickle they were, and warned the Twelve that their mission would be difficult. They would face hatred and opposition (Matt. 10:17–21, 22–23), their words and works would be divisive as they called for unswerving loyalty to Jesus (Matt. 10:21, 34–39). At the end of his earthly ministry few remained faithful to him, and even many of the disciples deserted him.

2. THE APOSTLES, THEIR FRIENDS AND SUCCESSORS.

After the Ascension of Jesus the witness of the apostles to the Jewish community was marked with outstanding success. In only one day, the Jewish feast of Shavuot (Pentecost), three thousand Jewish people were baptised (Acts 3:41), and each day following “the Lord added to their number” (Acts 3:47), until over five thousand men believed, not counting women and children. No section of the Jewish community lay outside the reach of the Good News, even “...many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). With the transformation of the Sanhedrin’s leading hit-man, Saul of Tarsus, first century Judaism was shaken to its core.

Paul’s theology and practice of Jewish mission.

(i.) *The theological primacy of Jewish mission.* Romans 1:16. The meaning of *πρωτον* (first). *TDNT* – “*requiring special notice*”. A clue to understanding the meaning of *first* in Rom. 1 & 2 is Matt. 6:33. In seeking *first* “his kingdom” believers are not merely giving the Lord the first hour of each day or the first day of the week. They are placing the kingdom at the very centre of their lives – it is the hub around which their lives revolve.

Likewise, witness to Israel lies at the heart of the continuing history of redemption and the outworking of God's missionary purposes in the world. This is corroborated by our Lord's commission in Acts 1:8; the spheres of missionary activity indicated are *concurrent* not consecutive. It is the abiding commission of Christ to his Church for all time. Note the use of the present continuous tense.

(ii.) *Paul's missionary strategy in Acts.* (First a warning! Acts is transitional and it is unsafe to develop doctrine or practice from Acts alone, without the corroboration of the epistles, the normative books of the New Testament. That is why we started by looking at Romans 1:16.) The important chapters are: 13:5, 6; 14; 14:1; 17:2; 17:10; 17:16–17; 18:4; 19:8 etc. In 28:17 Paul calls first for the Jewish leaders to visit him, cf. in light of Romans 1:11f. Of course having preached to the Jewish community there often was polarisation and, on the part of some, rejection, so Paul then “turns from” the Jewish people to the Gentiles. But this turning away is never total or permanent, it is always local and specific, and in response to the rejection by a particular community. What I find challenging and significant and of abiding relevance is that Paul so operates *not* as the Apostle to the Circumcision but as the Apostle to the Gentiles! In other words, Paul is setting out a paradigm (a model or standard of procedure) not just for Jewish mission but world mission – his witness to the Jews is integral and strategic in reaching the Gentile community.

After the Apostles.

It was a miracle that Jews who believed in Jesus and Jews who did not could co-exist in the synagogue throughout the terrible years of Roman vengeance against Palestine (c. AD 67–74). In 67 a general rebellion broke out against Rome's tyranny. Vespasian the Emperor sent his son Titus to crush it. (What followed is probably to be seen as the fulfilment of much of Matt. 24 and of the book of Revelation too. A better knowledge of Jewish Christianity would help us to understand such prophetic material in the NT). In 70 the Temple was destroyed and

Jerusalem razed to the ground. The next year, Titus held a triumphant procession through Rome in which the ritual objects of the temple, and its leaders, were displayed. In 74 the last Jewish resistance ceased as Masada fell.

The serious tensions between Jewish Christians and their fellow Jews did not become terminal until around 132–135 AD when Jewish Christians refused to support the attempt by Bar Kochba, the false messiah, to overthrow Roman power. Their refusal to support Bar Kochba was largely due to his earlier persecution of their people. As a result of the introduction into the Synagogue liturgy of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh*, a curse against those who had not supported Bar Kochba, Christians were now unable to attend synagogue worship. From then on witness could only be conducted from outside of the community, for no believer in Jesus could attend a synagogue where maledictions against the Messiah and his people were part of the liturgy.

As throughout the wider Roman empire the Good News was welcomed by more and more Gentiles, so the cultural balance shifted. The Hebrew Scriptures came to be considered as inferior to the Greek language and Greek philosophical traditions became the accepted framework for Christian reflection.

Dialogue with the Jewish people was often carried on in a bitter spirit. From the second to the sixth century, there emerged a whole body of writings entitled *Adversos Judaeos* (*Against the Jews*). Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho The Jew* (c.160 AD) was a little softer than most. Others, like Chrysostom, sought, often with deplorable arguments, to justify the suffering that had befallen the Jewish nation. It became increasingly difficult to find an authentic and gracious presentation of the Gospel to Jewish people. Augustine of Hippo was almost a lone voice when he called the Church to preach "...with great love for the Jews. Let us not proudly glory against the broken branches; let us rather reflect by whose grace it is, and by how much mercy, and upon what root we have been grafted".

3. THE MIDDLE AGES

As people like Isodore of Seville wrote his book *Against the Jews*, and Raymond of Martini contributed his *Muzzle for the*

Jews there were few attempts to respect the integrity of the Jewish people. On the contrary, the Middle Ages were a time when Jews found their lives held in disregard and many perished in the Crusades. Under duress, large numbers of Jews became nominal Christians. However, coercion cannot account for all who turned to Jesus. In twelfth century England so many Jews professed Christianity that William II, probably for economic reasons, endeavoured unsuccessfully to turn them back to Judaism. Under Henry II centres were opened to care for those who had been ejected from their ghettos because they had embraced Christianity. In 1290, through a cynical measure calculated to raise the standing of the king, the Jews were expelled from England and all debts owed to them were cancelled.

4. THE REFORMATION AND THE PURITANS

During the early part of the Reformation Martin Luther entertained the hope that the Jews, who had endured mistreatment at the hands of the medieval papacy, would join him in working for religious reform. To win them for the Reformation he wrote a tract entitled *That Christ was born a Jew*. When the Jews rebuffed his overtures, Luther adopted a embittered attitude towards them thus preparing the way for future anti-Semitism. However, preaching within a few hours of his death Luther more or less returned to his former compassion, telling his congregation, “we have to...bring them to the Christian faith that they may receive the true Messiah who is their flesh and blood.”

John Calvin generally had a more benevolent view of the Jews; although at times his remarks could be acerbic, he nevertheless taught that the Bible indicated a time when Israel would be restored by coming to faith in their Messiah.

Among Jews who came to believe in Jesus during the second wave of the Reformation was John Immanuel Tremellius (1510–1580), who became professor of Old Testament in Heidelberg and one of the compilers of the Heidelberg Catechism. Following Calvin, many, such as the Dutch theologian Voetius (1588–1676) and the English Puritans, emphasised the Biblical prophecies and encouraged prayer for the

conversion of the Jews. Whilst they did not themselves engage in missionary activity among the Jews, the Puritan belief in a future spiritual restoration significantly motivated later missionary developments. Puritan philo-Semitism created such a climate as to make it possible for Oliver Cromwell in 1655 to allow again Jewish re-settlement in England.

5. THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

If England had not always been a comfortable refuge for Jewish people, in the northern kingdom of Scotland it was different. Scottish acquaintance with Jewish people probably dates from about 1290, when Jews found a refuge in Scotland after the violent expulsion of the English Jewish community. Other Scots made acquaintance with Jewish people through pilgrimage, trade and travel. The minutes of the Edinburgh town council record the goodwill shown to David Brown, a Jewish trader, who, in 1691, applied to the city fathers for permission to live and trade in the city. Hitherto only Christians had any privileges within the city of Edinburgh or suburbs. However, Brown was given permission because the city fathers held that:

Jews as such are not to be considered or treated as other infidels. They being the ancient people of God of the seed of Abraham...they are beloved for their fathers [*sic*] sake upon which and several other accounts it is that they are allowed the liberty of trade in places of greatest trade where the reformed religion is professed.¹

In England the universities were only open to members of the Church of England, thus excluding Jews from following academic courses. In Scotland however there were no such restrictions and so closer contact became possible for Scottish students, including those training for the Christian ministry, when

¹ Cited by John Cosgrove, "Scottish Jewry" in Stephen W. Massil, ed. *The Jewish Yearbook 5760-5761* (Valentine Mitchell, 2000), p.12.

in the late eighteenth century Jewish students started to attend the Scottish universities. By 1780 there was an established Jewish community in Scotland, although not religiously organised until some years later (1816 Edinburgh, 1823 Glasgow).

During the eighteenth century the first steps were taken to establish organised witness and in this Scottish Christians took a lead. Bizarre though it may seem to us today, in North America, David Brainerd was originally employed by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), his task was to preach the Gospel to native Americans, who were then believed to be descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Brainerd's mentor Jonathan Edwards and a Scottish minister from Cambuslang called M'Culloch entered into a trans-Atlantic prayer pact, the Concert for Prayer, for the spread of the Gospel, particularly to the Jews.

In 1742, under George Whitefield's ministry, there was a revival at Cambuslang, near Glasgow. One of the converts, Claudius Somers, became one of M'Culloch's elders and the maternal grandfather of a certain Claudius Buchanan. Buchanan, born in 1766, was baptised by the elderly M'Culloch, then seventy-five years of age. As a young man he ran away from home, was converted in London, became a brilliant student at Cambridge, a protégé of Charles Simeon, and a curate to John Newton, later becoming a chaplain to the East India company and perhaps the first British missionary to the Jews. He visited the Beni Israel Jews around Bombay and the Cochin Jews of the Malabar coast, witnessing to them of their Messiah, and collecting Hebrew manuscripts. Buchanan was highly influential both in England and Scotland, contributing directly to the establishment in 1809 of the London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews now Church's Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ) and indirectly to what is now Christian Witness to Israel (CWI).

Meanwhile on the continent Moravian missionaries made an impact on the Jews of Saxony who "accustomed to bitter treatment, expressed their amazement at the kindness shown to them by the Moravians". In 1728 in Halle, under Professor John Henry Callenberg, the *Institutum Judaicum* was established for

the instruction of Jewish Christians and the training of missionaries to the Jewish community. Two of whom, Midman and Monitus, made the first recorded attempt to reach Hungarian Jews with the Gospel but who were rapidly forced to withdraw by the intolerant Habsburg authorities.

In 1809 there was established The London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Jews. This was originally an inter-denominational work, including both Anglicans and Dissenters (mainly London based Presbyterians connected to the Church of Scotland). It was strongly supported in Scotland, where many auxiliary societies were established to raise finances for the work and to pray for its success.

One of the London Society's foundational principles has been summarised in the following statement:

It is the object of the London Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews, to limit themselves to the simple object of convincing their Jewish Brethren that Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour of the world; leaving them, when thus instructed, to search the Scriptures, and judge for themselves, respecting all inferior points on which Christians themselves are not agreed.²

This was interpreted to mean that Jewish converts of the mission would be encouraged to decide for themselves, which Christian denomination they should join. A policy which was believed would have enabled all Christians to work together. However, the work was so successful that many Jewish people asked for baptism. A dispute broke out as to which denomination they were to be baptised into; were the new converts Anglicans or non-Anglicans? As the work rapidly grew, a very large debt was accumulated by the Society. Anglicans supporters indicated

² Anon., "The annual report of the London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews" in *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, 10 (April, 1815), pp. 282f.

that if the work did not become totally Anglican they would cease to support. A split was inevitable and the non-Anglicans withdrew. Under Anglican control the Society continued to grow and became the largest and most effective Jewish mission of its day.

However, in Presbyterian Scotland support for the Church of England Jewish mission began to wane. Scottish Christians, both in Scotland and south of the border, now sought to establish their own church mission to the Jews. At the 1838 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland it was agreed to establish such a work and four ministers were commissioned to undertake an extensive survey of Jewish communities in Europe and Palestine and advise the General Assembly where would be best to establish the first mission stations. Because of Jewish communities in India and Aden, these places had been suggested as suitable locations for a mission. One person strongly advocated starting a work in Jamaica. Political instability in the region effectively ruled out establishing a work in Palestine. The first missionary was Daniel Edward, who was sent to Iasi, Romania. In 1841 Dr John (Rabbi) Duncan and his team arrived in Budapest, Hungary. Other stations included Constantinople (Istanbul).

In November 1842 Robert Murray M'Cheyne, one of the four ministers sent out by the Church of Scotland, was preaching at communion services in the National Scots Church, Regent Square, where his friend James Hamilton was minister. He met with a number of men who had links to the London Society but who had had no choice but to withdraw from it when it became a Church of England Society. Hamilton and M'Cheyne were influential in establishing at that time The British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews (now CWI).

Around the same time Jewish missionary work was also started by the Irish Presbyterians and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists. In Europe, by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, witness to Jewish people was being carried by agencies from Germany, Switzerland, and Norway. By the end of the century Jewish missions were the very centre of the Church's missionary activity. Even missionary leaders, called by God to

labour in other fields, still had the Jews on their heart. For example, Hudson Taylor the founder of China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship) sent each year his first missionary donation to the work of John Wilkinson, inscribed on the back with the words of Romans 1:16, “to the Jew first”.

6. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A great harvest resulted from the work of the nineteenth century, earning it the reputation “as the most fruitful of all missionary work”. By the nineteen thirties, in Hungary alone it was estimated that there were over 100,000 Christians of Jewish descent. Austria had 17,000 “Jesus believing Jews”, Poland 37,000, Russia 60,000, and the USA 20,000.

All across Europe, throughout the 20s and 30s, Jewish people attended church services, listened to talks and discussed the claims of Jesus the Jew with missionaries. By 1945 the Nazi’s Final Solution had wiped over 6,000,000 Jewish men, women and children from the face of the earth. Into the death camps had streamed the transports carrying a cargo devoted to destruction and along with Orthodox and assimilated Jews were those who believed in Jesus. Even in Auschwitz, the Lord did not leave himself without witnesses.

Since the Holocaust leaders in the Jewish community, with a bitterness never before experienced, have misrepresented Jewish evangelism as an act of hostility aimed at destroying the very community it seeks to address. Traditional missionary societies felt intimidated by such outbursts and their approach became retiring and low-key. In the nineteen sixties some young American Jews rebelled against tradition. They opened their minds and hearts to someone of whom their parents disapproved, Jesus. They wanted to find ways in which they could share their new faith and this resulted in a fresh, innovative and authentically Jewish evangelistic approach. This in turn re-invigorated some of the older societies and has resulted in many Jewish people coming to faith.

So at the start of the third millennium, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, there is a vibrant and articulate community of Jewish people who find that Jesus is all that the Hebrew prophets

claimed for him and more. So great is the impression made by this movement today that the Jewish community is finding it more and more difficult to deny its claim to be both Christian and authentically Jewish. One Rabbi writing to *The Jerusalem Report* lamented, “we have little hope of stemming what is fast becoming a ‘Jewish Christian’ reality”. To use what seems to me an entirely appropriate Jewish expression – Hallelujah!

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