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CLAUDIUS BUCHANAN: SCOTLAND'S FIRST MISSIONARY TO THE JEWS

JOHN S. ROSS, GREYFRIARS FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, INVERNESS

THE REVIVAL BACKGROUND

Jonathan Edwards, the great American Congregationalist theologian, saw revival movements such as the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century as part of a spiritual continuum, dating back to Pentecost, whereby Christian life is, from time to time, renewed and reinvigorated.¹ He held that God's work in the world was advanced not so much by the ordinary work of the Christian ministry, but by the extraordinary work of God's Spirit:

Though there be a more constant influence of God's Spirit always in some degree attending his ordinances, yet the way in which the greatest things have been done towards carrying on this work, always have been by remarkable effusions, at special times of mercy....²

In his work *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1774) Edwards represented the revivals of the mid-eighteenth century as precursors of yet greater blessing to be experienced throughout the world, culminating in the millennium.³ This theory empowered by spiritual renewal resulted in evangelistic and missionary commitment. Indeed, during the 1742 Cambuslang revival some people testified that they only found freedom in prayer when they 'ceased to be self-regarding and preoccupied with their own concerns' and prayed for the salvation of the wider world.⁴

¹ Cf., e.g., J. A. De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea* (Kampen, 1970), pp. 119-21; I. H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 48-55; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, 1995), p. 277f.

² Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption in The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (London, 1974), p. 532 ff.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 604-9.

⁴ Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival* (London, 1971), p. 211.

The Concert for Prayer

When around 1743 the Great Awakening in Massachusetts began to falter, Edwards attributed the slow-down to a lack of faithfulness in prayer. He believed, however, that the lost momentum was only a temporary setback; God would revive his work and it would continue until it had 'subdued the whole earth'.⁵ In order to attempt to regain the earlier progress of revival Edwards wrote to the minister of Cambuslang, William M'Culloch, proposing the launching of a Concert for Prayer, a reintroduction on an international basis of an old Scottish practice whereby Christians covenanted to pray for a common cause.

The Concert for Prayer was the result of interaction, correspondence and personal friendship between Jonathan Edwards and four Scottish Christian leaders, John McLaurin of Glasgow, James Robe of Kilsyth and William M'Culloch of Cambuslang.⁶ As Andrew Walls points out, this international ecumenical co-operation was symbolised by the way 'a gift from a Scottish Presbyterian to an English Baptist of a book by a New England Congregationalist' led to William Carey's pioneering initiative of 1792.⁷ The connection between Edwards, the Concert for Prayer and William Carey's pioneering contribution to the modern missionary movement has become a commonplace in the historiography of Christian missions.⁸ Less remarked, but no less clear is the connection between the Concert of Prayer and Jewish missions.

For Edwards, the conversion of the Jews was crucial to his understanding of the international expansion of the Christian church.⁹ In *A History of the Work of Redemption* he depicts the restoration of Israel as a part of the fall of Antichrist, immediately preceding the 'Latter-day Glory':

Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews... When they shall be called, that ancient people, who alone were God's people for so long a time, shall be his people again, never to be

⁵ Cf. De Jong, op. cit., p. 131.

⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

⁷ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 79; Cf. De Jong, op. cit., pp. 175-81; Fawcett, op. cit., pp. 228-33.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Bosch, op. cit., p. 280; George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, 1972), p. 344; Jim Reapsome, 'Carey, William' in Scott Moreau (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, 2000), ad loc.; J. Verkyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 23.

⁹ Edwards, op. cit., p. 286.

rejected more. They shall be gathered into one fold together with the Gentiles... Though we do not know the time in which this conversion of Israel will come to pass; yet thus much we may determine from Scripture, that it will be before the glory of the Gentile part of the church shall be fully accomplished; because it is said, that their coming in shall be life from the dead to the Gentiles.¹⁰

His pen not only provided Jewish missions with the stimulus of theological rationale but his biography of David Brainerd, and the publication of Brainerd's Journal, set before the church an inspiring role model of self-sacrificial missionary service.

David Brainerd (1718-1747) was employed by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), which had been established in 1709 and had its roots in an earlier praying society. By 1730 the SSPCK had branched out into missionary work among the indigenous people of Pennsylvania, employing both David and his brother John.¹¹

The 'Lost Tribes of Israel'

Bizarre though it may seem from today's perspective, eighteenth-century missions to native Americans had their roots in nascent Jewish evangelism. For many decades there had been keen interest in 'the ten lost tribes of Israel'. The Amsterdam rabbi, Menasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657), who had successfully championed the resettlement of the Jews in England during the rule of Oliver Cromwell, promoted, through his book *The Hope of Israel*, the notion that the lost tribes might prove to be the American Indians.¹² Thomas Thorowgood had expressed the same view in a tract *Jewes in America* (1650) and this was held with certain modifications by orthodox Calvinists including the pioneer missionary John Eliot (1604-1690).¹³ Eliot was familiar with the works of Menasseh Ben Israel, and as he worked among the Amerindians he thought he detected elements in their religion and language that were vestiges of Jewish culture.¹⁴ Such reflections led Eliot to consider that 'the conversion of the Indians, of which his labours were a pledge, is but the sign that God is going to break

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 607.

¹¹ D. E. Meek, 'Scottish SPCK' in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), ad loc.

¹² Menasseh Ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, ed. Mechoulam and Nahon (London, 1987), p. 115ff.

¹³ Cf. Sidney H. Rooy, *The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition* (Delft, 1965), p. 230ff., De Jong, op. cit., pp. 63-78.

¹⁴ Rooy, op. cit., p. 231.

eastward for the conversion of Israel, the ten tribes as well as the two'.¹⁵ Edwards, who was himself formerly a missionary to the Indians, expected the restoration of Ephraim as 'the remains of the ten tribes, wherever they be' as well as that of the Jews, though he does not seem to have explicitly associated Ephraim with native Americans.¹⁶

AN ANGLICAN CHAPLAIN

The most direct link between the Cambuslang revival and modern missions to the Jews, however, was the work and influence of Claudius Buchanan (1766-1814).¹⁷ Buchanan was baptised by the elderly M'Culloch, then seventy-five years of age, and Arthur Fawcett was surely right to consider that, 'M'Culloch would have rejoiced to see Buchanan, once held in his arms and part of the spiritual fruit of the revival days of 1742, building the kingdom of God in India and seeking to send the good news into China.'¹⁸ Yet it is greatly to be regretted that Fawcett fails to acknowledge Buchanan's significant contribution to Jewish missions, especially in advocating the translation of the New Testament into Hebrew, particularly when it has been demonstrated by J. A. De Jong that Buchanan was the 'leading Anglican apologist for missions among Jews'¹⁹ and that this, not missions to India, was arguably 'the major new emphasis of the period'.²⁰

Buchanan's maternal grandfather was Claudius Somers, a convert of the 1742 Cambuslang revival and one of M'Culloch's elders, serving as the congregational treasurer. His family entertained the hope that young Claudius would enter the ministry of the Church of Scotland but he had other ideas and planned to explore the Continent. In fact his plans misfired and he did not get beyond London. There he was greatly influenced by Philip Doddridge's autobiographical *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*,²¹ and came under the influence of John Newton, then rector at St Mary, Woolnoth.²²

¹⁵ Walls, op. cit., p. 59.

¹⁶ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 607.

¹⁷ Hugh Pearson, *Memoirs of the Life and Writing of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan, D.D.* (London, 1834), p. 2. Cf. Fawcett, op. cit., pp. 235-6.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ De Jong, op. cit., p. 194. Cf. pp. 192, 196.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 198.

²¹ Pearson, op. cit., p. 16. Cf. *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 76-8, where Buchanan is styled as 'Mr *****'.

²² Ibid., p. 19. Cf. H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London, 1948), p. 112.

Educated at Cambridge under the patronage of Henry Thornton, Buchanan was surrounded by influences compelling him to consider the place of the Jewish people in the divine scheme of things. He became a protégé of Charles Simeon who had immense influence with students and believed passionately in the strategic importance of Jewish evangelism: to him it was simply 'the most important object in the world' and he acted on this conviction by becoming a founder of the *London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews*.²³ Simeon's commitment is illustrated by a famous incident. He was speaking at a meeting of the *London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews*, when Edward Bickersteth, secretary of the Church Missionary Society, passed him a note asking, 'eight millions of Jews and eight hundred million heathens — which is more important?' Simeon's succinct retort, scribbled on the other side of the note, read, 'If the conversion of the eight is life from the dead to the eight hundred, what then?'²⁴

At Cambridge Buchanan also read the works of the Scottish Episcopal Archbishop, Robert Leighton (1611-1684), who also entertained strong convictions concerning the conversion of the Jews and had once commented, 'They forget a main point in the Church's glory, who pray not daily for the conversion of the Jews.'²⁵

India

In 1794 John Newton had floated the idea that Buchanan could serve in India. At midsummer 1795, after a brilliant academic career, Buchanan modestly left Cambridge, without formally graduating.²⁶ Plans were laid for his ecclesiastical examination and ordination, on 20th September, by the Bishop of London, Beilby Porteus (1731-1808).²⁷ After a brief period as Newton's curate at St Mary, Woolnoth, he was appointed as one of five chaplains to the East India Company.²⁸ Sailing in September for Bengal, he arrived in Calcutta on 10th March 1797, where he was appointed vice-

²³ Ibid., p. 29. W. T. Gidney, *The Jews and Their Evangelisation* (London, 1899), p. 273. Cf. Moule, op. cit., pp. 95-6; Simeon's interest in Jewish missions was 'perhaps the warmest interest of his life' (p. 95); and 'Literally to the last the thought of the recovery of Israel to the divine Messiah was on Simeon's heart' (p. 96).

²⁴ Gidney, op. cit., p. 273.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁶ Pearson, op. cit., p. 73.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁸ Idem.

provost of Fort William College.²⁹ Through his linguistic interests he became an acquaintance of William Carey and a supporter of his work of Bible translation.³⁰

In 1803 Henry Martyn (1781-1812) became Simeon's curate, and later, in 1806, departed to follow Buchanan to India as another of Simeon's East India Company chaplains.³¹ I. H. Murray correctly draws attention to the fact that Martyn himself had a prayerful interest in the Jewish people.³² But his interest reached far beyond his prayers, as both his biographers, Sargent and Padwick demonstrate.³³ In his travels through Persia Martyn met with members of the Sephardic Jewish communities in Basra, Isfahan and Shiraz. Some, like the 'Jewish Moollah' Abdulghanee, had been induced to half-heartedly embrace Islam.³⁴ On his thirty-first birthday, the last before his death, Martyn met with 'two Mussulmen Jews', acquaintances of Abdulghanee, who quizzed him regarding their welfare 'in another world'. Reflecting on their anxiety Martyn was led him to record in his Journal his sympathy for them:

Feelings of pity for God's ancient people, and the awful importance of eternal things impressed on my mind by the seriousness of their enquiries as to what would become of them, relieved me from the pressure of my comparatively insignificant distresses. I, a poor Gentile, blest, honoured, and loved; secured for ever by the everlasting covenant, whilst the children of the Kingdom are still in outward darkness! Well does it become me to be thankful.³⁵

In May 1806, as Martyn sailed up the Hoogly river to Calcutta, Buchanan was making his way downriver on his journey to the west coast where he would commence a research mission to ascertain 'the present state and recent history of the eastern Jews', specifically the ancient community of Cochin Jews and the fabled Bene Israel of Bombay (Mumbai).³⁶ The Bene Israel held to tradition that maintained their ancestors left Galilee subsequent to the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-163 BCE) and

²⁹ Ibid., p. 121ff.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

³¹ Constance Padwick, *Henry Martyn Confessor of the Faith* (London, 1953), p. 58f. Cf. Moule, op. cit., p. 90.

³² Murray, op. cit., p. 154.

³³ John Sargent, *Henry Martyn* (London, 1828); Padwick, op. cit.

³⁴ Cf. Sargent, op. cit. pp. 353-61; 410-11. Cf. Padwick, *ibid.*, pp. 163, 146.

³⁵ Sargent, op. cit., p. 411.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4. Cf. Padwick, op. cit., p. 85. Pearson, op. cit., p. 202.

that their ship was wrecked on the Indian coast some twenty-five miles south of Bombay, and that seven men and seven women survived to establish the community.³⁷

Manuscripts and Moonshes

When, on his journey up through Madras to Cochin, Buchanan lingered to satisfy his curiosity at the ancient Mar Thoma Syrian churches and the various contemporary mission stations, he suffered a twinge of conscience that he was neglecting the Jewish community: 'The interesting scene of the Christian missions have obliterated from my mind the poor Jews.'³⁸ Arriving in Cochin in December he established a friendship with Colonel Macaulay, who brought to him 'a copy of certain chapters of the Jewish Scriptures, which he understood I wished to see'.³⁹ Other important Hebrew manuscripts were purchased and conversations held with Jewish leaders before Buchanan was glad to embark on his ship and 'get out of the throng'.⁴⁰

Returning to Calcutta he corresponded with Macaulay over technicalities of Hebrew texts and anecdotes of literary conversations held with a Jewish friend called Levi.⁴¹ Not only did Buchanan bring back Hebrew manuscripts, which Carey 'beheld with veneration' but also a Hebrew 'moonshes' (secretary or writer) as well as Judah Misrahi, a Cochin Jew and proficient translator.⁴² A final visit to Cochin took place in December 1807, when Buchanan was en route to England. Evidently he had established cordial personal relationships with local people at Cochin, for Pearson records his frankly self-congratulatory comment that, 'all my Jews and Christians were in fine health and spirits, and highly gratified at my unexpected arrival'.⁴³ At this time the community was agitated by questions of the interpretation of biblical prophecy and had called a meeting

³⁷ Cf. 'Bene Israel' in *The Encyclopaedia Judaica* (London, 1972), ad loc.; E. M. Jacob Gadkar, *The Religious and Cultural Heritage of the Bene-Israelis of India*, 2 vols (Bombay, 1984). For Cochin Jews see J. H. Lord, *The Jews in India and the Far East* (London, 1907), and 'Cochin Jews' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ad loc. Menasseh Ben Israel also speaks of the Cochin Jews, op. cit., p. 154.

³⁸ Sargent, op cit., p. 224.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 262-3.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 269.

⁴² Idem.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 291.

to discuss the matter. Buchanan entered into the debate with some enthusiasm, stating in a letter:

The Jews at Cochin are very unsettled in relation to the prophecies. They wonder at the attention paid by the English to these subjects for the first time. You will read in the *Bombay Courier* an account of a ceremony in the synagogue at Cochin, which took place at Christmas last, a few days before I arrived. Some Jews interpret the prophecies aright, and some in another way; but all agree that a great era is at hand.⁴⁴

And again:

I am about to call another Sanhedrin on the subject, before I go. It is a strange event. I am happy I have visited this place a second time. May God direct all these things to his own glory and the good of men! ... Tell H. that the poor Jews, blind, lame, and halt, are come this morning, exclaiming as usual, 'Jehuda Ani' (poor or afflicted Jews). I wish I could impart a better gift than silver or gold.⁴⁵

THE LONDON SOCIETY

On 18th August 1808 Buchanan arrived in London and was stunned to learn that John Newton had been buried on 27th December, the day he arrived in Cochin.⁴⁶ There then followed a visit to Scotland to see his mother, now 72 years of age but in fine health. The memorisation and interpretation of biblical prophecy was evidently her forte, and three years later Buchanan reported that she astonished and amused his wife 'by her eloquence on the prophecies, which she utters in hard words [Scots], without affecting at all the English language'.⁴⁷

In April the next year he visited Cambridge, depositing in the library his collection of manuscripts, which included a one hundred and fifty year-old Hebrew New Testament, translated by a rabbi from Travancore, who had in the course of his work become a Christian. As Buchanan put it: 'His own work subdued his unbelief.'⁴⁸ This version had been transcribed at Buchanan's expense with the intention that it should form the basis of a

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 293.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 291.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 311.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 356.

⁴⁸ Cf. *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1810), p. 206. Cf. vol. 1, p. 138; Gidney, op. cit., p. 113.

translation of the New Testament in the 'pure style of the Hebrew of the Old, for the benefit of Jews, and in aid of the laudable design for this purpose of the London Society for the conversion of that ancient people'.⁴⁹ The London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews (LSPCJ) had been established just two months earlier on 15th February 1809, evolving from a branch of the non-denominational London Missionary Society, via a 'small and unpretending association' connected with the Jewish Christian, Joseph Samuel Christian Fredrick Frey, and continues today as the Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ).⁵⁰

Buchanan strongly expressed astonishment and disappointment that the newly-established society had made no progress in producing a reliable Hebrew translation and urged them to consider the swift implementation of such a project:

It is with surprise I learn that as yet you have not obtained a version of the New Testament in the Hebrew language, for the use of Jews. It is surely the very first duty of your Society to execute this translation. You are beginning to work without instruments. How can you find fault with a Jew for not believing the New Testament if he has never seen it?

How strange it appears that, during a period of eighteen hundred years, the Christians should never have given the Jews the New Testament in their own language! By a kind of infatuation they have reprobated the unbelief of the Jews, and have never, at the same time, told them what they ought to believe.⁵¹

Although, as Gidney points out, there were in fact three Hebrew translations then in existence, Hutter's, Robinson's and Cradick's, all were either inadequate, unobtainable or incomplete. Buchanan's reproof was taken to heart and the work was entrusted to a Jewish scholar, Judah d'Allemand and a Gentile colleague. By 1814 Matthew's Gospel was completed with the other books appearing in rapid succession to critical acclaim.⁵² Two years later Buchanan contemplated the possibility of a journey to Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia to investigate translation possibilities, the circumstances of the Jews in those regions, and the 'extension of Christianity' among them.⁵³ Due to ill health these plans were aborted.

⁴⁹ Pearson, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁵⁰ Gidney, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵¹ ECI, *op. cit.*, p. 208; Gidney, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁵² *Idem.*

⁵³ Pearson, *op. cit.*, p. 352; Cf. ECI, 1811, vol. 2, p. 423.

On 6th December 1814 Buchanan was visited at his home in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, by two men, Mr S. and Mr B., sent by the LSPCJ to recruit him as their secretary. He felt unable to accede to their wishes, not because of any lack of commitment to the cause but because he held 'radical objections to the constitution of that society in its present form, and suggested renovation and improvement'.⁵⁴ On the 24th the delegation returned to his home. Mr B. had been replaced by the persuasive Lewis Way, one of the founders, but even he could not prevail as Buchanan more fully explained his disapproval of the current constitution:

I declined, however, pledging myself for its support, further than by offering my best advice. I desired them to communicate their plans and wishes to all good and eminent ministers in the kingdom, to request useful hints and affectionate support, and to do nothing of themselves:— not to call their Society, 'for conversion of the Jews': but a Society for the education of Jewish children; for diffusing the New Testament among the Jews; for corresponding with them concerning the Messiah in all lands; and for the diffusion of Jewish literature. Lastly to connect the Institution with the Church Missionary Society, the end being the same.⁵⁵

Although Buchanan did not take up office in the LSPCJ he was greatly influential in formulating its policy and shaping its strategy. In his view the society would best achieve its aims by renouncing its interdenominational membership and by becoming a voluntary society within the Anglican communion. The implementation of this policy inevitably led to the dissolution of the LSPCJ in its original form as the non-conformists, who were in the main London-based Church of Scotland members, withdrew. In 1842, in the wake of the initial success of the Church of Scotland's own Jewish mission and under the influence of Robert Murray M'Cheyne and his friend William Hamilton, minister of Regent Square Church of Scotland, they founded the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Jews (BSPGJ), now Christian Witness to Israel (CWI).⁵⁶

Buchanan was now in the last months of his life but his thoughts and prayers still focused on India and its Jews. The plight of two Cochin Jews stranded in London caught his attention and he sought help for them from his old friend Macaulay. He died three weeks later on 9th February aged 49,

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 410.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 411-12.

⁵⁶ F. Exley, *Our Hearts Desire* (London, 1942), p. 13f; cf. *The Jewish Herald* (London, 1846), vol. 1, no. 1, p. 1.

and was buried near his second wife at Ouseburn, between Ripon and York.⁵⁷

Fifteen years later in 1829 Joseph Wolff (1796-1862), the Jewish adventurer and Christian missionary visited the Bene Israel at Pune. Here he was introduced to John Wilson (1804-1875) then of the Scottish Missionary Society whose work with the Bene Israel owed much to the pioneer researches of Buchanan. Wolff commented that it was 'wonderful that Gentiles from Scotland should be the instruments of re-teaching the children of Israel their native language'.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 419.

⁵⁸ Gidney, *op. cit.*, p. 115.