NEW FOCUS

Jesus And The Gentiles - 2

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The Old is in the New revealed

Isaiah in the Old Testament relates how God tells His Servant in His covenant work, ‘To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel’, adding, ‘I will also give thee as a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth’. This was the Old Testament gospel. That this was still Jesus’ New Testament task is shown by His great world-wide commission in Matthew 28:19 commanding His chosen ones to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Thus, whatever modern critics are telling us about their rejection of the Old Testament, our Lord preached its continuation in the New Testament which stands on its shoulders. After all, Christ was always, is, and ever will be, our Covenant-Keeper. It is thus of great interest to know that even at the birth of Jesus, non-Jews such as the three wise men from the East recorded in Matthew 2:1-12 were present as His worshippers. Here, the account is so long and detailed that one realises the full extent of Herod’s crimes against God’s Covenant yet how world-wide the gospel always was.

The Gospel is for all nations

Those who think that there has been an ethnic chosen race called ‘the Jews’ from Adam on might turn to Genesis 10 which speaks of all the different races united by one common language, at that time, but not one religion. These were pre-Babel times but what happened at Babel and after, described in Chapter 11, shows how the world became much more mixed nationally and mixed up in religions and languages. We notice that the confusion of languages was a punishment to the nations for departing from God’s true religion. Happily, we are told of Abraham here in Chapter 12. He believed in the Lord God as did other Gentiles such as Job at this time and they knew the Lord’s salvation. Thus, Abraham and those like him were placed within the Covenant of Grace. All this was many hundreds of years before Israel became a nation to share God’s promises with the world. So, too, the Biblical language ‘Hebrew’ was a post-Babel phenomenon compiled out of many other languages, including the Indo-Germanic and Semitic and was perhaps never a spoken language but one used like Latin previously by the Roman Catholic Church for purposes of worship.

The Jewish failure as a nation

We note that in Christ's day, when the few Jews left in former Israel and Judah were split up into various protectorates, Christ's dealings with them was strictly against the background of the Covenant of Grace, including the Law of Moses. Christ was born a Jew and saw that the task of the Jews was to spread God's world-wide gospel, but the Jews as a nation, failed in their duty and rejected their Messiah. They yet still clung to the letter of the Law, which they had embroidered out of all proportion, chiefly due to Babylonian and other pagan influences. They had rejected the spirit and true meaning of the Law within the Covenant which had been given them through Abraham and Moses. The religion preached by Moses, David and the prophets was now almost dead in a formal, national, Jewish protectorate state.

These people were still called Christ's 'own' by John but they would not have him, as their Saviour. Christ, to them, was an outsider. The New Testament gospels outline how Christ condemned the sham-faith of professing, but unbelieving, Jews and opened the way for a wider evangelisation of the non-Jews, thus bringing in all God's Holy Goy, Jew and non-Jew alike, which was the true aim of the Incarnation and Atonement. Christ respected the national and political boundaries surrounding the protectorate He was in, or outside of, throughout His earthly ministry. A special case was that of the Tyre-Sidon area which the Romans had put under the Herodian dynasty. Tyre and Sidon, like the Gaza coastlands which belonged to the Philistines, were not part of the Canaan promised to the Children of Israel. Jewish possessing of them, even temporally, was a disregarding of God's Word.

The Jews for centuries under the reign of foreign powers

Here we see the negative development of the one-time nation of the Jews because of their turning away from dependence on God and belief in a Redeemer. After the Exile, they were supressed and ruled for centuries by foreign powers from both the East and the West and a residue had come under Roman rule in Galilee placed under an Idumaean vassal king named Herod. A few of Herod's ancestors had been forced to take on the Jewish religion but the king, of mixed racial and religious origin, was anything but part of the Holy Goy. He mocked the Jews' Temple worship by nationalising it and placing a large golden eagle before it to please the Romans. The spiritual Israel preached by David and the Prophets was not wanted. Yet the residue left of the national Jews, now strove to preserve themselves as a people apart. This was not by living according to God's Covenant but by degrading non-Jews as almost sub-human, calling them 'Gentiles'(Goyim), ignoring, or having forgot, their own history as bearers of the Covenant and God's own Goy. They had become mere bearers of the Law and foreign traditions which they altered or adjusted to suit themselves. Old Judaism was dead. Fritz Rienecker, whose Greek studies were a great help to me as a student, says in his commentary on this

passage that the hatred of non-Jews by the Jews in Christ's day was 'grauenhaft' (horrible). Yet in God's plans for His Goy, there was no such horrible distinction.

Jesus' use of the terms 'Jew' and 'Gentile'

Thus, Jesus used the new connotations of the terms 'Jew' and 'Gentile' wisely and cautiously at first so as not to offend His own people. He gradually revealed who the true Holy Goy really were as it was clear that the 'national' Jews had no longer an interest in the Messiah revealed in their Scriptures. The opening chapters of the New Testament gospels, however, show that there was still a believing remnant amongst the Jews at the time of Christ. Jesus called out twelve of them to be taught and teach others. So great was the prejudice of the national Jews that Jesus trod very warily and wisely to give them no cause for complaint, although complaints came from those, as usual, who had no eyes to see or ears to hear. Jeremiah tells of those who were circumcised in the body having uncircumcised ears so they could not hearken. Indeed, Christ even used the contemporary Jewish distinction to test the true faith of His hearers as in the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman. We note that His measuring rod was not to declare who the Jews as a people were but who was a member of the true House of Israel. This House, and that of Judah, according to the Old Testament Prophets and the writers of the Books of the New Testament, was given the New Covenant which both Testaments see as belonging to a holy remnant of Jews and Gentiles whom God called His ' Goy.'

It is difficult to find an exact time sequence in Christ's approach to non-Jews, yet, we find Him referring to them and their needs in general from the start of His ministry, preparing His hearers for the fact that He would also bring in flocks from other folds.

The faith of the Roman Centurion

One of the most informative cases of Non-Jewish, Christian belief is the case of the Centurion from Capernaum who respected the true Jewish faith shown by his building a synagogue for them. The Jewish delegation which spoke up for him said, 'he loves our nation'. This Roman commander of 100 soldiers asked Christ to heal his grievously ill servant, knowing in faith that He could and would. The account is found in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. Of the Centurion, Christ says. 'I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. Then Christ takes His hearers back to the Covenant with Abraham and says: 'And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven'.

These are the true children of the Covenant, world-wide. In a former essay in this series, I have pointed out that there are two sides to the Covenant of Grace. Those given to believe it, accept it. Those given to disbelieve it,

reject it. So, Christ, after praising the faith of a non-Jew, a faith greater than that which He finds in Israel, goes on to say: ‘But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth’.

So, we see the two functions of the New Covenant, as given to Jeremiah, were always to knock down and build up. We read in Jeremiah’s calling by God to preach the Covenant in Chapter 1:10, that God had set him up above the nations and kingdoms: ‘To root out, to pull down and to destroy, to throw down, to build and to plant’. This is the work of the true Covenant of Grace and that of a true gospel preacher. Either we are saved by God’s grace or lost through our rejection of it.

The man called Legion

A very different kind of non-Jew who was raised in the Decapolis cities of mainly non-Jewish occupants, was the Gadarene man possessed with so many unclean spirits that he was nick-named Legion. His story is related in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39. When this poor castaway saw Jesus, he ran to Him and worshipped Him. Perhaps his plague had been his own sin and now he saw Christ and knew Him as his Redeemer. This knowledge did not please him at first according to Luke but, as soon as he was healed, the man became one of the first non-Jews to preach the gospel to his fellow men. Now both sides of Lake Galilee knew that Jesus had come to make two folds one.

The ten lepers

Jesus demonstrates clearly in the gospel that He has not merely come to seek out the prominent Gentiles who were well in mind and body but also those of an unclean body as well as an unclean mind. Here, the story of the ten lepers, told in Luke 17:11-19 is a fitting example. Of the ten lepers cleansed only one gave the glory to God and returned and worshipped Christ. He was a Samaritan, looked down on as a pagan by the Jews, but Christ told him ‘Arise, go thy way. Thy faith hath made thee whole’. The nine Jews had no praise for God but the ‘stranger’ had proved he was of God’s Holy Goy. Now the leading Jews pressed Jesus to give them a sign that the Kingdom of God had come. The Lord said that the kingdom of God was within its citizens but when the outward sign would come that the Jews wanted, it would mean their perdition. Again, the Lord uses the Old Testament, this time the case of Noah, to back up His point. This is, again, how the gospel Covenant works through both Testaments.

The woman of Samaria

Here, Jesus broke with a then contemporary Jewish practice which was quite out of keeping with traditional Judaism as we see in the case of the widow at Sarepta. The Lord approached a Samaritan woman and spoke with her. For this he was even rebuked by His disciples who had still much

to learn. We find the story in John 4:5-42. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews because they rejected Jerusalem with all its politics and their temple was at Mt. Gerizim not Jerusalem. The Samaritan woman refers to this in verse 20. The Samaritans maintained that the Jewish religion had been radically altered by High Priest Eli and his two sons Hophni and Phinehas. They were not exiled like the Jerusalem Jews, who, on their return, accused the Samaritans of having mixed with other peoples in their absence. The Samaritans, who had not been placed under Babylonian indoctrination, accused those returning from exile of bringing false teaching back and altering the Scriptures. The Samaritans, however, only recognised the Torah or Pentateuch as God's Word. The main differences in their version are in the place names, so Christ told the woman in verse 21 that places have nothing to do with a right faith which is a spiritual matter and not one of geography. The more important thing was that this woman looked for Christ to explain all things and He saw that the harvest was ripe and began to reap. We are told that Jesus witnessed to this willing people and 'many believed'.

Elias and the non-Jews

This story, recorded in Luke 4:25-27 shows how God was at work saving non-Jews during the time of Elias. Here, Jesus picks out Sarepta, the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. This true, historical fact, we are told, caused the false Jews in the synagogue to be so overcome by anger that they tried to kill Jesus before His time. Of course, here their evil intentions were thwarted by the Lord. The idea that Jesus could save the non-Jews according to the Scriptures was anathema to their ears as they had abandoned God's Word for their traditions of men.

The Syro-Phoenician woman

One of the most intriguing accounts of Christ's dealings with the non-Jews is that of the faith shown by the Syro-Phoenician woman described in Mark 7:25-30 and Matthew 15:21-29. Most commentators on these passages wonder whether Jesus is teasing the good lady or testing her faith. Matthew calls this woman who lived in a non-Jewish area, a Canaanite. This mixture of peoples constituted the original dwellers in the Promise Land before the settlement of the Children of Israel but they also held great territories outside that area. The Canaanite-Phoenician script was taken over by the Children of Israel and much of their culture. The inhabitants of Canaan were often called 'Habiru' or 'Habiri,' being translated variously as 'brigands' or 'merchants.' They were of a multi-racial and multi-cultural background. Their name seems to have been shortened to Hibri, a people whom modern Israel claims to have been their original ancestors. They argue that 'Hebrew' has developed from 'Hibri.' It is an oddity of history that the Children of Israel theoretically did not allow Canaanites to escape with their lives but modern Israel say they are descended from the original inhabitants of Canaan which the Children of Israel spared. In other words, they claim to be the descendants of the enemies of the Children of Israel.

Jesus treated this chosen Canaanite woman, once the deadly foe of the Jews, with the gift of faith.

Jesus had gone into a non-Jewish area so was obviously seeking out non-Jews. Tyre and Sidon had a semi-independent rule under Greek and Roman oversight and allowed the Jews special privileges of asylum in pre-Christian years. Perhaps Jesus is referring to this fact when he says, 'Let the children first be filled', thus referring to privileges given the Jews in this non-Jewish area. What is important here, however, is not the traditions and politics of this area but the faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman that Christ was drawing out.

In Mark's foreword to the event, He quotes Isaiah on the practice of unbelieving Jews, even then, of rejecting saving doctrine and turning to the commandments of men. They followed what became known as the 'traditions of the Elders' which were based on a misunderstanding of the Law and had no basis in God's Covenant history of salvation. Knowing that Christ, a Jew, was first called to those who bore the name of Jews, the Syro-Phoenician humbled herself in faith and told Jesus that even the dogs under the Jewish table received the food given to the Jews. This response, was just what Jesus was waiting for as a personal testimony of great faith, demonstrating, too why the Lord visited this non-Jewish area, thus fulfilling Christ's Messianic claim recorded in John 10:16: 'And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd'.

Footnotes

1. Isaiah 49:6-8.

2. Matthew 28:18-20.

3. John 1.11.

4. Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9.

5. It must be said that over two thirds of practising Jews already lived in the Diaspora at the time of Christ, so the Jews in Palestine were truly 'a nation apart', The situation is the same today as Israeli Jews are only a fraction of world-wide Jewry and should not be seen as their representatives. I was brought up in an area (Bradford/Leeds) where there was an estimated population of 46,000 Jews, mostly Progressives, who tolerated Christians well and worked with the Mildmay Mission to the Jews in their hospital in Leeds, and were against the 1947 deportation of the Jews to Palestine and rejected a worldly Jewish State. Most of these British Jews lived in or around the area now called 'Little Germany', but their pioneers, especially in the jewels and coal trades were from Italy. The Yiddish-speaking groups were in the meat, spinning and weaving trades.

6. Das Evangelium des Matthäus, p. 96, Verlag R. Brockhaus, 1953.

7. Such as Elizabeth and Zacharias mentioned in Luke 1, and Simeon and Anna mentioned in Luke 2.

8. Jeremiah 6:10.

9. See for instance, Hebrews 8:8.

10. The five books of Moses.

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