

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PURPOSE OF JEWISH EVANGELISM

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PREFACE

I want to begin this paper by pointing out that, though it touches upon the Holocaust, it is not really focused on the Holocaust. I do hope, however, that this paper will further our understanding of how we should reach out to the Jewish people as we do so in the shadow of those atrocities.

I also want to make two admissions. One is that I have been involved in Jewish evangelism for approximately eight years now, six as a missionary with Jews for Jesus and two as general director of The Toronto Jewish Mission, operating as New Covenant Forum. I dare say that many, and probably most, of my colleagues at this conference have far greater tenure than I. Secondly, I am not a scholar, and do not pretend to present here an erudite work on the teleological implications of Jewish evangelism.

What I do hope to present is an expression of my own concerns about the purpose of my work, which I anticipate has been shared by not a few of us over the course of our ministries. My hope is that this will lead to some discussions that would help us to go forward in the work of Jewish evangelism with firmer purpose, and with a clearer sense of our calling.

I anticipate that some will disagree with my conclusions, and that is a good thing. I stand ready to be corrected.

INTRODUCTION

It is within the nature of humanity that we do things for a purpose. We go to university to get a better job. We diet to lose weight. We have children to provide a legacy.

Furthermore, the way we approach a task is often affected by our purpose in that task. If, for instance, we go to university in order to get a lucrative professional position, we are likely to work hard at the task of learning. If we go to university with no greater purpose than to delay getting into the work force, we might not be so diligent in our studies.

During this conference, we have been discussing the ramifications of the Holocaust on Jewish evangelism. There can be no question that the Holocaust has left an indelible mark on the psyche of the Jewish community. Though there may be some diminishment of concern among the younger generation, I believe that one of the greatest difficulties the Holocaust has created for us is the entrenchment of Jewish identity among our people, which is perceived to be in opposition to the truth claims that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel and that faith in him is the continuation of the biblical faith presented by God to the Jews.

It has also been evident to many that, since the Holocaust, there has been a diminishment of evangelism to the Jewish people as a response to those horrible events.¹ This is sad, but not surprising, since the Holocaust affected the Church as well. Many Christians began to question the existence of God in the face of the Holocaust, and this opened the floodgates of Christian liberalism. It is for this reason that we have a growing multi-faith ecumenism that eliminates the need for Jewish evangelism. It is also the cause of such modern doctrinal positions such as dual covenant theology and replacement theology.

For the ecumenist, if there is no God, or if God allows many ways to Him, then there is no purpose to Jewish evangelism. Why do it? Within the church, if I can reason that the Jewish people have their own special agreement with God, or have no special standing with God as a people, then I can also reason that there is no need to evangelize them. Purpose defines action.

A couple of years ago I attended a symposium on Messianic Congregationalism sponsored by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Conference. Now I have been challenged with regard to Messianic Congregationalism for a long while now, and during the symposium, I had a conversation with a dear colleague of mine also ministering in Toronto.

In response to some concerns of mine, he presented me with some reasons for the need for Messianic congregations, one of which I mention here because it led me to pursuing this question of Eschatological Purpose and, ultimately, to presenting this paper. He asked that, though I might feel comfortable maintaining a Jewish identity within a non-Messianic congregation, what about my children and grandchildren – will they identify themselves as Jewish?

This really challenged me, and I spent some time in searching to find whether this question had validity. As you will see, I have determined that the question posed is based on a faulty eschatological understanding. This paper is the result of my search, and asks the question: what is the eschatological purpose to Jewish evangelism?

ROMANS 9-11

With reference to Jewish evangelism, Romans Chapters 9-11 have been gone over and fought over *ad infinitum*. It has been translated in such a way as to make Jewish evangelism imperative, and it has been translated in a way that would deter people from Jewish outreach. With regard to the latter, this is usually done by diminishing its reference to Israel as an ongoing distinct nation chosen by God.

¹ WEA Theological Commission Task Force, The Berlin Declaration of the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today. 2008.

What was the purpose of Romans 9-11? It almost seems like a non sequitur to what is written before and after it. But a close examination would suggest otherwise.

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul points out the pitiful condition of humankind and its rebellion against God. In Romans 2-6, Paul then develops his theme of justification by faith. In Chapter 7, Paul addresses the battle between the new nature, which is the Holy Spirit, and the old nature that is inherent in the flesh, which includes our bodies and mind. Then, in Chapter 8, Paul encourages us with the truth that despite this fact, when we are in Christ, God will enable us to see the completion of His work in us – our glorification to eternal life.

Therefore Chapter 8 ends with these encouraging words:

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:37-39)

Now many here would suggest that the continuation of this chapter is found in Chapter 12, which begins, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). The “therefore” here would then simply refer back to the victory we have in Christ expressed in Romans 8, and this would make Chapters 9-11 a digression with no introduction or explanation.

But I believe we can see a clear purpose to these three chapters that emanates directly from the chapter preceding. Paul realizes that an individual’s response to his conclusion in Chapter 8 could very well be this, “How can you be so sure that God will not cast *us* off, when he has cast off Israel?” Recognizing the fairness of this argument, Paul then spends three chapters responding.

It is not the purpose of this paper to deal with a complete hermeneutical study of Romans 9-11, so I will summarize my own interpretation which is that Paul is showing his readers that 1) God has not cast off Israel (9:1-11:5), 2) God is not finished with Israel (11:6-25; 29), and 3) God will be faithful to Israel (11:25-32). It is at this point that, along with the wonderful encouragement of Romans 8:37-39, we have added the great doxology of 11:33-36.

And it is from this point that we are to understand the “therefore brothers” of 12:1. It is because of the certainty of God’s continued faithfulness to Israel that we, as believers in Messiah, can have assurance of God’s continued faithfulness to us. And so from the inspired Word of God, we can say with certainty that the Jewish people will come to the Lord one day in great numbers.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. If the nation of Israel still has a role in God’s plan of salvation, then we can understand that at some point they must discover who Messiah is. We have this in prophecy:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.” (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1)

ROMANS 11:25-26

This understanding does not alleviate the issue for us. It neither vindicates nor denies, for instance, the question put to me by my colleague regarding the importance of Jewish identity with regard to Jewish evangelism.

I believe that Romans Chapter 11 does hold the key, however, to determining the purpose of Jewish evangelism and thus the answer to this and many other questions regarding Jewish outreach. Particularly, Romans 11:25-26 gives us a crucial key to understanding Jewish evangelism in the light of God’s plans for the Jewish people and for the world at large.

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’” (Romans 11:25-27)

A Mystery

Paul introduces this passage by telling the reader that what he is about to say is a mystery. Paul is not talking about mystery in the context of pagan cult, but as William Hendriksen I believe rightly puts it, “a truth which would not have been known if God had not revealed it.”²

In context, this mystery is connected with the fact that Israel seems rejected but is not truly rejected. Remember, the purpose of revealing this mystery is that the primarily Gentile brothers in the Roman church will not get conceited about their own inclusion as people in covenant with God, as well as to prevent them from despising the Jewish people.

A Partial Hardening

Paul has gone to great lengths in the first verses of Romans to show that justification is by faith and not by works. The natural implication of this is that salvation is a personal thing, not a national thing. Nevertheless, he makes it equally clear in Romans 11:28-29 that Israel as a nation is bound up in the promises and calling of their forefathers.

² Hendriksen, W., New Testament Commentary: Romans (Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book, 1981) p.377.

So there is a remnant in Paul's day of Jewish people, like himself, who have been saved. And we well know that over the 1,900 and some years since Paul wrote this epistle, there has continued to be a remnant to this very day.

For A Time

Not only is this hardness numerically partial, but it is also temporally partial. This partial hardness will last "*until* the fullness of the Gentiles" (italics mine). When that time will be, we don't know, but in the context of the recent Arab Spring, the recent tsunami in Japan and similar events, I think it is safe to say that the "fullness of the Gentiles" is not yet.

All Israel Saved

Ultimately, the mystery lies in that fact that the result of this hardening of Israel is the harvest of the Gentile elect which in the end results in all Israel being saved. But what does "all Israel" means?

Hendriksen is again helpful here. He points out three possibilities for the meaning of "all Israel:"

1. It is referring to the whole nation of Israel at the time of Messiah's return.
2. It refers, as Calvin suggested, to the total number of the elect, both Jew and Gentile throughout history.
3. It refers to the all the Jewish remnant throughout history till the time of Christ's return.³

Hendriksen clearly favours the third possibility, but this seems hard to justify in the light of a number of factors. There are two objections, both rather spuriously countered by Hendriksen (p. 382) and that are best expressed by Everett F. Harrison, that it, "fails to come to grips with the climactic nature of Paul's argument, in particular this contrast between all Israel and the remnant as set forth in v. 16a. It fails also to explain the use of the word, "mystery" in v.25 ... Clearly "all Israel" stands over against "in part" by way of contrast."⁴

Another problem with the third possibility is that it does not fit with a somewhat parallel passage in the Tanakh, namely Zechariah 12:10-13:1:

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by

³ Hendriksen, W., *ibid.* pp. 379-382.

⁴ Harrison, E. F., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 10. Ed. Gaebelien, F. E. (Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1976) p.124.

themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves; and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves. On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

In this passage we see a clear representation of Israel coming, in fullness, to recognize the Messiah who was pierced – a clear reference to Yeshua – and then mourning for him. It clearly comes as a recognition of sadness at missing Messiah the first time. Not only that, but this will occur in the plains of Megiddo, what the B’rit Hadashah terms Armageddon. And on that day, it says, a fountain will be opened up to Israel to cleanse them from sins.

This clearly has not occurred, nor will it occur until Messiah returns. So Hendriksen’s third possibility doesn’t jive.

Calvin’s explanation that “all Israel” refers to all the elect of all time (Possibility #2) is more clearly fraught with difficulty. Throughout Romans 9-11, Paul differentiates between Gentile and Israelite. In Chapter 11, for instance, vs. 11-14, Paul is speaking directly to the Gentiles in the church in the hopes of saving his Israelite brethren. Israelite, therefore, is used in the physical sense, not the spiritual sense, as does the term Gentile. There is absolutely no reason to expect that it means anything different in 11:25.

Far more sensible and logical, especially in light of Zechariah 12:10-13:1 is the first possibility, that “all Israel” means Israel as a whole at the time of Messiah’s returning. This does not necessarily deny the inclusion of the remnant of the past, but definitely defines a distinct time of national repentance and salvation to come. For this reason, Paul quotes Isaiah 59:20: “‘and a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,’ declares the LORD” (Isaiah 59:20). Paul has already said that there is a hardening of Israel for a time, and so this quote points to the end of that hardening – the time when “all Israel will be saved.”

I believe this garners further support from Revelation 7:1-8. Here we see a numeric representation of Israel: 12,000 of each of the 12 tribes. There is no biblical precedent to define the twelve individually named tribes as anything other than the whole of Israel. And so it is that at the time (or just before) Messiah returns to judge the quick and the dead, “all Israel” will see Messiah for who He truly is, and, with repentant hearts will bow their knees and obtain eternal life.

In this way, God will have brought to completion all the promises he made to the Patriarchs, to Moses and all Israel at Sinai, to King David and to us. Hallelujah!

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS ESCATOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

There are a number of implications that come out of this understanding of God's end times plan for Israel:

1. We must understand that Israel is still a people with a future and a part to play in God's plan, and that includes His plan of salvation. We cannot, as some have done, deny the importance of Israel as a people group or, as Boettner has done, deny that the Jews have any special privilege even to exist.⁵
2. We cannot anticipate that we will see a great number of Jewish people come to salvation except that, not knowing the time of our Lord's coming (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32), we live prepared for that time (Mark 13:33).
3. While Gentiles come to faith in great numbers, the time for "all Israel's" salvation is not yet. Paul is very clear that the time is predicated on the full number of the Gentiles entering the kingdom.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS ESCATOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING ON JEWISH EVANGELISM

1. It is therefore clear that Jewish evangelism is important if for no other reason than Jewish people are a nation that needs to hear the Gospel. But as God's promises to Israel will be kept by God, we must also assume that his promise to Abraham to bless those who bless his promised seed will still hold true (Genesis 12:3a). If my own experience in Jewish evangelism is anything to go by, it indicates that Jewish outreach increases the fruit of Gentile outreach; which is not surprising in the light of what Paul says: "Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean" (Romans 11:12). This is in keeping with the words of God through the prophet Zechariah who spoke of a time when ten Gentiles will take hold of one Jew because the Lord is with him (Zechariah 8:23). The evangelization of the Jewish people, therefore, is important for its own sake, but it is also important for the evangelization of the world.
2. If we cannot anticipate large numbers of Jewish people coming to faith in Messiah until the fullness of the Gentiles (though we can hope and pray), and if we admit that this fullness is not yet come, then we must recognize that the major purpose of Jewish evangelism is primarily preparatory. It is the first goal of Jewish evangelism, then, to maintain a faithful witness to the Jewish community so that, when the time comes, the seeds of faith in that community will be there.
 - a. Therefore, it is the propagation of the Gospel message that is of primary importance. It is the continued forth-telling of the truth of Yeshua that will accomplish this. Although I do not deny a place for a 'come and see' model of ministry, the primary need is for a 'go and tell' model. In this, we are no different than our First Century counterparts, as is especially evidenced in the Book of Acts.

⁵ Fruchtenbaum, A.G., *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*. (Tustin, CA ; Ariel Ministries Press, 1989) p. 70.

- b. By tempering our expectations, we can also be encouraged. Nothing is more difficult than seeing the limited response from the Jewish community, despite our best efforts to impact them with the Gospel. If we understand that the receiving of Messiah by a great number of Jews is not yet to be expected, then it is easier to remind ourselves that success is measured by our faithfulness in our proclamation and not by the results. We can be blessed all the more by those who do come to faith.
3. In the light of these things, one must question the importance of Jewish identity with respect to Jewish evangelism.
 - a. Even in the traditional Jewish community, there are Jewish people who do not really identify as Jews. Whether in that community or the Jewish believing community, identity is ultimately a matter of personal choice. It seems to me that the Jewish people who do come to faith in Messiah, do so not because their concerns about identity is allayed, but because of their certainty of the identity of Messiah as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
 - b. That being the case, my colleague's question regarding my children's identity as Jews is answerable. Of greatest importance for them is their identity in Messiah. Their identity as Jews has little effect, either for them or for the greater purpose of Jewish evangelism.
 - c. The time will come when "all Israel" will be saved by the power of God, and at that point Jewish identity will be of little concern, either for those who come to faith then or for their children, since that time will herald the coming of the Messiah. At that time, the Kingdom of God will be on earth as it is in heaven and it is doubtful that there will be a distinction between Jew and Gentile.
 - d. This isn't to say that there is no place for Jewish believers to identify as Jews. It certainly opens some Jews to the hearing of the Gospel, while closing the ears and hearts of others. But I think we need to be realistic and not overstate its importance in the grand scheme of God's plan of salvation for the Jewish people.
4. In regard to obstacles such as the Holocaust, if we can see it as part of God's fine tuning in history, perhaps a means of maintaining the hardness of Israel until the time is ripe, then we can put it in eschatological perspective. Certainly the Holocaust was a major catalyst towards the prevalence, especially in the West, of Jews seeing Jewish identity as more important than God or a relationship with Him. At the same time, we can also recognize that the Holocaust paved the way for the creation of Israel, a place where we are seeing great harvest and whose creation might easily be seen as part of God's plan coming to fruition. It is also interesting to note that Jews in Israel are not nearly as concerned about identity as their Western counterparts.
5. We are better equipped to educate and deputize the greater Body of Messiah (especially our Gentile brothers and sisters) in the importance of Jewish evangelism when we can put it in a consistent biblical perspective. Although there are many in that Body who are enthused by the large-scale results of something like a Billy Graham Crusade, it will excite some to know that a time is coming when all Israel will be saved and will help if they understand the importance of Jewish evangelism in the light of God's plan for the future. We have the further ability to increase that excitement because there are greater numbers of Jewish people coming to faith than

ever before, perhaps foreshadowing the coming of that great day when “all Israel” will be saved.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the preface, the intention of this paper is to encourage discussion about our purpose in Jewish evangelism. It is my hope that such a discussion would lead to a better understanding, not only of the *why* of Jewish evangelism but also will help us to better identify the best way *how* to do Jewish evangelism. There is never going to be but one way; different people receive the Gospel differently and come to faith differently. However, if we do not rightly discern God’s purpose, we can often go off on tangents that are not beneficial to His purpose.

It is my firm belief that in order to work towards a right understanding of Jewish evangelism, we must first come to grips with the purposes of God as revealed in the Scriptures. I further believe that purpose to be the continual and faithful proclamation of God’s Word in the face of a hostile and unyielding Jewish community, so that when the time is ripe – when God has gathered in the harvest from the Gentiles to its fullest – that community will hear the Gospel message by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, we help in the harvest of those few who do hear and enter the Kingdom, we disciple them and then strive to plant them firmly in the Body of Messiah.

It is this understanding that should inform us as to what we do to reach the Jewish people and how we do it. I don’t want to be dogmatic here. This is the result of my search into these matters, and I would welcome the response of my colleagues both in affirmation and in contradiction. Let us work together towards faithfully proffering to the Jewish people the truth of their Messiah, with love for each other, love for believers everywhere and love for the great majority of Israel who are lost.

Thanks for letting me share!

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