

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MESSIAH

In our introduction we spoke of the difficulties the missionary encounters when preaching the Gospel to Jews. But there are also many advantages in Jewish evangelization, because of the basic principles common to both Christian and Jew, such as the common conception of God, the common belief in the Bible and the Messiah.

These three beliefs are unknown to the heathen in foreign mission work, while with the Jews, these beliefs are the essence not only of their faith but also of their very existence as Jews.

Next to God nothing occupies the Jewish religious mind as does the Messiah. The various daily prayers, at the synagogue and at home, revolve around this axis — the Messiah.

It is the old, old story, and they believe it. They believe that God had chosen Israel to be a holy people, a “**kingdom of priests**” — to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. He was very strict in the training of them toward the fulfilling of that divine mission. Whenever they disobeyed Him, He chastised them severely by raising enemies (“whips of His wrath”) against them. Then when they repented and pleaded for His forgiveness He raised unto them “redeemers” (Judges and Kings) who helped them against their enemies. Whether they implicitly believe it, or only have a beclouded idea of it, it is in every Jew’s conscience. It lies deep in his heart.

He, more than anyone else, sees that all through the Bible God never wanted to destroy them entirely as He destroyed other sinful rebellious people; He did not want to defeat His own purpose in His plan of salvation. So He always restored them to their senses, to their home, to their well-being. To make them conscious of their guilt and need of atonement He instituted the sacrifices. Thus God made it clear to them: “You, as individuals, and you as a nation, deserve to be punished by death, but I will overlook your sins if you ‘cover them’ by the blood of an animal substitute.” If he is learned in Jewish lore he also knows that several years (70) after the destruction of the First Temple God caused a Gentile King, Cyrus of Persia, to be a redeemer, a “messiah” to let the Jews return to their “Promised Land” and there serve God as ordained by Moses and the prophets, i.e. in the preparation toward the final goal of being a blessing to the world.

This preparatory schooling under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah and other enlightened and earnest teachers wrought wonderful changes in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. Idolatry disappeared entirely. There was a genuine faith and love of God, a passion for justice, etc. But what he is not (usually) aware of is that the Rabbis in their mistaken zeal, zeal without knowledge, in course of time came to worship the letter that killeth and forsook the spirit that reviveth.

It seems that when Satan could no longer beguile the chosen people with the worship of foreign gods, he tried, successfully, to confuse and falsify the worship of the true God. The greatest, the most fatal of these falsifications and adulterations was the conception of the Messiah. For some reason, mainly ignorance, fear or egotism, the leaders of the people, during the latter part of the Second Temple, found it expedient to blur the picture of the promised Redeemer.

They should have known, and undoubtedly many did know, that the only purpose for electing their people, the only aim of the Covenants, beginning with Abraham, was to make them into a holy people of priests to teach the world the truth of God and that the culmination of the covenants was to be the coming of the Saviour of the world.

Abraham was shown, at the "offering" of Isaac, the Lamb for the greatest of all sacrifices (see Genesis 22:8, etc.). Moses and the prophets foretold His coming. Jeremiah announced the coming of the New Covenant in unequivocal language. Daniel predicted the exact date of His coming. Many of the Rabbis knew, and said, that all the prophets prophesied only to the time of the Messiah. They, the Rabbis, even deduced from the Bible that the Old Testament laws including the observance of the festivals were to be abrogated by the coming of the Messiah.

And yet when He came, they received Him not. They rejected Him.

They had been teaching the people that the Messiah would come only to free them from the foreign yoke. They withheld from them the vision which the prophets saw, of a Messiah who would be Redeemer of all mankind. Thus when Jesus came, the Rabbis pictured Him as an apostate to Judaism, a rebel against the invincible Roman power and therefore most dangerous. Thus He was delivered to the "powers that be," and executed as a dangerous criminal. This the average Jew does not exactly know.

Divine retribution was not slow in coming. The Jewish people, who rejected Him who wanted to make them free, were driven into exile, their capital city destroyed, and the Temple, the altar, the priesthood, and with them the sacrificial rites to "cover up sin," came to an end.

Had this calamity happened to any other nation, the nation itself would have come to an end. Not so with Israel. God is not through with the nation yet. He destined them to be an everlasting nation. They have yet to serve Him, to fulfill His mission. But while not utterly destroyed, they have nevertheless experienced by His chastening, one catastrophe after another. As Moses foretold: the horrors of the day would make them pray for the night, and the terrors of the night make them wish for the day to come. Of this the Jews are well aware although the picture is not yet clear. It is partial blindness that obscures the real picture.

No wonder that most of their solemn and fervent prayers are for the coming of the Messiah, not only to redeem them from their bondage and the misery that is involved in it but, more so, because the Messiah would restore the sacrifices and so “cover up sin.”

The observant Jew, throughout exile, has firmly believed that only the priestly sacrifices are valid to atone for sin, and all they could do, in prayer, repentance, charity and studying the Torah, was obviously only a temporary substitute.

This consciousness of guilt and need for a means of atonement is expressed in nearly all the prayers during week-days and especially so on the Sabbath and Feast Days.

At the beginning of the daily morning prayers God is invoked to remember His oath to Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his beloved son. Afterward the chapter ordering the daily sacrifices is read (Numbers 28:1-8). Then there is to be recited a certain chapter of the Talmud (Mishnah, Treatise Zevachim, chapter 5) which deals with the locations of the various sacrifices, the use of their blood, etc.

After reading several passages of the Bible, mostly Psalms, there follows the most solemn part of the three daily services — the so-called “Eighteen” (eighteen benedictions) which is recited standing and silently. Before rising up the worshiper pleads:

“O Rock of Israel, arise to the help of Israel, and deliver according to thy promise, Judah and Israel. Our Redeemer the Lord of Hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who has redeemed Israel.”

The greater part of the “Eighteen” is supplication for the national redemption and welfare of Israel. Thus for example: “Look upon our affliction and plead our cause, and redeem us speedily for thy name’s sake; for thou art a mighty Redeemer. Blessed art thou, O Lord, the Redeemer of Israel.”

“Sound the great horn for our freedom; lift up the ensign to gather our exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who gatherest the banished ones of the people Israel.”

“And to Jerusalem, thy city, return in mercy, and dwell therein, as thou hast spoken; rebuild it soon in our days as an everlasting building, and speedily set up therein the throne of David. Blessed art thou, O Lord, the rebuilder of Jerusalem.”

“The offspring of David thy servant speedily cause to nourish and let his horn be exalted by thy salvation, because we wait for thy salvation all the day. . . .”

“And let our eyes behold thy return to Zion in mercy. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who restoreth thy divine presence (In Hebrew: Thy “Shekinah”) unto Zion.”

After the “Eighteen” there comes the prayer that God may speedily rebuild the temple where they might serve Him with the offerings that would please Him as in ancient years.

On New-Moons and feast days there is an additional prayer that God may remember the Messiah son of David.

There is a shortened form of the “Eighteen” for those who on account of illness or some weighty reason cannot recite the full form. This shortened form really shows us what is the quintessence of the Jewish prayer.

I quote it here in full:

“Give us understanding, O Lord our God, to know thy ways; circumcise our hearts to fear thee, and forgive us so that we may be redeemed. Keep us far from sorrow; and satiate us on the pastures of thy land, and gather our scattered ones from the four corners of the earth. Let the righteous rejoice in the rebuilding of thy city, and in the establishment of thy temple, and in the flourishing of the horn of David thy servant, and in the light of the son of Jesse, Thine Anointed (Messiah). Even before we call, do thou answer. Blessed art thou who hearkenest unto prayer.”

Toward the end of the morning prayer there are these lines:

“And a Redeemer shall come to Zion and to them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord: And as for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord: my Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the Lord, from now and forever” (taken from Isaiah 59:20,21).

On holy days (Sabbath, New Moon, etc.), on the days when during the existence of the Temple additional sacrifices were offered, extra prayers are now recited, confessing that on account of “our” sins “we” have been exiled and thus not being able to bring the prescribed sacrifices, therefore “we” implore God not for our sake (for we are not worthy) but for your name’s sake, and for the sake of the covenant with the forefathers — to bring us back to our land and there we will again offer the prescribed sacrifices.

This yearning for redemption, for forgiveness of sin, is felt and uttered not only in the liturgy of the daily services but on various other occasions. Thus, the lengthy prayer (“grace”) which is recited after meals is saturated with that longing. From among many such passages let us quote this:

“May the All-merciful make us worthy of the days of the Messiah, and of the life of the world to come. Great salvation giveth He to His king, and showeth lovingkindness to His Messiah, to David and to his seed forevermore. . . .”

And not only in prayer, which is performed several times every day, but also, in common parlance, is this longing for the Redeemer, the Mashiah, given expression.

In short, the belief, the yearning, and expectancy in the speedy coming of the Messiah, has exerted the greatest influence upon the life and customs of the Jewish people. Throughout the centuries of misery, humiliation and persecution in exile, the “coming of Messiah” has been the greatest consolation and most treasured hope.

No article of faith is recited with so much fervor and devotion as this: “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming.”

What is the Jewish conception of the person of the Messiah? Well, there is no consistent or uniform picture of the Messiah. The Jewish sages differed widely in their portrayal of the Redeemer, depending on the times and places, and the material and cultural position of their people. There is thus much confusion about the Messiah. Some thought of Him as a divine all-powerful person who would perform great miracles and introduce great changes in nature. Others thought and taught that He would be human although endowed with extraordinary powers and qualities. Maimonides (Rambam), who formulated the “articles of faith,” teaches that “There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except subjection of Kingdoms.”

We have already seen, in the chapter on religion, that Maimonides often contradicted himself. He was a rationalist and did not believe that anything is supernatural or is not in accordance with previous human experience. On the other hand he was a faithful follower of the rabbis and he enjoined the people to observe all their laws and teachings with all the irrationalism and the absurdities it involved.

If the Jew is to believe Maimonides the rationalist, that the Messiah is just as human as human can be, how is he to believe Maimonides the rabbinic dogmatist, that he is to expect daily the Messiah’s coming? How can He come today or tomorrow? Does He not have first to be born and grow up in a natural way?

Or was He born already? When? Where? Where is He now, He who may at any moment arrive (according to that same Maimonides)?

Well, the Jewish people are quite confused in their belief in the Messiah, as in many other beliefs, because the rabbis have confused them, for various reasons. Generally the Jews who were born and reared into ages-old tradition firmly believed in the Messiah as superhuman, as divine.

We have seen that in the daily prayers the Redeemer is sometimes referred to as God, sometimes as “Son of David” sent by God. No doubt the Jewish people throughout the ages have harbored the thought, the vision, though not a clear one, of the Messiah being God incarnate.

The “Targums,” the translations and interpretations of the Bible, that have been used in the synagogues since ancient times (see “Targum”) have the same conception of the Messiah as is to be found in the New Testament. Those passages in the Old Testament which in the New Testament are applied to the Messiah are also interpreted so in the Targums.

The fact that the Targums have been held sacred and printed side by side with the Hebrew text, and read every Sabbath, according to old usage, clearly proves that the Messiah was held by the ancient rabbis, and the people in general, as being divine in human form.

In the “Benediction of the Moon” (recited monthly) the worshiper shouts: “David King of Israel lives and exists” and the prayer is finished with the verse, “And they shall seek Jehovah their God and David their king, Amen” (Hosea 3:5).

Young people in Israel have a popular dance which is accompanied by singing continuously, “David king of Israel lives and exists.” This is sung in a rapturous manner quite often on various occasions. Does it not show that the belief in the supernatural Messiah is still deeply ingrained in the Jewish heart?

Moreover, ever since the restoration of the State of Israel, the Jewish people still wait for the Messiah. They still pray the same old prayers for God’s return to Zion. Nothing in Jewish liturgy referring to redemption physical and spiritual, has been changed, although many Jewish leaders demanded changes. The people still wait for the miraculous, for the divine Messiah.

What have the people been expecting throughout the exile? The answers are various. The prayers during the weekdays, and more so on holydays, expressed the main yearning for the return to Zion in order to be able to serve God, as ordained in the Old Testament by bloody sacrifices, which may be done only at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The coming of the Messiah was also to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven, sometimes called “Kingdom of Shaddai,” with Zion as its center.

His coming is also associated with “resurrection of the dead” and the “Day of Judgment.” All these events are often included in the name “Olam Habba,” the world to come.

While some of the Rabbis portrayed this “Coming World” as pure spiritual bliss, others pictured it as a paradise, where and when men, mainly Jews, will live pleasantly and where they might obtain all the innocent, harmless pleasures of life without the need of any exertion to obtain them. Delicious food, as well as beautiful clothes, will be produced by the earth ready to be used, according to Talmud: Sabbath 30b and Ketuboth 111b. There will be banquets where the righteous one will partake of the meat of the mythical wild ox, and the fish Leviathan, and imbibe the wine which is preserved for them since the six days of creation.

These beliefs and hopes of Olam Habba (Eschatology) are closely knit also with the immortality of the soul which after leaving the body is purified in purgatory (in Gehenna) and then ascends into Paradise (“Gan Eden”) where it lives in bliss till the coming of Messiah and the resurrection.

Now, as mentioned previously, these ideas are quite confused, but they all revolve around the Messiah who lives and waits for the opportune time for His appearance. Where is He? Some Rabbis said that He is now in “Gan Eden” (Paradise). Some said that He is living disguised in Rome. Some said that He is the “Shechinah” which is in exile, wherever the Jewish people sojourn.

Explaining the beginning of verse 3, chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, which may be translated: “And He will return with thy returning . . . ,” the Talmud Meggilah 29a says that this teaches that the Holy One is in exile together with His people and together with them, He, too, will return.

In other words, when He redeems His people, He Himself will be redeemed with them. When is the Messiah to come? There is no uniform answer to this question. To sum up the various opinions of the Rabbis it may be said that there has been a specified time for His coming but this set time might be hastened or postponed in accordance with the worthiness of the people.

Many Rabbis tried to figure out the appointed time of His coming, but as ever, were disappointing. It often even led to disaster. Often usurpers, scoundrels, or half-witted men assumed the role of the Messiah and thus misled the people into great calamities. Jewish history has many tragic accounts of such false Messiahs.

Christians witnessing to Jews, and the Jewish people have thus a subject in common and to both it is of the most vital interest (See chapter, “How to Identify the Messiah”).

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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