

Workshop on Jesus and Israel

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I want to try and draw out some of the implications from the fact that Jesus is a Son of Israel. In fact, the first words of the New Testament tell us about the human identity of Jesus: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1: 1). So our first reflection: why David and why Abraham. Why not Jacob?

Yes, Jesus was also the son of Jacob. But it seems that Matthew wants to highlight the fulfilment of God’s promises. Jesus is the son of David, because he is to be the messianic king who will sit on the throne of David, his father. And Jesus is the son of Abraham, because the covenant of election was first made with Abraham and because the promises concerning the descendants and the land were first given to Abraham. These two affirmations bring together the unique calling of Jesus as the messianic king and his ordinariness as simply one of the chosen people. He will be anointed as king and he is one of the millions of the circumcised.

So right from the start of the New Testament, Jesus is presented totally within the context of Israel. I will not attempt to illustrate all the ways in which Jesus lived as a faithful Jew. No doubt the other contributors will bring this out in a variety of ways. I want to focus on how the Jewishness of Jesus affects our understanding of his mission and of our salvation.

Simeon tells Mary prophetically about her son: “this child is set for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against” (Luke 2: 34). Simeon predicts that Jesus will provoke a schism within Israel. Some Jews will speak for him, and some will speak against.

The baptism of Jesus is of huge theological significance. Here Jesus identifies with his own people, not just in their high calling, but also in their sin. He asks for the baptism of John, which is a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3: 3). John naturally protests against baptizing the sinless Lamb of God. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3: 14). But Jesus insists, saying: “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matt. 3: 15). In his baptism by John, Jesus accepts his mission as the suffering servant, accepting his future death for the sins of his people, by going down into the waters of the Jordan. This identification is with his own people. John preached to the people of Israel. He “came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel” (John 1: 31).

The prophet Jeremiah had spoken several times about “the grievous wound of my people”¹ – sometimes “my people” is in the mouth of God, sometimes in the mouth of the prophet. So in chapter 30, all in the context of Israel and Jacob, the Lord says again: “Your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous.” (Jer. 30: 12). But only a few verses later, the Lord says, “For I will restore health to you, and your wounds [the incurable wounds] I will heal.” (Jer. 30: 17). I believe that this promise is linked to the promise in the next chapter about a new covenant:

¹ See Jer. 6: 14; 8: 11, 21; 10: 19; 14: 17; 15: 18.

“Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31: 31). In his baptism, Jesus commits himself to his mission to bring healing to Israel through the making of a new covenant.

This interpretation of the baptism of Jesus goes with his mission during his earthly ministry being restricted to his own people. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt. 15: 24). Similarly when the twelve were sent out, Jesus told them: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt. 10: 5 – 6).

Jesus is totally identified with his own people. But this means that he identifies with them in their calling as a “priestly people” (Ex. 19: 6) to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12: 3). Because he is the Messiah and Saviour of Israel, he becomes the Saviour of the world. The fulfilment of all righteousness means the establishment of righteousness in all the earth. This total identification with Israel is central to the figure of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. The Servant is Israel, and the servant is Jesus, who embodies Israel. “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Is. 49: 6). Does this mean that Jesus is above all servant to Israel? And that being servant to Israel, he enables Israel to become a servant to the nations and a light to all the world?

Jesus dies first for his own people. He was “stricken for the transgression of my people” (Is. 53: 8). It was the sin of Israel that prevented Israel from being a light to the nations. Note places in the New Testament that present Jesus as dying for his own people: first, the prophecy of Caiaphas “it is expedient that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11: 50); second in Galatians, “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Gal. 4: 4 - 5).

Jesus is welcomed to Jerusalem by the crowd acknowledging him as Messiah-King, crying “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matt. 21: 9). But the king should be welcomed on his arrival by the rulers and city authorities! Here we find the beginnings of the division in Israel prophesied by Simeon. From now on, there is an Israel of the new covenant created in the blood of Jesus, and there is an Israel that has refused the claims of Jesus, but with which he is still totally identified.

The total mutual exclusion of Church and synagogue then produced a situation damaging to the Christian understanding of both sides. The Church that is Israel according to the new covenant, vividly described in Eph. 2: 12, 19 – 20, forgets her Israelitic identity and understands herself simply as the Catholic Church of the nations.² At the same time, the

² The condition of the Gentiles before the coming of the Messiah: „remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world“ (Eph. 2: 12); after his coming: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2: 19).

Church forgot the identification of Jesus with Israel, even in sin and rebellion. So the way is opened to teaching and attitudes of rejection and contempt.

The division in Israel corresponds to two different forms of the presence of the Lord with his people. We are familiar as Christians with the various forms of the presence of the Lord with the Church. But the way in which the Lord Yeshua is present with the Jewish people in their long exile is a new question for us.

Let me raise a few questions. First, is there a parallel between the presence of the Lord with his people in the first exile (Babylon) and the second exile of the Christian centuries? In the first exile, the forms of the Lord's presence in the land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem and the temple had been removed, and yet the Lord was still with them. This was probably the time of the origin of the synagogue.

Second, is there a possible relevance to our theme in the role of the two goats on Yom Kippour as described in Leviticus 16? One goat is sacrificed as a sin offering for the people (v. 15), and its blood is sprinkled on and before the mercy seat.³ With the second goat "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat" (v. 21).

My question is this: is it possible that the fate of the two goats symbolizes the destiny of the two Israels: the Israel of the new covenant effected in the blood of Yeshua, and the Israel that did not die in the baptismal passover. With the first, there is an acceptance of the blood of Yeshua which has been shed for the sins of the people. With the second, no blood is shed, the sins are also confessed, and the goat is released in the wilderness. In the second case, the wilderness is a consequence of sin, but not of rejection, because Yeshua has fully identified with them and accompanies this Israel into the wilderness.

The whole message of the servant songs of Isaiah shows us the inseparable relationship between the personal servant Jesus and the servant people Israel. Jesus is identified with the sufferings of Israel through the Christian centuries. Their history has an intrinsic connection with the history of Yeshua himself. I am not saying that the world is redeemed by the sufferings of Israel, but somehow the sufferings of Israel cannot be separated from the sufferings of Yeshua, by which all – Jew and Gentile – are saved. The sufferings of the Jewish people throughout history have an inner meaning that can only be understood in relation to Jesus: not merely as punishment, but as the unfolding of the one mystery of Messiah.

³ A bull was sacrificed as a sin offering for the priest (Lev. 16: 6).