

## The Challenges from/of the Messianic Jews

In this talk I want to consider some of the challenges that the Messianic Jews pose to us as Gentile Christians, to us personally and to our Churches.

### 1. Concerning Unity

MJs remind us that the original unity was between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. In the teaching of Ephesians, Jesus himself, our peace, “has made the two [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2: 14). “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross” (Eph. 2: 15 – 16). Thus the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is at the heart of Paul’s doctrine of redemption. The later suppression of a Jewish expression of the Church must therefore have been a disastrous loss in terms of the Church’s unity.

The MJs confront us with the issue of the natural olive tree. In Romans 11, Paul uses the imagery of the Gentile believers as wild olive branches being grafted into a natural olive tree, which is believing Israel anchored in Yeshua. In other words, the two being made one in Ephesians 2 has to be understood as the Gentiles being united to the existing living organism of the body of Messiah Yeshua. This perspective turns something upside down in the current debate about whether Christians should evangelise Jews. The usual way this is put is: Should we evangelise Jews and bring them into the Church? But the teaching of Romans 11 and Ephesians 2 can lead us to formulate it differently: Is not authentic Christian evangelism bringing everyone into something foundationally Jewish, symbolised by the natural olive tree?

The decision of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 not to “make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15: 19) and not to require them to become Jews/convert to Judaism in order to become followers of Jesus was

a decision for unity in difference. The teaching of Ephesians 2 presents the image of a Church that is made up out of two elements: with the new, the Gentile, being united to but not absorbed by the other, the Jewish. The later exclusion of a specifically Jewish witness not only outlawed the foundational element, but made possible the danger of the Church becoming too “monopolar”, lacking the tension of differences built into the original plan.

The restoration of an identifiable Jewish component in the Church will make possible a healing and overcoming of the major points of divisions between separated Christian Churches, particularly between Catholic and Protestant.

## 2. To rediscover the Jewishness of Our Faith

MJs challenge us to rediscover once again the Jewishness of our faith. First of all, this means to rediscover the Jewishness of Jesus. Meaning of the word *Messiah*.

Jesus’s self-understanding. Sent only to the house of Israel. Identifies with his own people. Fulfills the calling of Israel. “Jesus fulfils Israel’s vocation perfectly: in contrast to those who had once provoked God during forty years in the desert, Christ reveals himself as God’s Servant, totally obedient to the divine will.” (CCC, para. 539). Jesus dies first for his own people: “for the transgression of my people he was stricken” (Is. 53: 8). In Galatians, Paul says that “God sent his Son, born of woman, born under law, to redeem those under law” (Gal. 4: 4 – 5).

Jesus fulfils Israel’s calling to be a blessing to the nations. So the Messiah of Israel becomes the Saviour of the world. Cf the prophecy of Caiaphas: “as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.” (John 11: 51 – 52).

Jewishness of the New Testament. Decisive newness in the New Testament, but it is the newness of Jesus. “on the one

hand, the New Testament demands to be read in the light of the Old, but it also invites a “re-reading” of the Old in the light of Jesus Christ (cf. Lk 24: 45).<sup>1</sup>

**Jewishness of the Apostles.** Twelve apostles because twelve tribes: “you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19: 28). In Ephesians 2, then Gentile believers, who are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” are now “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets”, who are Jewish, “with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” (Eph. 2: 19 – 20).

**Jewishness of Mary.** Very important for healing of Catholic – Protestant divisions over Mary. The loss of the Jewish connection led to a separation of Mary from her own people and made possible a separating of Mary from the Church. The biblical renewal in modern times led to the very important decision at Vatican Two to incorporate the teaching on Mary within the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

Mary fulfils in her person a key aspect of the call of Israel, that is to bring forth the Messiah. Catholics have normally interpreted the prophecy of Simeon to Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2: 35) in terms of a mother seeing her son dying the agonising death of crucifixion. But there is surely also a dimension in Mary’s suffering that links with Paul’s anguish in Romans 9: 2 where the apostle says “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” over “those of my own race, the people of Israel” who had not welcomed Jesus as Messiah. The strong Jewish setting of Simeon’s prophecy is clear from the text in Luke 2. First, Simeon prophesies to Mary about her son: “This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.” (Luke 2: 34). This is the context of the prophetic word to Mary about herself. Her suffering is then essentially connected with the falling of many in Israel, which is of course connected with

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, (II A.1, p. 43).

Jesus's death on the cross. But our normal interpretation has de-judaised the context, which facilitates more individualistic and even sentimental readings of the text.

Revelation 12: the woman clothed with the sun, pregnant and crying out in the pains of childbirth.

### 3. The Challenge to our Eschatology

The faith of the Jewish people is inherently Messianic. It is inherently drawn towards the future fulfilment in history. It is based on past acts of God, but ordered towards the fulfilment of God's purposes and the liberation/redemption of Israel, the nations, and all creation.

The loss of an explicitly Jewish component to the Church led over time to a serious weakening in its eschatology, in its **hope**. The hope of Israel was corporate, the hope of the chosen people. What has often happened in the Church is that we say – wrongly – that all the Old Testament prophecies have already been fulfilled in Jesus. This is often said in Advent as we prepare for Christmas. Again the modern renewal in biblical and liturgical studies has been leading us back to the “blessed hope” of the Church, so strongly affirmed in the liturgy. This has made possible the wonderful paragraph in the Catechism about Advent: “When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming.” (CCC, para. 524).

The coming of the Messiah, in humility and not yet in glory, posed a huge challenge to the eschatology of his Jewish disciples. So we have a whole process of reinterpretation of the Messianic hope that takes place in the infant Church, first in the totally Jewish church of the first generation. The passage that maybe best illustrates this re-interpretation is Peter's sermon in Acts 3, especially from verses 18 to 26. This brings out clearly the two stages of fulfilment with the two

comings of the Messiah. First coming: “this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ [Messiah] would suffer.” (Acts 3: 18). Second coming: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ [Messiah], who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3: 19 – 21).

#### 4. The Challenge concerning Bodiliness, Incarnation, Resurrection

The faith of Israel is very earthy and bodily. The worship of Israel involved sacrifice – the killing of animals, the use of their blood. Admission of males to the covenant by the fleshly rite of circumcision. Worship involved the whole person and the whole community, even the whole creation.

The election involves the choice of a people, the choice of a land, and ultimately the choice of a city. The scandal of particularity. This is all inseparable from the choice of a Messiah and a Saviour.

The Jews, and particularly Jewish believers in Jesus, face us with our tendency to a “spiritualisation” that removes us from this earth, from human history and away from an authentic understanding of incarnation. The MJs face us in a new way with our Christian tendencies towards a false “spiritualisation” of the Christian message. It appears most clearly perhaps in those presentations of heaven as our destiny that make no reference to resurrection, no reference to the return of the Messiah to this earth, no reference to the biblical promise of a new heavens and a new earth.

Salvation is salvation of the whole person: body, soul and spirit. But the person belongs to a society, is part of the human race. And the human race forms part of a bigger creation. All have been damaged and contaminated by sin; all

are comprehended in the saving work of the Messiah. All are saved by one (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 14).

## 5. The Challenge concerning Repentance

The Jewish people as a whole challenge the Church to a repentance for the sins of the past. First, because the worst and the most shameful things in the history of the Church concern the treatment of the Jewish people. Over such a long period.

I believe there is a particular challenge from the Jewish observance of the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippour*. According to Leviticus 16, the high priest makes atonement “for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel” (Lev. 16: 17). It seems to me clear from the Old Testament that there was a huge development in Israelite repentance for the sins of the people as a result of the destruction of the Temple and the exile in Babylon. This is particularly evident in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, from which it seems that Yom Kippour was not yet in existence. Nehemiah and Ezra lead a repentance for the sins of Judah and Israel.

The rejection of a Jewish expression of the Church reduced the comparisons between the history of the Church and the history of Israel. Particularly the gradual emergence of a triumphalist Church with the Constantinian settlement, and later in the West the theology of the Church as a perfect society, produced the situation in which there was little scope for a public confession of the sins of the Christian people.

In 1994, there was an historic break-through with Pope John Paul II's call for a confession of the sins of the past. For the first time, this subject has been the focus of a church document, the report *Memory and Reconciliation* from the International Theological Commission, published in March 2000. Real fellowship between Catholics and Messianic Jews depends on a sincere Catholic confession of past sins against the Jews, including the sins against the Jesus-believing Jews.

I think we have to see this as a new beginning of immense promise that still has some way to go. The MJs face us more clearly with the fact that the sins against the Jewish people were not just the sins of individual Catholics, even in high places, but were also sins of the Church – however we explain this theologically. Up to this point, these recent statements have denied any sin to the Church. Of course, in its deepest reality the Church is the body of which Jesus is the head, and we cannot impute sin to Jesus. The challenge that comes particularly from the MJs concerns the outlawing of a Jewish expression of the Church. These could not be the responsibility just of individual Catholics, for they were official decisions, mostly of local synods. The one instance of a decree relating to this subject comes from the Second Council of Nicea in 787<sup>2</sup>.

I think the solution to this impasse already exists in para. 6 of the Decree on Ecumenism. “Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth.” There are deep issues of ecclesiology here, but I believe we have to find a way of acknowledging the corporate sin of the Christian people and of the institutional leadership – as we find in Israel, particularly in the prophetic writings.

## 6. These Five Challenges all link together

It is not hard to see that these challenges are all closely interconnected. The return to the Jewishness of Jesus and of the New Testament faces us clearly with the Messianic hope of Israel and the centrality of the corporate hope for the

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<sup>2</sup> “Because those from the Hebrew religion have been deceived, they seem to mock Christ as God, pretending to become Christians, but they deny him as they openly and secretly keep the Sabbath and follow other practices in the manner of the Jews. We determine that they are not to be received into communion, nor into prayer, nor in the Church, but the Hebrews are manifestly according to their own religion: their children are not to be baptized; nor is a slave to be purchased or acquired. But if anyone of them will convert out of a sincere faith and heart and will make a profession of faith with all his heart, disclosing their customs and practices so that others might be exposed and corrected, he is to be received and baptized, and also his children; but indeed we decree that they are to be observed so that they depart from Hebrew practices, otherwise they are not to be admitted at all.” (Canon VIII).

Messiah's return in glory. The Messianic hope for the coming of Jesus in glory is tied to our hope of bodily resurrection, and the salvation of the whole cosmos.

Our repentance is absolutely necessary because time does not take away sin. In all the areas where the Church suffered because of its refusal of an expressly Jewish component, we must ask the forgiveness of the Lord. Only this can ground an authentic renewal.

It is important not to think that we can address these challenges and sort all these things out in a short time. It will be our task for as long as we all live – possibly our task until the Lord comes. It is here that the two talks I have given link together: the first on the Messianic Jews and our response to them; the second on the challenges they pose to us. Both are long-term projects: but that does not mean that we can put them “on the long finger”.