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KNOWING JESUS IN HIS JEWISH CONTEXT



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Knowing Jesus in His Jewish Context

Introduction

Love and knowledge are often closely linked. In our personal relationships as one builds friendships and perhaps especially as one 'falls in love', we gain knowledge of the 'other' and share knowledge about ourselves. Giving and receiving friendship, and especially falling in love, always requires openness and a degree of vulnerability. Yet it is possible to love faithfully without fully knowing. This is good as no-one fully knows another. There is always more to discover and understand. This is also true not just in our human relationships, but also in terms of our knowing, following and loving Jesus.

In terms of loving and following Jesus it is important to know and appreciate that Jesus is Jewish. It is possible to love Jesus faithfully without being aware of His 'Jewish identity', and many Christians over the centuries have served and loved Jesus without this important insight. This is deeply regrettable, but is perhaps understandable when one considers the limited teaching some Christians received, and the way in which Jesus and the Gospel are sometimes presented by a largely Gentile Church; a Church which has often been planted in the soil of Replacement Theology and shaped by a climate of anti-Semitism.

What is more disturbing is when some Christians who know the Jewish identity of Jesus deliberately seek to deny this. In some such cases the desire to deny the Jewish identity of Jesus leads them to try and 'repackage' Jesus within a deliberate 'Palestinian' or 'universal narrative'. Such a narrative suppresses the Jewish identity of Jesus and the 'Jewish contours' of the Gospel.

Setting the Scene

I understand that a key part of the identity and ministry of Jesus is His Jewish identity. This identity should be clear from any careful encounter with the gospel texts. The following three examples are all taken from early in Luke's Gospel, but similar and additional insights about the Jewish identity of Jesus can be found in all four of the gospel writings.

Firstly, Luke tells that Jesus is born into a Jewish family. We see this clearly in the genealogy (3:23-38) which is placed by Luke in the context of Jesus' baptism¹. We also see for example prior to the genealogy that Mary in her song of praise places her unborn child in the wider redemptive Jewish narrative; "He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as He promised our ancestors." (1:54-55).

Secondly, Luke tells that Jesus is then dedicated and circumcised² in the Temple according to Jewish practice (Luke 2:21-40). Within the context of these key events we have the prophetic words of Simeon (2:29-32) which affirms that Jesus is to be both; "...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel." (2:32). This 'dual purpose' to the Gentiles (the nations) and for Israel (the Jewish people) is a vital component in understanding the mission of Jesus and the emerging evangelism strategy of the early Church.

Thirdly, Luke also describes an astonishing encounter between the twelve-year-old Jesus and the priestly scholars in the Temple (2:41-51). In this encounter we are told that Jesus' parents kept the Torah commands by travelling up to Jerusalem to mark the annual Passover festival (2:41). Also, here we may well have the first clear statement of Jesus' own self-awareness of His unique identity and calling when He addresses His frantic parents; "Why were you searching for me? He asked. Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (2:49). From this declaration onwards Jesus continued to grow "in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." (2:52). This growing up included a growing love for and commitment to His family, His community, the teaching of Torah, the festivals and the Scriptures.

The public ministry of Jesus

As the public ministry of Jesus takes place Luke continues to reference the 'Jewish contours' of this ministry. For example, Jesus is often referred to as 'Rabbi', His style of dress appears to follow a rabbinical style (8:44)³. He teaches and debates frequently within the context of Torah (6:1-11) yet He teaches with an authority which sets Him apart from all other Torah scholars and experts among the Scribes and Pharisees.

In addition to this His teaching engages with key 'Jewish markers' such as the Temple, the festivals, the Sabbath, acts of charity, prayer and fasting. His 'cultural and spiritual connections' along with His wider 'worldview' reflect a deep Jewish Biblical inheritance and education. His whole message could be summed up as the message of the Kingdom, and His method for implementing His message is that of calling people into personal discipleship⁴. The message of Kingdom and the method of discipleship can only be fully understood and explored within the context provided by Second Temple Judaism. This vital historical and theological point has been taught by many key scholars; see especially the work of contemporary scholars such as N.T. Wright, James Dunn, David Stern and Oskar Skarsaune⁵.

The Jewish context of the emerging Church

The Jewish identity of Jesus continued to shape the life of the emerging 'Church' community and the teaching, preaching and healing ministry which flowed from this community. At first the early Church met in the Temple courts and was probably widely seen at this time by most as a sect within Judaism⁶. Luke in Acts tells us, for example, about "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7), and later he reports the testimony of James and the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem, namely that; "You see brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law" (21:20). This prominent Jewish character of the emerging 'Church' led to the need for the Church to decide if, and how, and on what terms, new non-Jewish Believers (Gentiles) would be welcomed into full membership of this growing community. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) deals with this key issue and tells the Gentile Believers scattered through numerous Diaspora communities of this decision. This decision promoted unity and acceptance, while allowing for appropriate diversity between Jewish and Gentiles Believers in Jesus.

One clear, yet controversial, sign of the Jewish context of the emerging Church is found in James 2:2, the contested word in the translation of this verse is the Greek word 'sunagoge'. Clearly James sees this refereeing to a gathered community of mainly Jewish Believers in Jesus. Yet in today's eight most popular English translations the word synagogue is not used but is replaced by a more 'neutral' word such as 'meeting place', 'assembly' or even 'church'. I personally would argue strongly that the Greek word 'sunagoge' must be translated as synagogue. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, this is the word James chooses, he could have used for example the Greek word 'ekklesia' as he does later in the letter (5:14), but here he chooses the term 'sunagoge'. As stated earlier, James here has in mind a group of mainly Jewish Believers in Jesus (Messianic Jews) who are seeking to oversee a Torah faithful synagogue community in ways which honour Jesus as LORD and expresses faith in Him. Secondly, not to use the word synagogue potentially undermines the 'Jewishness of the New Covenant faith' and has the consequence of robbing contemporary Messianic Jews of their clear New Testament Biblical identity.

I am not sure why so many translators change the word here, especially when no change is made in translating Revelation 2:9 and 3:9. I fear it may be an example of pre-conceived theological bias 'trumping' good practice in translation. Maybe some translators cannot conceive of Messianic Jewish synagogues or, perhaps worse, namely their denominational or theological allegiances demand that they resist such a concept?

Going Deeper

As we build on this foundation of the Jewish identity of Jesus (and of the early emerging 'Church' or Jesus centred synagogue), it is important to recognise that the Gospel was, is and always will be 'good news' for Jewish people, both individually and collectively. For the Gospel is the outworking of the covenant narrative of the Jewish people. This can be shown in a range of wonderful ways, but let us focus here on the following three.

Firstly, through the outworking and fulfilment of prophecy: The Jewish Scriptures provide numerous prophecies relating to the coming Messiah and the outworking of the Gospel. These prophecies can be placed helpfully into the following four categories; the Messiah's ancestry and birth, the Messiah's ministry, the Messiah's death and finally the Messiah's resurrection, ascension, rule and return. It is clear as the writer to the Hebrews declares: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe." (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Space does not allow for full details of all the ways the prophets spoke and for all their prophecies to be referenced and explored. However, a good starting point will be the following which all focus upon the person and work of the Messiah:

- Isaiah 7:14 (Mathew 1:23)
- Micah 5:2, Isaiah 9:7, Psalm 110 (John 8:58)
- Isaiah 61:1-2, Zechariah 9:9, Isaiah 53:12 (Matthew 27:44)
- Psalm 22:16-18 (John 20:27 and Matthew 27:35)
- Psalm 69:21 (John 19:28-30 and Matthew 27:34)
- Psalm 22:1 (Matthew 27:46) and Zechariah 12:1-14:21

Secondly, through the promise and purpose of the Torah: At the heart of the Torah is the promise and instruction given by Moses, namely: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him." (Deuteronomy 18:15). Yet Deuteronomy concludes with the assertion that: "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all the signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel." (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).

The Torah is therefore 'pregnant with the hope' of the coming of one like Moses, yet the Torah ends without this hope been fulfilled. Therefore, the Torah is not 'an end in itself' it has a core purpose to point beyond itself to the one who is to come. This 'Messianic hope' is at the heart of Torah interpretation and Torah obedience.

Believers in Jesus declare that in the fullness of God's perfect timing a prophet like Moses did come, and He performed signs and wonders leading up to the establishing of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31), just as Moses had performed signs and wonders leading up to the establishing of the Sinai Covenant⁷.

Thirdly, through the structure and related timing of the writings which make up the Jewish Scriptures: The first 'revelations of God' are set out in the book of Genesis. Here we are given truths relating to the sovereignty and character of God, to creation, to human identity, and then onto the reality of sin, judgement and mercy. This is then followed by the call of Abraham, and the covenant with Abraham and the outworking of this covenant through the generations represented by Isaac, Jacob and the sons of Jacob.

Following all of this there is a period of about 400 years of 'silence' regarding the revelations of God. The next revelation occurs when the distant descendants of Abraham cry out to the LORD as a result of their harsh slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:24-25 and 6:1-8). The book of Exodus then records the events which follow with a focus on the ministry of Moses and the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt.

The Jewish Scriptures conclude, in terms of chronology, with the revelations given through the prophecies of Haggai, Zephaniah and Malachi⁸. Yet these prophets are followed by another period of about 400 years of 'silence' regarding the revelations of God. Now in one sense this 'inter-testamental period' was far from silent, as this period was crammed full with all the activity of the Hellenistic period (330-166 B.C.), the Hasmonean period (166-63 B.C.) which included the Jewish revolt led by Judas the Maccabee, and then the beginning of Roman rule in Israel (63B.C.) initiated by Pompey and his Roman forces as they conquered Jerusalem.

During this time there is also an out-pouring of important apocalyptic writings much of which is contained in the Apocrypha. Also, this period saw the writings of what we now refer to as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

However, in terms of what Protestant Christians understand as revelatory writings (authoritative canonical texts) no such revelation was given during these 400 years – hence the term the ‘silent years’.

This structure of 400 years of silence which precedes the revelatory event of the Exodus is matched by a similar period which precedes the greatest revelatory event, namely the coming of the Messiah. It is as if God chose to mark both these separate momentous events (the Exodus with the establishing of the Sinai Covenant and the ministry of Jesus with the establishing of the New Covenant)⁹, with a profound time of waiting, silence and deep spiritual and physical longing.

Some concluding thoughts

As we discover more about the Jewish context of Jesus we should be strengthened in our discipleship. We will be helped to see and love Jesus ‘more fully’, and we will appreciate the Jewish contours which shape the gospel narratives and the wider New Testament texts.

We should also be helped in our witness, especially to Jewish people. We can with confidence place the message of the Gospel within the wider Jewish narrative. We should be able to naturally find points of connection for the message of the Gospel to engage with, to challenge and to enlighten this Jewish narrative. For the Gospel provides the climax of the covenantal faithfulness of God to His people.

In doing this we will have God-given opportunities to dismantle many of the barriers¹⁰ which can prevent many Jewish people from hearing, engaging with and receiving the Gospel. I fully realise that for many Jewish people becoming a disciple of Jesus means facing and overcoming a range of accusations including those of disloyalty, cowardice and opportunism. We can also begin to build bridges into the lives of many Jewish people and Jewish communities.

We can declare with confidence that the Gospel is ‘first¹¹ for the Jew’ (Romans 1:16), and nothing could be more authentically Jewish than for a Jewish person to become a faithful disciple of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and LORD of all.

In reflecting on all of the above, I have been drawn again and again to the story of Joseph, especially the moment when he chooses to make himself known to his distressed brothers (Genesis 45). Joseph was unrecognisable to them in his Egyptian context, so he needed to make himself known to them once again.

Maybe in knowing and presenting Jesus in His Jewish context we will help many Jewish people to discover and recognise Jesus as their ‘brother’ and by this discovery and through this recognition many will be reconciled with Him¹². Such recognition and subsequent reconciliation will have clear echoes with the recognition of and reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. Both events give cause for rejoicing, but the recognition of and reconciliation with Jesus by his Jewish brothers and sisters have eternal significance and a value beyond measure. For as Paul wrote: “For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (Romans 11:15).

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In addition to these helpful books please see previous Olive Press Research Papers. These can all be downloaded for free from the CMJ UK website www.cmj.org.uk

All Bible quotations in this paper are taken from The New International Version (NIV) Anglicised Edition. First published in Great Britain in 1979 by Hodder & Stoughton.

End Notes

1. The other genealogy in the gospels is provided by Matthew. He opens his gospel account with the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17) which is structured in a different order to that found in Luke. Matthew's account starts with Abraham and works forward to Jesus. Matthew also selects to follow the line of Joseph (the legal father of Jesus) while Luke emphasises the line of Mary.
2. There is an insightful commentary on the circumcision which says that three times in the gospel accounts do we have recorded that the blood of Jesus was shed. Firstly at His circumcision, secondly in the garden awaiting His arrest and thirdly upon the cross; each of these times point to a key part of who Jesus is - His circumcision declares His Jewishness, the sweating of blood in the garden declares His humanity, and the shedding of blood upon the cross declares His divinity, as He offers through His death the perfect atonement for sin.
3. This fact is not always clear from translations of this verse which speaks of the 'edge' or 'hem' of His garment or cloak - the more precise term is 'tzitzit' (the ritual fringe of a Rabbi's cloak).
4. See for example the calling of His first disciples (Luke 5:1-11) and the calling of Levi (Luke 5:27-32).
5. For details of some of the key books by these scholars and others see the bibliography at the end of this paper.
6. For a fuller study of how the early Church emerged from within Judaism to form a separate identity see my Olive Press Research Paper, *The Parting of the Ways? A brief historical and theological reflection on the development of Rabbinical Judaism and Messianic Judaism/Christianity from the ministry of Jesus to the destruction of the Temple*". (Issue 31, 2017). This paper can be downloaded for free from the CMJ UK website www.cmj.org.uk.

7. For a fuller study of the similarities and differences between the ministry of Moses and Jesus see the Olive Press Research Paper by John Atkinson – “Yeshua; A Prophet like Moses” (Issue 19, 2013). This paper can be downloaded for free from the CMJ UK website www.cmj.org.uk.
8. In the book order of ‘Christian’ Bibles the Old Testament (Jewish Scriptures) closes with Malachi, and in many ways the closing words of Malachi with the instruction to remember the Torah given by Moses (Malachi 4:4), the promise of the coming of Elijah (4:5) and the restoration of fathers to children and children to their fathers (4:6) provides a perfect ‘springboard’ for introducing the ministry of Jesus. However, the Jewish book order of the Old Testament follows a different arrangement and concludes with 2 Chronicles. The closing words of 2 Chronicles with the promise to rebuild the Temple/house (2 Chronicles 36:23) in Jerusalem may equally be a perfect springboard for introducing the ministry of Jesus. For Jesus is the builder of the Temple/house, He is God with us, and the place of the Temple becomes best understood as being the place where the Holy Spirit dwells; namely the hearts of each of His disciples - see John 2:19-22 and 2 Corinthians 6:16.
9. See Jeremiah 31:31, Matthew 26:18 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.
10. Barriers which have been constructed from the anti-Semitic reality of some of the history of the Church along with the associated presentations of Jesus which have been devoid of any sense of His Jewish identity.
11. I prefer to translate the word ‘first’ as ‘especially’.
12. Signs of this recognition can be seen in many places today. For example in many Jewish academic circles there is a clear reappraisal of Jesus and an understanding of the significance of Jesus as a rabbinic teacher. Alongside this we see the growth of Messianic Jewish Believers throughout the world, and especially in Israel.

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