

Reconnecting with our Jewish Roots

Introduction

In our studies we have seen that not only do Jews and Arabs trace their biological descent back to Abraham but Christians trace their spiritual roots to him also. Last autumn we saw that one consequence of being a descendent of Abraham was that we share in the inheritance promised to him, not the physical land of Israel promised to the descendents through Isaac, but the kingdom of God, which all who have like faith with Abraham will share in.

We also saw that Christianity was birthed as a spiritual awakening among Jewish people. This was not an accident. God had prepared the people of Israel for thousands of years to be the context within which the Messiah could come and be properly understood. He did not come to Hindus or Buddhists or animists, he came to Jews. He was not crucified because they did not understand him. They understood him too well and rejected what he had to say.

The family of faith then started to include non-Jews, even though this was a painful process for the Jews to accept. However, we then saw that after a few decades the Gentiles Christians started to isolate themselves from Jews, and started to demand that any Jew who became a Christian must give up everything that made them Jewish. Anti-Semitic attitudes grew up in the church and when the church became part of the state system this anti-Semitism developed into active persecution of Jews. At the same time Jews naturally hardened their hearts to Christians, partly for theological reasons, but also for self-preservation. The consequence of this process was that the Church became partly cut off from its Jewish roots.

Why are Jewish roots important?

I say the Church was “partly” cut off from its Jewish roots because it kept hold of the Old Testament, mainly in the Greek version called the Septuagint and thus the Church regarded heroes of the Old Testament such as the patriarchs and prophets as part of the Christian ancestry just as the writer in Hebrews 11 did. In addition the church had the New Testament, which is written by Jewish writers except for Luke. The problem was with the way the Church interpreted these writings.

In my professional work I have written many instruction manuals for instruments that are going to be sold all over the world. However, since the instruments have to be used in places other than English mother-tongue countries something has to be done to make the manuals useful. It used to be thought that one just needed to “translate” the manuals but these days we say that they need to be “localized”. It is not just enough to translate words from one language to another; one has to ensure that the total message is correctly transferred into the context of the local culture.

For example, if I make a series of pictures from left to right showing step by step how to perform some task and then expect Arabic readers, whose script goes from right to left, to follow the correct sequence there may be problems. Or if we use a red warning sign and the Chinese regard red as a lucky color the message may get misunderstood. Correct interpretation of a document requires not only knowledge of the language but also knowledge of the local culture.

Gradually the Church became separated from the Bible both in time and culture. By excluding Jews it lost understanding of the background concepts that shaped the writing of the Bible. It began to interpret the Bible through the concepts it was most familiar with; these came from the Greek worldview. Although the Romans dominated the world militarily, their thinking was controlled by the Greek worldview. People who became Christians from a Greek background (which was almost everyone in the early years of the church) brought this way of thinking to their handling of the Bible and especially to the church councils that defined how Christianity was to be understood. Once this definition of Christianity had been established it became difficult and dangerous to suggest any other alternatives.

Jews have also lost their Jewish roots!

We should not make the mistake of thinking that Jews did not also change. Rabbinic Judaism is only one variation of the many forms of Jewish thought at the time of Jesus. The great Alexandrian Jewish writer at the time of Jesus, called Philo who died in 50 AD, was deeply affected by Greek thinking. Later Jewish thinking absorbed occult ideas and, in the form of Kabbalah, this is a major influence in Jewish thought especially amongst the Ultra-Orthodox. So strictly speaking we should be talking about the loss of the Hebraic roots of the church before the development of Judaism. But since “Jewish roots” is the term people are familiar with I will continue to use it.

Greek roots

Greek thinking is a combination of a rationalistic element developed by Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, as well as a mystical element that comes from the east through philosophers like Pythagoras. This mystical element can be most clearly recognized these days in Hinduism but its roots can be traced to the heartland of Indo-European language and culture – Babylon. Greek philosophy can be thought of as the rationalism of Athens joined with the mysticism of Babylon in contrast to the Hebraic worldview of Jerusalem.

The clash between the worldviews of Greece and Israel is a vast subject. I have only scratched the surface in the years I have been learning about it and in this study we can only look at a few examples of how Greek thinking has distorted the message of the Bible from what the original writers intended.

Just in case you wonder how I can claim that we know what the original writers intended, let me explain. It is true that we are separated from the Bible in time much more than the church fathers who shaped Christian doctrine in the Church councils. However, we do have access to many writings from the time of the New Testament and before, which they did not have. We have this knowledge because of archeological research and especially the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition to scholarly research we also have the insights of Messianic Jewish believers who are learning to live as Christians in the context of Jewish culture instead of rejecting that culture when they become believers.

Attitude to the material world

A fundamental area of difference between Biblical thought and Greek thought concerns the nature of the material world. The Greeks believed, as do Hindus, that pure souls have become imprisoned in material bodies. The material world is essentially evil simply because it is material. Only the mental or spiritual world is

good. Thus the aim of spirituality is to escape from the material world and return to the spiritual world. This is also part of Kabbalah thinking. Some Greeks taught that the material world was the evil creation of an evil god.

In contrast Hebraic thinking teaches that the material world is essentially good because it is the product of the only God, who is himself good. Humans are not souls imprisoned in bodies but bodies made to live by the spirit of life from God. The evil in the material world is not due the fact that it is material but due to the fact of human and demonic sin. Thus the aim is not to escape from the material world but to see evil removed from it so that it can revert to its original goodness.

As a consequence of its Greek thinking, the church began to emphasize celibacy as an ideal. A holy person did not have, or stopped having, sex. Priests were unmarried. In contrast the Jewish aim is that every man should marry and have children. Most of the apostles, with the exception of Paul, were married.

In Greek tradition, material work was inferior to spiritual work. Thus church workers were of a different class than normally employed people. In the Jewish tradition even a teaching rabbi should have a trade, as Paul, Peter and Jesus did. There was nothing to be ashamed of in physical work, it was as much glorifying God as any other work.

The millennium

Since the aim of Greek thinking was to escape from the material world, the Christian version of this was to emphasize going to heaven as the ultimate goal. In contrast Jewish tradition emphasized that the rule of God is coming to earth and as a result of that the earth will be restored to its original perfection. The coming of the Messiah is to establish the kingdom, not to take people away to heaven.

Since the one place where the NT clearly tells of the thousand-year kingdom on earth is in Revelation 20, and because there was a misunderstanding of the idea of the “marriage supper of the lamb” thinking it meant a sexual orgy, the Church had great difficulty in accepting the book of Revelation. Around 325 AD Eusebius writes:

“Yes, Cerinthus also, by means of revelations purposed to be written by a great apostle (The Revelation of John GT!), fraudulently foists marvellous tales upon us, on the ground that they were shown him by angels. He says that after the resurrection, the kingdom of Christ will be on earth, and that the flesh, dwelling at Jerusalem, will once more serve lusts and pleasures. And – enemy that he is of God’s Scriptures – in his wish to deceive he says there will be a period of a thousand years, to be spent in wedding festivities.”ⁱ

The idea of the kingdom coming after the return of the Messiah, as clearly taught in Revelation, was replaced by the idea that the spread of the Church was the coming of the kingdom and thus used to justify the combination of the state and church that developed after the time of Constantine in the early fourth century. A-millennialism and post-millennialism are still the dominant concepts in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches today.

Converts from a Greek background also brought with them the dislike of Jews that had developed amongst Greeks and this led to anti-Semitism and to persecution of Jews.

The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity as developed by Church leaders such as Augustine has the Greek concept of God as a background. The Western Church emphasizes the unity of the Trinity based on the common substance shared by the Father, Son and Spirit. In contrast the Eastern Church emphasizes the Father as the source of the substance of the godhead as well as being the One who begets the Son and being the One from whom the Spirit proceeds.

This difference in the understanding of the Trinity split the church into Eastern and Western parts in 1054 AD. This was the so-called “filioque” controversy because of the addition of the term “from the Son” in Latin “filioque”, which the Western church added to the creed in reference to the procession of the Spirit i.e. “I believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son” instead of the original version “I believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father”. In contrast a Jewish understanding of God emphasizes the personality of God, rather than speculating about the unknowable substance, and focuses on the Father as the origin of all. The Eastern Orthodox view is closer to this than the Catholic and later Protestant versions of the doctrine.

The Spirit

Biblical and especially NT Christianity emphasizes the role of the Spirit in revelation and healing through the spiritual gifts. Greek rationalism suppressed this “irrational” element and emphasized the role of reason and the dominating role of the church hierarchy in interpreting the mind of God. It thus eliminated the prophetic/charismatic dimension from the Church and consequently greatly limited the manifestation of the Spirit to heal and deliver. Christianity became primarily a question of mental assent and human action conforming to carefully designed liturgies and structures instead of a Spirit-led and empowered movement. This limited its dynamism in evangelism and the spread of the Church became a question of spreading a political system, often with the sword. Thus the evangelistic effort that had started so well slowed down and the return of Jesus has been delayed for hundreds of years.

Rationalism also meant that leaders had to be trained academics rather than Spirit-controlled lay people as the original apostles were. Congregations became passive recipients of the teaching and actions of the priests rather than Spirit-gifted co-workers with the leaders, as was the case in the early church.

The emphasis on the mind meant that for many people Christianity was a mental assent to a doctrine rather than a life to be lived. We see this problem already in the days of John when early Gnostic teaching was putting forward the idea that it did not matter how you lived, it was only the knowledge (gnosis) you had that mattered. In contrast Jewish thinking emphasizes actions more than just mental belief.

Also, for many Christians, worship has become very intellectual. It is like attending a classical music concert where everyone sits without moving and just experiences

inside their heads. For Jews, dancing is a natural way of expressing their joy because the body is not perceived as evil and it can thus be used to celebrate God.

Finally the loss of connection with its Jewish roots meant that Jewish feasts were ignored and thus a window into the purposes of God was closed to the church.

The danger of losing our roots

Trees get much of their nutrition through their roots. Paul in Romans 11v17-24 uses the picture of Gentiles being grafted in to the tree of faith. Through this connection Gentiles can benefit from all that God has prepared for his people by means of what he has taught and done with the Jews. It was his intention that this tree should bear much good fruit and be a blessing to the world. Instead, by losing the connection with the proper roots and having become connected to Greek roots, a bitter fruit has been produced, which has brought much suffering to the world. Anti-Semitism, military conquest, the crusades, persecution of Christians and suppression of the Spirit are just some examples of the bad fruit.

Reconnecting with our roots

It is so important that we understand this and consciously seek to reconnect with our true roots. This means rejecting all forms of anti-Semitism. It also means working hard to check our beliefs and practices to see if we have taken wrong ideas from Athens and Babylon. It does not mean that we just start to imitate Jewish customs. Remember that many of the customs we see these days are the product of Judaism, which developed after the second temple period and took in the occult stream of Kabbalah. What we have to do is penetrate deeper to what God really was communicating to and through the Jewish people and then see the implications of that as a consequence of the coming of the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. We can also learn from the teaching and the struggles of Messianic Jewish believers as they seek to understand and live out the life of Christ in the context of Jewish culture and history. Messianic Jews are no more perfect than any other Christians but because of their unique relation to the physical descendants of Abraham, and hence to the roots of our faith, there is much we can learn from them.

I encourage you to keep evaluating and digging. Don't accept teaching and customs just because "that is how our church does it" or "the reformers thought that way" or even "because the church fathers taught this" Instead go back to the Bible and ask "What did Jesus really teach?" "What would this have meant to the apostles?" "What new light is the Holy Spirit shedding on this matter?" You may find that God will open up new insights and give new connections that will not only enrich your life but that of your church and many others.

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Spring 2010

ⁱ Eusebius, Book 3, chapter 28