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Cultural Challenges to Jewish Evangelism: Some insights from the Ministry of CMJ

Alex Jacob

KEY WORDS

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ABSTRACT

All missionary work is set within a prevailing cultural context. In this paper I reflect upon the insights gained from the work of The Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ) over the past 206 years in regards to Jewish evangelism.

Attention is given to the cultural challenges and shifts arising from the re-establishment of the State of Israel (1948), the Shoah (Holocaust), the growth of Messianic Judaism, the changing 'mission focuses' within the Church and the legal and cultural climate of 'post-modern' Britain. In addition to this work issues around identity and values are explored from a Biblical perspective.

The paper concludes with a renewed sense of confidence in the changeless Gospel message set within the ever-changing landscape of the Jewish community, the Church and wider society.

INTRODUCTION. SETTING THE SCENE

The Church's Ministry among Jewish People has been active in pioneering innovative and biblically astute Jewish evangelism since 1809. During this long period there has been immense cultural change with associated cultural challenges.

Firstly let's begin by exploring what is meant be the all-embracing term 'culture'. I think it is fair to say that the term 'culture' along with many other terms is a somewhat 'slippery term' but I have found the following three definitions to be helpful;

- Culture refers to a way of living and thinking which is unique for a specific group of people, based on language, values, symbols and norms of behaviour.

- Culture is primarily the ideas and social customs shaped by knowledge, experience, values and hierarchies of a particular group of people.
- Culture is an individual and social construct which reflects values, traditions, meaning, creativity and governance.

Throughout the history of CMJ mission activity we have worked at the meeting points between 'Jewish culture', 'church culture' and the 'culture of the wider society'. In every mission encounter and in every Christian community there is an awareness of the importance of place (culture). Places shape people. Also faith shapes people.

These two powerful forces often clash and result in much conflict, yet also at other times

and in other places such a meeting is immensely creative. I suggest one can see in much of Paul's missionary writings the wrestling between place and faith as he seeks to help the church and each Christian to grow in genuine discipleship.

EXPLORING 'OUR' CULTURE

In terms of the 'culture' and associated 'values' of Britain today, the Evangelical Alliance recently carried out a major survey of British values¹, based on 1730 responses from Christians. In terms of positive values the three most important were seen to be, 1) A sense of humour, 2) Tolerance and 3) Fair play. The three most negative values were, 1) Consumerism, 2) Obsession with celebrities and 3) Sexual promiscuity.

I suppose when one sees these values, it is important to explore how these may have or are currently influencing church culture and specifically evangelistic mission. Also there is a need to dig a little deeper to know what is really meant by these values. For example, historically, tolerance in a British context is linked to toleration of religious differences and specifically the Act of Toleration passed in 1689, which allowed for 'religious freedom' to dissenting Protestants.

Today I think most people would be unaware of this historic context and would see tolerance in terms of 'accepting the other' within a non-discriminatory pluralistic society. Tolerance would therefore for many people seem to undermine to some extent evangelistic work. However, from a Christian perspective tolerance is a virtue which can spur evangelism, for true tolerance gives genuine space for engagement with different opinions, belief and

cultural practices. As Christians (and Messianic Jews) we expect and enjoy the right of sharing our faith publically. Sometimes this can be in a 'robust way' but while doing this it is vital that we allow the same rights for others and to make absolutely sure that our methods of outreach do not give any space for the maligning or abuse others.

To this end CMJ has a strong code of behaviour² for all our evangelist workers as they engage with Jewish people and Jewish communities. Hopefully, this code gives proper boundaries to our work and shows cultural sensitivity and the marks of the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit, while at the same time not reducing our work to bland platitudes and without an undermining of the direct and radical challenge of the Gospel. This is the 'tight-rope' we walk, as do all involved in evangelistic mission, especially mission with a strong 'cross-cultural' element.

In terms of building a true missionary church, the fundamental challenge is I believe, 'how to live out and apply genuine Christian holiness in the middle of a rapidly changing culture?' The current Archbishop of Canterbury, in a recent address to church mission leaders challenged the church to be culturally astute by seeking to be a community which values and seeks to incarnate within its life three things above all. Firstly, Christ-like love. Secondly, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, a true biblical perseverance which deals with differences by allowing and celebrating 'diversity within unity'. I am sure these community cultural values would indeed enhance the mission of the church.

As we turn to the Jewish world, one sees a great amount of diversity in Jewish culture.

1 See the *Idea* magazine, Sept/Oct 2015 (The magazine of *The Evangelical Alliance*).

2 See the *CMJ* website for details:
<http://www.cmj.org.uk/>.

This should not surprise us as Jewish culture has evolved (and is evolving) over 4000 years of history. One key insight we have learned as CMJ, from over 200 years of ministry is that our evangelistic approach must be flexible as one approach would not be acceptable for all shades of Jewish culture. As one of our evangelistic workers recently stated; "One size does not and never will fit all."

In terms of the diversity within Jewish culture we have tried to establish modes of evangelism which are culturally relevant to a number of Jewish groups, such as those who would self-define as Orthodox, Conservative, Liberal (reform) and Secular. My reading of current Jewish culture is that it has (and is) being shaped primarily by five realities—namely, 1) The Holocaust (Shoah) and related anti-Semitism, 2) Zionism and the modern re-establishment of the State of Israel, 3) The growth of Messianic Judaism, 4) The Jewish academic and to some extent religious 'reappraisal of Jesus' and, 5) Growing secular values relating to the advancement of post-modern and multi-cultural contexts.

While we see great diversity within Jewish culture, there are however a number of shared values and views to note. Namely, I suggest a shared calling to belong, to celebrate and to survive alongside an on-going 'Messianic hope' which in some way holds onto the belief that the goals of the prophets, priesthood and kings will be, at some future point, fully consummated.

As one looks at the cultural shifts within Jewish communities, the church and wider society, it is clear that such shifts will bring opportunities and challenges in regards to Jewish evangelism. With the risk of some oversimplification, let me now explore these five cultural shifts.

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL IN 1948

Firstly, it deepens the faith of those who have always held together the 'two pillars' of Jewish evangelism and Jewish restoration. For if the LORD has restored the people to the land in fulfilling some of the Scriptural promises, how much more can we trust that the LORD will restore the people to Himself through the Messiah?

Secondly, it changes how we may well read and interpret scripture. The restoration of Israel provides an additional 'hermeneutical lens' for us. For example, Isaiah 19 has a renewed immediate and eschatological context for many readers now that Israel is a nation. The vision of the Isaiah 19 highway can renew those working in the mission contexts alluded to in the text.

Thirdly, it changes the practical focus of mission and the deployment of mission resources. For example, probably for the first time since the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple more Jewish people now live within Israel than outside Israel. For those historical mission agencies, like CMJ which may have had in the past a primarily European focus there has been a need to radically invest new mission resources in Israel, in order to respond to new opportunities.

Fourthly, it changes the relationship between the sent mission worker (and his or her church network) and the receiving community, especially as indigenous and in some cases independent messianic congregations are established and as they begin to develop their own identities and mission strategies within a well-established Jewish setting. A greater value is therefore rightly placed on partnership with local congregations. It seems to me that in the past mission history of groups like CMJ the focus was upon the actions of heroic individual

missionaries, while today the focus is more upon wider partnerships of mutual support with the local congregations and more self-sustaining shorter term mission projects.

Fifthly, it creates a different reality when compared with a focus on the Holocaust. The holocaust led to most Jewish-Christian encounters and theological reflection becoming 'Holocaust shaped'. With this there is often the view of Jewish people as victims. This view often stimulates a reappraisal of 'anti-Semitic Christian theologies' and some liturgical practices. While an alternative focus on the re-establishment of the State of Israel often leads to seeing Jewish people as victors and in some theological contexts as oppressors.

Sixthly, it brings about in some cases a new openness to the Gospel. I believe this is linked to renewed Jewish confidence in their identity and cultural life. In this sense what was once anathema to a loyal Jewish person suffering in a European ghetto may become a possibility on a Tel Aviv beach. This personal openness to the Gospel (and many other things) has also been reflected in wider areas of academic study. For example, there is a well-known Jewish reappraisal of Jesus and a moving away from former polemical views. This has also produced fruitful work in areas of shared textual studies and in areas of exploring the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Christian influence on Rabbinic Judaism and upon Talmudic texts. In addition new pioneering Jewish-Christian studies are taking place in areas of religious identity, pilgrimage, spirituality and a shared reflection on the on-going engagement with Islam.

THE HOLOCAUST

As one reflects upon the Holocaust one enters the deep mysteries of God sovereignty alongside

the dual dark aching realities of human sinful actions and demonic activity. In the light of the Holocaust Jewish evangelism can be challenged in a number of ways. Firstly, it can instil into many Christians a sense of shame and an associated loss of confidence in the church and even the Gospel. This in turn leads to a shift away from direct 'evangelistic ministry' to an emphasis on dialogue and to the development of a 'servant mission' approach. Often this also brings about a theological re-appraisal and the development of a Two-Covenant approach³ which undermines the need for any Jewish evangelism. This approach is expressed clearly by Arnulf Baumann who states:

The terrible facts of the Holocaust and the contributing teaching of contempt gradually dawned on Christians in Germany and other countries. It can well be understood how such Christians began new ways of relating to Jews and Judaism, a way which would exclude any sort of contempt, hatred or triumphalism on the Christian side. It seemed to be a fascinating idea to understand Christianity and Judaism as two separate entities, emerging from the same root but now neatly separated; one belonging to the world of the nations with the task of leading all nations to the true God through Jesus Christ, the other belonging to the one elect people, with the task of leading the scattered remnants of this people to covenantal faithfulness in the ancient way of Israel. If the relationship between Christians and Jews was seen in this light there would be no room for interference with each other anymore.⁴

Secondly, in the light of Hitler's attempted annihilation of the Jewish people, Jewish

3 For a full study of the development of Two Covenant Theology alongside a study of Replacement Theology and the promotion of Enlargement Theology, see Alex Jacob, *The Case for Enlargement Theology* (Saffron Walden (UK): Glory to Glory Publications), 2010.

4 Arnulf Baumann, 'The Two Ways/Two Covenants Theory,' *Mishkan Journal*, 11, 1989, pp. 37-38. See, <http://caspari.com/new/en/resources/mishkan-archive>

survival and Jewish identity is seen as especially important. This again has been interrupted by some theologians as a reason to restrict or remove Jewish evangelism. Margaret Brearley outlines this position and states:

If Christians knew Orthodox Judaism better, they would judge it more humbly. The Holy Spirit has been widely taught and experienced in the Synagogue and the Word of God loved, cherished and lived out in countless Jewish homes since Rabbinical times. The exiled Jewish people have been faithful to the covenant, sensing God's forgiveness, love and blessing being renewed each Shabbat and festival, sustaining them in the task of *tikkum olam* (mending the world).⁵

Thirdly, Jewish evangelism has also been undermined by a growing pluralism and liberalism within part of the Church and also some extreme forms of Dispensational Theology which have taken root within segments of Church thinking and mission practice. While these factors are not directly connected to the Holocaust they need to be noted at this point as they connect with the promotion of Two-Covenant thinking.

Our response to this theological and cultural challenge is to state the following. Yes we need a servant ministry alongside a more evangelistic mission; yes we need to give space for genuine dialogue alongside proclamation. Yes we need to re-examine our theological models, especially where there may have been elements of anti-Semitic teachings contained within, for these we must repent and reform. However, the Gospel remains Good News for the Jewish people⁶, in fact not to try and share the Gospel

sensitively and appropriately with Jewish people may become a form of anti-Semitism. Also we must state clearly (and have the theological⁷ and missional models in place to back this up) that Jewish identity is not lost, terminated or destroyed when a Jewish person becomes a disciple of Jesus (Yeshua) but rather there is a renewal and enlarging of this identity. On one level what could be more Jewish than to put your trust in the Jewish Messiah.

Let me give the final word in this section to a contemporary Jewish Believer in Jesus- Mitch Glaser states:

The salvation paradigm which has the Jew going through Moses and gentiles through Jesus is untenable, as it confuses the great intent of the great Old Testament covenants. The Mosaic covenant was never intended to provide salvation for the Jewish people; its purpose was to point toward the New Covenant. Paul says the Law was a schoolmaster to teach us the way of salvation in Christ (Galatians 3:34). It would be the height of irony if we Jews were barred from graduating from the school of our own Law! For according to the Apostle, Christ is the very fulfilment of the Torah (Romans 10:4).⁸

THE GROWTH OF MESSIANIC JUDAISM

Messianic Judaism is another slippery term, so let me offer you some definitions I have found helpful:

- Messianic Judaism is a biblically based movement of people who as committed Jews, believe in Jesus (Yeshua) as the Jewish Messiah of whom the Torah and prophets spoke.
- Messianic Judaism is a movement of Jewish congregations committed to Jesus (Yeshua) who embrace the covenantal

5 Margaret Brearley, 'Jerusalem in Judaism and for Christian Zionists,' in, P.W.L. Walker (ed.), *Jerusalem, Past and Present in the purposes of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 1994), p. 21.

6 See Rom. 1:16.

7 *Op cit*, Alex Jacob, *The Case for Enlargement Theology*.

8 *Op cit*, *Mishkan Journal*, 11, 1989, p. 64.

responsibility of Jewish life and identity, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant.

- Messianic Judaism is an important work of God in which He is grafting back some of the original branches (Romans 11) and also restoring the whole church to its Jewish root.
- Messianic Judaism is the movement of Jewish believers in Jesus who affirm that their Jewish identity comes alive in Jesus rather than is terminated by faith in Jesus. Such believers seek to live out their faith in traditional Christological categories and to serve fully as part of the church while seeking to uphold and develop special links to the wider Jewish community.

The growth in Messianic Judaism in Israel (and also especially in the USA) can be seen over five modern periods, namely the late Ottoman period, the Mandate period, the birth of Israel period(1948+), the Jerusalem period (1967+) and the twenty –first century period. In this twenty –first century period, one can see the growth due largely to the high number of Messianic Jews from Russian (and the former Soviet Union) making Aliyah to Israel. Within each period one can trace significant developments and growth factors. It is especially encouraging today to see 3rd and 4th generational Jewish believers in Jesus.

I have found it particularly significant to see how many Messianic congregations are transitioning through the three main cultural stages of community identity, firstly the ‘continuity stage’ in which there is a strong connection to the biblical narrative. Namely our story is part of the big story of the bible. This stage has particular resonance for Messianic Jewish communities. Secondly, the ‘indigenous stage’ in which one works out that God has and is meeting us in our own contemporary culture. This stage reminds us that the Gospel

is transformative within all cultures and the out-working of the incarnation is that that the Gospel brings forth much culture richness and diversity. Thirdly, the ‘pilgrim stage’ in which a community is aware of the challenge to “go beyond’ one’s own cultural ‘comfort zones’ in order to witness and share with the so-called ‘outsider’. I suggest we should see an awareness of these three stages in all true mission communities. Also I suggest one can see these stages in the early mission life of the church, as outlined in the Acts of the Apostles.

For us in CMJ we have been involved in the support and nurture of the Messianic Jewish movement from its modern inception in 1813. One of the challenges is how to celebrate Jewish Messianic identity while maintaining wider unity within the church. Clearly if this can be achieved a great catalyst for Jewish evangelism will occur. For many within the wider Jewish world the growth in Messianic Judaism has challenged the way in which Jewish identity and culture is defined.⁹ Some may argue a paradigm shift in Jewish identity is taking place. Equally many within the church are equally challenged by this growth and much reflection and study is taking place.¹⁰

LOSS OF MISSION FOCUS AND CONFIDENCE WITHIN THE CHURCH

This cultural shift has already partly been commented upon in relation to the emergence of Two-Covenant Theology. Associated with

9 See, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (London & New York: Continuum, 2000).

10 See, Peter Hocken, *The Glory and the Shame* (London: Eagle, 1993); see also, Daniel Juster, *Growing to Maturity* (Rockville, MD: Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, 1985; reprinted 2011); and Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology* (Series: Studies in Messianic Jewish Theology; Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009).

this has been the post –modern rejection of any meta-narrative and the diagnosis that any declaration of ‘objective truth’ is linked to the misuse of power. This understanding has clearly undermined all evangelistic missions. However I feel Jewish evangelism has been especially hit hard when one adds to this cultural mix the widespread disengagement with Old Testament texts, a loss of eschatological hope and an anti-Semitic and anti-Israel agenda which has particularly impacted parts of the church. This disengagement with the Old Testament has I believe been so serious in some cases that the church leaders have unknowingly sown the seeds of the ancient ‘Marcion heresy’ back within the church.

For us within CMJ we recognise that at times some evangelism and mission endeavours may have been unhelpfully linked to imperialism or other unhelpful cultural agendas. However the best response to any past misuse is seldom non-use, but rather right use. Therefore, we have learned the need to make sure that our motives and methods in Jewish Evangelism are biblically astute and personally authentic and transparent. We have also sought to equip the church to appreciate the fullness of Scripture and to grasp the ‘big picture’ of a true Biblical Theology. I believe throughout the history of the Church effective Jewish Mission has been and always will be the ‘litmus test’ for the uniqueness, all-sufficiency and power of the Gospel.

Also within the church decline in mission giving and the changing patterns of this mission giving (often with a greater focus on personalities and short term projects) have tended to make gaining support for more ‘traditional’ mission agencies a struggle. However, one also sees encouraging areas of support and many new mission opportunities opening up, partly through the social media revolution. This

revolution has made levels of communication possible which would have been unthinkable to even our most visionary missionary leaders in previous generations.

THE LEGAL CLIMATE

I will not say much on this as one of the papers today is being presented by Paul Diamond who is a barrister and standing legal counsel to the Christian Legal Centre. Clearly he will be able to speak with more insight on these issues. However CMJ has faced legal and charitable challenges partly from having a focused (but not exclusive) Jewish mission. This has raised questions for us from the outworking of the Equality Act of 2010. Also the charitable preference scheme which is currently at the committee stage in parliament may (probably unintentionally) make it very difficult for us and other charities to use our current method of fund-raising in regards to contacting donors.

In the wider context I am concerned that in the near future Christian evangelism and Christian educational ministry may not be regarded as in the wider “public good” in regards to maintaining or gaining charitable status.

CONCLUSION

Over 206 years CMJ has recognised cultural challenges to Jewish evangelism from historical events and from changing attitudes within the Jewish community, the church and wider society. I have briefly attempted to flag some of these up and to reflect upon them. However, regardless of how we understand these challenges and cultural shifts it is vital that we stand firm in the following two ways:

Firstly, we are strong in our own identity in Christ and our ministry callings. Ephesians

2:18-22 is a helpful starting point. Here Paul states that our relationship to God is enabled by the one Spirit (:18) and we are built upon strong foundations and this same Spirit (:22) renews and secures us in our individual and corporate identity in God.

Secondly, we have confidence in the power of the changeless Gospel to be communicated well in the turmoil of a changing world with so many fluid cultural reference points. Above all we can do this because the Gospel message is not rooted in us or in any one mission endeavour or agency, but in the eternal God, who keeps His covenantal promises in every generation.

Alex Jacob

Alex Jacob is a United Reformed Church Minister, ordained in 1985. Since 2006, he has worked with the Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ). Alex has travelled widely in his teaching, pastoral, evangelistic and leadership role within CMJ and is the author of three theological books- "The Case for Enlargement Theology" (2010), "Receive the Truth!" (2011) and "Prepare the Way!" (2014).

Alex is also a major contributor to and the editor of the Olive Press Research Papers. These are occasional papers promoting insight into key areas of Jewish-Christian relations. Alex holds an M.A in Theology (Cambridge Theological Federation/ Anglia Ruskin University) and a M.Phil research degree (Nottingham University).

Alex lives in Cambridgeshire and is married to Mandy and they have three grown up children.