

# Making Messiah Known through Public Debate and Media

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### Introduction

Mission to the Jewish people has gone through significant, sometimes gut-wrenching change since the Holocaust some 66 years ago. Before the Holocaust, European Jews were becoming increasingly open to the Gospel as evidenced in the large number of baptisms recorded in various countries and glowing statistics reported in missionary and Hebrew Christian publications.<sup>1</sup> The Holocaust destroyed not only European Jewry but also missions to the Jews in Europe. This was compounded by the Communist bloc closing its doors to the remnant of Jewry in the east.<sup>2</sup> In many countries, a shamed Church increasingly turned to dialogue with the Jewish people as opposed to evangelism, as illustrated by the story of Jacob Jocz who moved to Toronto to lead the Anglican outreach to the Jewish people there but quickly had to resign.<sup>3</sup>

The last few decades however have seen an increased use of public media and public debate to make Messiah known in the United States, Canada, England, and even Israel.

By public debate, we mean events where issues related to the Messiahship of Yeshua are argued between personalities that differ as to whether he is Messiah. The public participates in such events as an audience, is sometimes invited to interact with the arguments presented, and has the opportunity to learn from the exchanges it observes.

By public media, we mean the various means of communication via one medium or another which are public in nature. For example, signs, billboards, internet and email, telephone (mass automated or personal phone calling), direct mail, print, radio, television, podcasts, and more are all media. What makes them public is that they are used to reach a wide audience who otherwise may have no association with those broadcasting their appeal. Often debates themselves become items in a given medium such as YouTube or the press.

### Public Debates and the Media

Public debates and media are different and yet similar. When used to make Messiah known both methods result in that certain messages are publicly laid bare: We believe Yeshua is the Messiah. We want people to know Yeshua is the Messiah. Both debates and media generally bring what is an issue that Jewish people would generally prefer *not* be made known – their conviction that Yeshua is not the Messiah – into the open.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mitchell Glaser, *A Survey of Missions to the Jews in Continental Europe 1900-1950*. Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Jocz, a third generation Jewish believer from Eastern Europe, reluctantly precipitated the transition of Nathanael House in Toronto from an active mission and centre of Hebrew Christian life to a centre of dialogue for the Anglican Church. Daniel Nessim, *The History of Jewish Believers in the Canadian Protestant Church, 1759-1995*. Vancouver: Regent College, 1996. 117-118.

Other messages are implicit and whether true or not may be perceived as being: Many Jews do not believe Yeshua is the Messiah. We want Jews in particular to know that Yeshua is the Messiah. We are transmitting a religious message. We are proselytising.

Public debates between Christians and Jews are nothing new. The first believers in Yeshua, Jews themselves, were no stranger to controversy with their compatriots.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the Middle Ages, an overbearing church was using disputations as an infamous missionary tactic, often at the instigation of Jewish converts. Attendance at these extended debates was in many cases enforced upon the Jewish community, Jewish representatives were put under crippling constraints on their speech, inducements were given to Jews to accept Christianity, and often difficulties came upon those who did not. Jakob Jocz remarks concerning what is probably the best known mediaeval debate:

*The disputation at Tortosa, which is unique in Jewish history both for the length of time it covered and for the interest it aroused, ended with even more disastrous consequences. For it resulted in a bull (1415) forbidding the study of the Talmud and other forms of degradation.*<sup>5</sup>

A full six centuries later, such events are still a bitter memory for the Jewish community and a lesson not forgotten. Nevertheless, there is little that modern debates have in common with the disputations of old. They are not sponsored by dominant or even influential church bodies. They are not imposed on the debaters or the spectators. There are no inducements, positive or negative, on the table. There is considerable respect for the positions of both parties, in keeping with modern pluralistic values. There are no restrictions placed upon the debaters in any respect, including what can or cannot be said from the podium. Rather than taking place over weeks or months, they generally take only hours. Jewish belief that Yeshua is not the Messiah is not considered a cause for disdain in our postmodern and sometimes post-Christian world. Nevertheless, the natural Jewish reaction in light of Jewish sensitivities is understandably negative and is part of the Jewish community's immune system that protects it against menaces that threaten its survival, including, sometimes first and foremost, Christianity.

It is in this context that debates have become a more useful tool in recent years than in the past. Today, debaters of all persuasions are anxious to make their case. Rather than fearing the limelight, they sometimes view the exposure as advantageous to their causes. Given the short time frame in which debates take place, there is no time to adequately explore every proposition or objection. The audience therefore is not able to take away enough information to form an informed opinion.

Why then? Public debates have a number of positive effects. Dr Michael Brown, a popular debater and a Messianic Jew, has verbalized that he welcomes the opportunity to provide Jewish believers in Yeshua assurance that their faith in Yeshua can stand up to intellectual

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:14-16ff;

<sup>5</sup> Jakob Jocz, *The Church and Jesus Christ: The Relationship Between the Church and the Synagogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), p. 99. The disputation is adequately covered in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 13:1270-71.

inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Debaters on the Yeshua-denying side, such as Rabbi Shmuley Boteach or Tovia Singer, clearly believe that their arguments too must be heard.

They aren't all wrong. An ongoing dialogue on YouTube and Jewish sites shows that clips of these debates are continuing to stir up interest and discussion regarding the Messiahship of Yeshua. In the online world, people feel free to criticise proponents of their own views, abandoning party lines if necessary. The crossover between debates and the public media is ongoing even now.

### **A Case Study**

In May 2008, a selection of UK missions to the Jewish people embarked on an evangelistic venture in London and Oxford. Following the pattern of what had been done in the United States and Canada, and with funding from Chosen People Ministries USA, we engaged Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and Dr Michael Brown in two debates.

A number of weeks before the event, the planned debates were reported on in the *Jewish Chronicle*, along with criticism of Shmuley Boteach.<sup>7</sup> While discouraging people from attending, the article did give the dates of the debates to take place. The first topic was provocative enough: 'Jewishness and Jesus... Are they Compatible?' The second likewise, 'Can Jews Believe Jesus Is God?' invited a rousing debate.

Advertising for the events was specifically geared to reach the general public. Mission supporters were not actively recruited to attend although some of course did. The London Metro, distributed free on the Underground, was a key. Local newspapers were also used, as well as Facebook.

The first, held in Euston, London, was advertised in a number of local and one city-wide free paper. On the day, the lower hall was filled to capacity and a few were seated in the upper gallery making almost 600 people in attendance. Attendees were from various backgrounds. Gentile and a few Jewish believers mingled with a smaller number of Gentile and some Jewish non-believers. Both Boteach and Brown held forth well. Some of the Jewish non-believers were known to us, and to them the arguments on both sides made sense, particularly as they had had previous exposure to the Gospel. Productive conversations following the event were a natural by-product. What was clear is that there is a strong argument to say that Jewishness and Jesus are compatible, whatever popular opinion might be. Brown was able to present the Gospel clearly at a number of points during the evening.

The second event, held in Oxford Town Hall was also advertised in local media, through Facebook, and as much as possible through Christians in Oxford who were encouraged to bring their Jewish friends. Oxford is a city that has a history and reputation for controversial public debates, but most Christian groups were afraid to endorse an event that they felt could prejudice Christian-Jewish relations. In light of this our expectations were severely curtailed and greatly exceeded when some 300 people came out to hear the debate on 'Can Jews Believe Jesus Is God'. This was a city where Rabbi Boteach had previously served with the

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<sup>6</sup> Private conversation between Dr. Michael Brown and Daniel Nessim, May 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Jewish Chronicle, "Rabbi 'boosts Christian missionaries'" 04/04/2008.

Lubavitch movement, but had left under doubtful circumstances. For one reason or another, a significant contingent of Jewish students and others came to the event. Unfortunately, Rabbi Boteach did not give the impression of having been adequately prepared to debate on the topic at hand. Once again, however, what was important is that he had numerous opportunities to share the Gospel within a Jewish context. The credibility of the Gospel was thus upheld and the facts of Yeshua's Messiahship made known.

Such results are fairly typical of debates of this type. What is significant is that some Jewish people who otherwise would never hear about Messiah from another Jewish person find this an environment in which they can engage with the question at hand. Debates are a useful tool for the task at hand.

As can be imagined, however, engaging such high profile speakers, advertising, and securing a high profile venue are expensive both in terms of finance and in the amount of planning and effort that go into staging such outreaches. This is no less true in regards to more straightforward uses of the public media.

### **Public Media**

Insomuch as public media has blossomed in the last century, it is by no means a recent phenomenon. Early technologies (i.e. the printing press) provided ample means for mass media five centuries ago, and were used to propel the world into an era of accelerated innovation and learning, not to mention religious innovation on the back of the Enlightenment. The reformers depended on their tracts, printed in mass and widely distributed, to disseminate their message.<sup>8</sup>

Two programmes in recent years have used the media to good effect. The first, held in Israel by Jews for Jesus, sought to correct the typical Jewish misconception that the Hebrew name of Jesus is 'Yeshu'. The majority of scholars believe that יש"ו stands for the Hebrew expression ימח שמו וזכרו (*yimmach shemo vezikhro*), meaning 'may his name and memory be blotted out'. As such it is a slur on Yeshua. Publicising that misconception and seeking to convince the Israeli public that Yeshua is the proper pronunciation and spelling provided a good opportunity to make Messiah known in a constructive manner.

A second programme using the media is the Isaiah 53 campaign initiated in 2010 in New York. Various media were used in harmony. Billboards in prominent New York locations went out simultaneously with postcards sent to Jewish neighbourhoods, newspaper, online, subway, radio and Facebook advertisements. Automated telephone messages were initiated, bulk emails were sent out and a website was professionally designed. Invitations were issued to visit the website or call a number to obtain a copy of a book called *Isaiah 53 Explained*.<sup>9</sup>

The results of this campaign were significant. In a city where 'core' Jewish people are difficult to reach with the Gospel, over 500 self-identified Jewish non-believers called in or used the web for their free book. Many others also received free copies, including over 1500 Gentile believers.

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953), p. 606.

<sup>9</sup> Mitch Glaser and Darrell Bock, *Isaiah 53 Explained: this chapter will change your life* (New York: Chosen People Ministries, 2010).

The results were measurable, as surveys taken showed a marked increase in ‘Isaiah 53 literacy’ in the Jewish population of New York. More Jews than ever now know that there is a chapter in the Jewish Bible that appears to speak of Messiah – and that Messiah appears to be Yeshua. Surveys were also useful in another respect. Over the phone and via an online questionnaire, recipients of the book were asked to identify not only their mailing address, but how they heard about the book offer and whether they were open to having someone contact them in the future. The value of such surveys for the planning of future outreach goes without saying.

### **Conclusions**

Use of debates and the public media both bring the issue of the Messiahship of Yeshua into the public domain. The Jewish community is no longer embarrassed nor rendered insecure in postmodern society. The effectiveness of these tools is highly dependent upon their skilful use, and adequate funding.

Such media are useful to make Messiah known. They do not necessarily result in immediate confessions of faith in Yeshua as the Messiah. They do, however, increase awareness of our claims regarding the Person of Yeshua.

As the Apostle Paul’s amanuenses busily scribbled his letters for distribution to various churches, he was using a medium available to him to the best of his ability. It is hard to imagine that any of the Apostles, some of whom were also writers, would have shunned the opportunity to use mass media to their advantage in getting the news of Yeshua’s Messiahship out to their world. Certainly they did not believe that the Gospel can only be shared on an individual basis, as Peter’s frequent use of the medium of public preaching illustrates.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:14; 3:12; 4:20; 5:21.

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