

## **Anti-Semitism and Evangelism in Israel**

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### **Introduction**

Anti-Semitism has been in existence for too long to try to determine an exact date or time for its beginning. It is defined as *hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group*. It is not a new phenomenon, but has been in existence ever since the very beginning of Israel's history.

Anti-Semitism and its effect on Jewish evangelism can be divided into two aspects. The first is that which comes from outside the church and the second is what is rooted in the church and fed by theological misunderstandings. The two affect each other and as such we need to consider both of them. The relationship between the two is stronger than we might like to admit. God has called us to be a light to the world and to be in the world but not part of the world, but the church of Christ is often influenced by the world more than it is able to influence the world. Though we ought to be a light shining brightly in the dark world, its darkness sometimes overpowers us.

The world has influenced our church music and our dress code. It is expressed in how we seek after the things that our world admires, such as wealth and power. We are influenced by the teachings of the world: anti-Semitism is rising in the church. As those who are a part of the church and have some measure of influence in it, we need to make a stand and speak up loud and clear against any form, expression or hint of anti-Semitism in the church. And this is particularly true for our Gentile brothers and sisters.

The world influences the church, and it is also true that the church has influence in the world. For example, take the writings of the great reformer, Martin Luther. Although we appreciate the great things God accomplished through him in bringing much-needed reformation to the church of his time, we must also distance ourselves from his ruthless and biased writings. Most of us are familiar with the horrible book written only three years before his death in 1543, entitled *On the Jews and their lies*. In it Luther recommends a course of action to get rid of the Jewish race, if they will not be converted. He asks: "What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?"<sup>1</sup> and in reply proposes setting their synagogues or schools on fire and burying whatever will not burn. He also advised that "rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb"<sup>2</sup>, and recommended that their holy books be burned and that they be expelled from Germany. While Luther's recommendations were not implemented in his day, they did provide

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin. *On the Jews and their lies, 1543. Translated to English by Martin H. Bertman.*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

a guideline for the German Nazis four hundred years later. The German Lutherans went so far as to endorse some of the views of Adolph Hitler published in his book *Mein Kampf* in 1925 and 1927. Thus we see how the church influenced the world to bring the "Final Solution" on the Jewish people.

### **Anti-Semitism outside the church**

The long history of the Jewish nation teaches us that there have always been those who wanted to wipe us from the pages of history. Few months ago Jews around the world celebrated the feast of Passover and were reminded of the Egyptians' plot to destroy the sons of Israel by killing all baby boys as they were born. Those of us who believe in Messiah celebrated our deliverance from Satan and the power of sin. God was faithful to His enslaved people. If He had not intervened through his servant, Moses, the Jewish race would have been destroyed.

The Old Testament teaches us of nations that sought to conquer and enslave the Jewish people. Many did conquer the land, killing and enslaving many, yet the Jewish race survived through to modern days, 2000 years after the coming of Messiah. God has always been and continues to be the protector of His people. The Keeper of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. After all, the Lord promised to send the world a Messiah through this very race, how could he not protect it?

As we fast forward to modern times, we hear the voices of new enemies calling for the destruction of Israel. The voice of Iran's president Ahmadinijad is probably heard louder and clearer than others. Yet for all his outspokenness, he is not the only one who desires the destruction of Israel. Others may not be as brave, or perhaps as stupid as he is, but his voice does not stand alone. Nasrallah from Hezbollah, Khaled Mashal the Hamas leader who resides in Damascus, Syria, Musa Abu-Marzuq, and many others are in line to annihilate the Jewish people. While they may not publicly admit it, they are the successors of Hitler, attempting to finish what he was not able to accomplish. We know that Neo-Nazism is rising in Europe, North America and other parts of the world.

### **Anti-Semitism – inside the church**

Regrettably, anti-Semitism is alive and well within the church of Christ as well. Mishkan dedicated its latest issue to what is called "New anti-Semitism"<sup>3</sup>. I prefer not to use the word 'new' as there is nothing new in anti-Semitism. Its goal remains the same as ever. However, as Oliver J. Melnick points out in his article, the boundaries of anti-Semitism have spread far beyond Europe into all other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> Expressions of anti-Semitism can be seen now in North and South America, in the Far East and certainly in the former

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<sup>3</sup> The New Anti-Semitism and Jewish Evangelism, *Mishkan*, Issue 62/2010.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver J. Melnick, *Mishkan*, no. 62(2010): 5-13.

Soviet Union. Melnick also notes that anti-Semitism is fed by the Replacement theology that is taught by too many churches. History shows us that the so-called "church" has always provided much fuel for the hatred of Jews, who are blamed for killing Christ.

In the first three centuries after Christ the gentile Church did much to marginalize the Jewish people and to raise its own status. This often took the shape of a theological offensive. Anti-Judaic literature was fairly uniform in content. "Whether written in the form of dialogue or theological treatise, all centered on the Messiahship of Christ, the abrogation of the Law, and the vocation of the church."<sup>5</sup> The church saw its origin back to Adam and the Patriarchs, and became increasingly gentilized. The Mosaic law was seen as only for the Jews, "who for their unworthiness and their cult of the golden calf were given the burden of the law."<sup>6</sup> The church was supposed to have taken the place of the Jews yet the Jews continued to exist and flourish and even oppose the church. The Jewish people, it was taught, became an apostate nation, and lost their calling as the chosen people, and fell from grace. St. Justin became the first to claim that Jewish misfortunes were a divine punishment for killing Christ.

Anti-Semitism within the church is the worst kind to battle and is most damaging not only to the church but also to the cause of the Gospel among the Jewish people, something that is near and dear to our hearts, and actually should be to the hearts of all Christians because of the clear scriptural mandate.

I think that we ought to divide church anti-Semitism into two groups. The first group is the one that advocates that the Jews do not need the Gospel to be saved and therefore are silent in the effort to share the wonderful news of Messiah with them. While this group might be motivated by different reasons, the result is the same – no need and therefore no desire to evangelize the Jewish people. Some in this group are motivated by their theological understanding. They believe that the Jewish people can be saved under the Old Covenant and therefore there is no need to waste our efforts to bring them the Gospel. Others think that since the Jewish people had their chance in the first century and "categorically" rejected the Messiah, we need now to go only to Judea, Samarian and the remotest parts of the world. Obviously both of these groups bring disaster onto the Jewish people.

A while back, while being interviewed in Haven Today, a Christian radio program in the western USA and Canada, I stated that those who advocate the view that the Jewish people do not need the Gospel are in effect bringing a second, worse holocaust upon the Jewish people. While the aim of Nazi Germany was to kill the body, keeping the Gospel from the Jews will bring them spiritual death. Jesus said that we should not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, but rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28). Any one who fences the gospel from any

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<sup>5</sup> Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York, Paulist Press, 2004), 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 39.

group of people, whether because of their ethnicity, skin color, social standing or any other distinction, commits the worst crime in my eyes. We ought to present the Gospel to all people freely.

The second group is the one that has some level of hatred or dislike to the Jewish people as a whole, whether consciously or subconsciously. This group often has an exaggerated notion of the influence of the Jews and the State of Israel on the world. These people have internalized racist views of the Jewish people and their genetic makeup. At times this is expressed in a mistrust of anyone with Jewish blood. Often it shows itself by a one-sided misconception of the political situation in the Middle East. Some accept the conspiracy theories, and even unknowingly adopt some of the claims of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, that first appeared in 1903 in Russian.

It might be hard for us to admit, but we need to recognize that anti-Semitism in the church is on the rise and becoming more and more evident. Although historically Europe was the center where anti-Semitism developed, we see anti-Semitism growing in other areas of the world such as the USA, South America and Africa. Unfortunately a natural outcome of this type of anti-Semitism is a decreased desire to bring the Gospel to the Jewish people.

Not long ago I met with a very conservative and respected Christian man from this continent. In his comments he referred to the Jews' DNA and how smart they are. Under other circumstances I may have taken his opinions as a compliment, but in the context of his other words, they had a taste of anti-Semitism. Unfortunately he is not alone in his views. I am sure that he and others are sincere Christians who love the Lord and do much for the cause of the Gospel and even for Israel and the Jewish people. But the basic attitude, the generalization, is wrong.

In the Epilogue of his *The Land of Many Names*, Steve Maltz challenges his readers to ask themselves three basic questions:

- Do you believe the Jewish people are eternally cursed as a result of their rejection of Jesus?
- Do you believe they have forfeited the right to be the 'Chosen People'?
- Do you believe that Christians have supplanted the Jewish people as the only 'people of God'?<sup>7</sup>

These three simple yet deep questions are a good beginning to check any anti-Jewish sentiments that might exist, God forbid, in us!

### **Anti-Semitism and Evangelism**

Anti-Semitism affects evangelism in two ways. First is of course what we have seen so far that it causes people to shy away from Jewish evangelism, and to promote a non-evangelistic approach to the Jewish people and to Israelis living in land of Israel. However, the other negative consequence of anti-Semitism on Jewish evangelism is seen in the reaction of the Jewish people

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<sup>7</sup> Steve Maltz, *The Land of Many Names*, (Authentic publishing, Milton Keynes UK, 2003), 158.

to the Gospel. If the "Christians" are so anti-Jewish why should I want to believe in their Jesus? If they have such hatred towards my people then how I can believe the same as they believe? There is no doubt that anti-Semitism has a negative affect on Jewish evangelism in more than one way.

My family disowned me once they realized that my faith in Jesus was not just a "stage". They told me that I was no longer their son, that I was dead to them. When Eti and I were married no one came to our wedding, though the wedding of her child is one of a Jewish mother's greatest moments. In their eyes I had committed the worst kind of betrayal possible. I had joined the enemy camp – this was unforgivable.

Edward H. Flannery, a Roman Catholic priest ends his classical book, called *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty Three Centuries of Anti-Semitism*, by these words:

*The sin of anti-Semitism contains many sins, but in the end it is a denial of Christian faith, a failure of Christian hope, and a malady of Christian love. And was not this Christianity's supreme defection: that the Christian people to whom persecution was promised by its Master (John 16: 2-4) was not the most persecuted people in Christendom, but rather was it the people from whom He came? And the ultimate scandal: that in carrying the burden of God in history the Jewish people did not find in the Christian churches an ally and defender but one of their most zealous detractors and oppressors? It is a story that calls for repentance.*<sup>8</sup>

No matter how we perceive anti-Semitism we know that it does affect Jewish evangelism in that some of it comes from the same place to which we try to bring in the Jewish people.

### **Effect in Israel Society Today**

Those of us who recall the Gaza war in Dec 2008-Jan 2009 also known as Operation Cast Lead, know that it brought about a new wave of anti-Semitism in the world and particularly in the churches. My family and I recall vividly the days of the war as one of the missiles landed three homes away from ours, while Eti and the children were home. Much criticism was leveled against the Israeli military. Some of it might have been justified. However, the intensity of the biased criticism was such that it quickly spilled into the church. Many churches in the U.K. cancelled meetings that were planned for CWI staff. I received an urgent call from a colleague in Hong Kong asking for help with some arguments raised by people from her church and other churches she was visiting. In a nutshell the question was "Isn't Israel using too much force against the innocent people in Gaza, particularly when it comes to schools, hospitals and mosques?" My immediate response was to ask her friends how they think the Hong Kong government would have responded if two or three missiles, not 7000 had been shot on Kowloon Island? I do know that during

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<sup>8</sup> Flannery, *Anguish*, 295.

those months church support for evangelism and for the work in Israel took a nose dive.

If there is something positive or shall we say, 'not negative', in this, it is that in general anti-Semitism does not affect evangelism in Israel. For the most part Israelis are not aware of the anti-Semitism that exists in the church, though they hear about various anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli events. Sometimes lack of knowledge can be a good thing!

Jewish evangelism outside Israel is hurt more than in Israel, where the Jews are exposed to various forms and expressions of anti-Semitism. They are the target of the various anti-Jewish activities. These activities hinder the Jewish people from even considering the claim of Jesus to be Messiah. After all, they are the ones targeted by these activities and it certainly leaves them a bad impression of the church and Christianity. My grandmother would often remind me that the Jewish people have suffered far more from Christians than from the Muslims.

### **Conclusion**

Anti-Semitism is alive and kicking and it causes great damage to the cause of the Gospel among the Jewish people. This problem has been in existence almost from the beginning of the New Testament era, and continues till today. It is obvious that since it also comes from within the church it is negatively affecting the cause of the Gospel among the Jewish people.

We must make a clear stand against the anti-Semitism that is rooted in our faith and in our churches. The world, and particularly our gentile brothers and sisters in the Church, need to hear a different voice regarding the Jewish people. We need to stand up for the truth of the Gospel. God's love for all includes the Jewish people and it is our duty to bring the Gospel to the Jews first. Together we can make a difference. We cannot rewrite the shameful history of the church, but we can add more Christ-honoring pages to it.

It is good to know that the God of Israel is sovereign and gracious. He can and will bring good from evil. It is God alone who is able to replace the stony hearts of the Jewish people with a heart of flesh. Nothing can stop him, not even Christian anti-Semitism. To him alone be the glory, Soli Deo Gloria.