

Uniqueness of Christ in Jewish Evangelism in Israel

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Introduction

The title for this Bible study could have been *The Uniqueness of Christ in Jewish Evangelism in Today's Unique Israeli Society* – but of course that would have been too wordy for a title!

To understand the uniqueness of Christ in Jewish evangelism in Israel, we need to take a look at Israeli society. The huge changes that we have gone through over the past three decades (since the establishment of LCJE), have had a great impact not only on the people and the land but particularly on the church in Israel. So while the message of the Gospel remains the same, the methodology of proclaiming it has to be made relevant to a changing society.

Israel society today

Israeli society today is unique in the global village and has developed tremendously over the past decades. Israel is modern and maturing, dealing with critical issues of identity much like a teenager. The question is often asked: are we a democracy that happens to be Jewish, or are we a Jewish democracy? And of course the answer depends on who you ask. Or how do we best express our Jewishness? Many people today prefer to call themselves Israelis rather than Jewish, as we are becoming more and more a secular society.

To complicate things further, Israel today is beset with deep social schisms - between the Orthodox and the secular, between the sabras (Israeli born natives) and the new immigrants, and between those of us who serve in the military and the increasing numbers of those who do not and between the rich and the poor. The poor are getting poorer and the very rich are getting richer. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics 2007 report, 30% of children in Israel live under the poverty line, with the majority of these from an ultra-Orthodox or Arab background. So what is the glue that keeps all of us together in the midst of all these schisms?

We are a society with a history of tradition but little faith in God. We possess the scriptures in our own language, given to us as a nation, yet most people read them only for the mandatory Bible classes at school. In most homes you can find the Hebrew Scriptures, but these have been long forgotten and ignored. We are a society with low morals: many of our leaders have been or are presently under investigation for criminal acts. To date Israel's former President, former Prime Minister and current Foreign Minister are under criminal investigation. A former Finance Minister is serving time for embezzlement, and the list of Knesset members under investigation is too lengthy to detail.

By the way, these are only the internal issues. We have not touched on the external issues that trouble Israel: issues with the Palestinians and the Muslim world, and the very real threat posed by Iran. According to recent reports from Israel, Iran will soon have enough uranium to create two atomic bombs! Nevertheless, I believe that the

biggest threat to our society today comes from inside rather than from outside, and affects our youth in particular.

Alcohol, violence, sexual promiscuity, and drugs are four main threats to our youth and therefore to the future of Israel. The drug-related crime rate among youth rose from 2008 to 2009 by 20%¹. The age of young people who commit serious crimes such as rape and murder is increasing alarmingly. In March 2010, two 16-year-old boys climbed up to the roof of their school to sniff gas from the air-conditioning unit. An argument broke out and one of them pushed the other from the roof to his death. A week earlier a group of 11 boys, all under the age of 16, were arrested for raping and abusing a 13-year-old girl over the last three years. Police believe that in all probability more boys participated in the rapes than those identified, and that she was not the only victim. In the first week of March a 15-year-old girl stabbed her mother with a kitchen knife. These are just some of the headlines in the papers.

Unfortunately, our leaders do not set a good example for the youth or for society at large. In March, Knesset member David Rotem of the Kadima party, proposed a law that would enable municipal rabbis to authorise conversions to Judaism. This important task has always been the sole prerogative of the Rabbinic central authority. When the proposed legislation backfired, he was quoted as saying that *when he gets to heaven, he will be honored* for having introduced such important legislation! These are the words of an MK in Israel. On what grounds is he sure that he will get to heaven?

All of these incidents paint a distressing picture of our society, particularly for those of us who live in Israel and see and hear such things day-in and day-out. But it is to this very society that God has called us to bring the Gospel and call to repentance, like the prophets of old. And it is to this unique people that we need to declare that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a living God and rules in power. One day His only begotten Son will return to judge the living and the dead. It is now time that we as a society repent and return to the God of our fathers. Anything that might blur this clear message causes great harm to our people and society, and we need to stand strong and united against it.

Uniqueness of Christ

Webster's dictionary defines *unique* as *being the only one, being without a like or equal or unusual*.²

¹ 2009 Report of Police Commissioner David Cohen; www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1066814.html

² Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Inc. Publishers, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1987.

By this definition, Christ is unique in all things and in every possible way. There is none like Him and no one can approach to Him. That is the essence of His uniqueness. Though we strive to be like Him, in this world we cannot fully achieve that because He is unique in his nature and in His perfect obedience to the Father. In His sacrificial love He is distinct from any other prophet or great man. His wisdom is unsearchable. He has changed the face of history and left His distinctive mark on the world. The Gregorian calendar used universally is influenced by His life: Anno Domini, A.D. *the year of our Lord*. And today faith in Christ is the largest growing religion in the world.

I believe that it is the uniqueness of Christ's nature and work that provides the basis for everything else. The *God-man*, or the *second Adam* as Paul refers to him, is the only One who has descended from heaven, and Who has also ascended into heaven. He is the only one who was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him. John tells us that without Him nothing was made that has been made, and that in Him is life. The great mystery is that God became one of us without ceasing to be fully God. In becoming man He did not cease to be any less God. As Paul wrote in Col 2:9 the *fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him bodily* (ESV).

This unique nature of Christ, fully revealed in the New Testament, was not completely hidden in the pages of the Old Testament. The writer of the second Psalm, for example, tells us about the Lord and His anointed against whom the nations and kings take counsel. At the end of the Psalm, the writer warns them to make peace quickly with the Son, *kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you perish*. Well - who is the anointed and who is the Son?

Again, Isaiah speaks of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Who is he referring to? Dr. Mitch Glaser in his recent book on *Isaiah 53 Explained* referring to the prophecy in chapter 9:6-7 writes these words: "These all important names given to Messiah in Isaiah Chapter 9 reveal His deity."³ Or who did King Nebuchadnezzar see in the fiery furnace with the other three, whom he referred to as the son of the gods?

When the Anointed One was born, he was expected by many, who knew what he had come to accomplish even before he was able to render a word. Dr. Luke relates to us in chapter 2:28-32 of his Gospel these wonderful words of Simeon, who was a righteous and devoted man. When he saw the Son **"he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."** (ESV) Simeon knew that he was gazing on the one who would bring salvation both to Israel and to the gentiles. He got it!

In that same chapter Luke also writes about Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, a devoted widow who committed her life to fasting and worshipping in the temple. In that very hour she **began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.** (Luke 2:38, ESV). Apparently there were many who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem, and Anna had the privilege and opportunity to tell them about it. She got it too!

³ Mitch Glaser, *Isaiah 53 Explained*, (2010, Copy Right Chosen People, page 151)

This is the amazing wisdom of God, who planned our redemption from eternity, from before the creation. The writers of the Old Testament prophesied of Him, and the people of the New Testament era saw the fulfillment of the prophecies with their own eyes and heard Him with their own ears. And today, just like the prophets of old we need to declare the unique nature of Christ. The message needs to be preached boldly to people everywhere - and particularly in Israel today.

But admiring the uniqueness of the Messiah's nature is not sufficient to bring us salvation. There has to be a redemptive work that provides atonement for our sins, since we cannot do anything to accomplish it by ourselves. That would be like me trying to do brain surgery on myself. As Paul said in Ephesians, we are dead in our trespasses. A dead man cannot do much! That is why the uniqueness of Jesus' nature and his atoning work are the basis for the faith of our fathers and it is this unique phenomenon that Israeli society needs to hear about, now more than ever before.

The active and passive obedience of Christ provided salvation for mankind. But He has done more than that: He has provided us an example to follow. He lived the life that we live, He was tempted as we are, and even more so; He was frustrated and disappointed far more than we will ever experience. He was betrayed by one of His disciples who had lived and followed him for some three years. Shortly before this disciple betrayed Him with a kiss, Jesus had washed his feet and fed him, and revealed to Him his knowledge of the plan to betray Him to the leaders for 30 pieces of silver. And the spokesman of the disciples, who had declared that he would never desert Jesus but would be willing to die for him, came to deny that he even knew the Master - not only once, but three times. Again, Jesus had already told him this would happen. So Jesus experienced all that we ever will, and yet without sinning. Israeli society needs to hear of this unique person and His work. This has to be the message of Good News to Israeli society today.

The faith of our fathers was based on the redemptive promises of God to the people of Israel. It was the message of Moses and the message of the prophets, and throughout the ages it was the hope of the common people. We see this vividly in the testimonies of Simeon and Anna in the temple as they held baby Jesus in their arms. We see it in the calling of Apostle Paul and in the other testimonies in the New Testament and throughout history ever since.

Our faith in the Messiah of Israel stands or falls on the person of Christ and His atoning work on the cross. If He is not who He claimed to be, then He could not have lived a perfectly obedient life and He could not atone for us. It is only the uniqueness of our Messiah and His unique death and resurrection that makes our faith what it is. Jesus must be both God and man in the fullest sense possible in order to be true to his claim to save us from our sinful nature and damnation.

It is the uniqueness of His nature that has become a stumbling block to our people. Whatever view of the Messiah the Jewish theologian may have, he cannot come to terms with Christ's uniqueness as the God-Man. As Jesus Himself put it: **"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"** (Matt 21:42, ESV).

If our message is anything less than this to the Israeli society, then there is really no reason for them to wish to believe in Him. In our history and even in present there have been many wonderful and heroic men. But however much we may admire them and be inspired by them, they cannot change us from within. The one who can has to be the God-man who is able to fulfil his claims. He has done so in my life, your lives and lives of millions and millions of people over the last two millennia. So let us faithfully and loudly proclaim the full counsel of God with humility and boldness. We are not ashamed of the Gospel that is the power to salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first but also to the Greek.

Conclusion

We have looked at Israeli society today with its unique challenges. Israel's most immediate threat is not Iran's nuclear program, however frightening that might be for those of us who live and raise our children there, but rather that our people do not know the Anointed One. The Israeli society is putting its trust in anything and everything but the one true Messiah. Israel does not know that judgment is coming, and coming soon. We the Jewish people, particularly we Israelis, take great pride in who we are and what we have accomplished, but we need to understand that in ourselves there is nothing that can bring us peace with God. We need Jesus. We need Him as desperately as anyone else in this world. We have a great heritage and a glorious history; but we cannot have a meaningful future without faith in the promised Messiah.

May He grant us the boldness, the zeal and the desire to preach the uniqueness of Christ to our people where ever and in whatever condition they may be.

Amen.