

## **Biblical Foundations for Post-Holocaust Messianic Soteriology**

### **European Messianic Jewish Symposium**

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This presentation entitled “Biblical Foundations for Post-Holocaust Messianic Soteriology” will have a simple structure. First, I am going to introduce this topic by suggesting some corrections to its original title. Second, I will discuss main principles that must be considered as we engage in this discussion. Third, I will set forth main challenges that make the discussion of principles more complex than desired. And, fourth, I will conclude by summarizing what we have learned in the Introduction, Main Principles and Main challenges sections of this paper.

### **Introduction**

The section on the introduction for the purposes of presentation will be divided into four parts each part arguing, though briefly that the name adjustment and therefore the trajectory of the question ought to be slightly re-directed. I will consider four changes to the original title as follows: First I will highlight that this paper is a presentation of my personal views on this topic and not necessary biblical teaching in the purest of forms, second, I will argue that there were a number Holocausts in the world and that therefore the problem is wider than the problem raised by the Jewish Holocaust. Third, due to the lack of agreement on this topic in both Messianic community in particular and in the Church-at-large a tentativeness in our statements is called for and, fourth, I will suggest that the question of the so-called Jewish soteriology should be considered in the wider context of the Covenant-keeping.

### ***My personal views***

I am who God made me to be. No person on this planet is the same. The experience varies and so do the particular lenses through which we perceive all reality. So while the text does not change, different people and look at the same text and see slightly and sometimes very different things. My reading of ancient holy texts (as my “reading” of everything else) is not determined, but is, nevertheless, “colored” by my own pre-history and background. Who I am does not have any bearing on the original meaning of the text, but it does on my own perception of that text.

### ***Jewish Holocaust***

There were a number of holocausts in the world, not only the Jewish one (i.e. Armenian holocaust) so soteriology must be viewed in the context of God’s allowance of great evil to take place in the world-at-large (problem of evil). So in a sense this issue could be evaluated from the standpoint of all holocausts that ever took place. Our reading from the standpoint of the Jewish holocaust is also appropriate for other reasons. *Shoah*, however, is indeed unique to us as Jews because it 1) is a fairly recent event 2) took place in civilized Europe and most-importantly that it 3) specifically has to do with God’s Ancient Covenant People.

### **Towards something better**

One of the reasons why this theme was adopted by the organizers of this assembly is because it has been a controversial topic of interest to anyone who either identifies with, or loves, the Jewish people. Its controversial nature warrants my tentative approach as I speak about this difficult topic. We must acknowledge the fact that due to its many complexities, Post-*Shoah* followers of Jesus must seriously and honestly re-engage in this important and difficult discussion without a fear of a modern (sometimes pro-Israel) “inquisition”. The reason for this is that much research has led to relevant and breakthrough insights in the area of New Testament and Jewish studies only during the past 25 years. Moreover, In the main, these new results have not yet been taken into consideration in this discussion. Since the Bible and its witness is understood in Jewish Messianic communities (and the Church-at-large) in slightly and sometimes very different ways, we must take special care not to overlook an aspect of the problem usually highlighted by opposing (and normally not-talking-to-each-other ☺ or not-talking-about-that) sides. As we engage in this discussion, we must strive to have as much clarity as humanly possible in our statements and assumptions. We have to make sure that acknowledgement of complexity will not be sacrificed in the name of much needed clarity. We must become more comfortable with the thought that some things will be abundantly clear while others will remain obscure. All of us have puzzles in our houses but it is fairly rare that after many years of children’s use to have a puzzle that actually have all the pieces.

Reconstructing history is like putting together a puzzle. Some puzzles of history are very well preserved missing perhaps only 20% of the pieces, while most are in a far worse of a shape. *Prof. Michael Bauman of Hillsdale College, writes:*

*Even though I am a convinced Protestant, I believe that Erasmus is the greatest theologian the church ever produced, and for many reasons. Here's but one: along with him, I prefer those who define things too little to those who define them too much. The theological humility appropriate to our fallen condition requires of us precisely that broadness of love and of understanding. It's just too easy to be wrong. That ease of error means that it is unwise to spell out the answers to difficult issues in the enormous and overly precise detail that so many of us arrogantly proffer.*

### **Soteriology vs. something better?**

People who know me know that I am no stranger to the Christian church (being an ordained minister in the PCA). Neither do I normally sympathize with people who feel they need to blame any unresolved and difficult issues in theology on the supposed enormous difference between the Greek vs. the Jewish mind. This has been conclusively proven to be inaccurate. Judaism was not purely Jewish, just as Hellenism was not purely Greek, etc. However, to some degree we can say that Soteriology is an extra-biblical designation or a category that could be viewed instead under a different biblical heading. An alternative (and to my mind better) category would be the category of Covenant-Keeping. The difference here is a subtle, but important. Soteriology *tends* to ask and

answer questions like “who will be saved?” and “could this salvation be lost?” While, not exclusively, the general category of Covenant-keeping will ask these, but also a different set of questions such as “How am I connected to God?” “What is required by the terms of the covenant?” “What blessings and curses could I expect as part of my or my nation’s covenant-keeping?” The first category is much more systematic than the second. It has to do more with knowing what is the right thing, while the latter one tends to concern itself more with the doing of the right thing (though it often includes the “knowing/believing” the right thing too). Both are important and neither should be overlooked. But the category of “covenant-keeping” includes the questions raised by “soteriology”, while the reverse is not always the case. For those of you wondering about this already. I am not a follower of NT Wright and myself see problems with redefining justification in now traditional PPT way.

*Having introduced and slightly redirected the trajectories of the question, we can now turn to discussing of the main principles of this presentation.*

## **Main Issues**

We will consider this the main issues raised in this section under the headings of 1) Hermeneutics, 2) Prerogatives and 3) Salvation.

### **1. Hermeneutics**

The texts describing the way of “salvation” applicable to “the Jews” are 1<sup>st</sup> century texts and must not be treated as texts from post-Shah origins. The post-Shoah as a form of Reader-Response criticism reading as interpretive method must be first understood, accessed and only then used in a responsible manner. “Reader-Response” criticism as a hermeneutical method (when the reader’s perception of these texts becomes part of what this text *now* means) must be used sparingly, carefully, and always as accountable to other critical methods (such as literary and exegetical) to insure the accuracy of textual reading. Reader-Response interpretive criticism as a method makes us aware of the powerful interaction that reader’s pre-history and hers/his current identity is influencing the perception (or reception) of the texts and their original meanings. Our post-*Shoah* reading of the Bible must still be based on ancient texts and “material culture” (i.e. archeology) only. Both witnesses (textual and material) are ancient sources. What makes post-*Shoah* perspective distinct is greater (and one hopes final) realization of the danger of wrong reading of sacred texts and therefore the immense responsibility of re-reading them accurately. We now know that the tragedy of *mis*-reading of the New Testament is connected (though by itself can not be blamed for it) with *Shoah*: The *mis*-translated “Jews” in John’s Gospel lead to “the Jews” in (some) Church Fathers. From (some) Church Fathers the chain goes to (some) reformers. From (some) reformers due to the timing and proximity to the sub-Christian ideas of the Third Reich.

### **2. Prerogatives**

When Angels depart to destroy Sodom, Abraham continues his frank conversation with the Divine Being that visited him:

Genesis 18:22-25 <sup>22</sup> ... The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing - to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Israel's God is the Judge, so we must resist the urge to be or seek to act as judges ourselves. We must not be pre-occupied with knowing or being able to clearly declare who goes to hell and who doesn't. This decision and knowledge is not our prerogative, but God's. We must be persuaded in our minds that Israel's God is both more committed to justice than we can ever be (because he is the very definition of Justice), and more merciful than we can ever imagine (because it is He and not us – who is the very source of mercy.)

Revelation 1:17-18

And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

Jesus' absolute sovereignty as described in Rev. 1:17-18 through the imagery of holding the keys from hell and death can not by itself be used for the argument that Jesus will in the end open gates of heaven to someone to whom the Bible forbade the entrance to it. Jesus and God's Word must not be juxtaposed in authority. What it rather means for our discussion is that we should not assume the role of judges *or even the members of the jury*. The Father has given all authority to his His Son. This is where we ought to stop.

### 3. Salvation

**John 11:25-26**

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.

**John 14:6**

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.

**Acts 4:12**

"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

**John 8:24**

<sup>24</sup> "I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am (*He*), you shall die in your sins."

### **1 John 5:12**

<sup>12</sup> He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

### **2 John 1:9**

<sup>9</sup> Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

Israel's Messiah is the Savior, so we must cast all our hope upon him. We must trust his covenantal mercy, pray according to his covenantal promises, and call/disciple God's people in covenant fidelity through repentance and faith in Israel's Messiah, God's Royal Son - Jesus.

*Now that we have briefly discussed the main principles that ought to be considered, let us turn our attention to the more difficult portions of this paper and that is the section I call the main challenges.*

### **Their Lack of "Grasp"**

We will consider the section of the main challenges under two sub-sections that themselves will have sub-sections of their own. First, we will look at Their Lack of the "Grasp," discussing the "Jewish" misunderstanding of the Gospel, and, second, we will turn our attention to Our Lack of "Grasp" discussing the Messianic/Christian inability to see everything perfectly.

#### **1. Mis-Perception**

Many Jewish people perceive the Gospel (the Good News) as Anti-Gospel (Bad News) even though the Biblical definition of Gospel is rooted in the joy of the rule of Israel's God over his and Israel's enemies. At times it is *mis*-hearing, while at other times it is *mis*-representation that takes place during "Christian" witness. Many Jewish people often (sometimes rightly) feel provoked to distrust, and not to jealousy (Rom. 11). Many Jewish people have naive views of (Rabbinic) Judaism's treatment of Christ, Christians, and Christianity (See Peter Schäfer's *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton University Press, 2009)).

#### **2. Human Exceptions**

Non-Cognitive salvation for the infants and children dying at an early age is acceptable to many even in conservative Christian circles. Non-Cognitive salvation for people with mental disabilities is also acceptable to many even in conservative Christian circles.

This kind of non-cognitive application of the benefits of salvation does not imply that salvation *does not* come through the shed blood of Messiah.

WCF X:III. "...infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how he pleases. So also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

The presence of such exceptions does not preclude the responsibility Christian communities to fulfill the great commission.

### **3. Jewish exceptions?**

Non-Cognitive application of salvation for some individuals (including Jews) may be possible, who, due to special circumstances, are rendered from God's standpoint incapable of seeing Jesus' Gospel as good news.

### **4. Disclaimer for heretics ☺ and heresy-hunters ☺**

}This argument is not based on Jewish covenantal privilege and/or on two covenant theory.

}This argument does not presuppose automatic salvation of Jewish people.

}Everyone who is saved will be saved through Christ, and eventually everyone who is saved by Christ will profess Christ.

## **Our Lack of "Grasp"**

### **1. Friends of Job**

They knew the truth (One God, all knowing, etc)

They overestimated the level of their knowledge of that truth (Job's sufferings did not come from his sins)

### **2. Missing Reference Points**

Overwhelming majority of "exclusive way" texts comes from Johannine literature, the context of which is less than clear. Understanding the context accurately can change the perceived meaning of the text... sometimes dramatically. The knowledge of the context is crucial for knowing the meaning of the text. To put it differently: there is no meaning in the text apart from its original *con*-text. While there are books of the Bible whose historical context, authorship and reasons for composition are completely unknown (i.e. "The Book of Chronicles"), for understanding of Jesus' polemical statements against "hoi Ioudaioi" and "exclusive" salvific statements in the context of that polemic, grasping that context is crucial and the current lack of reference points calls for humility.

### **3. John's Gospel - Main Question**

One of the major issues around which everything in the Gospel of John seems to revolve is the question of legitimate authority in Israel's leadership. Is it the current Jewish authorities in Jerusalem? Is it Jesus and His Father? Or is it Pilate and the Roman

Empire? The unquestionable authority of the incarnate Memra/Logos of God sets the trajectory for the entire Gospel, providing a clear answer.

#### **4. Nature of polemic**

Understanding Ezekielean “evil shepherds of Israel” (Ezek.34:1-25) vs. “The Good Shepherd of Israel” (Jn. 10:1-18) rhetoric is crucial for proper reading of John. The exclusive polemical statements are part of this Gospel’s polemic, and they set forth the Judean Jesus as true King of Israel over against the contemporary corrupt *hoi Ioudaioi* establishment. *Hoi Ioudaioi*’s statement to Jesus in that context : “If You are the Messiah tell us clearly!” should probably instead be read, “If you are the Messiah tell us clearly.” In the same way, Jesus’ words: “I am the way, the truth and the life” should probably instead be read: “I (with emphasis on “I”) am the way, the truth and life.” (vs. the leadership of *hoi Ioudaioi* being that entering point to God’s blessed Kingdom).

*Now that we briefly looked at the main challenges to discussing and understanding our topic, let us conclude with few summary remarks.*

#### **Conclusion**

- 1. Acknowledge complexity of the situation**
- 2. Entrust *Am Israel* to the mercy of *Israel’s God***
- 3. Re-dedicate to the Biblical mission to *Am Israel***
- 4. Leave the rest to the Good Shepherd of Israel**