

Jewish People: Destiny or Calling?

Introduction

The focus of our consultation this time rests on “The purpose and role of Jewish followers of Yeshua in God's providential design.” Although in many respects we, as Jewish followers of Yeshua (further in the paper - JFY), in my opinion, share the same purpose with the rest of the Body of the Messiah and of the Jewish people, we have our specific distinct calling. In this paper I will concentrate on this distinct and specific role of JFY that is different from those of the Jews and Christians in general. I am going to frame some theoretical foundations followed by discussing their practical dimension as applied for today. Thus, I intermingle some of my personal understanding concerning our role and destiny with its practical implementation.

Especially, it is important to consider the outward dimension of JFY existence, namely, our role regarding others even more than the role we are playing for ourselves. This role is related to the impact of JFY in three areas: Jewish community, society, and the Church/Christianity. I am going to discuss each of these three areas in its turn.

JFY: Jewish Destiny and Calling

The matter of “flesh” that has “spiritual” significance and impact

Although Jewish people are considered as a matter of “flesh,” including their physical origin from the Patriarchs as well as distinct historical, ethnic, and cultural components, they are assigned with “spiritual” significance and impact from the very beginning of their existence (cf. Gen 12:1-3). Although Christian theology generally affirms that for the period before Jesus-event, the “spiritual” significance of “Israel by flesh” is often considered void after that. However, we can find many passages and ideas in the New Testament clearly supporting the significance of the Jewish people. Jesus was firm in his Jewish identity not just before his death but also after his resurrection.¹ The authors of the New Testament affirmed this in multiple ways. None of the Apostles ever denied or abandoned his Jewish identity or encouraged others do so.² The Jewish people by “flesh” are considered “spiritually” important through the end of the times. It is particularly true for JFY.³

Historic Reality

At times Jewish people can look and behave as everybody else in the society they live in, making the difference between Jews and Gentiles unseen. However, the history proves that as soon as anti-Semitism prevails and a Nazi-like group gets to the power, the Jewish people are

¹ Starting with announcement of his coming, through his birth, life, teaching, work, and death, Jesus was evidently considered and treated as a Jew, the Jewish eschatological King. He was consciously aware of and constantly lived his Jewish identity. According to the New Testament writings, after his resurrection though his ascension until his return Jesus still considers himself as long-awaited eschatological Jewish Redeemer-King of Israel (cf. Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 1:6; 2:36-39; 3:19-26; 5:30-31; Rom 9:5; 11:25-27; Rev 5:5; 22:16).

² For Paul see e.g. Acts 22:3; 21:21-26; 28:17; Rom 9:1-5; 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:4-5. Paul fully identifies himself with his Jewish people. He calls all Jews “my brothers.” In the whole book of Acts we can see Paul as an evidently Jewish leader, who was considered Jewish by all Jews and Gentiles around him. He was unashamed to be Jewish in his lifestyle and was always ready to demonstrate it (e.g. Acts 23:1-6; 25:8). Even ministering among the Gentiles Paul was evidently identified as a Jew (cf. Acts 16:19-21). For Apostles see e.g. Acts 15. For leaders of the church in Jerusalem see e.g. Acts 21:18-20. For James see e.g. Jam 1:1-2; 2:21. For Peter see e.g. Acts 10:28-29

³ It is the subject that has been intensively dealt with at the previous conferences of our Consultation. The related papers and statement can be read and downloaded from www.helsinkiconsultation.squarespace.com. Particularly see the Consultation in Paris in 2011.

immediately seen, noticed and singled out. It is also fully true for Christians of the Jewish background. The Jewish community can persist in distancing itself from the JFY, even considering JFY to be non-Jews. On their part, some JFY can consider themselves as not being part of the Jewish people any longer, assuming that they are “Christians” now. But when Jewish people are led to the gas chambers, the Orthodox Jews, Reformed Jews, Jewish Marxists, Jewish Atheists, etc., are going there together with JFY of different denominations. Historically, events like the Holocaust make us all Jewish, disregarding our different convictions and worldviews.

Thus, as Jewish Followers of Yeshua we share the same destiny and calling with our Jewish people. Let us consider some aspects of the Jewish destiny and calling.

Destiny

Unique people in human history

The Jewish people constitute probably only about 0.2% of the World’s population, what makes them statistically insignificant. However, the role of the Jewish people in history is outstanding, being un-proportional to their number. The impact of the Jewish people includes all areas of life and society – religion, ethic, science, literature, economy, music, philosophy, etc.⁴ In contrast to other big nations, including major empires in history, the Jewish people has not just survived, to the most part even without their land, but significantly advanced in many aspects the nations they have lived among. It includes both, Western and Eastern civilisations. The Jew Jesus, followed by his Jewish Apostles, is the core of Christianity, the religion that encompasses more than 2 Billion of the World’s population. At its very beginning Islam (more than 2 Billion followers) was significantly influenced by Judaism. The Jew Karl Marx, although having strong anti-Semitic attitude himself, was at the beginning of Communistic ideas that in some forms have more than a Billion of adherents today. Rationalism and even atheism have had also some Jewish people in its origin (e.g. Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marks). When people consider all this, it impresses them so much that many come up with various conspiracy theories, assigning to the Jewish people secret attempts to control the World. However, majority of the significant Jews in history acted independently of the Jewish community or society.

The suffering of the Jewish people is also unprecedented. We cannot see any other nation in history that has such long (four thousand years!) history of suffering. Although all nations have gone through periods of affliction and suffering, most of them either disappeared shortly after or were restored. Only Jewish people seem to carry the burden of unceasing suffering from generation to generation, without complete disappearing or long-lasting restoration yet. Whatever we have tried, it was unable to free us from this burden.

From one side it seems like it simply happens to and with the Jewish people. Our paradoxical existence as the people of suffering, survival, and success brings us through the history, carrying our fate and destiny.

But is it only a matter of our destiny?

Unique People in Biblical History

The Bible relates to the most part to the history of the Jewish people. It is true not just for the Old Testament but also the New Testament as well. Indeed, an unbiased look at the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, parts of the apostolic Letters related to the divine plan, and the Book of Revelation, reveals that the main events are directly connected to the people of Israel.

⁴ Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_Jews

God has chosen Abraham to initiate the people from him through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The course of destiny began. In the “womb” of the forefathers we were destined to go to Egypt, to be freed from there, to receive the Torah, to travel in the desert, to enter the land, to struggle under enemies, to start the kingdom, to build the temple, to go into captivity, to return, and to receive the Messiah. It is just an excerpt from the great amount of different events described in the biblical history. But was it only a matter of the Jewish destiny?

Calling

If we look at the events in Biblical history of the Jewish people, we can see a calling, regarding other nations, attached to each of them. God initiated the people through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to provide a source of blessing for all the peoples (cf. Gen 12:1-3). Jewish people went out of Egypt to serve their God and entered the Land for all the surrounding nations to see that the God of Israel is worth of following. The groundbreaking standards of the Torah applied in the life of the Jewish people had to reveal the divine righteousness and His light to gentiles and attract other nations to the advantages of the obedience (cf. Deut 4:6-8). The Temple was designed to become the house of the prayer for all nations (cf. 1 King 8:41-43). Yeshua, Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, is the Saviour and Light for all peoples. These are not the exclusive descriptions of the Jewish calling. However, there are some aspects of it.

Living according to the divine standards given to them, the Jewish people should receive blessing. Other nations would look at Israel and see the blessing. It would testify that the God of Israel is the only true God who is worthy to believe in. As result they will glorify the God of Israel and be willing to follow him (cf. Deut 28:7-14; Jer 33:9). Jewish people were created to be a unique, living testimony of the God of Israel, living witness of the true God, the Father of all creation. Jewish calling was and is to live in the way for others to be driven to worship the God who calls us. The calling of the Jewish people is for other nations to look at us and see the God of Israel working. The dramatic part of it is that it was very difficult for us to take care of this commission. Certainly, there were glorious periods in Jewish history. For example, in the story of Purim, God made his people victorious and gentiles were willing to become Jewish. They saw that the God of Israel is stronger than any other god. He was the God of victory. Unfortunately, in our history we have been frequently rebuked by God that because of our disobedience the name of God was humiliated among the nations (e.g. Ezeq 36:16-21). The God of Israel was not worshipped because the Jewish people were not good witnesses of Him. However, we expect Jewish people to fulfil this calling in the end-times (e.g. Zec 8:23).

Usually, it is said that the Jewish people are not “evangelising” or proselytising other nations. Although it is historic reality, it is not the biblical truth. It is rather our tragedy. We as the nation are not in a position to boldly call other nations to our God as the only true One. We are scattered and immersed in the victim-mentality.

Suffering, survival and impact of the Jewish people in history is not just a matter of destiny. It is directly related to our calling to guide all nations to the God of Israel. Through the Jewish people God has been always revealing himself in his essential characteristics, in his righteousness and forgiveness, justice and mercy, loving-kindness, faithfulness and compassion (cf. Exod 34:6-7). However, in many cases it was not intentional following our calling but rather done by God in spite of our disobedience. Here, instead of being a Jewish “calling” it became solely Jewish “destiny,” the destiny that we are complaining so much about.

Jesus came to fulfil the calling of Israel, not just to take the sin of the Jewish people, but to become the perfect Jew leading other nations to God. Our people have never been more successful in bringing other nations to our God as in Jesus. Jesus did what we could not do over thousands of years, bringing Billions of Gentiles to the God of Israel. It is a reason to highly appreciate him as a Jew. None of the Rabbis in the Jewish history did more for converting the World to the God of Israel as Jesus did. And He is going to bring even more. According to the commission that Jesus has given to us, our calling is to attract, to guide, to lead all the people to the Messiah of Israel, ultimately guiding them by doing that to the God of Israel. He is enabling us for that by giving us the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8). Jesus reminds us of our Jewish calling, returning us to the very meaning of our Jewish existence. In the Messiah the sense of destiny gives space to the sense of calling. Fate gives space to purpose, to our purpose among the Jewish people, in the Church, and in the World.

Now I am going to give some practical suggestions regarding how JFY can live their calling in the three areas – the Jewish people, the society and the Church.

Role in regards to the Jewish people

To lead the Jewish people to Yeshua

As insiders among the people, we have the very unique role of guiding the Jewish people to Yeshua. We are part of the people. Talking to Jewish people we talk to “our” people. Nobody else can do it in the same way. This requires us to maintain our Jewish identity while clearly appreciating our belief and new life with the Messiah of Israel.

To care about the wellbeing of the people

We are called to care about the wellbeing of all people of the world. However, our particular direct responsibility is to care about the wellbeing of our Jewish people, the people we are part of. This includes not just providing humanitarian aid or caring for the weak and poor but also supporting the causes of the Jewish communities, fighting anti-Semitism and supporting the existence of the state of Israel.

To protect the people in reverting the divine wrath from them

The Bible is full of different texts emphasizing that disobedience to the God of Israel causes the judgment of God to come upon the people of Israel. Our people are in danger. Following the example of the righteous Jews of the past, we are to intercede for our people in prayer and to petition for their salvation. Besides, the righteous remnant in the midst of the Jewish people has always served as a protector for the nation, averting the divine judgement and complete destruction of the people. We have the role of this “righteous remnant.” This includes not only our strong faith in the Messiah but also our lifestyle. Our good deeds and our righteous life according to the divine desire serve as protection for our people. In this regard we are to live righteously not just for our own sake but also for the sake of the Jewish people.

Role in regard to society

To guide others to Yeshua

as Jewish people, following the example of the Jewish Messiah.

To be an example

The Jewish people are usually the subject of much attention within society. The reasons for that extend over a broad spectrum – from extreme Judo-phobia to admiration of the Jews. Therefore, what happens to or with the Jewish community is usually noticed within society. In these circumstances, JFY are to play an exemplary role within society by presenting the godly

life the Jewish people are supposed to live. If we identify ourselves as Jews (which we should), then, even if some ignorant members of the Jewish community say we are not Jews anymore, we will still be identified as such by the Gentiles among whom we live. Many of them will project their prejudices on us, but many of them will also be making up their minds about the Jewish people by observing us. Therefore we are to be a testimony of this God to them and provide an example of following Him.

Role in regard of Christians

To be a blessing

According to the divine plan, the Jewish people are created to be a blessing for other nations. JFY seem to have this role within the Body of the Messiah. Our presence in the Church brings the Jewish blessing to others within it. The Church in general needs our visible and identified presence in its midst. We are to identify ourselves as part of the body of the Messiah that consists of Jews and Gentiles.

To be unifiers

Messianic Jews are the foundation of the unity of the Body of the Messiah. We are the essential part of it. There is no biblical unity without Jewish participation. We are to live, to show, and to promote unity with the Gentiles. This unity is a very strong evangelistic tool and has also a “sacramental” meaning in expressing the very unity of God.

To present Yeshua from a different perspective

Due to our background, we have a different perspective when looking at Yeshua than is common Christianity. Our perspective can tremendously compliment the Church in general. It includes the Jewish view on spirituality, the Bible and its interpretation, commandments, life, etc. We are to teach and to exemplify this perspective without arrogance or ignorance as to other views. This has to be done while also keeping in mind our previously mentioned roles in regard to the Church.