

## **The Greek and the Hebrew**

The relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Messianic Jews has to be based on a right understanding of the relationship between the Greek and the Hebrew. The Orthodox Church represents in a particular way the Greek heritage in the Christian world. It is clear from the influence of the Greek Fathers, from the importance of the ancient liturgies of St Basil and of St John Chrysostom and from the place of Mount Athos in the Orthodox monastic tradition. In contrast, the Hebrew patrimony is absolutely central for the Messianic Jews for whom a Jewish understanding of the Scriptures and Hebraic thought-patterns are presented as essential.

Before looking at the relationship between the Greek and the Hebrew, we need to note that the two groups meeting at this Consultation are so unlike each other that it makes such a meeting a remarkable occurrence. The Orthodox Church is anchored in a long tradition for which the Orthodox people cherish a deep love and reverence. While the Orthodox heritage develops over centuries, it cannot be approached on a piecemeal basis, that is take this and leave that, a cafeteria approach. By contrast, the Messianic Jews, although affirming a continuity with the wholly Jewish church of the beginnings, is in its current expression a modern development, in rapid flux, without universally-recognized structures, and without any clear theological articulation or philosophical underpinning. This does not make it less significant – indeed this inchoate character arises precisely from its recent and surprising appearance on the world scene.

These huge differences mean that the relationship between the Orthodox Church to the Greek heritage is not exactly parallel to the relationship between the Messianic Jewish movement and the Hebrew heritage. There is a danger attached to this latter relationship. It is that the Orthodox Church is deeply anchored in the Greek heritage and has developed from there into neighboring cultures. But the Messianic Jews are not in fact deeply anchored in the Hebrew heritage – or shall we say, not yet? It would seem that the biggest number of Messianic Jews have been formed either in the United States or in the former Soviet Union. With those formed in the United States, there is often a dependence on English-language Bible translations and commentaries and an inherited antipathy to rituals and to tradition. With those formed in the former Soviet Union, seventy years of enforced atheism have taken their toll. The rootedness of the people in their historic heritage, including a very rich Jewish heritage, has been seriously damaged or even destroyed. As a result, Messianic Jews are often very vulnerable to simplistic teaching which they can mistakenly think is Jewish and biblical. One example of such simplistic thinking is the attitude, quite widespread in some circles, that one can sum up as “Hebrew good, Greek bad”. That means the task of the true believer is to root out everything Greek, which is denounced as pagan. If you think like this, then TJCII is a delusion! For TJCII stands for the reconciliation of Jewish believers in Jesus and the churches of the nations (the Gentiles).

So there is a first challenge of the Lord to the Messianic Jews to reshape their Jewish-Hebraic heritage in the light of the incarnation, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Yeshua of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel who has become the Lord and Saviour of all. There is then a second challenge to the Messianic Jews: the challenge that faced the apostles and elders of Jerusalem at the council described in Acts 15, the challenge of the entry of the nations (Gentiles) and of not imposing all the requirements

of Judaism on the Gentile converts. This second challenge for the Messianic Jews we can describe as how to relate the Hebrew to the Greek.

But the challenge of the Lord to the Church(es) of the nations is different. It is how as churches that have been established in the nations they are to relate to the Jewish people and to the Hebrew roots. Obviously a first step here is to repudiate all replacement theology based on the false premise that God has rejected the Jewish people and that the Church has taken their place. This recognition means that the whole Church needs to return to its roots, which are Israelite-Jewish-Hebrew roots. They also recognize that **the election of Israel is permanent and irrevocable** (Romans 11: 29) and that **the election is so that Israel will be a priestly people, through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.**

The initiative Toward Jerusalem Council II (TJCII) is based on the principle that follows the election and the priestly character of Israel and that was clearly expressed at the first Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15: **that the Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to receive salvation or in order to be participants in God's full plan for the human race and all creation revealed first to Israel in his Son Jesus Christ.** This principle is clearly asserting an implication of the first two principles that is not always understood by all who reject replacement theology: **the distinction between Israel and the nations still applies in the new covenant as it did in the Old.**

We can see many examples among Evangelical Christians who are pro-Israel and among Messianic Jews strongly influenced by Evangelical teaching and categories of extreme positions that contradict or are not compatible with this declaration of the apostles and elders of Jerusalem:

- those Messianic Jews and (judaizing) Gentiles who argue that all Christians are obliged to keep the Law of Moses, to keep the Jewish feasts, to observe Saturday rather than Sunday as the Lord's Day, etc.;
- those Christians who argue that Jewish converts to faith in Jesus must follow the patterns of the Churches of the nations and who refuse to allow them to live as Jewish disciples of their Messiah and Lord;
- those who say that the Church's acceptance of anything Greek (e.g. Greek philosophy) is automatically a distortion of the (Jewish) Gospel.

It is this third position that I want to address in this talk as it is directly relevant to this Consultation. I have already described its most extreme expression in the slogan: “Hebrew good, Greek bad”.

### A Biblical Theological Framework

I propose that the right framework for examining this issue is that of **creation, redemption in Christ and final glorification.** The need for redemption follows the defilement of the human and of the creation by sin. The final goal of glorification indicates that the mission of Jesus is more than the elimination of evil.

How did God deal with sin and begin the process of the healing and the glorification of all that God had made and seen to be “good” (Gen. 1, *passim.*)? It was by the call of Abraham and the election of a people with the promise of descendants and of a land. The chosen people were called to be a holy people and for this purpose they had to be separated from the peoples around them. This was a requirement of the Lord. The people must not be contaminated by the idolatry and evil practices of the surrounding peoples (“When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there.” [Deut. 18: 9; on destruction, see Deut. 7: 1 - 6]). The land must be purified from the evil effects of previous inhabitants. In the Torah, there is a tension between this commandment of separation and the teaching about aliens found for example in Ex. 23: 9.

The separation of Israel from the nations is to make them **holy**. The holiness of God and the requirement to be holy remains central to the Jewish tradition. God is revealed as totally holy, first to Moses. “Do not come any closer,” God said, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (Ex. 3: 5). Israel is to be a school, in which God's people are taught to distinguish between the holy and the unholy. The Sabbath is described as a “holy day” (Ex. 35: 2). The Lord said to Moses: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” (Lev. 19: 2).

This clear separation of Israel from the nations is not a cursing of the nations. It is ultimately also for their sake. For Israel, once purified, once Israel behaves like the first-born son of God, will be the vehicle through which the nations also are freed from idolatry and impurity and enter into the holy heritage of the sons of God. But it is only through the death of Jesus on the cross that the “wall of hostility” between Israel and the nations was destroyed. “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has *destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility*, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.” (Eph. 2: 14 – 15). Later at the end of v. 16, we read that it is through “the cross” that “he (seemingly Jesus rather than simply God [the Father]) put to death their hostility” (the hostility between Jews and Gentiles). Notice that the “hostility” between Israel and the nations was commanded by God (for a time) in relation to the Mosaic prohibitions and commands. In this aspect, the Jewish-Gentile opposition and hostility is fundamentally different from other patterns of strife between peoples.

It is not my primary purpose here to enter into discussions about the use of Torah (the Law of Moses) after the death and resurrection of Jesus. But I can just remark that it seems to me that the destruction of the wall of hostility was the result of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has identified himself fully with his people Israel. And now Israel in Jesus has died on the cross and risen to new life. So Paul writes: “the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives” (Rom. 7: 1). Thus Jesus submitted to the Law during his earthly life, but now in his risen and glorified life, it has no more applicability to him. “For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.” (Rom. 6: 9). And this risen life of Jesus is now communicated to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But the fundamental difference between Israel and the nations goes back before Moses and the Law. It is grounded in the call of Abraham and the election of Abraham and his descendants through the “son

of promise”. This is Paul's argument: “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham as a promise.” (Gal. 3: 17 – 18). The conclusion then is that **the destruction of the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile did not abolish the distinction between Israel and the nations in God's purposes.**

We can then arrive at a good framework for a biblical understanding of the difference between the Hebrew and the Greek:

1. All creation is foundationally good. In consequence, the nations are given their own riches and gifts.
2. But all creation has been seriously affected by the fall and by sin. So, in order for there to be a bringing to the Lord of all the gifts of the nations, these peoples and their gifts have to be purified from all the effects of sin and idolatry.
3. God makes this purification possible by choosing one man and one people to be holy before him and so to be a priestly people. This involves the long and profound schooling of the Torah.
4. It is through the one man Jesus (see Romans 5: 12 – 21) that redemption and the forgiveness of sin is brought, first to Israel, and then to the nations (by the admission of the Gentiles to “the commonwealth of Israel” Eph. 2: 19).
5. The final vision of the glory of the coming kingdom-city is given in Rev. 21 – 22, where we read: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.” (Rev. 21: 23 – 26). “And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Rev. 22: 2).

### Some Relevant Comments

I hope that what I have said so far indicates the shallowness and the total inadequacy of simplistic attitudes like “Hebrew good; Greek bad”. The real question is to determine the right relationship between the Hebrew and the Greek. From the above framework, we can see that the right relationship requires (a) an affirmation of the priority of the Hebrew (Jew) and (b) a purification of the Greek (Gentile) coming from the interaction with the Hebrew.

The axiom “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (see Rom. 1: 16) was not just Paul’s missionary strategy. It expresses a foundational element in the divine methodology for the salvation of all. God chooses one to bless all. God reaches the universal through the particular. The one is Abraham, Jacob (Israel), Moses, David, Jerusalem and above all Jesus. The particular is Israel, the people of Israel, and

Jerusalem to reach all peoples and all cities. The one and the particular are thus foundational and remain foundational – just as Jesus always remains the one way, the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2: 5). But the foundation has to be built on. It cannot remain alone. The election of the one cannot be understood without the priestly role of the one to bless all the others.

The recognition of the election of Israel and the first place of the Jews is not an invitation to exalt everything Jewish uncritically. The election is not an acquired possession; it is also a call to be worked out in obedience. And we see in the Scriptures how much disobedience there was. In fact, the Lord used the disobedience of Israel to bring salvation to Israel and to the nations. The Jewish believers in Jesus have to learn an obedience and a faithfulness that is not automatic. They have to learn from the Holy Spirit how to be Jewish disciples of the Messiah of Israel, and learn not just to copy Gentile patterns, Gentile modes of thinking, Gentile theology. This is often hard, because many Jews who come to faith in Yeshua had been strongly assimilated into Gentile culture. Others who were not, may suffer the temptation to over-react against the rigid patterns of rabbinic Jewish orthodoxy.