

Voices from the Past 1



ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE'S
OUR DUTY
TO ISRAEL

INTRODUCTION

A sermon by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, preached on 17th November 1839, after returning from a "Mission of Inquiry into the State of the Jewish People", commissioned by the Church of Scotland.

This updated edition of *Our Duty to Israel* by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, has been edited in an effort to make his extraordinary sermon more accessible to today's readers. Every attempt has been made to retain the content and emphasis that the author intended, and to stray as little as possible from the original text.

OUR DUTY TO ISRAEL (ROMANS 1:16)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. (Romans 1:16)

Most people are ashamed of the gospel of Christ. The wise are ashamed of it, because it calls men to believe and not to argue; the prominent are ashamed of it, because it brings all into one body; the rich are ashamed of it, because it is to be had without money and without price; the lighthearted are ashamed of it, because they fear it will destroy all their merriment; and so the "Good News" of the glorious Son of God, having come into the world (an assurance for lost sinners), is despised, uncared for – men are ashamed of it!

Who are not ashamed of it? A small company, those whose hearts the Spirit of God has touched. They were once like the unbelieving world, and of it! However, He awakened them to see their sin and misery and that Christ alone was a refuge, and now they cry, "None but Christ! None but Christ! God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Christ." He is precious to their hearts – He lives there. He is often on their lips, He is praised in their families, and they would gladly proclaim Him to all the world. They have felt in their own experience that the gospel is the power of God to salvation, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

1. BECAUSE JUDGEMENT WILL BEGIN WITH THEM

“Indignation and wrath ... of the Jew first” (Romans 2:6-10). It is an awful thought that the Jewish people will be the first to stand forward at the bar of God to be judged.

When the Great White Throne is established, and He sits down upon it, from whose face the heavens and earth run away; when the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books are opened and the dead are judged out of those things that are written in the books (Revelation 20:11,12), is it not a striking thought, that Israel – poor blinded Israel – will be the first to stand in judgement before God?

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him – then He will sit upon the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” – when the awful sentence comes out from His lips – “Depart from me, you cursed” (Matthew 25:31-45).

When the many who are guilty shall move away from before Him into everlasting punishment, isn't it enough to make the most careless among you pause and consider, that this indignation and wrath shall first come upon the Jewish people – that their faces will become more acutely pale, their knees knock more against each other, and their hearts wither within them more than others?

And why is this? Because they have had more light than any other people. God chose them out of the world to be His witnesses. Every prophet was sent first to them; every evangelist and apostle had a message for them. Messiah came to them! He said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). The Word of God is still addressed to them. They still have it pure and uncorrupted in their hands. Yet, they have sinned against all this light – against all this love.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37). Their cup of wrath is fuller than that of other men – their sea of wrath is deeper. On their very faces you may read, in every land, that the curse of God is over them.

Isn't this a valid and just reason, then, why the gospel should first be preached to the Jewish people? They are ready to perish – to perish more

dreadfully than other men! The cloud of indignation and wrath that is even now gathering above the lost, will break open first upon the head of guilty, downcast, unbelieving Israel. And have you none of the bowels of Christ in you, that you will not run first to them that are in such a grievous condition?

In a hospital, the compassionate physician runs first to that bed where the sick man lies that is closest to death. When a ship is sinking, and the courageous sailors have left the shore to save the sinking crew, do they not stretch out the arm of help first to those that are nearest to sinking towards death beneath the waves? And shall we not do the same for Israel?

The incoming tide of God's anger is ready to race first over them – shall we not seek to bring them first to the rock that is higher than they? (Psalm 61:2). Their case is more desperate than that of other men – shall we not bring the Good Physician to them, who alone can bring health and cure? For the gospel “is the power of God to salvation ... for the Jew first, and also for the Greek.”

I cannot leave this heading without speaking a word to those of you who are in a situation very similar to that of Israel – to you who have the Word of God in your hands, and yet are unbelieving and unsaved. In many respects, Scotland may be called God's second Israel. No other land has had its Sabbath as Scotland has; no other land has the Bible as Scotland has; no other land has the gospel preached, free as the air we breathe, fresh as the stream from the everlasting hills.

Oh, then, think for a moment, you who sit under the shade of faithful ministers, and yet remain unconcerned and unconverted, and are not brought to sit under the shade of Christ. Think how comparable your wrath will be to that of unbelieving Jewish people! And think again, of the marvellous grace of Christ, that the gospel is first to you. The more that your sins are like scarlet and like crimson, all the more is the blood that washes white as snow (Isaiah 1:18) free to you; for this is still His word to all His ministers, “Begin at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

2. IT IS LIKE GOD TO CARE FIRST FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The principal glory and joy of a soul is to be like God. You will remember that this was the glory of that condition in which Adam was created. “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26).

His understanding was without a cloud. He saw, in some measure, as God sees; his will flowed in the same channel with God’s will; his affections fastened on the same objects which God also loved. When man fell, we lost all this and became children of the devil, and not children of God. But when a lost soul is brought to Christ, and receives the Holy Spirit, he puts off the old man, and puts on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

It is, therefore, our true joy in this world to be like God. Too many rest in the joy of being forgiven, however our truest joy is to be like Him. Oh beloved, rest not until you are renewed after His image, until you partake of the divine nature. Long for the day when Christ shall appear, and we will be fully like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

Now, what I wish to insist upon at present is that we should be like God even in those things which are exceptional. We should be like Him in understanding, in will, in holiness, and also in His exceptional love. “Love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). But the whole of Scripture shows that God has an exceptional love for Israel. You will remember, when the Jewish people were in Egypt, sorely oppressed by their taskmasters, that God heard their cry, and appeared to Moses: “I have surely seen the oppression of My people, ... and have heard their cry ... for I know their sorrows” (Exodus 3:7). And, again, when God brought them through the wilderness, Moses tells them why He did it. “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you” (Deuteronomy 7:7,8). Strange, sovereign, most exceptional love! He loved them – because He loved them. Therefore, shouldn’t we be undifferentiated from God in this exceptional attachment?

But, you may say, “God has sent them into captivity”! Now, it is indeed true that God has scattered them into every land: “The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter!” (Lamentations 4:2). But what does God say of all this? “I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given

the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies” (Jeremiah 12:7). It is true that Israel is given for a brief moment into the hand of her enemies, but it is just as true that they are still the dearly beloved of His soul.

Shouldn't we give them the same place in our hearts which God gives them in His? Shall we be ashamed to treasure the same affection which our heavenly Father treasures? Shall we be ashamed to be different from the world, and undifferentiated from God, in this exceptional love for captive Israel?

But you may say, “God has cast them off!” Has God cast away His people whom he foreknew? God forbid! (Romans 11:1-5) The whole of Holy Scripture contradicts such an idea.

“Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him”, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:20)

“Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My Soul.” (Jeremiah 32:41)

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not forget you.” (Isaiah 49:14)

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob”. (Romans 11:26)

Now, the simple question for each of us (and for our beloved Church) is, “Shouldn't we participate with God in His exceptional affection for Israel? If we are filled with the Spirit of God, shouldn't we love as He loves? Shouldn't we engrave Israel upon the palms of our hands, and resolve that through our mercy they also may obtain mercy?” (Isaiah 49:16; Romans 11:31)

3. BECAUSE THERE IS UNUSUAL ACCESS TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

In almost all the countries we have visited, this fact is quite remarkable; indeed, in many places it seems as if the only door left open to the Christian missionary is the door of preaching to the Jewish people.

We spent some time in Tuscany, the freest state in the whole of Italy. There you dare not preach the gospel to the Roman Catholic population. The moment you give a tract or a Bible it is carried to the priest, and by the priest to the government, and immediate banishment is the certain result. But the door is open to the Jewish people. No man cares for their souls; and therefore you may carry the gospel to them freely.

The same is the case in Egypt and in Palestine. You dare not preach the gospel to the deceived followers of Mohammed; but you may stand in the open marketplace and preach the gospel to the Jewish people, no one forbidding you.

We visited every town in the Holy Land where Jewish people are found. In Jerusalem and in Hebron we spoke to them "all the words of this life". In Sychar we reasoned with them in the synagogue and in the open bazaar. In Haifa, at the foot of Carmel, we met with them in the synagogue. In Sidon also we discoursed freely to them of Jesus. In Tyre we first visited them in the synagogue and at the house of the Rabbi, and then they returned our visit. When we had lain down in the khan for the heat of mid-day, they came to us in crowds.

The Hebrew Scriptures were produced, and passage after passage explained, none making us afraid. In Safat, and Tiberias, and in Acre we had the same freedom. There is indeed perfect liberty in the Holy Land to carry the gospel to the Jewish people.

In Constantinople, if you were to preach to the Turks, as some have tried, banishment is the consequence; but to the Jewish people you may carry the message. In Wallachia and Moldavia the smallest attempt to convert a Greek would draw down the instant vengeance of the Holy Synod and of the government. But in every town we went freely to the Jewish people. In Bucharest, in Foxany, in Jassy, and in many a remote Wallachian hamlet, we spoke without hindrance the message to Israel. The door is wide open.

In Austria, where no missionary of any kind is allowed, still we found the Jewish people willing to hear. In their synagogues we always found a

sanctuary open to us; and often, when they knew they could have exposed us, they concealed that we had been there!

In Prussian Poland, the door is wide open to nearly one hundred thousand Jewish people. You dare not preach to the poor Rationalist Protestants. Even in Protestant Prussia this would not be allowed; but you may preach the gospel to the Jewish people. By the law of the land every church is open to an ordained minister, and one of the missionaries assured me that he often preached to four or five hundred Jewish people at a time. Schools for Jewish children taught the way of salvation by a Redeemer. Twelve years ago the Jewish population would not have come near a church.

If these things be true – and I appeal to all of you who know these countries if it is not so – if the door in one direction is shut, and the door to Israel is so widely open, oh, do you not think that God is saying by His providence, as well as by His Word, “go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”? Do you think that our Church, knowing these things, will be guiltless if we do not obey the call? For the gospel is the power of God, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

4. BECAUSE THEY WILL GIVE LIFE TO THE DEAD WORLD

I have often thought that a reflective traveller, passing through the countries of this world, and observing the race of Israel in every land, might be led to conclude, merely from the light of his natural reason, that this remarkable people are preserved for some great purpose in the world. There is an exceptional appropriateness in the Jewish people being the missionaries of the world. They have not that peculiar attachment to home and country which we have. They feel that they are outcasts in every land. They are also hardened to every climate: they are to be found amid the snows of Russia, and beneath the burning sun of Hindostan. They are also in some measure acquainted with all the languages of the world, and yet have one common language – the holy tongue – in which to communicate with one another. All these things must, I should think, suggest themselves to every intelligent traveller as he passes through other lands. But what does the Word of God say of all this?

“And it shall come to pass, that just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you, and you shall be a blessing” (Zechariah 8:13). To this day they are a curse among every nation, by their unbelief – by their unique characteristics; but the time is coming when they shall be as great a blessing as they have been a curse.

“Then the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples, like dew from the LORD, like showers on the grass, that tarry for no man, nor wait for the sons of men” (Micah 5:7). Just as we have found, among the parched hills of Judah, that the evening dew, coming silently down, gave life to every plant, making the grass spring up and the flowers to spread abroad their sweetest fragrance – so shall converted Israel be when they come as dew upon a dead, dry world.

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’ ” (Zechariah 8:23). This never has been fulfilled but, as the Word of God is true, this is true. Perhaps someone may say, “If the Jewish people are to be the great missionaries of the world, let us send missions to them only. We have received new light; let us call back our missionaries from India. They are wasting their precious lives there in doing what the Jewish people are supposed to accomplish.” I mourn to think that any lover of Israel should pervert the truth so far as to reason in this manner.

The Bible does not say that we are to preach only to the Jewish people, but “to the Jew first”. “Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations”, said the Saviour (Luke 24:47). Let us obey His word like little children. The LORD speed our beloved missionaries in those distant places. The LORD give them good success, and never let one withering doubt cross their pure minds as to their glorious field of labour. All that we plead for is that, in sending out missionaries to the heathens, we may not forget to begin at Jerusalem!

If Paul is sent to the Gentiles, then let Peter be sent to the twelve tribes that are scattered abroad (1 Peter 1:1; see also James 1:1); and do not grant merely a remote corner of your hearts to be given over to this cause; but rather let it be written prominently on your hearts, and on the banner of our beloved Church, “To the Jew first,” and, “Beginning at Jerusalem”.

5. BECAUSE THERE IS A GREAT REWARD

“I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you.”
(Genesis 12:3)

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: may they prosper who love you.” (Psalm 122:6)

We have felt this in our own souls. In going from country to country, we felt that there was One before us preparing our way. Though we have had perils in the waters, and perils in the wilderness, perils from sickness, and perils from the heathen, still the LORD has delivered us from them all; and if it pleases God to restore our cherished companions in this mission in peace and safety to their anxious families, we shall then have good reason to say that “in keeping His commandment there is great reward” (Psalm 19:9-11).

But, your souls shall be enriched also, and our Church also, if this cause finds its rightful place in your affections. It was well said by one who has a deep place in your affections, and who is now on his way to India, that our Church must not only be evangelical, but evangelistic also, if she would expect the blessing of God. She must not only have the light, but dispense it also if she is to continue as a steward of God. May I take the liberty of adding to this striking declaration that we must not only be evangelistic, but evangelistic as God would have us to be, not only dispense the light on every hand but also dispense it first to the Jewish people.

Then shall God revive His work in the midst of the years. Our whole land shall be refreshed as Kilsyth has been. The cobwebs of controversy shall be swept out of our sanctuaries, the distress and jealousies of our Church shall be turned into the harmony of praise, and our own souls become like a well-watered garden.

Our Duty to Israel is a sermon preached by Scottish minister of the gospel, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, on 17th November 1839, after returning from a "Mission of Inquiry into the State of the Jewish People" which was commissioned by the Church of Scotland.

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Shortly after his death in 1843, his friend Andrew Alexander Bonar edited his biography which was published with some of his manuscripts as *The Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*. It has had a lasting influence on Evangelical Christianity worldwide.



ABOUT CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO ISRAEL

Christian Witness to Israel is an international, interdenominational mission to the Jewish people. It was established in 1842 and has remained committed to reaching Jewish people throughout the world with the message of Messiah. CWI has workers amongst Jewish communities in Israel, Australia, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, New Zealand and the UK. Our basis of faith is the great Protestant confessions of the Reformation.

To find out more about the work of Christian Witness to Israel please visit us at www.cwi.org.uk, phone us on +44(0)1959 565955, email us at comms@cwi.org.uk or write to us at: Christian Witness to Israel, 166 Main Road, Sundridge, Sevenoaks, Kent TN14 6EL

