

Essential Role of Jewish Followers of Jesus in Reconciliation in Pauline Theology

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The Need for Healing

The relationship between the Church (Christianity in general) and Jewish people has seldom been harmonious throughout the centuries. In fact, for a long time Jewish people were oppressed, persecuted, marginalized, and even killed by those who called themselves Christians. That left many scars and wounds in the Jewish memory. Jewish people are historically memory-oriented people. We build our identity on the key events in the past, starting with the promise to Abraham and including such events as the Exodus, the destruction of the First Temple, Dispersion, Maccabees, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple, Masada, Crusades, Inquisition, pogroms, the Holocaust, and establishing of Israel as the state. All these and events like these are not just the Jewish “history” but also the Jewish “present,” being commemorated in feasts, fasts, and memorial days. The history of the Jewish people determines and impacts their present. Therefore, the wounds of the past strongly impact the relationship and the attitude of the Jewish people toward the Church. The credibility of the Church and, as result, the testimony of Jesus are communicated through the lens of memories, what is in the Jewish case – through the lens of wounds.

To heal the wounds of memory is important for the sake of the Jewish people and of the Church. It can help Jewish people to restore a sense of a more positive self-identity and to abandon the victim mentality that determines relationships with the world around them. Healing of the wounds can help the Church to have a sense of being “forgiven” and to come out of the conscious or subconscious “offender” role. Personal emotional healing is related to intrapersonal healing – reconciliation. These two dimensions are interrelated and impact each other. Emotional healing and reconciliation are distinct from, and more complicated than, the moral decision to forgive. In therapy it is often observed that “the choice to forgive opens the door to the emotional healing and to reconciliation, if safe, prudent and right. Healing and reconciliation are tasks requiring many, but different, steps from the basic spiritual decision to forgive.”¹

Repentance and Reconciliation from the Jewish Standpoint

While the connection of reconciliation and forgiveness is debated among psychiatrists and probably determined by a culture,² in order to initiate the process of forgiveness, reconciliation and emotional healing, people naturally expect repentance on the offender’s part. That is

¹ Harry J. Aponte, "Love, the Spiritual Wellspring of Forgiveness: An Example of Spirituality in Therapy," *Journal of Family Therapy* 20, no. 1 (1998): 42-3.

² Cf. Richard S. Balkin, Stephen J. Freeman, and Steve R. Lyman, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Mechila: Integrating the Jewish Concept of Forgiveness into Clinical Practice," *Counseling and Values* 53, no. 2 (2009): 154-5

especially true in Christianity and Judaism. However, the role and the essence of repentance differs significantly in some aspects in Jewish and Christian traditions.

Full repentance in Jewish tradition is expected to include not just (1) verbal liturgical and personal confession and apology, but also (2) an honest naming of the offence and acknowledging it as a sin, (3) an appropriate restitution, (4) a commitment not to repeat the sin, and (5) resisting the temptation to sin this way.³ All these steps are necessary, though it is possible to begin with any of them. In the process of repentance, Judaism generally does not necessarily aim for absence of all inner negative feelings toward the offender. Although it is desirable, Jewish tradition concentrates on more realistic things.

In Jewish tradition only the offender can set the wrong right and only the offended one can forgive. In other words, it is the responsibility of the offender to do whatever it takes to appropriately repent and it is the responsibility of the victim to allow and to accept the repentance. Although there is a possibility of participating in corporate repentance and forgiveness of the Jewish people, there is no mechanism of repenting or forgiving “on behalf” of somebody.

Sin alienates us from people and from God. Therefore, there is more than one kind of forgiveness. The most basic kind of forgiveness is Mechila (“forgoing the other's indebtedness”). If the offender has done proper and sincere repentance (Teshuva), the victim should offer waiving of his debt, and dropping the claim against the offender. It is not reconciliation or emotional healing, but simply concluding that the offender no longer owes anything to the victim.⁴ Thus, forgiveness in Judaism is not easy - the victim is not obliged to offer Mechila unless the repentance is indeed sincere and the steps to correct the wrong has been taken...⁵ The second kind of forgiveness is Selicha (“forgiveness”). It is when the heart is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner and has an empathy for him. Selicha is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender but rather simply reaching the conclusion that the offender is also human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. The third kind of forgiveness is Kappara (“atonement”) or Tahora (“purification”). These are a total existential cleansing of all sinfulness. However, this ultimate form of forgiveness is only granted by God.⁶

³ *Teshuvá* is the key concept in the rabbinic view of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. The rabbinic tradition agrees that repentance requires five elements: recognition of one's sins as sins (and not just mistakes or lapses), remorse, desisting from sin (deliberate action – to stop sinning), restitution where possible (the act of making good, as best one can, for any damage done), and confession (liturgical and personal). Cf. David R. Blumenthal, “Repentance and Forgiveness,” *Cross Currents* 48, no. 1 (1998): 78-79.

⁴ Judaism also includes the concept of *Takkanat ha-Shavim* (lit. “the enactment of the penitent”) - repentance with compassion accordingly to the evil done clears the sinner from the consequences. Cf. mGittin 5:5; bGittin 55a. The essence of the term is encouraging proper later behavior by rewarding it in ways that lessen the in consequences of prior illegal acts. Cf. A. D. Panken, *The Rhetoric of Innovation: Self-Conscious Legal Change in Rabbinic Literature* (University Press of America, 2005), 199.

⁵ “The principle that mechila ought to be granted only if deserved is the great Jewish “No” to easy forgiveness. It is core to the Jewish view of forgiveness, just as desisting from sin is core to the Jewish view of repentance. Without good grounds, the offended person should not forgo the indebtedness of the sinner; otherwise, the sinner may never truly repent and evil will be perpetuated. And, conversely, if there are good grounds to waive the debt or relinquish the claim, the offended person is morally bound to do so. This is the great Jewish “Yes” to the possibility of repentance for every sinner.” Blumenthal: 79-80.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*: 80.

Insufficiency of Christian Repentance from the Jewish Standpoint

In Jewish tradition, there is a big emphasis laid on the repentance directed toward the victim, In Christianity the repentance is primarily directed toward God in order to secure his purification and forgiveness of sins. The direction toward the victim remains in many cases secondary and sometimes even neglected. From the standpoint of Jewish victims, such repentance can seem meaningless and even offensive, especially if it does not include reparation and radical change in the behavior.

The Catholic Church is a good case to consider. In the document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*⁷, there are statements addressing the issue of the Church's repentance that were restated and emphasized in the document of International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December 1999). After admitting the turbulent relationship between Christians and Jews in the past and indicating that some Christians failed to exemplify the love of Jesus regarding Jewish people during the Holocaust, it is said:

“This fact constitutes a call to the consciences of all Christians today, so as to require ‘an act of repentance (teshuva),’ and to be a stimulus to increase efforts to be ‘transformed by renewal of your mind’ (Rom 12:2), as well as to keep a ‘moral and religious memory’ of the injury inflicted on the Jews. In this area, much has already been done, but this should be confirmed and deepened.”

Although it was probably the best the Church could do at that time, from the Jewish standpoint, it could not be perceived as “repentance.” To consider it as Teshuva, Jewish people would expect the Church to name the sins of the past together with acknowledgement of the physical, emotional, and financial traumas caused. Repentance for anti-Semitism should include criticizing and opposing it in the present. If seeing herself as extensions of the previous generations, the Church should express the willingness to offer some concrete compensations for the past misdeeds of the Church. Hopefully, the Catholic Church produced since then some new statements that deal with these issues which cover the gap, though I am not aware of such statements. However, according to the documents mentioned above, the repentance of the Catholic Church is not complete from the Jewish standpoint.⁸ It is, by far, not enough for reconciliation and emotional healing, while falling short even to receive Mechila, the most basic forgiveness, from the Jewish people.

A similar case we find in the declaration of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD, the official Protestant Church in Germany) on “*Martin Luther and the Jews; A necessary reminder on the occasion of the Reformation anniversary*” from November 2015. Acknowledging some horrible anti-Semitic passages in Luther's writings, the document states:

⁷ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, Rome (March 16, 1998), III, in Information Service of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, n. 97, 19.

⁸ See extended discussion in Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford :: Oxford University Press, 2002), 211-15.

“We recognize the part played by the Reformation tradition in the painful history of 'mismatching' (from Martin Buber's 'Vergegnung') between Christians and Jews. The far-reaching failure of Protestant churches in Germany in regard to the Jewish people fills us with sorrow and shame. The horror at such historical and theological aberrations and the awareness of our share of guilt in the continued suffering of Jews give rise to a special responsibility to resist and oppose all forms of enmity and inhumanity towards Jews today.”

Although this statement indicates sincerity, remorse and of the desire to act differently in the future, from the Jewish standpoint of repentance, the declaration fails to concretely name the sins and to make compensation for them. Therefore, the declaration does not go far enough to offer even the basic Mechila.

Although some individual non-denominational churches as well as some smaller Christian denominations did more full repentance on behalf of Christianity, the impact of this repentance was seen primarily only on a local level. The major denominations have mostly never even considered a need to do that. The general assumption (Jewish and Christian) is that only the historic churches are responsible for Jewish struggles. Therefore, Jewish people have never yet had a chance to see Christianity repenting from the Jewish standpoint. Consequently, there has not yet been an occasion to offer forgiveness to Christianity. As a result, reconciliation and healing the wounds of memory remains impossible.

Additionally, as noted earlier, in Judaism responsibility for repentance and forgiveness lies exclusively on those involved. While in the Jewish mindset we see concepts of personal forgiveness and of corporate repentance as well as of personal repentance on behalf of the people, we do not find indications of granting forgiveness on behalf of the whole nation. Actually, there is no formal mechanism in the Jewish mindset by which Jewish people could corporately forgive (neither Mechila nor Selicha) the Church for the long history of anti-Semitic teaching and persecutions, culminating in the Holocaust. Besides, there is no ultimate designated Jewish authority that could grant a corporate forgiveness.⁹ Consequently, even Jewish followers of Yeshua cannot offer forgiveness to Christians on behalf of the Jewish people. The only type of forgiveness that is left is Kappara (“atonement”) that comes only from God.

The Apostle Paul on Reconciliation

The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles that, due to differences in approaches to forgiveness and repentance as well as to previous mentioned factors, seem impossible from the human standpoint, is becoming a reality through Yeshua (Jesus). A powerful passage of reconciliation in both dimensions, the horizontal (Jewish people and Gentiles) and the vertical (people with God) is found in Ephesians 2:11-22.

According to Eph 2:11-13, although lacking it before their redemption in the Messiah, Gentile believers in Ephesus, are joined in the Messiah with Israel and received access to God. In his explanation in Eph 2:14-18 Paul writes that this dramatic change happened because the Messiah is the peace, who made peace and preached peace. In particular, the Gentiles are joined with

⁹ Cf. Blumenthal: 80.

Israel and got access to God because the Messiah is the uniting peace of the Jews and Gentiles. He is the one who destroyed the complex division and hostility between the Jews and Gentiles (v. 14) by making the dividing law-regulations legally ineffective. In the complex structure of Paul's reasoning here, this legal change led them to become one people, resulting in peace between Jewish people and Gentiles (v. 15). The purpose of creating this unity was to reconcile both, Jewish people and Gentiles, in one people to God by destroying the hostility between them and God (v. 16). The death of the Messiah was the ultimate means for the reconciliation between the Jewish people and Gentiles and for the reconciliation between them both to God. The sacrifice of Yeshua is described as the means for the peace on the both dimensions, horizontal and vertical. It is the costliest and only acceptable price for the full two-dimensional peace. Thus, the Messiah is uniting peace for Jewish people and Gentiles and for them both to God.

Evidently, the text deals with Jewish and Gentile followers of Yeshua. The emphasis of the passage is on ultimate unity between the two groups – from “two” to “one” – that was impossible to have before Yeshua reconciled them to each other. This horizontal reconciliation is the foundation for the vertical reconciliation of the two groups to God. Repentance for reconciliation on the horizontal and vertical levels is not explicitly mentioned in the text. The emphasis is clearly on Yeshua's role and on what he has done for the reconciliation. Yeshua is the crucial agent of the both reconciliations. He arranges it, while Jewish and Gentile followers seem to remain passive objects of his redemptive work. Jewish followers, as well as Gentiles, are essential for the redemption, while the reconciliation is done by bringing the Gentiles to the Jewish people.

According to Eph 2:11-22, at the current stage, Jewish followers are the essential and fundamental segment of the one “Body.” In a mysterious heavenly way, even without necessarily being intentional about it, followers of Yeshua from other nations are joined to the followers from the people of Israel. It is the deepest and the most ultimate reconciliation between Jewish people and Gentiles described in the Bible. This reconciliation does not depend on cultural boundaries and is not compromised by communicational challenges. While the reconciliation on the human level seems impossible, this divine reconciliation is full. Here, Jewish believers are not just an evidence that the full reconciliation is possible but they are a foundational element of such reconciliation. Their identifiable presence in the Body of the Messiah is, therefore, of crucial importance. This reconciliation does not automatically heal the wounds of the memory but it certainly lays out the best possible foundation for the healing.

Some Concluding Remarks

Jewish followers of Yeshua are strategically placed – simultaneously belonging to the Jewish people and to the Body of the Messiah. It gives them a unique opportunity to act as insiders in attempts of repentance and forgiveness. Jewish believers can become living examples of reconciliation and healing, while interceding, repenting, and forgiving due to the redemptive work of the Messiah.

Although the task is only possible through the divine intervention, nevertheless, the love of God should move the Church to undertake some steps that would communicate the desire of reconciliation corresponding to the Jewish mindset, in order to open the Jewish people for

reconciliation that will heal the wounds of the memories. The Church should recognize and acknowledge particular sins of the past regarding the Jewish people and sincerely repent for them, while fighting anti-Semitism and actively attempting to do good to the Jewish people. Jewish followers of Yeshua could set an example and keep encouraging the Church to do so.

From the Jewish standpoint, some passages of the New Testament are considered as anti-Semitic and build a stumbling block for the Jewish people to see the good will of the Church. Jewish believers can help explain the “Jewishness” of Yeshua, the gospel, the New Testament, and even of Christianity to the Jewish people and to the Church.

Thus, the Jewish followers of Yeshua are fundamental for the divine reconciliation within the humanity and the humanity with God. To be identified as such is an essential sign of this reconciliation and offers Jewish followers of Yeshua unique opportunities to fulfill their distinctly Jewish part in the reconciling plan of God for the Jewish people and the Church. That will naturally contribute and lead to the healing of the wounds of memory. The practical steps in fulfilling this role could be a good subject for another paper.