

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Jesus and Internationalism.

THE international character of the Christian faith is clearly manifest in these latter days, the influence of modern missions has swept aside all barriers of colour, race or caste; the Church has accepted the truth that the Gospel is to be preached unto all peoples. Whatever of good may be claimed for the spirit of nationalism, and it still has its advocates in every land, the form of nationalism which has raised its head in modern times, with its religion of soil and race, and its doctrine of the totalitarian State, has shocked the conscience of the world with its sadistic cruelties and oppressions. The clash between Christianity and nationalism soon becomes apparent in any country where the latter becomes rampant, the ideals of internationalism and the hope of the brotherhood of all peoples are fundamental to the Christian view of the world.

The question arises, however, whether this international spirit of Christianity is a growth and development of later times or whether it can be traced back to its founder and derive its authority from the teaching of Jesus. It really means for us the issue as to whether Jesus Christ is the adequate and all-sufficient answer to the needs of the present time, for there is no doubt that the greatest need of the world to-day lies in the solution of this international problem. Was the vision and mission of Jesus of Nazareth international in its scope, or was He a prophet unto His own people only, confined by the limits of His own race and land?

The opening years of the 20th century witnessed a movement in Christian thought which, in an attempt to get back to the Jesus of history, proceeded to eliminate from the Gospel all that had grown about the person of our Lord during the centuries, the accretions of tradition and the additions from legend and superstition. The result was rather disconcerting: the pale and rather anaemic shadow of the Man of Galilee was a child of His own generation, with all its narrow nationalism and human limitations. Dr. Albert Schweitzer writes: "There was a danger that we should offer a Jesus who was too SMALL, because we had forced Him into conformity with our human standards and human psychology. To see that we had only to read the lives of Jesus written since the 'sixties, and notice what they have

made of the great and imperious sayings of the Lord. . . . Many of the greatest sayings are found lying in a corner like explosive shells from which the charges have been removed."

It must be remembered that Jesus belonged to a race whose nationalism was more intense probably than that of any people in the history of mankind, and at the time when Jesus was born the spirit of racialism among the Jews was at fever-heat, because of the oppressions which they had suffered. There is nothing so calculated to produce a strong feeling of nationalism as some wrong; we have an instance of this in Europe to-day. Revolt was in the air in our Lord's time, frequent insurrections occurred, members of the extremist party—the Zealots—found a place among our Lord's following, the hope of national deliverance played a part in many who attached themselves to Him. How far did Jesus Himself participate in this nationalistic feeling? There are utterances of our Lord recorded in the Gospels which might be interpreted as savouring somewhat of a nationalistic spirit, the outstanding example is in His words to the Syro-phenician woman: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel," a saying which one cannot but feel has been given altogether undue weight and prominence. Again, when Jesus sent the twelve disciples out two by two, He said: "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It must be noted that the Gospel which records these sayings, with their distinct racial bias, is that of Matthew, which was written for the Christians in Jerusalem; the parallel passages in the other synoptics provide an interesting contrast. One cannot but recall that Jesus Himself exercised a considerable part of His ministry in Samaria and the borders of Sidon.

However, there seems to be an opinion held by many that Jesus had no vision beyond the borders of His own country. Professor Harnack, in his *Expansion of Christianity*, speaking of the apostles' first missions to the Gentiles, actually says: "The early disciples entered on a career which their Lord and Master never taught them." This view seems to conceive of Jesus as entirely confined to the limits of His own race.

There can be no doubt that the international view of Christianity is derived from the New Testament. Whatever we may think of Jesus, the Gospel which was preached by Paul was no narrow gospel of racialism, but a world-wide message. To the Ephesians he writes: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." "That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and par-

takers of His promises in Christ by the Gospel." In his letter to Colossians he says: "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision. Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ is all, and in all." It is inconceivable that Paul, who had renounced his pride of birth, his position and advantage among his own people for the sake of the Gospel, should ever give his allegiance to one who was less than the Lord and Saviour of the whole world.

It is important to remember that the earliest written references to the life of Jesus are those we find in the epistles of St. Paul, antedating the Gospels by many years, although there undoubtedly existed a Gospel either in written form or oral tradition in the early Church; but of our available written resources Paul's letters are the earliest, and there we find a Jesus Christ who is Lord and Saviour of all mankind, a universal and international Jesus.

There are evidences in the four Gospels that are in perfect harmony with the Christ of Paul's letters. It is to be expected that in an atmosphere of intense national feeling there should be some things that seem to lend colour to the idea of a national Saviour, yet the larger vision is not entirely obscured. There are windows that open to let in a flood of light upon the greater Christ. One of the earliest stories of Jesus in Luke's Gospel is the account of the visit to Nazareth and the teaching in the synagogue. In this Jesus mentions that in the Old Testament two who were blessed by the prophets of old were not Israelites but were Gentiles, the widow of Sarepta, a city of Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian. There were many widows and lepers in Israel, but it was to the Gentiles the blessing of God was given. The significance of Jesus' words was swiftly apprehended by His hearers, and they rose up in wrath to destroy Him. His wider vision of the Kingdom of God thus quite early in His mission kindled resentment amongst the Jews, and later was to bring about His death.

Again, towards the end of His life Jesus was challenged by the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem to show them some sign to justify the strange course He was pursuing. The sign He gave them was the sign of the prophet Jonah. It is of the utmost importance that we should understand what Jesus meant by this sign if it really represents the purpose of His mission. The synoptic gospels show some variance here. Matthew, with his nationalistic bias, seeks to find the meaning of Jonah in the prophet's experience in the belly of the whale, comparing it to the burial and resurrection of our Lord. Luke mentions only that the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. The Book of Jonah is one of the least understood of all in the

Old Testament. It has been obscured by controversy about the big fish, but to a dispassionate judgment it stands at the highest peak of Old Testament revelation, with its wide scope and great missionary purpose. The Divine mercy extended to a great heathen city. "Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?"

Jesus selected this book, with its emphasis upon the mercy of God to Jew and Gentile alike, as typical of His mission to mankind. How He would delight in that last phrase of the book: "And also much cattle." He who saw the Father's love in His care for bird and beast.

"I knew that Christ had given me birth
To brother all the souls on earth;
And every bird, and every beast,
Should share the crumbs broke at the feast."

The last piece of evidence is the most important of all, because it reveals the truth that our Lord not only believed in the international character of His mission, but that humanly speaking He died for it. In the last week in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and drove out the traders and money-changers from the court of the Temple. The court referred to was the court of the Gentiles, and according to Jewish law and tradition, the Gentile court was not sacred. It was outside the sacred enclosure, and it was accepted as permissible to arrange this trading for the convenience of those who came up to offer sacrifice. The Gentiles were not regarded by the Jews as holding any position of privilege, but Jesus, by His action in cleansing the court of the Gentiles, stated their claim as His words show. "My house shall be called the house of prayer for all nations." Strangely enough, only the earliest Gospel—Mark—preserves the all-important words "For all nations," and they are the significant words, as can be seen by reference to the chapter in Isaiah from which Jesus quoted.

"Also the sons of the stranger, even them will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. For mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."

The cleansing of the Gentile court was a demonstration of the claims of the Gentiles to their place in the Temple of God, and revealed to the Jews the international nature of Jesus' purpose. His action shook Jerusalem to the depths, it precipitated

the plot of the Jewish leaders and goaded them to action, and it turned the popularity that Jesus enjoyed to a sudden fierce hatred. The shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David," which had resounded on His entry into Jerusalem, became cries of "Away with Him. Crucify Him." Jesus had proclaimed an international ideal for which the Jewish people were not prepared. Jerusalem concurred with the verdict of its High Priest: "It is expedient that one man should die for the people, that the whole nation perish not." National expediency triumphed over the international ideal then, as it has done many times since, in the history of the world. That was the political and human cause of Jesus' crucifixion. It reveals Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world, the Lord of all peoples, the international Christ. "They shall come from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South, and shall sit down in the Kingdom of God." A lesser Christ than the international Christ is not big enough for the need of the world to-day, a smaller Christ than the Saviour of all men is not big enough for the need of the humblest of the children of men. Unless He is the Saviour of ALL MEN, how can I be sure that He is MY Saviour?"

T. J. WHITMAN.