

A Further Guide for the Perplexed

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A Guide for the thoughtful over the perplexity of Jesus from a believing Jewish point of view

“Shema Yisrael Adonoi Elohenu Adonoi Echod...”

“Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One”

However faint the spiritual condition of Jewish people, the cry of the Shema is familiar to all. How often have we taken refuge in it, and used it as a bulwark of rejection when the uncomfortable question of an alien Jesus is pressed upon our consideration. Persuaded of the un-Jewishness of the matter, and unwilling for a religious polemic that is threatening or disquieting, we return to the fundamental tenet of our monotheistic belief-though if the truth were known we are not that avid for that ‘God’ either-to put an end to the whole unwelcome matter. Then, comfortably assured we have righteously affirmed our Jewishness, we turn again to the more serious issues of life, which in fact constitute our idolatry and chronic rejection of Him who calls.

How ironic and eternally anguishing would it prove to be, were we to learn that the very scripture which we invoke to shut out the noxious issue, was the very one intended in the wisdom of God to be His key for our salvation. Having, characteristically, no knowledge of Scripture, nor having ever read a New Testament, subjectively assured that God-whomever He is, and if He is-must surely be pleased with us, we turn to doing that which is right in our own sight, persuaded that this nettlesome, goyish, persistence can have no relevance for us.

“Hear, O Israel...” What can more cruelly stab the heart of God more than to look upon generations of men employing His cry to ensure their deafness? Little wonder the book of the prophet Isaiah, little known to most modern Jews, and which contains the most incisive clues to the identity of the Messiah and the mystery of the Godhead, begins in the first verses of its first chapters with the words, “Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the Lord speaks.”

Why does God so plaintively appeal to the dumb elements?

“...Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand. (Is. 1:2b, 3)

That brute beasts can know, identify, and follow mere man, who only use, or often abuse them, and that Israel not know, nor even desire to know her God, must stun the soul that hears. When, may one painfully ask, has this condition of willful neglect even been rectified?

If to “revolt” or rebel is to choose not to hear, when has that historic rebellion been ended? How many of us are there in the mainstream of modern Jewry today that actually believe that “the Lord speaks”? Do not the greatest number of us, including our rabbis, stagger in incredulity at a God who speaks, and speaks yet through men? Is it not more comfortable and in keeping with the traditional tenor of our age to dismiss “thus saith the Lord” as only a stylistic matter, or biblical rhetoric, than as the actual and explicit speaking of God, which He expects us both to hear and to do? Is not our problem first the rejection of the Word in chronic incredulity and unbelief? Do not our rational minds boggle, and are not our intellectual assumptions challenged to conceive a personal God who is, and who desires to be known, and who like us, wills and speaks and calls?

Are we not comfortable and flattering to our own ethical and spiritual presumptions to prefer a God who is abstract? Distant? Unknowable? To whom we can make occasional pious reference in our speech, but who keeps safely out of our business, and does not intrude into our real lives? Can there be a more serious upsetting of God who is actual, who speaks and says, “Thou shalt not”? Or “Seek first His Kingdom (Matt.6:33)” Or “Follow Me (Matt.4:19)” Or, “Be ye separate (Num.16:21??)” Or “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house (Gen.12:1)” Or, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6a)” Or, “No one comes to the Father, but through Me (John 14:6b)”

How many prefer instead to throw the God of their consciences a so-nominal Christians included? How many, ironically, use even a measure of religion-from orthodoxy to humanism-to keep the Living God at arm’s length, by giving that modicum that placated their own minds, and frees them effectually to be actual lords over their own lives? How pathetically have we died, not for “being Jews,” but if we can see as He sees, for not being Jewish enough! In our comfort and affluence, how many have ever inquired how it is that we are born outside of the Land of Israel? How is it that we are a dispersed people? Why are we to be found over the face of the

earth, a proverb, a hiss and a byword for 2,000 years without a nation? Could God have a controversy with us? Why the perpetual predicament of Jewish life? The recurring hazards of our existence? Why alienate, despite the flatteries of a season, a despised and rejected people?

Can it be that there are indeed laws of God that cannot be forever evaded? That indeed, "whatever a man sows, this he will also reap (Gal.6:7)"? That indeed, "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him (John 1:11)"? That "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised and we did not esteem Him (Is.53:3)"?

Can it be that our chronic rejection of Jesus is only the continuation of a longer-standing indifference to God? That we have despised the cornerstone, stumbling over it as a stone of offense, because, ultimately, we have had no stomach for the Builder? That the rejection of "the Word became flesh (John 1:14a)" is only a continuation of the Word spoken through Moses, or recorded through the prophets? Hear, O Israel!

Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting [new] covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David. Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples [goyim]. Behold, you will call a nation that you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you, because of the Lord your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you. (Isa.55:3-5)

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of Jesus-only for the moment, for the issue of Jesus is the issue of God-ought we not to have repentance toward GOD? Is not this the beginning of any point of return towards Him? Ought we not to begin now? Ought it not to begin with you?

How many of us have congratulated ourselves for a relationship with God that is more fanciful than it is real? Wholly indifferent and likely ignorant of His Word, we have sanctified in our minds, or sentimentally revered, gods of our own making. "You thought that I was just like you (Ps.50:21b)" is the rebuke of the living God, who sees every heart; for indeed, the failure to know God as He is, is inexorably linked with another sin equally as grievous, and like unto it, the failure to see ourselves as we are. Ironically, modern mankind, or that portion that is ever disposed to direct their thoughts Godward, have more likely been guilty of making God into their own image than He has had opportunity to make them into His own. Smug, righteous, self-satisfaction has ever characterized those who delight in religion but are ignorant of Him whom their practices ostensibly celebrate.

We could all do well to ponder the piercing cry of Isaiah, prince of the Prophets, when by the God of grace and revelation he was enabled to see the Lord high and lifted up (Isa.6:1-8). If this great "oracle" of God must beat his breast and cry out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!", what then shall we say who are made of lesser stuff, when we shall be confronted by the same Lord of Glory? How many of us have presumed to "go for God," through one cause of righteousness or another, to find ourselves actually in contention with, and opposed to, His purposes and His servants, because we have not waited for that first work of repentance by which our sins are purged and our own iniquity taken away? Indeed, one may well speculate historically that the greatest encumbrance to the work of God in the earth has come from those who "have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge (Rom.10:2)."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)." So begins the final of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John. If this is true, as we believe of course that it is, the implications are stunning. One can measure, for example, one's actual love of God by one's relationship to His word, for He is the Word. How much actual time is given to the enjoyment of it? How much more do we prefer to read other materials, speak of the trivia of the day, or watch degrading TV programs?

How much do we give ourselves to the contemplation of God's truths? The laments and cries expressed through His prophets? The instructive history of Israel and the inspiration of the Patriarchs? The consolation of the Psalms? In a word, to the revelation of God Himself and His way recorded there?

How much of the crestfallen disappointment and dejection of Jesus' own disciples after His shattering suffering and death can be attributed to their failure to heed His spoken Word while He was with them, and their ignorance of what the Prophets had spoken before Him?

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ [Messiah] to suffer these things and [then] to enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:25b-27). How much of our own erroneous or distorted messianic expectation is the result of the same error? How many still continue to substitute, yea even prefer, the conjecture of men and tradition, more beguiling and flattering to our fleshly hearts, than what is written? May we have the disposition of heart and spirit, the whole reverence for the Word of God, which is recorded of Him whose every utterance and act was preceded by, "it is written (Mt.4:4b, 6b, 7b, 10b)."

These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled (Lk.24:44b).

How much is the rejection of God's Word the rejection of Him? How much, then, is indifference to the Word of God as much a rejection as blasphemous calumny against it? How much, then, is our indifference and

ignorance willful? That we should be knowledgeable about so much, and be biblical ignoramuses, is the very indictment of our pitiful condition before God and the root of every ill. How much then is return to God rooted in a new attitude and disposition of spirit toward His Word, “Thus saith the LORD”?

Will we continue to dismiss such prefaces as an archaic form, or a biblical rhetoric? Or will we choose to believe that it is indeed God saying? Because we cannot conceive in our finite minds of a God both able to speak and to speak through men, will we reduce the prophets to mere social reformers rather than holy bearers of His Word? Is anything impossible to God? Can He not bring into being His Word, and preserve in its integrity unto all generations? How profoundly do our base lives begin to alter in the process of being changed into His image the day we believe that God means what He says, and says what He means.

“...But to this one I will look [saith the Lord], to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word (Isa.66:2).

Until God looks at us, can we begin to look at Him? To see Him as He is? To the angry and contentious, to the disputer of His Word, He will not appear. To those who have made rationality their god, who elevate their puny reason and human judgments above His mysteries, His Book is closed! To them, it will be, at best, only tiresome genealogies, apparent contradiction and paradox, a product of a culture, poetry or chronicle.

How contemptible to them must be the small numbers who believe. How much must they appear to them as a people who have forsaken their reason. How vain to see them attempt to stand upon this Word, and to live by its precepts, ignoring the weightier wisdom of the world and the things visible, which contradict it. But,

Hear the Word of the Lord, you who tremble at His Word: “Your brothers who hate you, who exclude you for My name’s sake, have said, ‘Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy.’ But they will be put to shame.” (Isa. 66:5).

May the process of that dawning take place even with the contemplation of these pages, is our prayer, in the God of the Bible’s precious Name. Amen.