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PRACTICAL FOUNDATION FOR A
POST-HOLOCAUST MESSIANIC SOTERIOLOGY

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This paper was presented at the first gathering of *The European Messianic Theological Symposium*. This symposium took place in Berlin (23rd – 25th February 2011). The theme of the symposium was ‘Towards a Messianic Maturity’. Over 30 theologians and Church leaders gathered from across Europe and Israel and Alex Jacob was pleased to attend representing CMJ.

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PRACTICAL FOUNDATION FOR A POST-HOLOCAUST MESSIANIC SOTERIOLOGY

For all of us as Jews, whether messianic or not, the Shoah hangs over us like a dark cloud. Also in our soteriology we cannot entirely come out from under the cloud into the warm sunshine and light of God in his grace and pure beauty. The Shoah lurks behind every aspect of our faith, but it also highlights the glory of God and his covenant and promises as light stands out in contrast to the darkness of night. But post-Auschwitz questions challenge even the basic theological issues of the nature of God, his goodness and grace, his covenant purpose for Israel and through Israel for the world. Inevitably our soteriology is embedded in the wider truth of theology and cannot be kept separate.

Words

Faced with the incomparable horror of the Holocaust various writers have declared that “*all we can do is to weep and to pray*” (Elie Wiesel). Rubenstein and Fackenheim have both asserted that there can be no theology after Auschwitz, for “*the Holocaust represented a unique and radical evil in human history that has ruptured traditional theological categories*” (Z. Braiterman). In the Holocaust the dark cloud has given way to shattering thunder and lightning which defy mere words. All theology and soteriology can only sound somewhat trite and inadequate. As E. Wiesel says, “*All we can do is to weep and to pray*”. Many theologians would further deny the possibility of even praying, for they feel that no belief in God can survive the gas chambers. Where was God when his people lost their true humanity and perished in Auschwitz and Treblinka? How could the Shoah be allowed to happen if God exists and is omnipotent? And if in his sovereign glory he permitted such evil, can his people still cling to him as God of

grace and Chesed? Can there be any hope of salvation and new life when one discusses soteriology in the context of the Holocaust? Even the basics of theology can become repugnant in the darkness of such genocide extermination. So Rubenstein declares that *“all I have is silence”*.

In our modern world there is a tendency for people to lose their confidence in the meaning of words. Already in years past Goethe, in his table talk, cynically declared that words are given to us to conceal our thoughts. In this he denies the biblical concept of words. In the Bible God creates with positive intent through his words - *“And God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.”* In the mouth of God words have creational significance. But in the Bible words are also revelatory. While in Islamic theology revelation unveils the will of Allah, in biblical theology revelation relates to the very nature of God himself. Of course in knowing the essential nature of God we may also learn to know what he wills and how he saves. As Christians therefore, we struggle to maintain our faith in word as both creational and revelatory. Nevertheless we have to be aware of Wiesel’s declaration that words have lost their innocence because the Nazis perverted their use and meaning. However he also affirms that somehow there remains a redemption so there is a theological glimmer of saving light beyond the dark clouds in which *“words have lost their innocence”*. We have therefore to cling on to the importance of language and reason. Although we cannot come easily to a post-Holocaust messianic soteriology, yet with humility and faith we affirm that death must give way to the glory of resurrection – and as Christians we go beyond the resurrection even unto the Ascension and the eschatological assurance of a new heaven and a new earth. Salvation stretches out eternally.

And as the years of history roll on, we begin already to see the bitterness of the Holocaust becoming just a memory for the younger generations rather than a traumatic personal experience. My generation may cling to the stark horror of the gas chambers, insisting that everyone (and particularly our own Jewish people) must remember. And the younger generations will surely remember, but they will not have the same bitter experience in which the Holocaust overshadows everything in life and therefore also everything in our theology and soteriology.

So we maintain against all odds that a post-Holocaust soteriology can be formed and even proclaimed verbally.

The Suffering God

Post-Holocaust theologians frequently refer in their writings to the story of Job, asking how God could allow his beloved to suffer. Some stress the dialogue between God and Satan, wondering whether God is indeed in league with the devil. Is it allowable

to just affirm that Job's agonies stem directly from Satan alone and are not within the direct or indirect purposes of God? Should we examine the final prosperity of Job after his sufferings where God saves and vindicates him? Of course it is not so easy primarily to emphasise Job's final vindication and reward, for the victims of the gas chambers perished without any such restoration. In our theological analysis of the reality of God's chosen people's anguish in the death camps can we just escape into eschatological hope of 'pie in the sky after they die'? As Christians we want to underline that final vindication and the assurance of God's final reward to his faithful servants, but in the context of the gas chambers this may sound escapist and trite. And yet we note the biblical validity of our eschatological hope.

Questions also arise as to why God allowed Job to suffer at the hands of the devil. And why did the Jewish people as God's chosen people have to go through the infinite horrors of the Shoah? Perhaps it may be helpful to note the answers religious leaders of the various faiths gave to the parallel question of the Tsunami. Why did the people of North Sumatra, Sri Lanka etc have to perish under the rushing waters? The Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist leaders asserted that the Tsunami was God's punishment for the sin of those who suffered. The same answer has also been given by some to the 'Why?' of the sufferings of the Jews in the Holocaust. Dr. Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, gave a different answer. He said that Christians do not primarily ask the question 'Why?' when faced with others' sufferings. We ask the question 'What?' What can we, as Christians, do to help alleviate peoples' suffering? We particularly delight to celebrate those 'righteous Gentiles' who risked their lives to rescue Jews from the camps, to hide them in their homes and even smuggle some out of Nazi occupied Europe. We note with thanksgiving those who after the fall of the Third Reich have helped survivors to come to terms with life after Auschwitz with its relational and psychological traumas. The wonder of our salvation needs to be worked out in such practical terms.

In our reaffirmation of the biblical message, we should note the traditional view that suffering is a necessary prelude to coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. There can be no salvation without suffering. Again we see that the suffering of Job are the introduction to his rich blessing at the end of the Book of Job, blessings which even out-do his prosperity at the outset of the story. In Judges the cycle of prosperity – sin – judgement – repentance – renewed prosperity reminds us that God's glory flows out from Israel's anguish under the judgement of God. Suffering leads to repentance and true faith as the condition for God's mercy. In Ezekiel the dry bones of chapter 37 find new life through the breath of God; the spirit brings resurrection from the grave,

return to their own land and a renewed awareness that it is the Lord who has spoken and who has done this work of restoration. Then as the New Testament will further underline, the tragic battles of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 and 39 introduce the fantastic imagery of the coming glorious kingdom of God in the concluding chapters of Ezekiel (chapter 40-48). It is evident from Matthew 4 that Jesus has it clearly in his mind that the suffering of God's people remains the necessary introduction to the coming of God's Kingdom. He hears that John the Baptist has been put in prison (Matt 4:12) and "*from that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near.'*" (Matt 4:17) Likewise when he hears that John has been martyred, he feeds the crowds as an eschatological sign of the messianic kingdom feast at the table of Abraham, the climax of our salvation. In passing we may notice the central role that food and eating play in our theology – an important point in many non-western cultures!

The New Testament makes it clear that fruitfulness in the Kingdom demands the preceding death of the grain of wheat. The glory of the resurrection and ascension can only come after the crucifixion. Death is the gateway to life.

Some have therefore maintained that the phoenix of the state of Israel rose into reality out of the ashes of the gas chambers. It is certainly probable that the state of Israel would not have been founded in 1948 if there had never been a Holocaust (humanly speaking).

It is said that some very Orthodox Jews sang with a sense of triumph as they were forced into the gas chambers. Out of suffering will surely come the glory of God's redemption.

So where was God in reference to Auschwitz? We may confidently declare that he was in the death camps and the gas chambers with his people. He is our suffering God who shares our agonies as the suffering servant.

Indeed the New Testament also affirms that not only does he share in our sufferings, but also we share in his suffering. We are crucified with the Messiah, "*we know ... the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death*" (Phil. 3:10). And thus also we may "*attain to resurrection from the dead*". Surely this is a Post-Holocaust soteriology which is good news to our suffering people, a ray of sunshine beyond Auschwitz's dark clouds. Interestingly the Post-Hiroshima Japanese theologian Kitamori in his *A Theology of the Pain of God* also expounds the biblical reality of the God who suffers with his people. He defines this with the intriguing formula that $L+W = P$, Love plus Wrath equals Pain. If divine love is devoid of holy anger against sin, it becomes the unsuffering love of a grandparent without responsibility

for discipline or training. Likewise holy anger without love moves us to ‘tut-tut’ at the sin of the world around us, but we can do so without personal loving involvement. But the combination of love and holy wrath brings deep pain. So Kitamori places Jeremiah 31:20 at the heart of his theology. God loves Ephraim although his love remains undiminished. The consequence is *“Therefore my heart yearns/chamah for him”* – and the Hebrew word Chamah denotes fearful suffering. This word was used for the death agonies of a chicken which flutters in agony when its head has been cut off. The old King James’ Version depicts God’s suffering with a particularly graphic translation in which God declares *“My bowels are troubled”*! The mere discomforts of ‘Delhi-Belly’ can of course sound almost blasphemously superficial in the context of the horrors of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, but the biblical reality of God walking with us in our sufferings is indeed salvific good news.

The Trinity

a) Relationships

Without a knowledge of the Trinity we have no divine model of inter-personal relationships. The non-Trinitarian God of Islam and Judaism cannot have any relationships within his own being from all eternity before creation. And yet inter-personal relationships constitute the very heart of life within society, starting with our relationships with God and flowing out into our relationships within the family, within the church and in wider society and then on into international relationships too. Of course we find within both Islam and Judaism much teaching concerning God’s post-creation relationship to his creation, but they have no ideal within the essential nature of God. But within the Trinity the Father relates eternally with the Son, the Son with the Spirit, the Spirit with the Son etc. In their inter-relationship there is a distinct order and yet at the same time an absolute equality (Romans 1v16). This godly model should influence all our interactions as God’s followers. Within the life of the Christian church we need leadership structures, but they are not hierarchical. We belong in unity and equality together, paralleling the inter-personal relationships of the Trinity.

Within the Trinity we also see the ideal of mutual servanthood. The Holy Spirit does not glorify himself, but rather his goal is always to point the way from himself to the Son. The task of the Holy Spirit is to point the way to Jesus and make him real to us. As a result we may say that those who are filled with the Spirit will not talk much of the Spirit, but rather they will glorify the Son, Jesus the Messiah.

Likewise the purpose of the incarnate Son of God is to glorify the Father. He is the perfect revelation of the father, he makes the Father known, he is the way to the Father and brings his followers into union with the Father. Disciples of Jesus will, therefore, not glorify him so much as his Father. It is noteworthy, therefore, that most New Testament prayer is directed to the Father rather than just the Son and our worship ought to be for the glorification of the Father (through the Son by the Holy Spirit). Then we note in the New Testament that the Father takes pleasure in glorifying his beloved Son, so that even the Father thinks more of his Son than of himself. And finally, eschatologically we read that the Son lays everything at the feet of the Father, who will be all in all.

What a model for all our human relationships! And our salvation is not only to be understood individualistically, but also in terms of our relationships. So this indeed a very 'practical foundation' for soteriology and life as God's redeemed people. As married couples and within family we are to serve and exalt one another. There can be no male chauvinism in this – nor self-seeking feminism. In the world of employment and the work place all should be seeking to serve the others and to benefit them rather than ourselves. Thus the aim of Trade Unions and the employees will be to serve the company and nation, not just thinking of their own welfare. But the task of the employers and those in leadership will be to benefit the workers, desiring that they should gain as high a salary as possible and have as pleasant working conditions as can be obtained. Within politics too the members of the different political parties will be seeking to help those of the other parties and working together for the good of the nation and the wider world. Internationally too this principle of serving will surely lead to harmonious international relationships and considerable economic benefit through unselfish trading practices. Our soteriology concerns not only the forgiveness of sin and gracious gift of eternal life, but also the redemption of every aspect of life.

b) Transcendence and Immanence

With its emphasis on Tawhid, the oneness of Allah, Islam has an insoluble problem in seeking to reconcile the transcendence of God with his immanence. It is of course well known that the Qur'an states that God is closer to us than the artery in our neck. But without knowledge of the Trinity the theory does not work out in reality. Orthodox Sunni and Shia Muslims glory in the God who is akbar, the comparative 'greater' in Arabic. Allah is greater and higher than anything or anybody else. He is indeed so great that he is Al-Tanzih and Al-Mukhalafah, the one who is 'other' and 'distant'. The Muslim concept of Allah parallels the Hebrew Scriptures declaration that "*nobody*

can see God and live". And in Colossians 1 Paul also describes God as the one who is "invisible". God is absolutely great and high beyond all human knowledge, relationship or description. He is the totally transcendent one whom mere, weak little human beings cannot personally know or relate to. In Islam it is the greatness/bigness of God which separates God from people – In Christendom it is the holiness of God which separates God from people. The Christian message that God has come right down to earth in order to identify with humanity in all our sin becomes an impossibility without assurance of the Trinity. There remains therefore a lack of any adequate soteriology.

In contrast, the mystical Sufis bring Allah down into this world and into intimate relationship with his people. Thus Sufi poetry often pictures God within his creation and even parallels the Song of Solomon with its very intimate picture of God's relationship with us. But the Sufis find it almost impossible to hold this beautiful immanence of Allah together with the glory of his transcendent akbar nature.

As Christians we rejoice in the absolute glory and splendour of God on high while at the same time knowing the reality and beauty of the God who "*walks with us and talks with us along life's narrow way*" (to demonstrate my antiquity!), the God who comes to earth as Immanuel to win for us the forgiveness of our sins. He is indeed Yeshua, the saving Lord. We note the amazing reality of the high akbar El (the High God of the nations living around Israel - the Canaanites, Moabites etc) who is also 'Immanu', intimately here with us.

In the Hebrew Scriptures and in traditional rabbinic Judaism the tension between God's immanence and his transcendence is mitigated to some extent by the emphasis on God's theophanies. But inevitably this leads to serious questions concerning the identity of the men who visited Abraham etc. Were they somehow an emanation of the Godhead? If so how do they relate to God himself on high? Are there then different 'persons' within the Godhead? Likewise the almost personified nature of the Logos and of Wisdom within traditional Judaism comes close to the Christian New Testament understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Logos of God. In its firm opposition to the Trinity rabbinic Judaism faces considerable problems in understanding the theophanies and personified Logos and Wisdom. And it inevitably also finds difficulty in formulating any adequate doctrine of salvation.

c) The Holy Spirit Without the Trinity

Islam also inevitably lacks the knowledge of the Holy Spirit, God working within us to bring the holiness of God into our redeemed nature. It is noteworthy how Muslims

therefore lack the various elements of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, including the final element of self-discipline or self-control. Now wonder Islamic Law forbids all alcoholic drink, for without the Holy Spirit and therefore without self-control, one glass of wine can lead to another and on into drunkenness! Likewise women should so dress that men cannot see the shape of their bodies, for otherwise men in their weakness (being made of weak clay) will inevitably fall into sin. But as Christians we have it on good authority that actually sin does not only come through the eyes, but particularly from the heart. Women can hide the shape of their bodies, but men can and will still fall into sin of lust and sexual evil.

Judaism, of course, believes in Yetzer ha-Tov which can whisper into our ears that which is good. But such whispering falls far short of the glory of the Holy Spirit giving us power within and working in sanctifying holiness within us. And it is surely significant that in Judaism it is the Spirit of Evil which is written about much more than the Spirit of Good. In fact little emphasis is given to the Yetzer ha-Tov.

Despite all misunderstanding and misuse of the doctrine of the Trinity in the history of the Church, it must remain the true foundation of all Christian theology and soteriology. Clearly the actual word 'Trinity' does not occur in the Bible, but the reality of God's threefold being is clear. The Trinity is indeed 'good news', the basis for salvation and life for all humanity, both for us as Post-Holocaust Jew and for the wider world.

Humanity

Elie Wiesel sadly declares that "*In Auschwitz it was the very idea of mankind and man himself (sic) that died*". He observes that the death camps not only pose the question of 'where was God in Auschwitz?', but also force upon us the further questions of 'where was humanity in Auschwitz?'. As many of us may have discovered when meeting with people of the older generation here in Germany, the Nazis' dehumanizing strategies did not only cause many of our Jewish people to degenerate into a sub-human animal-like struggle just for survival, but it was also the guards themselves who became less than truly human. And still today one can meet with Germans who performed the most horrendous functions in Treblinka, Auschwitz etc. Such men often display an overwhelming sense of guilt with frequent nightmares and consequent lack of refreshing sleep. Without Christian assurance of forgiveness and cleansing if the truly repent and believe in Jesus as their only hope for this life and eternity, there can be no release from this corrupting stain of guilt on their souls. And their inhuman treatment of men, women and children in the camps has often hardened them, so that truly

human relationships have degenerated into the inhumane, in treating other people in ways that are less than human, they themselves become dehumanised.

In such contexts the foundational Christian message of repentance and faith leading to forgiveness and cleansing gains a depth of meaning. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. The basic promise that we can be born again carries with it such a promise of new resurrection life in Jesus the Messiah that we dare not use this expression merely as a slogan to define so-called 'born again Christians'.

In the light of post-Holocaust reflection the modern liberal faith in the goodness of humanity becomes totally unbelievable. The secular belief that good modern education will lead to moral ideals and harmonious social relationships is shown up as the absurd vain hope which it is. 20th century Germany led the world in its educational development. German music, art and philosophy together with all other forms of sophisticated civilization flourished abundantly in Germany. Even many of the leading Nazis were educated people and knew the refinements of modern civilization in their home lives. But none of that prevented them from falling headlong into total corruption and evil. And in their fall into sin they dragged the leading scientists and people of cultural distinction with them into the abyss.

The traditional biblical teaching concerning the fall in Genesis 3 and the doctrine of original sin and corruption must be foundational in a true post-Holocaust theology. In the light of such all-prevailing sinfulness in the essential nature of humanity we can begin to wrestle with the indescribable evil of the gas chambers and the inhumanly cruel nature of the Nazis in Treblinka and the other camps. In the light of this truth we can even begin to come to terms with the moral failures and cowardly betrayal of some Jews – a cousin of mine was betrayed and handed over to the Nazis by her husband and as a result she perished in Belsen. How could a well educated sophisticated man do such an evil thing to his own wife? It defies any normal understanding, but the essential sinfulness of us all allows us to begin to understand and even empathise with that man in his situation of terrible overwhelming fear. And he was living in a society which had gone mad in its racist hatred, in which we Jews were portrayed as having no human value, life had lost its value. In that context, what may I have stooped to under the fearful threat of the extermination camps?

It is with the background of human sin and corruption that the foundational words of the Christian faith take on renewed meaning. For this reason, and with my own German Jewish family background, it is always a special privilege and joy to minister in Germany. The Christian Gospel has wonderful significance and power. Words like repentance, forgiveness, cleansing, new resurrection life, unity, and

reconciliation become doubly beautiful and touchingly relevant. How glorious it is to put one's arms round a repentant German ex-guard and declare in the all-powerful and loving name of Jesus that his sins are forgiven and quote 1 John 1:9 to him. No longer does he need to shiver in the anguish of unforgiven memories of all the horrific evil he saw and did in the camps. His guilt and sin are totally cleansed through the shed blood of the suffering crucified Jesus. Nightmares need no longer plague his nights. Guilt need no longer stand immovably between him and his wife and children. Now he can be open with them and the tears can flow.

As in Paul's epistle to the Romans, the foundation of soteriology must be the reality of universal sin. In Romans 1 he shows the Gentiles are sinners. In chapter 2 he starts by showing that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, who judge others are themselves equally under sin. In the second half of chapter 2 and the first verse of chapter 3 he goes on to demonstrate that we Jews too are also under sin. Then comes the string of pearls from the Hebrew Scriptures which affirm that "*all are under sin*".

Continuity

In his book *Versus Israel, a study of Jewish-Christian relations in the Roman Empire from AD 135-425*, Marcel Simon summarises various approaches. He shows how some Christians in their opposition to the Jewish arguments followed a Marcionite denial of the Hebrew Scriptures as having any validity or authority. For them the Christian church was an entirely new entity with no relationship to what had gone before in the history of Israel. Others held on to a belief in the Old Testament as having been the Word of God and in the people of Israel as having been in the past the chosen people of God. But such Christians developed a replacement theology in which the Gentile church had now become the true Israel and the Old Testament had been fulfilled and thus abrogated in the New Testament. For them Jews could only become part of God's new people if they renounced their Jewish identity and became Gentile in every way. The church thus lost entirely its Jewish roots. The third group consisted of those who saw a direct continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, between the people of Israel and the church.

For this third group the person of Jesus the Messiah is in the direct line of the patriarchs. He is not only the second Adam, the perfect human being, but also the second Abraham, the father of Israel and many of nations. Then too Jesus is the direct successor of Moses as the supreme law giver, the one whose word is indeed the perfect word of God the Father himself. Beyond this Jesus is the son of David, the high water mark of the history of Israel, the ideal king whose kingdom shall know no end – we

may notice how the very Jewish Matthew particularly underlines the fact that Jesus is the son of David. Indeed Jesus is the climax and ideal Israelite who perfectly fulfils the calling of Israel as God's people and as God's means of bringing new life and salvation both to Jew and Gentile.

The New Testament sees Jesus as the climatic focal point of all the history of Israel. Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, teaches strongly that the Gospel account mirrors Israel's slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the wilderness and wanderings and the entry into the Promised Land. Egypt and the Exodus are continued also in the exile to Babylon and the return from exile. It is significant that Matthew 1:17 teaches the continuity of Abraham, David, the exile and Jesus himself.

Jesus stresses that his word does not annul the Torah. Not one jot or tittle of the Law shall pass away and yet still he declares that his word has superior authority over that of the Torah – *“you have heard it say ..., but I say unto you...”*.

Jesus is the climax of the very locus of God's presence, the temple in Jerusalem. In him God dwells on earth and in the midst of his people.

And the temple as the place of sacrifice also becomes redundant, for Jesus is the very Lamb of God, the perfect and final sacrifice for the sin of the world. Christians therefore believe that it is not just incidental that the temple was destroyed just a few years after the death of Jesus. It had become redundant both as the locus of God's presence and as the centre of the whole sacrificial system. And now the New Testament assures us that believers in Jesus through their union with him have become the temple of the Holy Spirit. God is present in as well as with his people. The full range of God's saving purpose is found in Jesus the Messiah.

Post-Holocaust theologians have queried whether the Shoah was entirely unique or whether it could be seen as being in the direct line of previous times of anti-Semitic persecution such as the inquisition, outbreaks of anti-Semitic persecution in Morocco, the Chmielnicki and Ukrainian persecution, the outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in Germany in 1875 after the Franco-Prussian war etc.

Some have been so aware of the uniquely horrendous nature of the Shoah that they want to draw a clear line of distinction between the gas chambers of Auschwitz and even the worst anti-Semitism of previous years. Others have seen a continuity in the various outbreaks of persecution, oppression and suffering. But they have also remained deeply conscious that nothing can quite compare with Treblinka and Auschwitz.

But as Christians we are constantly reminded that this continuity not only applies to the evils of anti-Semitism. The Christian faith holds the reality of new

life in the Resurrection as foundational. Although some Jewish writers have denied even the possibility of any resurrection life or hope after Auschwitz, we believe in the Resurrection and therefore always the hope of new life. We can share in the smile on Rabbi Akiba's face when he saw the fox running out of the ruins of the temple after its destruction. When asked how he could smile in the face of such tragic devastation and the overthrow of the very temple of God, he reminded people of God's promise. Mount Zion may lie desolate with foxes (or were they actually jackals?) prowling over it. But the promise of God remains that that he will restore Israel. He will not be angry for ever or beyond measure (Lam. 5:18-22). Disaster may indeed have come to the gates of Jerusalem (Micah 1:12), but the promise of God remains that *"the mountain of the Lord's temple ... will be raised above the hills and peoples will stream to it"* (Micah 4:1)

Even in the apparently unremitting darkness of the Third Reich, God's history of restoration and deliverance flows on. In our post-Holocaust theology we messianic believers must stand for the continuity of God's working in walking with us in the pogroms and gas chambers, but also in his gracious promise of redemption from the slavery of Egypt, return from exile, the resurrection of Jesus and now life after the agonies of the Shoah.

The Messiah Jesus

As Marcel Simon rightly observes, the principal element in early Jewish-Christian debate revolved around the central controversy of Christology. Still today the crucial issue remains the person of Jesus, the incarnation of God himself and the fulfilment of Israel's hope for the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of his kingdom of righteousness.

With Muslims too the fundamental disagreement is centred on the deity of Jesus and on what he has done for us in his atoning work on the cross. Muslims often attack Christians because of our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, seriously misunderstanding what we mean by this title. They often accuse us of believing that God took Mary as his wife and together they produced Jesus in carnal fashion. Sadly even Christian workers among Muslims have often not worked biblically on the significance of this title. Does it relate to the diversity of Jesus? If so, what does Luke mean in his genealogy of Jesus when he calls Adam *"the son of God"*? Or does it refer to the fact that children should bring honour to their parents and should be in some way like their parent? Is Jesus therefore the Son of God because he does indeed bring perfect honour and glory to the name of the Father? And we know too that he is the

effulgence of the Father, the absolute image and likeness of his Father.

Most Judaists and Muslims know a few facts about Jesus, but not enough of his life and personality to be able to have a personal relationship with him. Their understanding of Jesus is like a skeleton without flesh – and it is hard to gain an intimate relationship with a skeleton! In our soteriology and witness we need to flesh out the person of Jesus with an emphasis on his life, his relationships, his personality and character as well as his teachings and miracles of loving healing and salvation. The ancient creeds are sadly deficient in this respect – “*born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried*”. Half the New Testament is concentrated on the years between Jesus’ virgin birth and his crucifixion. Our theology needs to reflect the balance of the New Testament.

But in this section I want to concentrate on Jesus’ death, resurrection, ascension and second coming – the central truths of all biblical soteriology. We have already looked to some extent at his incarnation and his life. It is evident from the New Testament that the apostolic preaching majored on the key elements of the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and the climax of our eschatological hope.

a) The Cross

Some early Jewish apologists noted that God did not permit the death of Abraham’s son Isaac and also that in Daniel the three men in the fire were kept from death. So surely, they declared, God would never permit his Messiah to suffer the cruel and ignominious death of the cross. On the other hand the Christian apologists countered by pointing out that a great and holy Rabbi like Akiba could suffer a terrible death without God saving him from it. Even in the first centuries of our era Christian witness began to make use of the Servant Songs in Isaiah with particular reference to chapter 53 and the Suffering Servant. Interestingly the followers of Sabbatai Zvi also rediscovered this passage of Isaiah after their messiah had committed apostasy and turned to Islam. In his self-sacrificial apostasy, they came to believe, Sabbatai Zvi entered the Qlippot of Gentile evil and suffered in order to achieve the Tikkun/ release of his followers. This theology of salvation through suffering clearly had its roots in Lurianic Kabbalism, but was developed in relation to Sabbatai Zvi by his gifted prophet Rabbi Nathan of Gaza.

But generally it has to be said that neither Islam nor Judaism have any adequate theology to deal with the weight of guilt and sin. Of course the early rabbis struggled to find an alternative to the former sacrificial system which had become impossible after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. But none of their answers would seem to

give a sufficient answer to the problem. But a deep cloud of guilt hovers over many of us Jews in these post-Holocaust years. And some western psychologists have declared that a high proportion of illness has guilt at its root. The world desperately needs the atoning work of Jesus, in which he takes our sin and guilt upon himself on the cross.

Having worked for many years among the Muslims, I have from time to time given or sold Bibles to Muslim leaders. On several occasions they have said to me that they find the Bible full of truth and wisdom, but they then state that there is one verse in it which they find unjust, evil and repugnant. The offending verse is when Jesus says to the thief on the cross that *“today you will be with me in Paradise”*. With no understanding of grace or redemption Muslims believe that in the judgment they will be weighed in the balances with their sins on the one side and their good deeds on the other side of the scales. The thief had surely accumulated a heavy bundle of sins, but now had no time for amendment of life and yet Jesus blithely promises him that he will attain Paradise despite the evil of his former life. To a Muslim this seems fearfully unjust with no sense of moral values. In contrast the Christian rejoices in the assurance of salvation for all who believe in Jesus and his saving work on the cross.

What glory we have in the forgiveness of our sins! How wonderful too that we can declare this great truth even here in Germany after the depravity of the Holocaust!

b) The Resurrection

In the New Testament the resurrection of Jesus normally comes in the passive – Jesus was raised from the dead. He laid aside his glory and went even to the cold hopelessness of the grave. It was into this apparent despair and death that the Father broke in and brought life to the lifeless, hope to the hopeless.

Can God the Father also break into the despair of the Shoah? Martin Buber asks this question – is it possible that even Auschwitz can be redeemed? In answer he affirms his belief that it is indeed possible that even in the darkness of the Holocaust salvation can come. Of course with his Chassidic youth background in Poland he sees this redemption in terms of the Lurianic Tikkun. Fackenheim also declares with some hesitation that good can overcome the horrific memory of catastrophe, but he says that this should only be said sotto voce because the memory of the Shoah is so terribly sensitive.

For those of us to whom the memory of the Holocaust remains with us from our youth, for whom it is indeed a ghastly living memory, it may seem almost impossible that the smoking chimneys of Auschwitz could possibly give way to redemption and new life. Even the founding of the state of Israel in the aftermath

of the death camps seems a sadly inadequate form of new life. But the resurrection of Jesus gives us new hope. If God can bring new resurrection life to a totally dead, cold and useless corpse, we can reach out to him in faith that he can also bring new life into our post-Holocaust death. As Christians we maintain that God's saving purposes embrace not only the overall post-Holocaust situation, but also our lives as communities and as individuals. Indeed the New Testament emphasizes that God's salvation brings redemption not only to humanity, but also to the totality of creation. We look forward both to a new humanity and also to a new heaven and earth.

In Acts 17:18 Athenian philosophers felt that Paul was preaching about two new gods, Jesus and the Resurrection. Evidently Jesus and the Resurrection formed the twin emphases of his preaching. We are not surprised that his preaching was centred on Jesus, but we might have expected Paul to concentrate on the cross more than the resurrection. But clearly this was not the case. Of course the cross and the resurrection go inseparably together, but Paul's particular emphasis was on the new life of the resurrection. In any post-Holocaust soteriology this new resurrection life in Jesus must be central. In his sovereign power God can indeed bring new life into even the most traumatic situations of death and despair.

c) The Ascension

"In Christ in Colossae" – so Paul addresses the saints at the outset of his epistle to the Colossians. While it remains of course true that they still lived in the city of Colossae, Paul thus reminds them that they are by faith united to Christ. He is now ascended to the right hand of the Father, so they too are, in him, in the very presence of the Father. As John also noted, using different vocabulary, believers in Jesus already have eternal life. The future hope has already come, although it has not yet achieved its climactic fulfilment. God's glorious kingdom has already come and by new birth we have entered into it. So the New Testament boldly declares that death has lost its sting, for we have a sure hope of the Messiah.

In Islam it is considered a major sin to affirm with assurance that God will bring one assuredly to Paradise – unless one has died a martyr in Jihad for the sake of Islam. Muslims dare not presume that God will look with favour even on the most devout of his followers. Of course if one's eternal destiny depends on one's own merit, then no-one can face death with absolute assurance. And if God's power and freedom stands above his loving holiness, even a promise from God cannot be received with assurance.

God may decide not to keep His word, for according to Muslim theology He

is sovereignly free to do whatever He wills. But in the biblical revelation of the nature of God His loving holiness stands above His power – it becomes entirely acceptable therefore to say of God that He must do what is right, including being faithful to His promises of grace. Likewise we can say with certainty that God cannot do certain things – eg lie, break promises, be unjust etc. so in our union with Jesus we rest assured of eternal life, a relationship of love with God Himself which has already begun and which will come to perfection eternally. We rejoice therefore in Paul’s words that we not only live in our particular Colossae, but we are also with our Saviour Jesus in the glorious presence of the Father. We are not only crucified together with Jesus and buried with Him, but also risen with Him unto new life and ascended with him into the final perfect glory of the father which we may call ‘Heaven’.

d) Eschatology

We have already noted how suffering must precede the coming of the kingdom which breaks into this world in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. While Kitamori fails to break through the thick cloud of suffering into the sunshine of salvation, as Christians we maintain that sufferings of Jesus and then also our own suffering in union with Him, introduces the glories of our salvation. In this paper we lack the space to discuss at length the full salvation which is our sure hope. But we must remind ourselves of what has already been said, namely that we look forward to a new humanity and a new heaven and earth. We glory not only in our own personal salvation, but also in the wider reality that *“the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord”,* that *“the fullness of the Gentiles will be gathered in and all Israel will be saved”*.

So we are reminded that the call of Abraham and the purpose of God for Israel was that His mercies might reach out to the Gentiles too. As Paul underlines in Romans 4, Abraham was called to be father of many nations, not just Israel. And God’s purpose for Israel was to be a light to the nations. For this reason I always rejoice when I hear that through the witness of Jews for Jesus multitudes of Gentiles (as well of course as Jews!) have found salvation in Jesus. Commentators note how the very Jewish Matthew particularly emphasizes Jesus’ teaching concerning Gentiles. Luke too, both in his Gospel and in the Acts, underlines the fact that the Gospel is also for Gentiles. And John never tires of affirming that Jesus has come for the world. He loves to repeat words like “all”, “many”, “much”, “everyone” to show that Gentiles too must be included in our soteriology.

As we experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit, He will empower us and send us out as His witness with the universal message of salvation (Acts 1:8).

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