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CHARLES SIMEON AND THE
JEWISH PEOPLE:

‘THE WARMEST PLACE IN HIS HEART’

by Michael Eldridge

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Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – the replacement for the Olive Press Quarterly. This features articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ supporters or by interested parties.

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Two Anniversaries

In 2009 two important anniversaries are being celebrated: the formation on 15 February 1809 of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews,¹ and the birth of Charles Simeon on 24 September 1759. These 200th and 250th anniversaries respectively are not unconnected, for the London Jews' Society (LJS) as it was usually known, after running into financial difficulties, was rescued by Simeon in 1814 who thereafter devoted much time and effort to its work. As Daniel Wilson rightly observed following Simeon's death, 'In truth, he was almost from the commencement the chief stay of that great cause.'²

A Word Portrait

Such is the fickleness of fame and reputation that even a great church leader such as Charles Simeon, a household name in his day and unquestionably the father of the Evangelical movement within the Church of England, is little known to many Christians today. A brief sketch of the man and his life may therefore be helpful.

A sketch has in fact already been provided by Joseph John Gurney, a Quaker friend of Simeon's, who once described a visit he made with his family to see him in Cambridge in April 1831 when Simeon was then seventy-one years old.³ This short piece of some twenty pages is like a painting by a skilled portrait painter: it reveals the inner character of the man but also alludes to the significant aspects of his career. I will therefore take up this sketch, building upon it as appropriate.

Gurney notes some immediate impressions: 'Simeon has the warm and eager manners of a foreigner with an English heart beneath them.'⁴ Then he notes Simeon's ability to speak in an especially penetrating manner, even when in a distinct whisper, and the peculiarity of his countenance and gaze which are 'grotesque and versatile and at the same time affecting'.⁵ Another witness records his telling a story with 'the usual fervid moulding of his face'.⁶

We are at once reminded that Simeon was one of the foremost preachers of

1 The Society is now called the Church's Ministry among Jewish People or CMJ.

2 Carus, p. 844. Wilson, who knew Simeon well, had an outstanding ministry at St Mary's Islington (1824-32) after which he became Bishop of Calcutta in which office he served until his death in 1858.

3 Gurney, pp. 113-32.

4 Gurney, p. 117.

5 Gurney, p. 118.

6 Williamson, p. 61.

his day. Later he tells Gurney, ‘My dear brother, I speak to people with my tongue, my eyes and my hands.’⁷ Another characteristic was his earnestness. ‘O Mama! What is the gentleman in a passion about?’ exclaimed a little girl to her mother’s embarrassment as she listened to Simeon preaching.⁸

But what of the life that lay behind the man who preached thus?

Simeon’s Early Years

4 Following his opening greetings, Simeon takes his visitors for a short tour of the surroundings of King’s College before bringing them into his rooms. They pass some canal barges on the river and Simeon remarks how up to 13 barges can be towed if they are linked to two suitable horses.⁹ Gurney senses a parable is meant here and ponders on Simeon’s organisational abilities. Prominent among these were his shrewd assessment of character, enabling him to select key individuals for particular tasks, and his gift of insight into God’s intentions for the world that enabled him to fix on and then vigorously pursue specific strategies to take them forward. These qualities emerged throughout his career.

When Simeon was quite a young man, God took hold of his life in a truly remarkable way. Rather like St Paul, Simeon came to personal faith in Christ without a human agency such as a friend, relative or pastor encouraging him. On going up to King’s College, Cambridge in January 1779 he found, soon after his arrival, a note from the Provost requiring him to take Holy Communion at half-term. Hitherto, at Eton, Simeon had been mainly known for being extravagant in dress and prone to bursts of temper. His sorties into religion amounted to no more than observing the national fast-days in the War of American Independence, and sometimes giving alms, in both cases doing so with much ostentation.

On learning that he must in about three week’s time attend the Lord’s Supper, the thought rushed into Simeon’s head that ‘Satan himself was as fit to attend as I.’ So he set to reading what might prepare him for this solemn rite, and began with William Law’s *The Whole Duty of Man*, ‘the only religious book I had ever heard of’. Simeon then recalls, ‘Within three weeks I made myself quite ill with reading, fasting and prayer.’ In due course Simeon was to come

7 Gurney, p. 118.

8 Brown, p. 8.

9 Gurney, p. 119.

upon a passage from Bishop Thomas Wilson on the Lord's Supper to this effect, 'The Jews knew what they did when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering.' The thought rushed into his mind, 'What! May I transfer all my guilt to another?' So he sought to lay his sins upon the sacred head of Jesus and awoke early on Easter Sunday morning (4 April 1779) with the words 'Jesus Christ is risen today; Hallelujah! Hallelujah!' on his heart; then, he records, 'peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul.'¹⁰

At that time, King's was somewhat independent of the rest of the University, and so Simeon, as an undergraduate, had little contact with the few other evangelicals in Cambridge. He did, however, attend St Edward's, a church where 'vital religion' was still found. In due course, he was introduced to John Venn, the son of Henry Venn, one of the prominent ministers in the first phase of the Evangelical Awakening of the 18th century. Henry Venn had ministered in Huddersfield with much success under God, but had now taken a retirement ministry at Yelling, a small village near Huntingdon and about 12 miles from Cambridge. Through his friendship with John, Simeon was introduced to his father who then became Simeon's spiritual mentor and guide in his formative years.

In his frequent visits to Yelling, Simeon also came to know John Berridge, another prominent leader in the first phase of the Evangelical Awakening. Berridge was Vicar of Everton, a small village not far from Yelling, but after the manner of the Wesleys and George Whitefield his ministry was mainly itinerant. Although a Cambridge graduate, Berridge preached mainly to country people in simple direct language. Generally he was preaching in parishes other than his own, to the consternation of the Vicars concerned, who then complained to the Bishop of Ely. Only through the unasked for and unexpected intervention of a former College associate, who was not normally well disposed towards him but who had friends in very high places, was Berridge spared disciplinary proceedings.¹¹

These early contacts were to set Simeon's ministry in a particular direction. While Berridge had tried to persuade him to pursue an itinerant and unauthorised ministry like his own, Simeon, under the elder Venn's influence, came to see that adhering to strict Church order would gain for the Gospel a much greater influence

¹⁰ Carus, pp. 6-9

¹¹ Smyth, p. 263.

in the Church of England, and, beyond that, in society as a whole, especially among its leading members.¹² The wisdom of this course was to be borne out by the reforms pursued by the 'Clapham sect', to which William Wilberforce, among others, belonged. Not the least of these was the abolition in the British Empire of the slave trade (1807) and of slavery itself (1833).¹³

His Ministry at Holy Trinity, Cambridge

6 As an undergraduate, Simeon had often walked past Holy Trinity, a church close to King's at the centre of Cambridge, where the eminent Puritans, Richard Sibbes and later Thomas Goodwin, had ministered long ago. Simeon once confessed that he had entertained a dream of becoming the incumbent of this church but it had seemed as unlikely as his becoming Archbishop of Canterbury. Shortly after his studies were finished, the living at Holy Trinity became vacant, and through a combination of remarkable providences, the Bishop of Ely was moved to appoint Simeon at the age of only 23 to this parish.

The story has often been told¹⁴ of Simeon's rejection by the existing congregation, who even locked their pew doors before deserting the church, so that at first Simeon had to preach to just a few people in the aisles, and how Simeon was cold-shouldered by the Dons and ridiculed by most undergraduates. For many years, Simeon's ministry was a cross to bear.

As a controversial figure, Simeon attracted many undergraduates to hear him preach, usually just out of curiosity. But through the power of the Holy Spirit, his preaching bore fruit and changed lives. Perhaps the turning point came at a time of national famine in 1788-89. Charitable relief was organised to supply food to Cambridge itself but the surrounding villages were left to fare for themselves. So Simeon himself took on the relief of the villages, arranging for local bakers to supply bread at half-price, raising funds, contributing a large sum himself, and supervising the operation personally. Here Simeon's organisational abilities came out for the first time, and by this intervention Simeon gained wide respect even among those who had previously derided him.¹⁵

12 Smyth, p. 281.

13 Overton, pp. 295-312.

14 See Hopkins, pp. 36-49; Loane, pp. 181- 194; Moule, pp.38-39, 44-48.

15 Carus, pp. 80-82.

In due course, the enemies in his own church dwindled and Simeon was able to build up a large congregation of faithful followers of Christ. They were a mixture of poor townspeople of little education and Cambridge undergraduates. Eventually the congregation grew to above one thousand and the church building had to be enlarged. Simeon was ahead of his time, certainly among Anglicans, in mobilising lay people in ministry. In particular, he built up a team of about two dozen pastoral assistants, both men and women, to assist in parish visiting and pastoral ministry. Simeon was one of the first to appreciate the contribution women could make to the work of the church. At the meetings for ministers that he held at Little Shelford, minister's wives were also invited and had special sessions devoted to their particular role.

Ultimately on his death, after 54 years of ministry in Cambridge, Simeon was to be given what amounted to a State funeral. Although it was on a market day, all the shops were closed. The funeral took place in King's College Chapel. One witness records,

*Eight Heads of Houses, many learned professors, scholars and divines, above 800 undergraduates, nearly 900 of his own congregation attended. I thought within myself, 'And is THIS the man whose name was once cast out as evil? Is this the man whose parishioners formerly laboured to eject from his church and his living? Is this the man who was wont to be insulted in the streets?'*¹⁶

Simeon's Ministry to the Nation

Gurney on his arrival in Cambridge first sent Simeon a calling card in advance, and then, on approaching King's, he is surprised to find Simeon already striding across the college lawns, forgetting his gout, to meet him. Only Fellows were allowed to walk on the lawns, but Gurney and his family walked over the grass to spare Simeon's legs. This detail brings out the fact that, although Simeon was Vicar at Holy Trinity, he was also a Fellow at King's, living in college as a confirmed bachelor. This was a choice Simeon had taken quite deliberately. He judged that his ministry to the undergraduates meant that he should be among them in college: 'I should hate the University above all places as a married man.' Further, Simeon

16 Close, p. 15.

realised the strategic importance of this ministry in relation to Church and nation in the years to come:

The singular way I have been called to my present post and its incalculable importance forbid the thought of my now leaving it: therefore I think I shall never marry.

It is hard to assess the level of personal cost this decision meant for him. Certainly there is evidence that Simeon felt the need for female friendship and support. Further, the memorandum¹⁷ written when he was about 47, from which these quotations are taken, show signs of inward struggle as Simeon comes to terms with his special calling: after each consideration is weighed up, he declares firmly, three times in all, ‘therefore I think I shall never marry.’

Simeon’s ministry to the undergraduates was not confined to his preaching and pastoral ministry. In addition, he held classes in his rooms on how to preach, and there was also an open invitation to all who were interested to come to his ‘conversation parties’ where he would endeavour to answer any questions of a religious nature which guests might put to him. In this way, during his long ministry at Holy Trinity, Simeon was able to influence a dozen or more generations of undergraduates who would in due course become Curates, Vicars, even Bishops.

Gurney, in his conversation with Simeon, comments on the improvement in the Church of England that had taken place in his lifetime thus:

The rapid diffusion of evangelical sentiment and practice among the clergy of the Church of England – one of the best features of the history of our time – may certainly be traced in part and indeed in no small part (under a gracious Providence) to the faithful and indefatigable labours of the singular and excellent Simeon.¹⁸

Oliver Barclay endorses this assessment in more concrete terms:

Simeon influenced only a handful, say, a dozen, evangelical ministers in the Church of England when he started preaching in 1782; when he finished 54 years on, about one third of Church of England pulpits were evangelical.¹⁹

17 Carus, p. 230-31.

18 Gurney, p. 119.

19 Barclay, p. 9.

Simeon's Missionary Concerns

On entering Simeon's rooms, Gurney is struck by the painting of Henry Martyn hanging over the chimney piece in the drawing room. Simeon then gives a restrained account of how he had gone to the India House in London to receive it.²⁰ A letter at the time betrays his true emotions:

*I was so overpowered by the sight that I could no longer bear to look upon it; but turned away and went to a distance, covering my face, and in spite of every effort to the contrary, crying aloud with anguish: E was with me; and all the bystanders said to her, 'That I suppose is his father.'*²¹

Martyn was especially dear to Simeon and was already at the point of death when the box containing the painting was being opened. He died from fever on 16 October 1812 aged only 31. In his brief missionary career of only six years he had translated the New Testament into both Hindustani and Parsee.

The 'E' Simeon mentions will be Mrs Esther Dornford, the mother of Thomas Thomason who, like Martyn, was another of Simeon's protégés, who became one of the first English missionaries to India. Simeon and Esther were close companions for some thirty years until two years before he died, for she predeceased him. It was an affectionate brother-sister relationship, in which each found in the other a sympathetic listener and encourager.

Martyn and Thomason were among the many men of renown who had gone to India to serve as Chaplains to the East India Company through Simeon's instrumentality. Here we come to another of Simeon's strategies. In 1774 Warren Hastings, along with the traders of the East India Company, had made it a settled policy to discourage missionary activities in the British territories in India lest they arouse antagonism from the local population. But the East India Company did require Chaplains to minister to the British expatriates, and Simeon had contacts with certain of the directors of the Company who were of an evangelical persuasion. In 1787, they asked Simeon to provide Chaplains to the Company. These men were then in a position to proclaim the gospel more widely when in due course the authorities became favourable to Christian mission in India.²²

²⁰ Gurney, p. 124.

²¹ Carus, p. 358.

²² Martyn, after initially being most circumspect, first preached the gospel publicly to a large gathering of Indians in 1809. See Sargent, pp. 266-69.

We now leave Gurney and Simeon pensively viewing Martyn's portrait above the chimney piece, and turn to what, even above India, held 'the warmest place' in Simeon's heart.

The Warmest Place in His Heart

In his *Recollections* written shortly after Simeon's death, Daniel Wilson wrote about 'the interest he took in the great religious societies for diffusing the knowledge of the gospel'. After mentioning the Church Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society among others, Wilson observes, 'To the Society, however, for the Conversion of the Jews Mr Simeon was pre-eminently attached.'²³ Handley Moule in his biography of Simeon makes the same assessment: 'The Conversion of the Jews was perhaps the warmest interest in his life.'²⁴ In a similar vein, Marcus Loane could later write, 'But the warmest place in his heart had been reserved for the Jews and he was a strenuous advocate on their behalf for many years.'²⁵

However, other writers on Simeon have downplayed or simply ignored his concern for the Jewish people. The trend was set as early as Matthew Preston's *Memorandum* written only three years after Simeon's death. Preston is almost apologetic when he writes,

*If ever he appeared for a time to have lost, as it were, his equilibrium – forgetting or seeming to forget, the Scriptural proportions of which he was ordinarily most observant – it was about twenty years ago, in relation to the Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews.*²⁶

Preston here is referring to the time when 'at an interesting crisis of the Society's history, he had assisted, at large cost to himself, to save it from extinction.'²⁷ Others who were generally close to Simeon in his thinking were also sometimes at a loss as to why Simeon paid so much attention to the Jews. So what, then, was the extent of Simeon's involvement with the London Jews' Society, and what was it that lay behind his efforts on the Society's behalf?

23 Carus, p. 844. The *Recollections* are published as an Appendix to Carus's *Memoirs*.

24 Moule, p. 95.

25 Loane, p. 208.

26 Preston, p. 77.

27 Preston, p. 79.

Simeon's Contribution to CMJ

The 'interesting crisis of the Society's history' to which Preston refers was its threatened collapse under a mountain of debt in December 1814. Founded only five years before as an enterprise in which Anglicans and Dissenters (nonconformists) could alike participate, the Society soon experienced problems when some Jews made professions of faith in Jesus and sought baptism. By whom would they be nurtured in their new-found faith? Which Church or denomination would receive them? So the organisation and ministry of the Society was divided between the Anglicans and Dissenters, the latter using the existing Jews' Chapel at Spitalfields (previously the French Refugees' Church), which was not an authorised Anglican place of worship. It was then agreed, in 'a spirit of liberality' on the part of the Dissenter members, that a new specifically Anglican Chapel should be built at nearby Bethnal Green for those Jews who wanted to be received into the Church of England.²⁸ Even without this project the Society had already got into debt by some £7,500 and a further £5,000 at least would be required to pay off the cost of the new Episcopal Chapel.²⁹ A proposal had been put for the Anglicans to raise a special contribution of £4,000 and for the Dissenter members to raise £2,000. The Dissenter managers, however, had declined to raise their share.

By this time Simeon had met Lewis Way who 'had come in unexpectedly for a fortune from a stranger named John Way'.³⁰ 'Mr Way', reports Simeon, 'gave the thousands and, a few friends gave the hundreds, so that the whole debt is paid.'³¹ As part of the rescue plan the Society became a purely Anglican institution, and Simeon hoped that High Churchmen as well as Evangelicals would feel happy to support the Society.

After his death in 1837, the Society's Twenty-Ninth Annual Report included a two-page long appreciation of Simeon's work.³² It mentions his frequent visits to London to preach to Jewish people, his 'valuable contributions' to the *Jewish Expositor*, his 'munificent liberality', a recent donation being for £1,000, and his deputation speaking: 'for several years he continued to be the Society's most active

28 Seventh LJS report, 1815, p.35.

29 The foundation stone had been laid in April 1813. The event is described in Carus, p. 365.

30 Gidney, p. 47.

31 Carus, p. 412.

32 LJS 29th Report, 1837, pp. 26-28.

visitor.’ The appreciation notes, in particular, the long deputation tours Simeon made in 1813 (including Bristol and Leicester); in 1817 (Bristol, Shrewsbury and several of the Northern industrial towns); and in 1825 (the North of England). Strangely there is no mention of his visits to Amsterdam (1818) where he preached on the Dutch King’s Edict which provided for the education of Jewish children including their instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures;³³ to Dublin (1822) where he preached for the Irish Auxiliary of the LJS;³⁴ and to Paris (1823) where he preached at the Jews’ Chapel Lewis Way had established there.³⁵

Naturally attention is drawn to the prominent part Simeon took in the deliberations of the Committee, noting that ‘even in the last six or seven years he has, not infrequently, left Cambridge in the early hours so as to be present at a morning meeting.’

Finally the Report acknowledges the growing interest taken by Cambridge undergraduates in the Jewish cause as a result of Simeon’s efforts, and notes that his last message to the undergraduates was on ‘the immense importance’ to be attached to the restoration of the Jews. Carus explains the situation more fully.

Three days before his 77th birthday (24 September 1836), Simeon visited the new Bishop of Ely and, on being shown around the Cathedral, succumbed to the cold and had ‘a violent rheumatic attack’ from which he never recovered, although he was not finally taken to be with his Lord until 13 November 1836. During this time he was confined to his bed but was due to preach for the Society at his church on Sunday, 30 October, and to address the undergraduates the following day. Obviously he could not preach himself, so he got his attendant to note down the texts he thought should be taken. He told her, ‘Take care of these texts; they are gold, every one of them.’ The texts were: Jeremiah 12.7 with special attention drawn to the words describing the Jewish nation as ‘the dearly beloved of my soul’; Romans 11.28; Ezekiel 36.22-24; Jeremiah 32.41, with the emphasis on ‘with my whole heart and with my whole soul’ (indicating the strength of God’s love for his covenant people); finally Zephaniah 3.17.³⁶

A Mr Noel duly preached the sermon on the Sunday in ‘a forcible manner’

33 Carus, pp. 476-78.

34 Carus, p. 563.

35 Carus, pp. 579 -81.

36 See the account in Carus, pp. 815-16.

according to Carus, who visited Simeon later that day bringing him a first-hand report. But Simeon ‘rejoined by a comment on our ignorance, as well as want of feeling, on the whole subject. He begged me to observe the strong expressions which God had been pleased to use when describing *His* intense and unalterable regard for his ancient people.’ Then, clearly aroused, he forthwith dictated the address to be given to the undergraduates the following day.³⁷

In his excellent biography, Hopkins suggests that Simeon’s passionate concern for the Jews diminished over time: ‘This great interest was the nearest that Simeon ever came to losing his balance, but in due course he got even this enthusiasm sorted out into its true perspective.’³⁸ This comment is wide of the mark: Simeon’s deep concern for God’s covenant people continued unabated to his dying breath.

His Inner Motivation

To a remarkable degree, Simeon himself participated in God’s ‘intense and unalterable regard for his ancient people’ that many others neither shared nor understood. What made Simeon different in this respect? What drove him in his tireless efforts in Jewish work?

The period in which Simeon lived saw the launch of the greatest missionary endeavours ever seen in the Protestant world. In God’s providence, Great Britain, with its ever-growing territorial acquisitions in India and Africa, was to become the main sending nation. Between 1793 and 1834, thirteen new British missionary societies were formed.³⁹ We have already noted Simeon’s part in paving the way for the Anglican Church to begin missionary work in the British possessions in India.⁴⁰ At a meeting in 1799 of the Eclectic Society (a regular gathering in London for evangelical clergy), Simeon took the initiative in proposing to form the Anglican missionary society now known as the Church Missionary Society.⁴¹

This was a period of great buoyancy and optimism concerning the onward

37 Carus, p. 818.

38 Hopkins, p. 189.

39 Murray, p. 142.

40 Denmark, however, was the first Protestant country to send missionaries to India, beginning in 1705. When the Baptists of Northamptonshire sent William Carey to India in 1792, he had to make his base at Serampore, a Danish trading station.

41 Carus, pp. 169-170.

spread of the gospel through all the earth. What Iain Murray has aptly termed ‘the Puritan Hope’ was revived in this period and the new missionary societies were its practical expression. That Simeon shared in this optimism is clear, in particular, from his seeing evidence that ‘the time for the conversion of the Jews was near.’⁴²

The Puritan Hope, as Murray’s careful treatment shows, took its starting point from the recognition by some of the Reformers (not by Luther or Calvin but by Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr and Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza) that a future general conversion of the Jewish people is promised in Scripture. Different Puritans espoused a variety of views regarding just how and when the Jews would be restored. Hugh Broughton (1549-1612) was the first Englishman to propose a mission to the Jews and that the New Testament be translated into Hebrew for their benefit. Thomas Brightman (1562-1607) rejected the influential view of Peter Martyr that the conversion of the Jews would take place only at the very end of history, and so he encouraged the idea, taken up by others, that their conversion would lead to a great growth of the Church among the Gentiles. On Murray’s assessment, this became the predominant view among the Puritans over time.⁴³

That Simeon owed much to the Puritans in this regard is clear from his ‘Conversation Parties’ when from time to time he would discuss the conversion of the Jewish people. On one occasion, when he expounds Romans 11.11-15 and draws in Isaiah 59.20-21 and 60, he concludes, ‘The whole passage connects “light to the gentiles” with the Jewish restoration.’⁴⁴ On another occasion, he predicted that Jews will be used to convert heathens: ‘The heathen will take note of a converted Jew who once hated the Saviour.’⁴⁵

Nevertheless, such convictions concerning God’s purposes for the Jews could not by themselves have moved Simeon to work as strenuously as he did for their restoration. Rather, he may well be giving his own spiritual history, when in October 1834 in a letter to a friend recounting the substance of an Address delivered two days earlier (on 27 October) to the Cambridge undergraduates, he describes ‘the effects of Religion in its rise and progress’. To begin with, Simeon writes, the new Christian is absorbed with wonder over his [or her] own salvation;

42 Carus, p. 514.

43 Murray, p. 41-49.

44 Brown, p. 303.

45 Brown, p. 304.

later love for others fills his heart, expressed in concern, for example, with the schooling of the poor and with missionary endeavours of every kind. Then,

As religion advances in his soul, he takes deeper views of divine truth ... He now enters into the character of Jehovah as displayed in the Sacred Volume ...

*He longs to see God's glory advanced and His purposes accomplished; and in his prayers, as well as in his efforts, he labours to hasten forward this glorious consummation: yea, he determines to 'give God no rest, till he arise, and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth'. Formerly he thought little of conferring benefits on this despised people [the Jewish nation]; but now, seeing how nearly the honour of God and the salvation of the whole world are connected with their destinies, he accounts it his bounden duty to promote, by every means within his power, their restoration to the Divine favour.*⁴⁶

No Loss of Balance

Simeon's views here might suggest that a concern for the restoration of the Jews is a sure sign of spiritual maturity. That, however, is not always the case: for example, my own interest in the work of CMJ began soon after my conversion while only a babe in Christ. Further, there are some whose concern for Jewish people is characterised by crankiness or even a kind of sectarianism as they distance themselves from other Christians.

Simeon was well aware of the dangers that can arise. One of these is an unhealthy preoccupation with prophecy. Towards the end of Simeon's life, there arose within the evangelical movement an intense interest in the study of unfulfilled prophecy. The maverick preacher, Edward Irving, gave an impetus to this new direction when in 1824 he preached the anniversary sermon of the London Missionary Society. A little later, in 1826, the first of the annual conferences on Prophecy was held at Albury Park. Some of Simeon's closest associates were involved, at least initially. Characteristic of this new development was extreme pessimism regarding the spiritual condition of the Church and the possibility of it being an instrument to bring light and hope to the world. Further, there began

46 Carus, pp. 741-43.

the attempt, particularly associated with J.N. Darby, to schematise history into 'dispensations' that would unfold automatically as prophesied in Scripture.

Simeon's general attitude towards an excessive concern with prophecy is well conveyed by this observation at one of his Conversation Parties:

*The present mode of interpreting prophecy, and the dogmatizing spirit in which it is too often done, are truly lamentable and greatly against the genuine spirit of Christianity.*⁴⁷

But the real problem Simeon had with deterministic views regarding prophecy was that they tended to downgrade the need for action by believers, in cooperation with God, for His plans to be realised. In particular, as regards work among the Jewish people, he frequently had to counter the argument, "The time is not come for the Jews to be converted: why do anything now?"⁴⁸

In Simeon's day, as ever since, there were numerous controversies among Christians regarding the Jewish nation. Here, as always, Simeon's approach was not to become caught up in the controversy, but rather to concentrate on the main task: their spiritual restoration. A letter to a clergy friend in 1829 is very characteristic. The friend had wanted Simeon to attack someone who denied the future restoration of the Jews to their own land, hoping that he would 'answer him and knock him down'. Simeon begins by warning him to be reluctant about engaging in controversy:

*Let a man once engage in it, and it is surprising how the love of it will grow upon him; and he will find a hare in every bush, and follow it with something of a huntsman's feelings.*⁴⁹

Then, turning to the point in question, he casts it into the following general category:

And if I should begin, where should I end? One tells us, that the Jews shall never return to Palestine; another, that the Mosaic ritual is still in

47 Brown, p. 318.

48 See the beginning of his 1818 LJS Anniversary Sermon (Simeon, 1818, p. 1) and the Address intended for Cambridge University in 1824 but not in fact delivered (Simeon, 1832-33, XV, pp. 574-75). This was a common objection in the early years of LJS: see p. 6 of the First Half-Yearly Report, 1809.

49 Carus, p. 634.

*full force as it respects the Jews. One tells us, I know not what about the humanity of Christ; another tells us, he himself knows not what about the Old and New Covenants. In fact, this is a day of trifling. But I am a dying man, and view these things as I shall view them from the bar of judgment.*⁵⁰

He concludes with irony,

I shall be extremely glad to see that absurd position relating to the non-restoration of the Jews firmly assaulted, and triumphantly carried by your hand.

Nevertheless in the next sentence he advises against this course and suggests that the clergyman defend his views modestly if he feels he must.⁵¹

It may seem strange that Simeon here should be so subdued in his support of the national restoration of the Jewish people – it appears Simeon did believe in such a national restoration⁵² – but his over-riding priority was their spiritual restoration. In his estimation, the assurance of acceptance by God through Christ and of joy in the world to come was of far greater value than any blessed condition on earth. On one occasion Simeon said:

*Go to a man at the hour of death, one thoroughly awakened, offer him Christ crucified, and then offer him all the joys of earthly, though glorified, existence: which to him will be the most substantial stay, the greatest relief and comfort?*⁵³

Simeon's Preaching on the Jewish People

Just what did Simeon preach about the Jewish people? How did he try to persuade his hearers that their cause should be supremely important even to the quite normal Christian?

50 Carus, p. 635.

51 Carus, p. 635.

52 His LJS anniversary sermon in 1818 refers to the belief, from which he does not distance himself, of 'the generality of Christians that the dispersed of Israel will one day be restored to their own land' (Simeon, 1818, p. 1.)

53 Brown, pp. 315-16. This question in fact comes from a warning against preaching on the one thousand year reign of Christ on earth in priority to 'preaching Christ crucified', but the point made is equally relevant to this issue.

Here something must first be said about his *method* of preaching. Simeon, through personal experimentation, rediscovered the ‘natural’ method⁵⁴ as opposed to the ‘systematic’ method of preaching Scripture. The latter method, a rather unhappy legacy of the Puritan era, took a text, often just one verse, as the focal point for a particular doctrine and then elaborated the doctrine and applied it in a variety of situations. At its best, this procedure could produce a masterpiece such as John Flavel’s *The Mystery of Providence*, but unfortunately it gave rise to the tendency to interpret Scripture by reference to some presupposed theological system. This tendency was most evident in the bitter Calvinist versus Arminian dispute that was rekindled following Whitefield’s death in 1771.⁵⁵

The basic principle of the ‘natural’ method is to let the text be heard on its own terms and without regard to any presupposed system. In particular, great attention has to be paid to the character of the text, whether promise, threat, encouragement, narrative, law of cause and effect, and so on, and also to its spirit:

*It may be tender and compassionate, indignant and menacing: but whatever it be, let that be the spirit of your discourse.*⁵⁶

So, when Simeon comes to preach on the Jewish people, he takes specific texts and tries to make them say what **they** want to say. It follows that to grasp and evaluate what Simeon preached, we must examine his individual sermons. In his 21 volume *Horae Homileticae*⁵⁷ there are the outlines of over eighty sermons Simeon preached for the LJS. In addition seven such sermons were published with the full text. I take four of these as generally representative of the whole corpus.

Individual Sermons

The Jews Provoked to Jealousy

In the first of the Anniversary Sermons Simeon preached for the LJS (in 1811), ‘The

54 Simeon later became aware of Jean Claude’s *Essay on the Composition of a Sermon* which set out similar principles to those he advanced. Claude was a French Reformed minister of the 17th century. Simeon duly acknowledged his debt to Claude, and subsequently edited the English translation of the essay, supplying additional matter of his own.

55 See Overton and Relton, pp. 173-74.

56 Simeon 1832-33, XXI, pp. 307-309. Simeon would have readily appreciated the value of genre identification and rhetorical criticism as developed in modern biblical studies.

57 Simeon 1832-33. This work contains the ‘skeletons’ or outlines of all Simeon’s sermons together with Claude’s *Essay*, as edited by Simeon, as an Appendix.

Jews Provoked to Jealousy’, he takes Deuteronomy 32.21: ‘They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God ... I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people ...’ The anger to which God was provoked by the Israelites’ idolatry and unfaithfulness is explained not simply as their exile in Babylon but also their present exile among the Gentiles resulting from their rejection of Jesus. Likewise, as with Paul, he takes ‘the foolish nation’ by whom they will be provoked, not simply as the Babylonians but the later, mainly Gentile Church. For the Jewish people, the prophecy urges them to consider the message about their Messiah being brought to them by Gentile Christians. For the Gentile Christians, the message has several thrusts: we must ‘adore the mysterious providence of God’; we must be afraid ourselves of provoking God to anger by pursuing the ‘vanities of pleasures, riches and honour’; above all we must ‘*concur with God in His gracious intentions towards the Jews*’ [my emphasis]. This in turn must make us strive to ‘live as no others can’, for we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that the very sight of us will carry conviction and so ‘provoke the Jews to jealousy’.⁵⁸

Can These Bones Live?

In the LJS Anniversary Sermon seven years later (1818) Simeon took Ezekiel 37.1-6 as his text. He treats the restoration of the Jewish nation promised in this passage as above all ‘a spiritual recovery from bondage to sin and Satan’. Yet how can that be, given their prejudice against the Gospel, for ‘they have been taught from infancy to regard Jesus as a vile impostor’? Moreover their prejudice is ‘reinforced by the contempt in which they are held by all, including Christians: “Can these bones live?”’

Simeon regards the command to Ezekiel, ‘Prophesy upon these bones ...’ as ‘not only relevant to the prophet but for the instruction of the Church’. Accordingly, much of the sermon is about our duty towards Jewish people and the encouragement given to us to fulfil it. This duty is primarily to pray for them, for only God can make the dry bones live. For those with the appropriate calling, there is also a duty to know how to present Christ to Jewish people and to be able to answer their common objections. It is also essential to see that they encounter ‘vital Christianity’: that begins with each of us. As to the encouragement given in this

58 Simeon, 1811, pp. 3-29.

passage, the repeated 'You shall live' gives the assurance that it is God who will do this thing, if we depend on Him, and use the rightful means.⁵⁹

Our Duty and Encouragement

20 One of Simeon's University Sermons preached in 1821 and entitled 'The Conversion of the Jews and Our Duty and Encouragement to Promote It' is based on Jeremiah 30.17: 'This is Zion whom no man seeketh after.' Here Simeon rebukes Gentile Christians at large for their neglect of the Jews. In contrast to Paul, who was prepared to forfeit his own salvation for the sake of the Jews (Romans 9.1-2), Simeon suggests that most Christians are more like the Amalekites and Moabites who failed to give the Israelites bread and water as they travelled to Canaan. Underlining the shame of this neglect, Simeon points to the disobedience involved: the Great Commission requires the gospel to be preached to the Jew first. Then there is the deep ingratitude of it. We were once in a deplorable condition like the Jews, but the sacrificial service of such Jews as Paul brought the gospel to us Gentiles. For our part, we do not even shed a tear for the Jews. Here Simeon makes a comparison. A rich man disinherited his son for some reason and let some who were not relatives have the estate. Later, the son's descendants fell on hard times. Should not the children of those who did gain the inheritance have pity on them?⁶⁰

Sovereignty and Equity Combined

Deputation speakers have their stock sermons. The nearest that comes to Simeon's 'Jews' Sermon' is that which he preached in Dublin on 20 April 1822, and preached again, about a fortnight later, on 5 May, before the University of Cambridge. It is on Romans 11.22-24, and is entitled 'Sovereignty and Equity Combined'.

The text taken is part of Paul's treatment of the Olive Tree, a representation of the people of God, into which Gentile believers have been grafted, and from which Jewish unbelievers have been cast off. Simeon contrasts the wretched condition of the Jewish unbelievers with that of the Gentile Christians. The Jews 'are the only people on earth who are incapable of serving their God in the manner in which their own consciences would dictate, and their own religion requires.' By

59 Simeon, 1818, pp. 1-17.

60 Simeon, 1821, pp. 7-28.

contrast, ‘to us has been given a greater revelation of His will, than He ever gave to His ancient people.’ But with the privileges we enjoy go great responsibilities ‘God will ultimately deal with us, *Gentiles*, according as we improve or abuse the privilege vouchsafed to us. We must “continue in his goodness.” Hence the application concludes with a plea to make ‘a united effort for the restoration of the Jewish people to the privilege they have forfeited.’ Simeon bids us recall ‘the self-denying efforts made by the Apostles and the primitive Christians [who were mainly Jewish] for our salvation’, and when we see a Jewish person, he says, the thought should instantly come to mind, ‘You were broken off that I might be grafted in, and I am occupying, as it were, the place which you have vacated for me.’⁶¹

If one were to attempt to summarise the main ideas brought out in these sermons, surely uppermost would be: the deep and continuing love of God for His ancient people; His extraordinary grace in including Gentiles as members of His people – like the bizarre action of grafting wild branches into a cultivated stock; and the heavy responsibilities laid on Gentile believers towards the Jewish people.

In the closing appeal to the last of these sermons, Simeon urges each of his hearers to resolve,

God helping me, I will never cease to labour till I have been the happy means of re-installing one withered branch into its own olive-tree. For this I will labour; for this I will pray. For this I will combine my exertions with others.

It is for the reader to judge whether Simeon by his words and endeavours, ‘being dead, yet speaketh’.

61 Simeon, 1822, pp. 5-21.

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