Israel and Church: Missiological Pathways
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The Jesus Movement, aka Christianity, in the 21st century, is experiencing such a disparate collection of missiological theories that it leaves every servant of Christ in a virtual state of chaos. Which is the best way to bring new members into the church? How can we reach those unreached people groups? What to do with followers of established religions? How to contend with secular trends and attractions? How to respond to religious extremism and WOKE philosophies? These questions and many more comprise the missiological debates of most church efforts in growing Christ's kingdom. I contend that perhaps we ought to trace our steps back to biblical and historical patterns to inform our quest for answers.

When God called Israel out of Egypt it was not simply to fulfil ancient promises made to their ancestor Abraham (Gen 12.1-3). Also, it was not merely a question of compassion for a people (Deut 7.7-9). There was clear missiological intent in the Exodus. We can observe this in two significant pieces of information.

First, the contest between Yahweh and Egypt's Pharaoh could have been summarily resolved in a single act of divine retribution and the matter would have been settled instantly. Instead, Egypt was taken through the 'ringer' (so to speak), an act that appears overkill in any version of warfare. The result was the total decimation of Egypt, economically, politically and militarily. Every conceivable Egyptian deity was also exposed as absolutely impotent: from the deified River Nile to the self-proclaimed god incarnate Pharaoh. Were this to happen in today's world, the scale of destruction would be viewed as God committing 'genocide' against Egypt. There is no comparative event in all pages of history. The point God was making is that Israel belonged to him, and he would protect them with the most drastic measures imaginable. The underlying reason for this over-the-top protection was to set up a people who would serve as a prototype of a truly theocratic nation, an example for the rest of the world.

Second, this underlying principle of Israel's mission was affirmed by Moses in one of his final speeches to the nation.

> 'If you listen to these commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today, and if you carefully obey them, the LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you will always be on top and never at the bottom.' (Deut 28.13 NLT)

The intent behind making Israel the 'head' and putting them 'on top' was not a question of dominance but rather of mission. It may be argued that God instituted a form of 'open exclusivity' as a missiological paradigm. Israel was meant to be the prototype or model for drawing the nations to Yahweh. That this was the case is borne out in the writings of prophets centuries later.

> 'Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see.
>   For the glory of the LORD rises to shine on you.
> Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth,
>   but the glory of the LORD rises and appears over you.
> All nations will come to your light;
>   mighty kings will come to see your radiance.' (Isa 60.1-3 NLT)

This divine intention however was not reciprocated by Israel in their estimation of who they were.

As soon as they were out of Egypt, Israel displayed a propensity to 'return' to Egypt as though it was their 'safe zone'. When they realised that they were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's army, they accused Moses of bringing them there to die and claimed that life and death as slaves in Egypt would have been better (Exod 14.11-14). Once in the desert, thirst got the better of them and again they saw Egypt as offering a better life than the torture of the desert (Exod 17.1-7). When they were offered an opportunity to enter the promised land, negative reports by ten of the twelve spies resulted in near mutiny as they again pushed forward the idea that Egypt was their real 'safe zone' (Num 14.1-4). When they assumed Moses was 'dead' on the mountain, they built themselves an Egyptian bull god Apis proclaiming he was their true 'saviour' (Exod 32). This behaviour was replicated numerous times during the 40 years of desert sojourn. This Egypt mentality was a failure to understand their mission because they were unable to recognise what God had really done for them and his intention in rescuing them. To paraphrase an old saying, 'You can take Israel out of Egypt, but you can't take Egypt out of Israel.' This produced a reverse looking mission perspective.

Once settled in the land, a new missiological perspective began to emerge. The reverse looking approach was replaced by an obsession with contemporaneity. They looked at the peoples (Canaanites) around them and found many things, particularly at the religious level, to admire and replicate, such as *asherah* poles, *baamahs* (high places) and even child sacrifice. The idea of devotion to just one God in a religiously pluralistic world seemed redundant. This was such a potent sentiment that it held sway over Israel from the settlement period to the Exile. The missiological concept during this period was more like 'we want to be like everyone around us', a perverse notion of inclusivist thinking. That idea reached its fruition in their stated desire to do away with theocracy and to embrace monarchy instead.

> Finally, all the elders of Israel met at Ramah to discuss the matter with Samuel. "Look," they told him, "you are now old, and your sons are not like you. Give us a king to judge us like all the other nations have." (1 Sam 8.4-5 NLT)

The rampant idolatry and apostasy of successive centuries made Israel vulnerable to the same divine retribution once meted out to Egypt. Wars, droughts, famines and centuries of foreign oppression did not alter their path. The attraction of being like others around them overrode every spiritual sensibility even though there were a few kings who attempted to keep the nation close to its original mission. Most kings, including Solomon, largely failed in this endeavour, and were hopelessly enamoured by the deities of the Canaanites and beyond. It would take nearly a century of Babylonian captivity to eventually cure them of this illness of inclusivism.

Tragically, the tough Babylonian medicine did not have the required effect as Israel swung into self-absorbed legalism or 'closed exclusivity' instead. They thought this would be the antidote to the contemporaneity issues of the previous centuries. They dove so deep into this approach that they lost sight of their mission to model God's kingdom to the world and replaced it with God's kingdom only for Israel. This 'Jews only' consciousness ran so deep that certain groups like the Essenes felt it necessary to withdraw from the world altogether. This 'closed exclusivity' was the *raison d'*etre of the entire rabbinic and Pharisaic systems. To fully appreciate the contestations between Jesus and the religious establishment of his day, this picture should inform every analysis. Jesus' attempt to bring them back to God's original mission simply meant he had to be removed from the equation in order to safeguard their now cherished 'Jews-only' view of mission.

The question now is whether similar trajectories are also visible in the Jesus Movement or whether something else may be observed. We need to examine the church's development along similar lines.

In the early centuries, prior to Constantine the Great, Christians adopted a missiological approach quite different from Israel's in their early centuries. The church did not look back at its Jewish roots as the 'safe zone' of their faith even though there were some who did as the controversies in Acts demonstrate (see Acts 15). By and large the early Christians were driven by a 'gospel-to-all-the-world' mentality which led them to permeate every place they could as well as every stratum of society. The great gospel commission (Matt 28.18-20) provided impetus to this missiological compunction and for these early Christians, there was no 'Egypt safe zone' to revert back to. Their willingness to face martyrdom was testament to this rather compelling experience.

The challenge of contemporaneity was dealt with very differently to Israel's experience. While Israel adopted a 'be like them' policy, the early Christians adopted more of a 'take from them' approach. The church from Pentecost (c AD 31) to Constantine (c AD 313) found itself in a virtual supermarket of religions. Not only did Christians have to contend with traditional Jewish, Greek and Roman religions, but also with the 'new' faiths known historically as mystery religions coming from places like Egypt and Persia. Cults like Mithraism and Isis-Osiris were the religious brands of that period. These were the real competitors for the hearts and minds of people in the Roman world. To overcome this contemporaneous challenge, the church went on a marketing drive which essentially appropriated elements from the various religions around them and reinvented them as Christian and in the process causing the demise of the source religion. An example of this was the use of Sunday to replace Sabbath which, on the one hand, enabled the church to discard its Jewish cult identification, while, on the other hand, turning that very Roman day into a Christian one. Another example led to where the church adopted the legends surrounding the origins of Mithraism and rebaptised them with Christian narratives and gave the world Christmas while consigning Mithraism to the lost pages of history. Through all of this, a clarity of mission existed among the early Christians and dominated their growth and controversies. This missiological view is a prime factor in the exponential growth of early Christianity.

However, once this phase had passed and the church became the dominant force (at least in Europe), the same malaise that afflicted pre-monarchy Israel and post-exilic Judaism appeared in Christianity. The forms might be different, but the results were similar. The church became more about power and control than mission and it reached a peak in the ecclesiastical idea that church dogma actually superseded Scripture. While the Protestant Reformation movement seemed to have put paid to that idea, the reformers themselves were not immune to the politics of their day. For instance, the so-called English Reformation had as much to do with the rivalry between English monarchs and Papal authorities as it did about theological revival. Along somewhat different lines, Calvin's Reformation in Switzerland had as much to do with establishing a theocratic city-state in Geneva as it did about hermeneutical revolution. Even Luther's Reformation was to some extent a by-product of politics driving German noblemen against ecclesiastical authorities in Rome. The somewhat naïve notion that the Reformation was simply about salvific issues fails to recognise its contextual roots. The reformers were very much children of their age. In that sense, contemporaneity should be considered one of the dominant factors during this period of church history.

In contrast to this, there has always been the desire among some Christian groups to do what the Essenes did, total withdrawal from the world with a 'Christian only' paradigm of mission. This was another version of the challenge of contemporaneity and may be seen in such groups as the Amish and cultic movements like Jonestown and Branch Davidian. While this sentiment did not always result in physical detachment, it is still available in attitude among those who say, 'unless you become Christian (or some sub-version of it) you will go to hell'. I contend that, like the Essenes in NT times, such groups have minimal impact on church missiological trends.

The most salient point though is where the Jesus Movement finds itself at the present. The issues being pursued by the church are frequently also the issues of the world around us (for instance the MeToo, BLM and LGBTQI+ movements). The concerns driving the church are the same driving society at large. For the sake of argument, we may consider certain pertinent areas of church life as symptomatic of this ongoing struggle of the Jesus Movement.

First, church organisations generally imitate secular management theories and practices. In particular, the 'emperor' syndrome has been evident in most church hierarchies since the Middle Ages. The move, during the time of Constantine and beyond, from Roman Empire to Holy Roman Empire was accompanied by a latent belief that the leader of the Western Church was also truly an 'emperor' of sorts. This led to the establishing of a Papal hierarchy which elevated one leader to the post of 'Vicarius Filii Dei', a virtual God-incarnate, known simply as Pope. This leader was attributed with all the powers which every ancient emperor claimed was gifted to them by God or heaven. In the contemporary scene, the 'emperor' syndrome (more appropriately 'CEO' syndrome) is still alive in the way many church hierarchies posit high secular titles like 'president' on their leaders. More often than not these 'presidents' act and speak as if they are above the law, not unlike the Medieval Popes or ancient emperors of the world. This is inevitable whenever humans posit too much power and control in the hands of one person or a ruling elite and the syndrome holds true in both secular and ecclesiastical governments.

Second, church financing also copies the economic theories of the world which are based on savings, investment portfolios and liquidity ratios as though these determined the business acumen of the church. The phenomenon is well established among so-called megachurches whose existence is propelled by 'prosperity gospel', an idea totally money driven. Less evident is that even churches which do not subscribe to this prosperity theory, base their existence on money concerns such as fixed deposits, investment portfolios, tithe and offering increase and endowment funds. Sometimes this is done at the expense of clergy remunerations creating a disparity between clergy and organisational finance. Even more tragic is that many local churches measure their existence by a simple equation, 'how much money do we have?', even though this flies in the face of biblical injunctions about money (see Deut 15.7; Eccl 5.10; 11.1; Matt 6.19-24; Luke 6.28; etc.). A disproportionate amount of time is often spent at church boards or business meetings haggling over money matters, as though money equals mission. Lost in all of this is Paul's vision of total finance equity between congregations (refer to 2 Corinthians 8-9) and is replaced by an inward and isolationist view of even tithe and offerings.

Third, the rampant impact of secular theories within the church has reached a point where even ministers of the gospel are evaluated by the same secular KPI's of success employed by business organisations. In most Protestant churches today, a pastor is measured by how often he preaches, how much tithe increases, how many new members are added, how many visitations are made, how many organisational meetings and professional development exercises are participated in and so on and so forth. The list is quite endless. Were these KPI's applied to biblical prophets, apostles and elders (the biblical equivalents to contemporary pastors), the biblical 'servants' would all receive a failed assessment and probably lose their jobs. Somehow, churches have convinced themselves that the worldly theories of growth, success and sales by measurable KPI's also apply to the church. Forgotten is the fact that success is never associated with God's kingdom. In 40 years of leadership, Moses encountered nothing but cycles of mutinies. Elijah even thought he was 'last man standing'. Isaiah was told that no one would really follow his preaching. Jeremiah was told his success rate would be 'zero' and everyone would attempt to take his life. At the time of his arrest, one disciple had betrayed Jesus, while ten others deserted him. Even on Pentecost (Acts 2), after over three years of Jesus performing miracles and preaching, only 120 people were present in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples. Most biblical servants of God would not pass the KPI

approach to modern ministry. Churches choose to ignore a simple biblical fact: God's kingdom has never been quantitative, and his servants cannot be evaluated by quantitative measures. In the eyes of biblical writers, loyalty to God and his mission is the sole measure of prophet, apostle or elder.

Lastly, the distinctives of the kingdom are swamped by the rhetoric of 'being like them'. In a curious twist of history, the church today is much more like Israel between settlement of the land and Exile. While the trajectories may differ, the symptoms are uncomfortably similar. Both biblical Israel and today's church have had to wrestle with the issues of 'safe zone' and contemporaneity. There is always a toggling between being distinctive and non-distinctive. The challenge has always been to 'be in the world but not of the world' or 'to be in the world and like the world'. The drive to be relevant has often served as a blanket for a 'be like them' attitude. Tragically, this drive results in a kind of missiological blindness which afflicted Israel throughout their history and fails to realise God's 'open exclusivity' paradigm, instead offering either a 'closed exclusivity' system in some segments of the Jesus Movement or complete inclusivism in the mainstream.

This reflection exposes similar patterns in the missiological consciousness of both Israel and the church (so-called spiritual Israel). A question remains: If Israel was missiologically side-lined by God (as Paul appears to argue in Rom 9-11), will the same thing happen to the church? Time will tell but it should alert all believers that we are failing the Kingdom in ways not too dissimilar to biblical Israel. That should be our wake-up call as we ponder the future.