

Was Jesus for Israel only?

Some Muslims claim that although Jesus was sent by God, his mission was only for the Israelites. His message was only for one community. They claim that his ministry 'did not extend beyond the Children of Israel' (Zafrullah Khan, *Deliverance from the Cross*, p.48, London: The London Mosque, 1992). They refer to two passages in the Gospel according to Matthew to support their view. Once, when Jesus sent his disciples out, he advised them, 'Do not go among the Gentiles, or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel' (Matthew 10:5-6). In another place we find Jesus said to a woman of Canaan, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24).

A Christian response

This was not something unusual. The good news of the kingdom was first to be preached to the Israelites and only later to others. If Jesus' ministry were only for the Israelites, then what of other passages in the Bible that speak about his universal ministry (John 8:12; Matthew 12:15-21; Isaiah 42:1)? If Jesus' mission was only for the Jews, he could not have given the great commission before his ascension: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19). The apostles understood this command to preach the truth to all nations. They did not hesitate because they knew that the gospel 'is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentiles' (Romans 1:16).

Muslims agree that one of the best principles for interpreting the Qur'an is to check all references on the subject and then draw a conclusion. However, they often fail to apply this principle to the Bible. Instead, they often ignore the specific context of a passage and the general teaching of Scripture.

If one wishes to be selective about Biblical references to show the limitation of Jesus' ministry, then a similar selective

standard could be used to prove the limitation of Muhammad and the message of the Qur'an. One could easily select a few passages from the Qur'an, leaving all others out, and declare that the Qur'an was in Arabic ONLY for the Arabs (Surah 43:3) and Muhammad was a prophet ONLY for the Arabs. Indeed, such an approach is not worthy of consideration. Yet many Muslims approach the Bible with such an attitude.

Jesus said: "I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also" (John 10:16). Some Muslims claim that Jesus was referring to the ten lost tribes of Israel to take the message to them. Such a

Jesus did not consider his ministry to be restricted to the Jews. When the right time came, he commanded the disciples to preach to all the world. (Matthew 28:18-20).

theory has no basis in the Scripture. Biblical evidence does not suggest that these tribes were 'lost' in the sense some Muslims claim. For example, when Ezra made a sin offering to the Lord for those who returned from captivity, he sacrificed twelve goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel (Ezra 6:17, 8:35). Before the exile, the nation of Israel was divided into two separate kingdoms, but the prophets of God were told that one day

these kingdoms would come together and live as one nation (Jeremiah 3:18; Hosea 1:11). We see the prophecy fulfilled in the Old Testament. The ten tribes were consolidated (2 Chronicles 11:14,16; 15:9).

There are examples in the New Testament which confirm that the Jews never considered the ten tribes of Israel to be lost, even though their numbers were depleted:

- ❖ Anna, the prophetess, was said to be of the tribe of Aser or Asher. (Luke 2:36).
- ❖ Jesus told his disciples that they would sit on twelve thrones to judge the tribes of Israel. How could they do this if they did not preach the gospel to the other ten tribes? (Matthew 19:28).
- ❖ In his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul said: "And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day" (Acts 26:6-7).
- ❖ The letter of James is addressed to Jewish Christians from the twelve tribes of Israel. This shows that the church in Jerusalem knew about the existence of members of each of the tribes.

The word 'lost' in the Gospel

What did Jesus mean, then, when he used the word 'lost' to refer to 'the lost sheep of Israel'? In Matthew 9:36, Jesus describes the crowds following him as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." That is, lost, not knowing which way to go. In Luke 19:10, Jesus told the tax collector, Zacchaeus: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." In the Gospels, the 'lost' included sinners, tax collectors, adulterers, outcasts, lepers, and all those who were spiritually blind or deaf.

When Jesus told the Canaanite woman that he had been sent to "the lost sheep of Israel," he was referring to the Jewish people living roundabout and not to some lost tribes in the east. In addition, when Jesus advised his disciples to go only to the "lost sheep" (Matthew 10:6), on this primary mission, they did not journey to Syria, Persia, or India to preach to the supposedly lost tribes. Rather, they went to the villages and towns around them and later returned to tell Jesus of the difficulties and success of their ministry.

It was not simply Jews but also many Gentiles who were blessed through Jesus. God had promised Abraham that he would bless all nations through him (Genesis 18:18), not just the twelve tribes of Israel. This was the promise to which Jesus referred to when he said: "I have other sheep which are not of this fold; I must bring them also ... and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Indeed, the words "which are not of this fold" refer to non-Jews (Gentiles).

When Jesus told his disciples: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans," He knew that this was the first

time they would preach. So, He wanted them to concentrate initially on preaching to the house of Israel. Later, however, Jesus sent them to a village of the Samaritans (Luke 9:52). He preached to a woman of Samaria and subsequently to the whole town, staying with them for two days (John 4:1-42). We can see that Jesus did not consider his ministry to be restricted to the Jews. When the right time came, he commanded the disciples to preach to all the world (Matthew 28:18-20).

Although some Muslims, following the teachings of Muslim commentators, think that Jesus was a messenger sent only to the Children of Israel, Jesus is not described in this way in the Qur'an. Rather, He is described as 'a sign to all the worlds', *ayatan lil-alamin*, and 'a sign to mankind', *ayatan lin-nas* (Surah 21:91, 19:21). The Christian Scriptures can tell you more about how Jesus is the sign for all people and also that He is the last hope for you and me unto assurance and eternal life.

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