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Turning “Bad Jews into Worse Christians”:

Hermann Adler and the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews

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In 1869, Hermann Adler, rabbi of London’s Bayswater Synagogue and future Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, lamented that missionary organizations were spending “immense sums...year after year...in turning bad Jews into worse Christians.” He was probably referring to the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, which was founded early in the nineteenth century and still exists today, operating under the name of The Church’s Ministry among Jewish People. Histories of the Society provide a good deal of information about how it did business--its finances; number of conversions and baptisms; schools, Hebrew translations of the New Testament, mission stations in other countries, and the like. In this paper, I will focus on the published sermons, a genre which has not yet received close study. Adler made his statement in a sermon—the first in a volume of twelve preached in response to “Christian theologians”—and we have access to a large collection of discourses preached at the Society’s annual meetings and on other occasions. A study of these sermons can provide additional insights into how the Society conducted its affairs and how a prominent member of the Jewish community pushed back against its efforts.

The Sermons of the London Society

The Society’s sermons were preached on a range of occasions before a variety of audiences. Its “flagship” discourses were the “anniversary sermons,” delivered during the annual meetings each May. The subjects are what we might expect to find, coming from messianic texts in the Old Testament and missions-related verses in the New. The most popular passages include selections from Isaiah, the Gospel of Luke, and Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

Many of these sermons were tailored to the audience and occasion, portraying the Society as part of the fulfillment of God’s prophetic plan. In 1811, Edward Cooper stated that “the Conversion of the Jews to Christianity,” as envisioned by Paul in Romans 11 and elsewhere, was “the avowed, and exclusive Object pursued by the Society.” Thomas Tattershall said much the same thing in 1839, stating that God wants to restore

his “blessings” to the Jews and that the Society exists “for the express purpose of furthering...this part of the will of the Most High.”

Several who preached in the intervening years suggested that the Society was succeeding in its purpose. In 1814, Henry Ryder, Dean of Wells Cathedral in Somerset, preached an anniversary sermon on Luke 24:34—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” He applied it to the Jews as well as to the Roman soldiers, stating that “*They* were the men who forced Pilate...to consent to the execution” and that they took part in it “when they declared “His blood be on us, and on our children’.” He goes on to say that Jesus is still interceding for “the modern Jew,” but he “cannot be reached without a distinct establishment expressly appropriated and suited to his case.” The Society, naturally, is just such an organization, and it is “under her auspices” that the Jews will find employment, have access to “useful and religious education,” and—most importantly—“be converted and brought to a saving knowledge of the truth.”

In their sermons on Isaiah, George Stanley Faber and Thomas T. Thomason took much the same approach. In 1822, Faber, rector of Longnewton in County Durham, preached an anniversary sermon on Isaiah 60:1-5, which ends with “thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.” In Faber’s view, this phrase refers to events that will take place very close to the end of the age: the Jews will be converted to Christianity *en masse*, and will bring “the great unreclaimed mass of the Gentiles...into the Church” with them. A logical question to ask, then, is when will this time come? Faber acknowledges that while “no man can be absolutely certain as to the exact year,” we can “safely pronounce the conversion and restoration of the Jews to be near at hand.” This can be seen, he suggests, in increased missionary work among the Christians and a corresponding “intense curiosity” about spiritual matters among the Jews. Faber gives the Society a good deal of credit for these developments, asserting that the “very existence” of an organization “whose special object is to evangelize the house of Judah in every quarter of the globe” is one “proof...that the hand of God is now specially stretched forth upon the earth.”

In his sermon of 1828, Thomason, chaplain of the East India Company, stated that the organization “whose object we are now assembled to promote...completes the circle of missionary exertions, which so

honourably distinguishes the present age.” He offers even higher praise a few pages later, asserting that if one were to compare “the present state of the Christian world, with what it was before the formation of this Society...we have abundant cause to thank God and take courage.” It will succeed, he says, it is “paving the way for the accomplishment of prophecy.” One such prophecy is expressed in the text for the sermon: Isaiah 30:18 reads, in part, “Therefore will the Lord wait that he may be gracious unto you...blessed are all they that wait for him.” In Thomason’s view, the pronoun refers not only—and perhaps not even primarily—to the people of Israel, but rather to Christians, and specifically to the members of the Society, who are, he says, “workers together with God.” Consequently, their work is bound to thrive; Faber and Thomason end their sermons with the promises that “God, even our own God, shall give us his blessing” and that “in God’s own good time, your labour shall not be in vain.”

While the anniversary sermons were preached *about* the Jews, there were occasions in which preachers affiliated with the Society spoke directly *to* them as well. Audience awareness is a key feature of these texts, just as it was in the Society’s anniversary sermons. Andrew Fuller began his sermon of 19 November 1809 by acknowledging that he had “some peculiar feelings on account of the *audience*, part of which, I am given to understand are of the house of Israel.” He speaks kindly about the Jews at the beginning of the sermon, noting the spiritual “debt we owe to that distinguished people”; addresses them directly throughout; and makes an earnest appeal to them at the end, declaring “O! ye children of Israel, our hearts desire and prayer to God for you, is, that you may be saved.” Similarly, Edward Bickersteth said that he wanted to address the Jews in his audience with the same “plainness” and “spirit of love” with which he spoke to Christians, and he was largely successful. He warns them of the danger of such sins as “self-righteousness,” “covetousness,” observing the “traditions of men,” and especially “unbelief in the Son of God.” He discusses each sin from the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures, and appeals to the Jews to set aside the “stumbling-blocks” that are keeping them away from God. He ends by focusing not on the consequences of leaving the blocks in place, but rather on the “blessed fruits of their removal.” Once they are gone, he says, they will be replaced by “revival and healing,” “comfort and peace,” and “gladness and glory.” His final appeal is that both “Jews and Christians” will “shine forth over all the earth.”

Similarly, in 1810 John Ryland acknowledged that he was preaching to “both you that believe in Jesus, and you the seed of Abraham.” His address to the Jews begins, somewhat oddly, in the third person, with phrases such as “I request the Jews also to consider”—but he eventually shifts to direct address, declaring that “all true Christians long for your salvation” and saying “I urge you to enquire, how can you hope for the pardon of sin, who do not look for a suffering Messiah, to make real and lasting atonement?” He concludes with a mention of both groups, anticipating the day that “Millions of redeemed Jews, millions of saved Gentiles, shall then unite in the everlasting song, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain’.”

Thomas Raffles, on the other hand, took a rather different tone. The published version of *The Claims of Jesus of Nazareth Examined*, a sermon he preached on 19 August 1810, contains something of a disclaimer or “content advisory.” “If any Jew,” he wrote

casting his eye over this Sermon, should deem some of the expressions contained in it too severe, the author entreats that he will not regard the language...as at all affecting the general argument; but only dwell upon that which, in the estimation of every candid reader, would be regarded as cool and dispassionate reasoning.

Raffles had good reason to be concerned. He had no way of knowing, of course, whether Jews would read his printed text, but he was well aware that “children of Israel” were in the chapel that day. His tone is nothing like Fuller’s and Bickersteth’s. When he speaks to the Christians in the audience about the Jews, he notes their “deplorable state of degradation and guilt.” When he addresses them directly, he says they are “miserable and degraded”; accuses them of “licentiousness,” “pride,” “prejudice” and “malignity”; and states that anyone who “refuses to believe, forfeits his rank in the creation of God.” Most of his exposition of Luke 7:19, in which John the Baptist’s disciples ask “Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?,” is deliberate, methodical, and logical, but language such as this is anything but “cool and dispassionate.” It would most likely have worked against his purpose, calling into question his earnestness and compassion for the Jews and actually reducing the likelihood that they would respond to his appeal to “turn and seek the Lord your God.”

Adler's *Course of Sermons*

Adler's goal in *A Course of Sermons* is the antithesis of what the Society preachers attempted to do. He begins the first address by reminding his audience that "Judaism is not a proselytizing faith," that it "seeks neither to make converts nor to attack other creeds." He does, however, reserve the right to respond when threatened or attacked, to "defend the citadel of the faith from all assaults" and to not "allow one single member of [his] flock to stray from the fold."

Adler's defensive strategy, as outlined in his fourth sermon, can be summed up in two words: *text* and *context*. To determine the proper meaning of a "disputed" verse, interpreters must set aside "the Anglican version," whose authors, he says, "were swayed by dogmatic preconceptions." They should instead use "a translation, composed by a scholar, thoroughly versed in the Hebrew tongue," or—even better—consult "the original" language. They must also look past "the passage as it stands by itself" and consider the surrounding material as well. In so doing, they "will find, that all the superstructure which had been erected upon it... will shake from its foundation, and crumble into dust."

Adler devotes most of his attention to the passages from Isaiah and Daniel that Society preachers and others most frequently invoked. He begins with Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." "Virgin," he asserts, is a mistranslation; the Hebrew word "simply denotes a young woman, one who is either marriageable or already married." The context is significant as well, as Isaiah's mission in this passage is to reassure Ahaz, king of Judah, that the attacks being waged on him by the kings of Syria and Israel would not succeed. Properly interpreted, then, the word translated "virgin" is not a prophecy of Mary, but rather a reference to "the young wife of the prophet himself." In Adler's view, it was she who would "bear a son, whom she was to call Immanuel, this name being intended to indicate the protection which the Lord would grant the nation."

He then goes on to apply his two-part test to Isaiah 9:6-7—"For unto us a child is born..."—and the "suffering servant" passages in chapters 52 and 53. He asserts that Christian interpretations of these texts are based on mistranslations: "mighty God," for example, should instead be rendered "mighty hero"—a human

reference, not a divine one--and the pronoun in 53:8 is plural rather than singular, reading "for the transgression of my people were *they* stricken," so the verse cannot be taken as a prophecy of Christ.

A study of the context will then reveal the proper identity of the hero and the people who had been stricken. The verses before and after Isaiah 9:6 "speak distinctly of the campaign which the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, is about to undertake against Jerusalem." "Deliverance" from these attacks would come during the reign of Hezekiah, "the future king of Judah." In addition to being a "hero," Hezekiah would be "a perpetual, constant father," the "devoted benefactor of his people," and a "Prince of Peace" under whose rule Judah would enjoy a time of "tranquillity." Adler says this latter designation is especially unsuited to Jesus, who said he "came not to send peace but a sword"; applying it to Hezekiah, however, would accord with the interpretations set forth by not only "our most ancient and valued commentators," but by some Christian authorities as well.

Adler holds that inaccurate readings of Isaiah 52 and 53 began with the gospel writers themselves, who crafted their work "in such manner as to tally with the prophecies" presented there. To use "a homely but expressive simile," he says, "the foot was cut so as to fit the shoe." A proper interpretation would read these texts not in isolation, or as part of a preconceived agenda, but rather as part of the discussion of Israel's captivity that began in chapter 40. These chapters are indeed prophetic, but they speak of a nation rather than an individual. In Adler's view, it is Israel who is the "servant of the Lord"; the people's "sufferings and degradation were necessary" for a season, but their "glorious exaltation in the latter days" will draw "the nations of the world...to put their faith in the One and Only God."

Adler begins his discussion of Daniel in Sermon VII and devotes all of Sermon VIII to "the last four verses of the ninth chapter," which he says have received more attention, by both Jewish and Christian commentators, than virtually any other passage. His task, he says, is to sort through the "mass of interpretation which these few verses have called forth" and "treat the subject in as simple manner as possible." As was the case with his discussion of Isaiah, his treatment involves determining the most accurate meaning of key words and phrases and viewing them in their proper historical context. The terms "most holy" in verse 24 and "prince" in verse 25, for example, always refer to "part of the Temple" and a person "invested with temporal authority"; they therefore cannot be "applied to the Nazarene."

The Christian views of Daniel's entire timeline—70 weeks, divided into periods of 7, 62, and 1, with the final week itself broken into 2 parts—are similarly untenable. The “various hypotheses” they have constructed are, in Adler's view, based in historical inaccuracies and misunderstandings of Hebrew grammar, and there is no satisfactory way “to make chronology tally with their explanation of the prophecy.” All the difficulties can be resolved, however, by reading the passage through a Jewish rather than a Christian lens. Adler proposes that it “most probably...refers to the persecutions and oppressions which Israel was destined to endure at the hands of the cruel and fanatic Antiochus Epiphanes.” Its purpose, then, was to “encourage the Jews to remain faithful to their God” and to assure them that there would eventually come a time when “their sufferings would be at an end, their iniquity pardoned, the piety and righteousness of old re-established, and the holy of holies again anointed.” This time did in fact come, but not with the birth and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, the prophecy was fulfilled “in the renewed dedication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus, and the re-establishment shortly afterwards of the independence of Israel.” Adler does concede that, “owing to our uncertain comprehension of Biblical Chronology, absolute numerical precision seems almost unattainable,” but he remains convinced that this interpretation is much more accurate than any Christian view.

It is important to note these sermons were not direct responses to sermons preached on behalf of the Society. Adler seldom discusses precisely the same passages on which they spoke, he makes no allusions to the Society after the first few pages of the volume, and while he often mentions “Christian theologians” and “Christian expositors,” he does not refer to any contemporary figures by name. The closest we have to an actual point-counterpoint is two sermons on Psalm 110: Sermon VI in Adler's volume and one preached by S. Newton on 30 August 1812 and published in the inaugural volume of *The Jewish Repository* the following year. This is a particularly apt choice, because it was a “demonstration sermon” delivered in a place called the Jews' Chapel, meaning that Jews were the intended audience of both addresses.

Early in his sermon, Newton suggests that Jews and Gentiles would agree that “a reference to the Psalms, is a reference to decisive authority, and that whatever was really written in the 110th Psalm is true and ought to be believed.” I suspect Adler would concur, and that may very well be their only point of common ground, for the two preachers expressed very different views on what was “really written” there.

The disagreements begin with the very title of the psalm. Newton calls it “a Psalm of David, a title which, for the most part, remains undisputed.” Adler, however, disputes it, asserting that it “most probably...does not signify a Psalm *of* David, but *for* (*concerning*) David.” The italicized words are short but crucial, as the reading adopted here will drive the interpretation of the entire psalm. If David is taken to be the author, then the psalm can be viewed as messianic; if he is the subject, then it is concerned with present, rather than future, events.

This is precisely the difference we see in these two sermons. To Newton, for example, both uses of the word “Lord” in verse 1—“The Lord said unto my Lord...”—signify the divine, the former referring to Jehovah, the latter to the “Lord of David.” Adler, on the other hand, takes the second instance as “my master,” a word that “simply denotes superiority.” Newton goes on to argue that the other “truths contained in the text...are applicable only to Jesus Christ,” a claim that Adler regards as easily falsifiable. Jesus, he says, could not be “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” because he never performed the priestly duties of “perform[ing] divine service and offer[ing] sacrifices,” nor could he be the warrior mentioned in the final verses, because “no record...exists of battles which the Nazarene fought.” In short, what Newton frequently refers to as the “plain” reading of the text is not self-evident to Adler at all. The traditional Christian exegesis, he says, is rife with “absurdities and errors”; only focusing on David rather than on Jesus will result in “a satisfactory explanation of the Psalm” and “sweep away the dogmatic cobwebs with which [it] has been covered in the process of ages.”

Responses to Adler

In 1891, the *Jewish Chronicle* noted that *A Course of Sermons* had “achieved the remarkable success of attracting to itself a whole page in the British Museum Catalogue wherein to describe the various replies it evoked.” I discuss these works in detail in a longer version of this paper. Here, I would like to just briefly note that they fell largely upon “party lines,” with the *Chronicle* praising Adler for his sensible treatment of a neglected topic and Christians, including one writing for the Society itself, accusing him of presenting weak arguments that would do little to strengthen his congregants’ faith. One reviewer even suggested that the sermons might actually backfire, spurring “a spirit of inquiry among the Jews,” which would do “the cause of Christ a very great service.”

Others, apparently including Adler himself, responded to these works in turn. A notice published in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1879 stated that he had “commenced a series of discourses at his Synagogue” defending what he said in *A Course of Sermons* and refuting the objections raised by the Scottish minister Paton James Gloag in *The Messianic Prophecies*, a series of lectures delivered and published earlier that year. These discourses have evidently not survived, but they are evidence of an active “feedback loop” that was taking place within the Jewish and Christian communities in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In April 1927, someone identified only as A. Lyons mentioned Adler in a letter to the editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*. Adler had apparently tried to distance himself from *A Course of Sermons*, asking Lyons not to remind him of his “youthful indiscretion.” Lyons disagreed with this assessment, writing that it is “an admirable little work, now very scarce, and I am glad to possess a copy.”

The book is no longer scarce. According to WorldCat, physical copies may exist in fewer than fifty libraries worldwide, but it was scanned by Microsoft in 2008 and is now available to all via the HathiTrust Digital Library and the Internet Archive. I would argue, moreover, that it was neither “youthful” nor “indiscreet.” Adler, was, after all, thirty years old when he delivered the sermons. By that time, he had earned a Ph.D.; been the principal of Jews’ College, a rabbinical seminary in London; and served as the rabbi of Bayswater Synagogue for five years. He had also gained a considerable reputation in the Jewish community.

His “talent and ability” had been recognized as early as 1859, the year in which he took “his degrees at the London University with great honour.” A few years later, in 1863, the *Jewish Chronicle and Hebrew Observer* noted that the *Bombay Gazette* had hailed him as a man of “real and profound learning”; several other articles and letters to the editor published before he delivered *A Course of Sermons* took note of the earnestness and eloquence of his preaching.

I also do not see it as untoward or inappropriate in any way. He published the sermons only after being asked to do so by “a great number of my own Congregation, as well as by other members of the Jewish Community.” As he notes in the Preface, they were preached to defend the faith from outside attacks, especially those waged by the Society; they are not offensive, either in the sense of “going on the offense” to win converts to Judaism, or in the sense of “likely to offend” his hearers and readers. He does call out and seek to correct what he believes to be erroneous teaching by his Christian counterparts, but he does so without the animosity and strident tone we see in some of his critics.

The fact that he *had* critics shows that Adler had positioned himself within an ongoing—and, I would suggest, important—conversation that was taking place in the pulpit and the press. This conversation, however, has not received a great deal of scholarly attention. Adler, Gloag, and others have been mentioned in some articles and books, but I have not been able to locate any works that focus solely, or even primarily, on their preaching. A good deal has been written about Jewish experiences in England, but pulpit discourse is one aspect of the interfaith landscape that can be much more fully explored.