

“Tisha B’Av: The Destruction Of The Second Temple And How It May Be Used In Jewish Evangelism”

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In one of most memorable statements ever delivered to the American people, Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared, “Yesterday, December 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy - the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” Thus began the United States’ involvement in World War II. There is another date however, which lives in infamy for world Jewry. It is the 9th day of the month of Av, otherwise known as Tisha B’Av, and this day has been a source of mourning in the Jewish community for two millennia.

Tisha B’Av commemorates a series of disasters that have taken place according to tradition on or around that date including, remarkably, the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. In addition, on Tisha B’Av in 1290, King Edward I signed an edict to have all the Jews expelled from England. In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain. (Columbus set sail that same day). In 1555, Pope Paul IV forced the Jews in Rome into a ghetto. In 1648, The Chielminicki Massacre began, in which Cossacks killed over a quarter million Polish and Ukrainian Jews. In 1914, World War I started when Russia declared War on Germany. Germany’s losses in the war set the stage for WWII and the Holocaust. In 1941 on Tisha B’Av, "The Final Solution" to exterminate the Jews was put into effect under SS general Reinhard Heydrich. And in 1942, Jews began being deported from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp.¹

For our purposes, this paper shall focus primarily on the reasons for the destruction of the Second Temple, and how they may be used within the context of Jewish evangelism. Historians have recorded in astonishing detail what took place as the Roman army under the leadership of General Titus surrounded Jerusalem and laid siege to it.

During the long siege a terrible famine raged in the city and the bodies of the inhabitants were literally stacked like cordwood in the streets. Mothers ate their children to preserve their own strength. The toll of Jewish suffering was horrible but they would not surrender the city. Again and again they attempted to trick the Romans through guile and perfidy. When at last the walls were breached Titus tried to preserve the Temple by giving orders to his soldiers not to destroy or burn it. But the anger of the soldiers against the Jews was so intense that, maddened by the resistance they encountered, they disobeyed the order of their general and set fire to the Temple. There were great quantities of gold and silver there which had been placed in the Temple for safekeeping. This melted and ran down between the rocks and into the cracks of the stones. When the soldiers captured the Temple area, in their greed to obtain this gold and silver they took long bars and pried apart the massive stones. Thus, quite literally, not one stone was left standing upon another. The Temple itself was totally

¹ Becher, Rabbi Mordechai (1995). "History of Events on Tisha B'Av". ohrnet. Retrieved 2013-02-10.

destroyed, though the wall supporting the area upon which the Temple was built was left partially intact and a portion of it remains to this day, called the Western Wall.²

The Jewish historian Josephus describes further the reckless abandon that the people in Jerusalem had when they saw the Temple burning, “As the flames shot into the air the Jews sent up a cry that matched the calamity and dashed to the rescue, with no thought now of saving their lives or husbanding their strength; for that which hitherto they had guarded so devotedly was disappearing before their eyes.”³ Despite the people’s valiant efforts to save the Temple from ruin, it burnt to the ground and has not been rebuilt to this day.

The tragedy and sorrow of the destruction of the Second Temple begs the question, “Why did this take place?” What could have caused so great a disaster upon the Temple? And how has this been explained throughout the ages? This paper shall attempt to answer these questions, and to provide an apologetic tool for those in Jewish ministry. The paper is divided into three sections: The secular answer, the rabbinic answer, and the New Covenant answer. It shall be argued that only the New Covenant answer provides a sufficient explanation for what occurred almost two thousand years ago on Tisha B’Av.

Section I: The Secular Answer

A secular answer may be posited as to why the Second Temple was destroyed. Rome was simply fed up with the continued zealous resistance of the Jews to her authority. The Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus were disgruntled in dealing with the continued Jewish rebellion. After many years of guerrilla fighting and uprisings by the sicarii, zealots, and others against the Romans, the Emperor sent Titus to put them down once and for all. And so, when Titus had the opportunity, after a long siege of the Holy City, his armies broke through the walls, murdered most of the people, and torched the Temple. But is this an adequate explanation? Certainly not for those who believe that there is a God who rules the universe. The purely secular answer must be rejected for the following reasons:

- 1) It fails to take into account the reasons that God gives in the Tanakh for the destruction of the First Temple (Solomon’s Temple). In Jeremiah 44:2-6 God clearly delineates why Solomon’s Temple was destroyed:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them, because of the evil that they committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went to make offerings and serve other gods that they knew not, neither they, nor you, nor your fathers. Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, saying, ‘Oh, do not do this abomination that I hate!’ But they did not listen or incline their ear, to turn from their evil and make no offerings

2 Ray C. Stedman, *What's This World Coming To? (An expository study of Matthew 24-26, the Olivet Discourse)*. Discovery Publications, 3505 Middlefield Rd., Palo Alto, CA 94306. 1970

³ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, p. 323

to other gods. Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, and they became a waste and a desolation, as at this day.”

And again Jeremiah declares:

“And the whole land [of Israel] shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ says the Lord; ‘and I will make it a perpetual desolation.’”⁴

It is God himself who brought disaster upon Jerusalem because of the people’s idolatry during the time of Jeremiah. It is not warranted therefore to believe that God had nothing to do with the destruction of the Second Temple as well. While it is true that a pagan kingdom was used to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple in both instances, God’s hand was also clearly involved in both as we shall see later on.

- 2) The secular answer fails by nature to recognize both the existence of God, and his sovereignty, especially regarding the Temple and his chosen people Israel. The Temple was an important thing to God. He commanded that the first one be built by Solomon, and then rebuilt in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Hence he would not allow it to be destroyed simply because of a pagan king’s wrath in and of itself. Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” God is sovereign over both kings and nations of the earth. In his book “God’s Greater Glory,” Bruce Ware gives an example of God’s sovereignty by describing the Lord’s sovereign hand over Assyria in Isaiah 10:5-19. Ware writes:

“God describes Assyria as ‘the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!’ The point seems to be, as it is confirmed immediately, that Assyria is carrying out God’s will and performing God’s work. Assyria is God’s very rod and staff by which God is accomplishing his will. And so it is. In the following verses we hear God saying, ‘Against a godless nation I send him and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.’ Our preliminary hypothesis has now been confirmed. God sends Assyria to do his work, he commands Assyria to carry out his will. Assyria, then, is God’s tool performing precisely what God commissions this nation to do.”⁵

If God used Assyria in previous times to carry out his just judgment and plan for Israel, then it is not inconsistent for God to use another pagan nation (Rome) to do the same thing in the first century. Throughout the scriptures we see God’s sovereign hand working in everything that occurs. “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19). “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever

⁴ Jeremiah 25:12, 13

⁵ Ware, Bruce A. *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004. Print. 83

He pleases” (Psalm 115:3). “For I know that the LORD is great, And that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Psalm 135:5-6).

By this rationale, a purely secular answer is not sufficient to explain Tisha B’Av and the destruction of the Second Temple. Even though it may be hard to comprehend, God was involved in it. So our question must now deal with the reasons why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Section II: The Rabbinic Answer

Many rabbis over the last two millennia have submitted various reasons for the destruction of the second Temple. A common answer is that the Jewish people in the first century were not hospitable, or that they were full of hatred, and that is why God brought this severe judgment upon them. The Babylonian Talmud addresses this in Yoma 9b. First, the passage agrees with the Prophet Jeremiah, that Solomon’s Temple was destroyed because of blatant idolatry, and then it gives the following question and response regarding the Second Temple:

But why was the second Sanctuary destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, [observance of] precepts, and the practice of charity? Because therein prevailed *hatred without cause*. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered as of even gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together. And [during the time of] the first Sanctuary did no groundless hatred prevail? Surely it is written: They are thrust down to the sword with my people; smite therefore upon my thigh,⁶ and R. Eleazar said: This refers to people who eat and drink together and then thrust each other through with the daggers of their tongue!⁷

The Talmud itself asserts here that there were the same issues during the time of the first Temple’s destruction as there were at the time of the Second (“*And [during the time of] the first Sanctuary did no groundless hatred prevail? Surely it is written...* ”). There are at least four problems with this assertion.

- 1) It does not address why the penalty in 586 BC was so much less severe than in 70 A. D. and following. The Israelites during the Babylonian captivity only had to endure 70 years without a temple, but it has currently been 1,943 years since the destruction of the second Temple, and there is still no third Temple! Therefore, the Talmud here gives an inadequate explanation for the spiritual reason behind the Second Temple’s destruction. There must have been a much more serious issue in the first century which has lead to such a severe consequence.
- 2) The answer given of “hatred without cause” as the main reason for the second Temple’s destruction is quite flimsy and generic. What does “hatred without cause” mean? Some have taken it to mean a lack of hospitality as related in the bizarre story

⁶ Eze 21:12

⁷ <http://yashanet.com/library/temple/yoma9b.htm> Retrieved 2013-02-10

of Kamza and Bar Kamza recounted in the Babylonian Talmud (see footnote).⁸ However, again, it is quite preposterous to assume that Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed because one man refused to allow another to attend his house party, and that the spurned guest somehow convinced Emperor Vespasian to destroy Jerusalem because of it!

- 3) Another reason why this answer of baseless hatred or inhospitality is insufficient to explain Tisha B'Av is because there is baseless hatred and inhospitality in every culture and in every age. There is no evidence that Israel in the first century was any worse than she had been previously regarding those things. For instance, there had been animosity toward the Samaritans for over 700 years by that time! And indeed the Jewish culture may have been even more hospitable than at previous times if one takes into account the roll call of various nationalities which were visiting Jerusalem during Pentacost in Acts 2:9-11.
- 4) Baseless hatred and inhospitality has no relation to the Temple being destroyed because there were sacrifices which were appointed for that very purpose in the Torah!

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby— if he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt. And he shall bring to the priest as his compensation to the LORD a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent for a guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him before

⁸ “The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamza and a Bar Kamza in this way. A certain man had a friend Kamza and an enemy Bar Kamza. He once made a party and said to his servant, Go and bring Kamza. The man went and brought Bar Kamza. When the man [who gave the party] found him there he said, See, you tell tales about me; what are you doing here? Get out. Said the other: Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink. He said, I won't. Then let me give you half the cost of the party. No, said the other. Then let me pay for the whole party. He still said, No, and he took him by the hand and put him out. Said the other, Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go and inform against them, to the Government. He went and said to the Emperor, The Jews are rebelling against you. He said, How can I tell? He said to him: Send them an offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]. So he sent with him a fine calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they do not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah b. Abkulas to them: People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. They then proposed to kill Bar Kamza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah b. Abkulas said to them, Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death? R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of R. Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land” (Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 55b-56a)

*the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and thereby become guilty.”*⁹

The Rabbis freely admit that there was unmerited hatred, they “realize their guilt” as stated above and yet, there is still no restoration of the Temple! Therefore, “unmerited hatred” must not have been the cause of the Second Temple’s demise. The Talmudic and rabbinical accounts of the reasons for the Second Temple’s downfall are woefully bereft of a satisfactory elucidation. In point of fact, there is only one convincing explanation, and that explanation is found in the New Covenant scriptures.

Section III: The New Covenant Answer

There is a pattern in scripture of sin-repentance-restoration for Israel as a nation all throughout the Old Testament. But that pattern seems to have stopped in AD 70. There is only one sufficiently reasonable explanation for why God allowed the Second Temple to be destroyed and stay destroyed until this day. And that answer is found in the words of Jesus of Nazareth as he approached Jerusalem,

“...When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, **because you did not know the time of your visitation.**”¹⁰

The Second Temple was destroyed, according to Jesus because the majority of Israel did not receive their Messiah when he came to them. This explanation is a profoundly adequate one. It certainly fulfills the criterion for the severity of the judgment! Not to mention, Jesus prophesied what would occur 40 years before it took place. Matthew 24 contains another account of Jesus speaking with his disciples about this matter, “Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”¹¹ This happened exactly as Jesus said it would.

It is also interesting to note the famous passage in tractate Yoma 39b about the scarlet thread ceasing to turn white during Yom Kippur:

“Our Rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple the lot [‘For the Lord’] did not come up in the right hand; nor did the crimson-coloured strap become white; nor did the westernmost light shine; and the doors of the Hekal would open by themselves, until R. Johanan b. Zakkai rebuked them, saying: Hekal, Hekal, why wilt thou be the alarmer thyself? I know about thee that thou wilt be destroyed, for

⁹ Leviticus 6:1-7

¹⁰ Luke 19:41-44

¹¹ Matthew 24:1-2

Zechariah ben Ido has already prophesied concerning thee: Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy cedars.¹²

This is a fascinating Talmudic passage! According to the rabbis themselves, sacrifices were no longer accepted by God after 30AD or so! Why? Could it be because the Ultimate Sacrifice had already occurred in the death of Jesus the Messiah whom the leaders in Israel refused to accept? This certainly seems to be the case. The Second Temple was destroyed because Jesus the Lamb of God, was sacrificed and three days later he rose again from the dead, and the Jewish leadership continued to reject him. By and large this has continued until this very day, except for a remnant who has believed.

Jewish leadership has had to circumnavigate the Levitical system of sacrifices for the last 2000 years, and invent “other” ways of making “peace” with God through prayer and mitzvot. And yet, there are some, particularly within the ultra-orthodox community who still see the need for blood to make atonement. The ceremony of kapparot is a good example of this. Never mind the fact that there is no prescription for the sacrifice of chickens in the Torah! We must convey to them, that God already has provided the blood to make atonement for one’s life by the shed blood of his Son.

Application

- 1) In talking about this topic with Jewish people we need to be sensitive of the Christian Church’s history with anti-Semitism. It is possible to present this argument about Tisha B’Av in an anti-Semitic way, as some Church Fathers did (see footnote).¹³ We as workers in the Jewish harvest field must never be, nor come across, as anti-Semitic. So in order to prevent this misperception, it is important to present our arguments with love and also with a sense of humbleness as we also were at one time objects of wrath.
- 2) I have purposely stayed away from the eschatological ramifications of this discussion, primarily because they bear no relevance to the issue at hand. It has been the author’s experience that it is usually most effective to not discuss eschatology when talking about these issues because of the various beliefs about a Third Temple, and the propensity to get off of the topic at hand, which is that the Messiah has already come.

¹² Talmud Yoma 39b

¹³ "In *Leviticus* it is written: 'Because they have transgressed and despised me, and because as traitors they walked contrary to me, I also will walk treacherously with them, and I will destroy them in the land of their enemies. Then their uncircumcised heart will be ashamed' (*Lev.* 26:40-41). For **the circumcision according to the flesh was given to you from Abraham as a sign so that you might be distinguished from other nations and from us, and so that you alone might suffer what you now rightly suffer; so that your land might become desolate, and your cities burned, and strangers eat the fruits of your land before you, and not one of you set foot in Jerusalem. ... Therefore these things have rightly and justly come upon you, for you put the just one to death**, and before him his prophets and now you deal treacherously with those who hope in him, and with him who sent him, Almighty God, the Creator of all things." --Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 16; PG 6.509-512. Cited in Robert Doran, *Birth of a Worldview: Early Christianity in its Jewish and Pagan Context* (Westview Press, 1995), p. 57

- 3) The author has found that discussion on this topic of Tisha B'Av is most relevant during the summer months, when Jewish people are thinking about it. However, at the same time, this is a very sensitive issue. Tisha B'Av is a time of mourning within the Jewish community, and care must be taken to get a sense of the individual's mindset before pursuing this line of argument.

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