

The Lost Sheep of Israel



Matthew 10:5 "These twelve (apostles) Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'"

Géza Vermes was born in Hungary in 1924, of Jewish descent, but the Vermes family had given up religious practice by the mid-19th century as a way to escape the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe. Like his parents before him, Géza was baptized as child in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1942, when he was eligible for college, Jews were not accepted into Hungarian universities, so Géza studied at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. After the Second World War, he became a

Catholic priest, but was not admitted into the Jesuit or Dominican orders because of his Jewish ancestry.

Vermes is, perhaps, best known for his complete translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls into English in 1962, but he also became a prominent scholar in the contemporary field of historical Jesus research. In 1973, he published his classic study, entitled "*Jesus The Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels.*" In this work, Vermes described Jesus as a 1st-century Jewish reformer and holy man, suggesting there that Jesus did not intend to reach out to non-Jews in his ministry.

Remarkably in the Gospels, the contacts with Jesus were indeed almost exclusively confined to his own people, to the Jews, at least until his trial before Pontius Pilate. Indeed, there are only three stories in all of the Gospels, of Jesus encountering non-Jews or Gentiles; and in all three of these stories, there is a certain apparent reluctance or resistance about the meetings.

In The Fourth Gospel, for example, there is a story of some Greeks who, we are told, approached the Apostle Philip wanting to speak with Jesus (Jn. 12:20-26). Philip is a Greek name, and he probably had a Greek parent, and as we are told, he was from the city of Bethsaida, a town at the north end of the Sea of Galilee and to the east of the Jordan River and therefore close to the Greek cities of the Decapolis. Philip responds cautiously

to the Greeks' request to see Jesus, and went with their request, not to Jesus, but to his friend Andrew, as if to inquire what he should actually do about it. Only afterwards did the two of them bring the request to Jesus. This story is just one in a sequence of apparently awkward encounters of Jesus with foreigners.

The next recorded incident of Jesus with a known Gentile is the familiar story of the Roman centurion (Lk. 7:1-10, cf. Mt. 8:5-13). In the Lucan version of that story, we are told that certain centurion had a slave who was dear to him, and who was sick and at the point of the death. When he heard of Jesus, the centurion did not approach Jesus himself, but sent some elders of the Jews to him, that they might go and ask on his behalf for Jesus to come and heal his slave. "When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.'" And so, Jesus decided to go with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and

the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in (all of) Israel have I found such faith.'" When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.'"

The best remembered encounter of Jesus with a Gentile is perhaps the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark's Gospel (Mk. 7:24-30) (referred to simply as a Canaanite woman in Matthew's retelling of the story, cf. Mt. 15:22). Here Jesus has left for Tyre and Sidon in the far north of Galilee, looking for a little break from his ministry, not wanting anyone to know that he was there, when this woman from that region came and started shouting, saying in Matthew's version: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus ignored her at first and his disciples begged him to send her away, "for she was (continually) crying after us". Finally, Jesus answered her, and somewhat cruelly replied that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (similar to his statement in today's Gospel). But the woman would not be deterred; and she came and knelt before him pleading for his help. This time Jesus replied that it was not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But she implored him further, noting that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. Only then did Jesus relent, saying, "'Woman,

great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish,' And her daughter was healed instantly."

In all three of these stories there appears to be a certain reluctance to get involved with the Gentiles. Perhaps it was only fear of the unfamiliar, fear of the stranger or alien in their land. For while Jesus' mission was admittedly to call sinners and not the righteous, the rejected and outcast with whom Jesus had contact appear to have still always been within the bounds of Jewish society, even the Samaritans are half-Jews. Jesus' ministry seems instead to have been primarily concerned with the Am Ha'arez in Hebrew, the people of the land, whom the scribes and Pharisees regarded as immoral, irreligious, and ignorant of the law. It was to these neglected common people of the Jews that Jesus seems to have devoted himself, the poor and outcast in Israel, not any foreigners in the land. When Jesus sent the Twelve out into the surrounding countryside in today's Gospel to preach about the kingdom of God, he specifically charged them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6). Thus, Jesus seems to have lived a much more insular life than we usually imagine. And though he did extend the boundaries of acceptance within the Jewish community to include the Am Ha'arez, the unclean, the sinners and tax-collectors to whom he ministered, he himself appears not to have

pushed the boundaries much further, except for these three stories.

In the New Testament, it was only later that Hellenistic Jewish Christians began preaching to the Gentiles (starting in Acts 11), and extending the ministry to the Gentiles was, as perhaps you will remember, a matter of great controversy in the early church. Peter was convinced of the rightness of such an effort only by a vision from God, which God had to be repeat three times before Peter understood it. And Paul was constantly defending his mission to the Gentiles against the attacks made by the so-called 'Judaizers' within the church. In the end, the apostles called a Council in Jerusalem to settle the matter. Even so, the actual ministry of Jesus appears to have been virtually limited to an isolated group within the Jewish community. And perhaps this should not be surprising to us. Jesus, the Jew, was primarily seen by his people as a prophet, as a Jewish reformer, like his cousin John the Baptist before him.

Nevertheless we must also remember that Jesus was in a very significant way extending the boundaries of acceptance within his Jewish community, and that Jesus did also overcome his natural reluctance and reticence with each of these foreigners; that Jesus did talk with those Greeks in the end, and that he did heal the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the slave

of the Roman centurion; and that Jesus in both of those latter encounters was surprised and impressed by the faith of these Gentiles, and open to acknowledge it.

Thus, we as followers of Jesus, perhaps, need to be able to recognize and admit our own prejudices and the limitations of our own experiences; and not try to pretend that we are not without them. None of us are as warm and welcoming as we might think we are. And like Jesus we should perhaps try to expand the boundaries of acceptability within our community even further, to be inclusive of those peoples outside the natural circle of our relationships and to overcome our own reluctance and resistance to engaging with those who are different from us, by engaging instead in some form of 'radical hospitality' that purposely includes all of us, regardless of our nationality, or culture, or class, or race, or level of education. For it is only by doing so that the universal proclamations and high ideals of Christianity that we espouse can ever be realized.

AMEN.