

Chapter Nine

The Election of Israel

Purpose: The primary purpose of this teaching is to underline the central place of the choice (election) of Israel in God's plan of salvation for the whole human race. It is not an accidental feature in God's plan. It shapes the human identity of Jesus and the pattern of our redemption. It is also important for showing that the divine methodology is always the choice of the particular to impact the universal, the election of the one to bless the many.

Presentation: The key role of Israel has already been introduced in the teachings on Faith and the Promises (Chapter Two), on the Four Surprises of the Holy Spirit (Chapters Six and Seven) and on God's One Plan (Chapter Eight). This teaching is more effective when it has this preparation in previous teachings so that this theme does not suddenly enter the picture like a UFO from outer space. The presenter should try to convey how their election pervades the religious consciousness of the Jewish people by showing how it runs throughout the Scriptures. Try to avoid just using a proof-text method: here is the doctrine and then here are the texts which prove it.

An Act of God's Wisdom

We can see the election of Israel that began with the call of Abraham as an act of God's wisdom. It may not look like wisdom to our normal human ways of thinking. Choosing one people out of all the peoples of the earth may look like favouritism. It would certainly arouse jealousy and resentment. But the choice of Israel was the major illustration of what Paul wrote about calling in 1 Corinthians: "For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor. 1: 26 - 29).

Biblical scholars are agreed that the story of salvation begins with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. The previous chapters are a kind of pre-history showing that the God of Israel is the God of all creation. The Old Testament is the sacred library of Israel. God says to Isaac: "I am the God of Abraham, your Father" (Gen. 26: 24). He says to Jacob: "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Gen. 28: 13). The God of Israel is known as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (see Deut. 6: 10; 9: 27)¹.

In the election of this people Israel, we see the following elements:

- God chooses Abraham to be the father of a people,
- God makes covenant with this people;
- This people is to become God's own people, his particular possession;
- God's choice of Israel will bless all the peoples of the earth.

God chooses Abraham to be the father of a people. When God calls Abram (later Abraham) to leave Haran and to travel "to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12: 1), he makes him promises for the future. In the next chapter we read, "I will make your

¹ See also this title in the mouth of Jesus: Matt. 8: 11; 22: 32; Luke 20: 37.

descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants can also be counted.” (Gen. 13: 16). In chapter 15, the number of Abram’s descendants is compared to the number of stars in the heavens (Gen. 15: 5). In chapter 17, God says, “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of as multitude of nations.” (Gen. 17: 5). But while Abraham was also the father of Ishmael, the son of Hagar, and had sons by Keturah (Gen. 25: 1 - 2), he will be especially the father of his descendants with Isaac (see below). The strong consciousness of the Jewish people that Abraham is their father is shown clearly in the dispute of Jesus with some Jewish followers in John 8: “They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father’. (John 8: 39).

God makes covenant with this people. “I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” (Gen. 17: 2). “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” (Gen. 17: 7: see also 17: 19). It is God who makes the covenant: God proposes it; God tells Abraham that “every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17: 10); Abraham obeys and the covenant is established. Note that the covenant is not linked to any conditions for Abraham to fulfil: it is totally God’s gift and God’s choice. This makes the covenant with Abraham different from the covenant at Sinai with Moses. Paul builds his teaching on faith and promise upon this difference in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

This people is to become God’s own people, his particular possession. This dimension of Israel’s election was mentioned in the last paragraph: “to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17: 7). To belong to God in a particular sense is implied in the title “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”. This belonging to God as his own possession is stated both ways in Deuteronomy: “You have declared this day concerning the LORD that he is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his commandments and his ordinances, and will obey his voice; and the LORD has declared this day concerning you that you are a people for his own possession” (Deut. 26: 17 - 18). This unique relationship between God and Israel will later be expressed in the refrain, “I will be their [your] God and they [you] shall be my people” (Jer. 31: 33, see also Rev. 21: 3). Note that this statement is always in the future tense: it is both promise and commencing reality. This language of God’s possession also recurs through the two Testaments: Ex. 19: 5; Ps. 95; Eph. 1: 14

God’s choice of Israel will bless all the peoples of the earth. The first promise to Abraham mentions not just his descendants but all the peoples of the earth: “I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” (Gen. 12: 3: see also Gen. 22: 18; 26: 4; 28: 14). The call and the promises to Abraham are then not just for the sake of his physical descendants but are to bless all the peoples of the earth. Here we find key elements in the methodology of the Lord: (1) those who are chosen for a particular role or task are not just called for their own sake as a form of privileged existence, but are chosen to bless all through their fidelity to the special call; (2) the call of Israel as chosen people is to be a priestly people (for priests are not called for their own sake but for the sake of others, cf. Heb.5: 1). This role of “for others” is expressed in the language of Israel being made a priestly people: for a priest is not chosen to minister to himself but to serve others: “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19: 6).

A Choice Out of Love

It is in the book of Deuteronomy that the concept of love comes more to the fore, both the love of God and the love of his people. Israel was chosen “because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them” (Deut. 4: 37). It is because Israel engages God’s love that the election of this people is permanent, not temporary. For God’s love does not go up and down with our alternations of behaviour. So Israel is called the “apple of God’s eye”, as the song of Moses celebrates: “For the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.” (Deut. 32: 9 - 10).

The love of God for the people is seen also in God’s love for David, the king he chose for his people. In words that point also to the coming Messiah, the son of David, the psalmist sings: “And I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. My steadfast love I will keep for him for ever, and my covenant will stand firm for him.” (Ps. 89: 27 - 28). Closely linked to God’s love for the king is God’s love for his chosen city of Jerusalem.: “On the holy mount stands the city he founded, the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.” (Ps. 87: 1 - 2).

The love of God is shown in his total fidelity to the covenant. It is extraordinary that this love of God is mostly dramatically shown at the time of deep disobedience and rebellion among his people. This love is at the heart of the prophetic imagery of Israel as the spouse of the Lord. This image is first used to expose the sin of Israel’s infidelity which is described as adultery, the infidelity of a wife to her husband. Hosea is instructed to take a prostitute as his wife. After further infidelity Hosea is instructed to take back his erring wife, with an explicit comparison to the faithfulness of God to his unfaithful people: “Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.” (Hosea 3: 1).

The love of God for his people is not just a kind of distant benevolence. It has all the passion of intense emotional arousal. A key passage is found in Is. 54: “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer.” (Is. 54: 5 - 8). Here we can sense something of the great drama being worked out in the heart of God. God’s wrath is aroused by the constant disobedience and recurring idolatry of his people. But God has given his love, which cannot change. The purity of God’s love and the righteousness of God’s wrath cannot be played off against each other for the purity and the righteousness belong together. But Israel’s behaviour provokes a grave dilemma for the LORD. As righteous God, he cannot ignore their sin and treat evil no differently from the good. But as the faithful LORD who has made unconditional promises He cannot go back on his love. So for a brief moment, in wrath the Lord hides his love, but it is like God cannot contain his love and repress it for very long. So the wrath is for a moment, but the love is everlasting. There is a similar passage relating to the northern kingdom in Hosea 11: 8 - 9.

The everlasting character of God’s love runs consistently through these passages. But unfortunately in Christian history, God’s everlasting love for his people Israel came to be denied. Although this rejection of Israel never came to form part of defined Church teaching, it did become the almost universally accepted understanding of the relationship

between the people of the first covenant and the people of the new covenant. In consequence the Church was understood to have replaced Israel as God's chosen covenant people. The first time the Catholic Church in its long history gave an official teaching on the Jewish people was at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, where it decisively repudiated this replacement teaching. Since Vatican Two, the Catholic teaching is that the Jewish people remain the people of the covenant. This teaching and some of its implications will be covered in later chapters.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you understand by covenant? What makes God's covenant with Israel different from other forms of covenant relationship?
2. Do you think God's love for you goes up and down according to your recent behaviour? What is wrong with this way of thinking?