

## Israel and the Church

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### Talk 1: The Past: Israel and the Origins of the Church

In my three talks on Israel and the Church, I will speak first about the past, about Israel and the birth of the Church, about Israel and the Church in the New Testament. In the second talk, I will speak about Israel and the Church today, in particular about the emergence again of the Church of the Circumcision, and in the third talk about Israel and the Church in the future, Israel and the Church in the End-Times and the challenge of Israel for the eschatology of the Church.

I am convinced that the right place to start a reflection on the relationship of Israel and the Church is the identity of Jesus. For Christians Jesus Christ is the head of the Church. We cannot discuss Israel and the Church biblically without starting from Jesus as Israelite and Jew. The first verse of the New Testament is programmatic: “A record of the genealogy [lit. *genesis*] of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1: 1). This verse situates the whole gospel of Matthew in the context of Israel: Jesus is a descendant of David, to whose line the Messianic kingdom had been promised, and he is a son of Abraham, that is, he belongs to the chosen people of election. In fact, the entire first chapter of Matthew is devoted to demonstrating that Jesus is the Messianic heir of David through Joseph. Thus the human identity of Jesus is established from the start: he is an Israelite, he belongs to the tribe of Judah, and to the house of David.

The identification of Jesus with his people is first expressed in his circumcision on the eighth day, noted by Luke (Luke 2: 21). It is the day he received the name Jesus. By his circumcision, Jesus enters into the heritage of the chosen people and their covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A deeper identification with his people takes place at the baptism of Jesus, again emphasised most strongly by Matthew. The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance: “John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1: 4; see also Luke 3: 3).<sup>1</sup> This baptism of repentance was only directed towards the Jewish people. In John’s Gospel, the Baptist says: “the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” (John 1: 31). We may say that most people are proud to belong to their nation, their culture and people, but that most are less willing to identify with their sins and their scandals. But it is surely the deepest and most total identification with one’s people to identify with them also in all that is most sordid and shameful. This is what Jesus did by accepting baptism at the hands of John. John recognised the total

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew does not have the phrase “a baptism of repentance”, but makes the same point in different words: “John the Baptist came preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent ...’ (Matt. 3: 1 – 2); “Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Matt. 3: 6): “I baptize you with water for repentance.” (Matt. 3: 11).

incongruity of this request, that Jesus – the sinless one – should receive a baptism reserved for sinners. “But John tried to deter him, saying: ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.’” (Matt. 3: 14 – 15).

What does to “fulfil all righteousness” mean? It no doubt means to fulfil all the righteous requirements of the Almighty. But it also refers to the call of the servant in Isaiah 42: “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.” (vv. 3 – 4). Righteousness in effect describes salvation in its fullest sense, as embracing the human person and all human relationships in society.

At his baptism then the identification of Jesus with his people was carried further: he identifies himself totally with Israel even in their sin. At his baptism Jesus is accepting the mission that will lead to the cross. It is in line with the identity and the identification of Jesus that his earthly mission is only to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15: 24). But I want to move now to the passion, death and resurrection. In line with what I have said above, I think it is right to see that Jesus died first for the sins of his own people. We must begin, as God began, with the particular and from the particular move to the universal. Caiaphas says: “It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” (John 11: 50). The evangelist comments: “He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God” (John 11: 51 – 52). These words accord with the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah, where the “we” and “us” refer to Israel. “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. ... But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53: 4 – 5). That these promises are given to Israel is not only evident from the context, but it is explicitly stated a few verses later: “For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.” (53: 8).

How then are we to see the New Testament affirmation that Jesus died for all sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike? I think that we are to see the salvation of Gentiles also in the light of the identification of Jesus with Israel: he also identifies totally with Israel’s calling to be a priestly people, who will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. In other words, Jesus, who is the Messiah of Israel, thus becomes the Saviour of the world. I think this interpretation is confirmed by Paul’s words in Galatians: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we [Jews and Gentiles alike] might receive the full rights of sons.” (Gal. 4: 4 – 5).

We should also see that in his Resurrection, Jesus remains Jewish, and a son of David, but a glorified son of David. This is important, because it is only as son of David that Jesus can become king. In the book of Revelation, the vision of the glorified Lamb of God is so described: “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.’” (Rev. 5: 5). And in the last

chapter, Jesus says: “I am the Root and Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” (Rev. 22: 16). That Jesus retains his full Jewish identity in glory is also important because in the work of redemption and salvation, God never destroys our identities; but He brings us in our fullest reality and particularity into the all-embracing harmony and unity of the holy city.

### Israel and the Church

Now let us come more directly to the question of Israel and the Church. I am sure that I do not need to persuade you here that the New Testament picture of the Church, particularly in the epistles to the Romans and to the Ephesians, is of Gentile believers being incorporated into Israel, in fact the opposite of the normally held view that Jewish converts leave Israel to join the Church. As you know Paul expresses in Romans this adhesion of the Gentiles in terms of “ingrafting”, the ingrafting of the wild olive branches into the natural olive tree. In Ephesians, we have the contrast between the former condition of the Gentiles who “were excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise” (2: 12), who after conversion and baptism “are no longer foreigners and aliens” but have now become “fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” (2: 19 – 20). In the context of Ephesians 2, which begins to address the Gentile believers in verse 11, the saints clearly in this context refers to the Jewish believers (see Eph. 3: 6), and God’s household to Israel. This understanding would also seem to be the theology of the book of Revelation: see in particular chapters 7 and 21.

How does this happen that Jesus, whose earthly mission was only to the Jewish people, becomes after his resurrection the Saviour of the world and the Lord of all? Note that it is after his resurrection that the Lord gives the great commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28: 18 – 19). It is in Ephesians 2 that we find the clearest answer: “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (2: 15 – 16). It is in and through the death of Jesus on the cross that the opposition and enmity between Jews and Gentiles are overcome. In Jesus the reasons for the separation of the chosen people are fulfilled: they were set apart for holiness.<sup>2</sup> In his death on the cross, Jesus has totally and irreversibly consecrated himself to the holy God: “For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” (John 17: 19).

For his death Jews and Gentiles conspire together, but with mutual suspicion. “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one. Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” (Acts 4: 26 – 27). But Jesus as servant Israel responds to

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<sup>2</sup> “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’” (Lev. 19: 1 – 2).

this collaboration of Jew and Gentile in profound rebellion with love and mercy. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2: 23). Jesus totally refuses the alienation of Jew and Gentile. In Jesus’ total consecration to holiness, the purpose of God for Israel reaches a definitive fulfilment. The protection of separation is no longer needed for the holiness of Israel.

Secondly, the reconciliation takes place “in this one body”, that is in the flesh of Jesus the Messiah of Israel. So Gentile believers are baptized into the death of Christ, into him who is and remains totally identified with Israel. (cf Rom. 6: 3 – 4). It is only after this explanation that the text of Ephesians 2 goes on to state that the Gentile believers are now “fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household”, that is, they now form part of Israel. They form part of Israel by becoming part of Christ, who is the personification of fulfilled Israel. The Gentiles have not just become part of Israel, as Israel was before Christ, but part of the eschatological fulfilment now programmatically realised in the crucified and glorified son of David.

### The New Framework of Israel Transformed into Church

In this view, we do not have two quite separate entities, Israel and the Church. At the centre we have a narrative of the transformation of Israel in Jesus himself. The theological basis for this transformation within Israel consists of two factors: (1) the total identification of Jesus with his own people and with their God-given calling, even unto death on a cross; and (2) the mighty transformation of Jesus-Israel in his resurrection from the dead.

As a result of this transformation, there is a schism within Israel. There is the Israel that accepts the crucified and risen Messiah as renewed Israel, and there is the Israel that does not so accept him. This schism is a fulfilment of the prophetic word of Simeon: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.” (Luke 2: 34). In Romans Paul speaks of the Jews who did not accept Jesus as branches of the cultivated olive tree that were “broken off because of their unbelief” (Rom. 11: 20), but which can more easily be grafted back in than the ingrafting of the wild olive branches (Rom. 11: 23 – 24). A recent author argues that this is the same position taken in Revelation 2 and 3, where the word of the Lord to the churches of Smyrna and of Philadelphia reproaches those of “the synagogue of Satan” who “say they are Jews but are not” (2: 9; 3: 9). In this view, the Jews who reject the Jewish believers are called “a synagogue of Satan”, not only because they reject Jesus as the Messiah, but because they were betraying the Jewish Christians to the Roman authorities, who were seen as an embodiment of the power of Satan.

However in other places, Paul clearly refers to the unbelieving Jews as still Israel, as when he writes, “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11: 25 – 26). Although Paul has used the argument “For not all who are descended from Israel are

Israel” (Rom. 9: 6), he still refers to the unbelieving Israel as Israel: “but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it” (Rom. 9: 31). Even though the wider Jewish community has not recognized Jesus as Messiah, he is still identified with the whole of Israel, and thus also with them. This has implications for how we as Christians understand the subsequent history of the Jewish people, and particularly, for example, the Shoah.

So when Paul writes to the Galatians: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” (Gal. 6: 16), it would seem that “the Israel of God” is the Church that is Israel renewed and raised up in the Messiah as the foretaste of the coming Kingdom, containing both Jewish and Gentile believers, but in which the Gentile believers have been brought into this renewed Israel.

In the New Testament, the Old Testament „Day of the Lord” becomes the “Day of Christ Jesus”.<sup>3</sup> There is here a dramatic change from the Old Testament Day of the Lord, which inspired terror and was dreaded by all, to the New Testament Day of Christ Jesus to which Christians look forward with longing and joy. I understand that there has been a first level of fulfilment of the Day of the Lord at Calvary, when Jesus took on himself the wrath of God against sin. That is why Christians, who are baptized into Christ’s death, are no longer under condemnation and can now long for the Day of Christ Jesus.

### From the Hope of Israel to the Hope of the Church

It is important in this reflection on Israel transformed in Jesus to maintain the strongly Messianic character of Jewish faith. I have sought to emphasise that the transformation of Israel effected in the risen Messiah is the beginning of the Messianic kingdom. We can examine this dimension more by considering how the hope of Israel was transformed into the hope of the Church (as renewed Israel).

Throughout the period of the Old Testament prophets we have an extraordinary build-up of promises concerning a coming Messiah-King and a coming kingdom. Even without the witness of a prophet for four hundred years, the Messianic expectation grew and developed among the faithful ones in Israel. Of this we find many echoes in the New Testament, as for example:

“He [Simeon] was waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2: 25).

“she [Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2: 38).

“The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.” (Luke 3: 15).

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<sup>3</sup> Für den Tag Christi sehen 1 Kor. 1: 8; Phil. 1: 10. In 1 Thess. 5: 2, Paulus das alttestamentliches Bild des Tages des Herrn benutzt. Dann sagt er zu den Christen: “Ihr aber, Bruder, lebt nicht im Finstern, sodass euch der Tag nicht wie ein Dieb überraschen kann” (1 Thess. 5: 4). Der Gegensatz zwischen denen unter dem “Zorn” und denen die das Heil erlangen klar vom Vers 9 ist. Zu sehen auch 2 Petrus 3: 10, 12.

“we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24: 21).

“So, when they met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’” (Acts 1: 6).

The passage which shows us most clearly the transition from the hope of Israel to the hope of the renewed Israel of God is from the preaching of the apostle Peter as reported in Acts, chapter 3. Addressed to “Men of Israel” (Acts 3: 12), the message addresses the issue of promises and fulfilment from verse 18. “But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer.” There has been in Jesus a fulfilment of the prophetic promises, but Peter sees the fulfilment in the suffering and death of the Messiah. What is the consequence of this initial fulfilment? “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus.” (Acts 3: 19 – 20). Here we find the sense of connection between the two comings. Those who have received the Messiah can through their repentance and openness to the Lord hasten his second coming. Then Peter goes on to say more about the fulfilment of the promises given to Israel: “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3: 21). The promises that remain to be fulfilled are those that concern the restoration of all things, and this restoration is here linked with the second coming of Jesus. “He must remain in heaven until ...”

This teaching of Peter shows that the hope of Israel was not reduced by the first coming of Jesus, but was enhanced. The hope of Israel was intensified through Jesus in two ways: (1) the identity of the Messiah was revealed, and with this revelation there is a revelation of the Father (“he who has seen me has seen the Father” John 14: 9); (2) the hope is made more secure: it is no longer just a word of promise embodied in God’s fidelity to Israel, but it becomes a promise already realized in Jesus himself through his resurrection from the dead and his full human glorification. Then, further promises were given by Jesus himself concerning the age to come, e.g. concerning the coming of the Son of Man in glory, the judgment of Israel (Matt. 19: 28) and the judgment of the nations (Matt. 25: 31 – 46). There is then a continuity but also a transformation between the hope of Israel before Christ and the hope of the Church as the Israel of God.

So in what ways did the Jesus-event go beyond the common expectations of Israel concerning the Messiah and his kingdom? First in the revelation of identity of Jesus himself as “the Son of the living God”. Secondly, in the fact that the Messiah is to come twice and not just once. He comes the first time in humility and hiddenness, to be welcomed by faith; and only in his second coming will he appear in all his glory. It is this double coming that grounds the continuity in hope between Israel and the Church. Believing Israel that becomes the Church has a deepened Messianic expectation, not one that is diminished because of initial fulfilment. Often in the past I heard and sometimes gave sermons stating that all the promises of the Old

Testament were now fulfilled in Jesus. This is not true. Some are completely fulfilled in his first coming: some are partially fulfilled in his first coming, but remain to be totally fulfilled at his second coming (probably the majority of the Messianic promises) and some it would seem are not yet fulfilled at all.

Thirdly, many devout Jews, and especially the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection from the dead. But their belief was for a general resurrection of all the righteous at the same time. What they were not expecting at all was that one man would rise from the dead before all the others. Just as there are two comings of the Lord, there are two resurrections from the dead. The first resurrection of Jesus himself, and the second on the last day of “those who belong to him”<sup>4</sup>.

These three unexpected elements in the coming of the Messiah all shape the hope of the redeemed Israel, the Church. The hope of the Church is first for the coming of the Messiah, but the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, who has been crucified and has been raised to glory. When he comes, we will see him in all his glory. Then the hope of the Church is for the resurrection of the body that will take place when Jesus comes in glory. A verse in 1 John combines these elements: “But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3: 2).

In the New Testament, the Old Testament Day of the Lord becomes the Day of Christ.<sup>5</sup> There is a dramatic change from the Old Testament Day of the Lord which inspires terror and is universally dreaded to the New Testament Day of Christ, to which the Christians are to look forward with profound longing. I understand that there was a first fulfilment of the Day of the Lord at Calvary, when Jesus took on himself the wrath of God against sin. That is why Christians, baptized into Christ, are no longer under condemnation and can long for the Day of Christ Jesus. In the third talk I will take up again the question of the eschatological fulfilment.

May I end with a citation from the (relatively) new Catechism of the Catholic Church concerning the meaning of Advent: “When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming.” (CCC, para. 524). Of course it would have been better if it had said “the Holy Spirit makes present this ancient expectancy”, for all the work of preparation for the coming of the Lord is the work of the Holy Spirit. And of course this beautiful passage reveals both the glory and the shame of the Church: the glory that an official teaching so wonderfully presents the blessed hope of the Church,

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<sup>4</sup> “But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” (1 Cor. 15: 23).

<sup>5</sup> For the day of Christ see 1 Cor. 1: 8; Phil. 1: 10. In 1 Thess. 5: 2, Paul uses the Old Testament image of the day of the Lord, and then says to the Christians that “you are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief” (1 Thess. 5: 4). The contrast between those under “wrath” and those awaiting salvation is clear in verse 9. See also 2 Peter 3: 10, 12.

and the shame that so few Church members have any idea that this is the meaning of Advent.