

“Car je ne veux pas, frères, que vous ignoriez ce mystère” (Rom. 11: 25)

Three times in Romans 11, the apostle Paul warns the Gentile Christians of Rome against arrogance (vv. 18, 20, 25). The apostle tells them, “if some of the branches were broken off [from the cultivated olive tree] and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree” (Rom. 11: 17). They are told: “do not boast over the branches” (Rom. 11: 18), that is over the Jews who did not believe in Jesus. This is the context for Paul’s statement: “I want you to understand this mystery, brethren” (Rom. 11: 25). Here the “mystery” clearly concerns Israel. I want to suggest that here the term *mysterion* has the same meaning as it has in several other places in the letters of Paul. I will summarise this meaning by saying that for Paul, the mystery is:

- the plan of God from before creation (Eph. 1: 3; 3: 11);
- hidden for all ages (Rom. 16: 25; Eph. 3: 5, 9; Col. 1: 26);
- now manifest in Christ
- revealed by the Holy Spirit
- to his holy apostles and prophets (Eph. 3: 5) and to his saints (Col. 1: 26).

Thus, in Romans 11, the use of the word “mystery” is placing the question of Israel’s “hardening” in “unbelief” in the context of God’s eternal plan centred on Christ. This plan is one of salvation and of covenant bonding. It is really repeating what Paul had already written earlier in the chapter: “But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.” (Rom. 11: 11). But the use of the word *mysterion* adds theological weight, and removes any thought that this tragedy was merely accidental or incidental. What had been anguishing Paul’s heart is in fact an element in God’s inscrutable plan about which he will later exclaim, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11: 33). The word “mystery” also makes clear that this relationship of Israel and the nations in relation to Christ can only be understood by the revealing light of the Holy Spirit.

For centuries, Christians had believed something that was not at all mysterious, namely replacement teaching. This said that the Church has taken the place of Israel, following Israel’s rejection of Jesus as Messiah, and that the promises once given to Israel now belong to the Church instead. In the replacement teaching, the Jews were no longer the chosen people, and were widely regarded as accursed and rejected. Whereas in the Old Testament, the promises and the threats were given to the same people - promises if they obeyed, threats if they disobeyed¹ – in Christian history the promises were taken over by the Church and the curses were left with the Jews. In receiving this replacement thinking, the Church fell into the danger of the arrogance against which Paul warned, of boasting over the “natural branches”.

¹ See, for example, the long contrasts in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28.

Today, many Christian churches have recognised the wrongness of the replacement teaching, and have acknowledged that the Jews are still the chosen covenant people. So at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church repudiated replacement thinking. “Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.” (*Nostra Aetate*, para. 4)². Almost all the major Christian traditions of the West have rejected replacement teaching and denounced all forms of anti-Semitism, even if these plagues have not completely disappeared from their church membership. This has particularly included repudiation of the charge of deicide against the Jews in relation to the crucifixion of Jesus. So Vatican Two stated: “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” (*Nostra Aetate*, para. 4).

Most of these churches have opted for dialogue with the Jewish community, and have become for the first time sensitive to the sufferings of the Jewish people. The development of Jewish-Christian dialogue has been widely accompanied by an abandonment of Christian mission to the Jews and an avoidance of biblical themes that are painful for our Jewish sisters and brothers. Thus, while some verses of Romans 11 are frequently cited, others are rarely mentioned, such as the breaking off of the “natural branches because of unbelief”. The second half of verse 28 (“as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers”) is always been cited, while the first half (“As regards the gospel they are enemies, for your sake”) is rarely mentioned. Not only is this one-sidedness the triumph of political correctness, but it really empties the *mysterion* of its content.

So I have chosen this topic of the “mystery of Israel” so as to try and return to the profound paradox presented in the New Testament and expressed by the word *mysterion* in Romans 11: 25. The paradox is dramatically expressed in verse 28 just mentioned: “As regards the gospel [the Jews who did not accept Jesus are] enemies, for your sake; but as regards election [they are] beloved for the sake of their forefathers.” How can the same people be enemies and beloved at the same time? The replacement teaching had no problem with saying that the Jews were “enemies of God” but forgot that they were beloved. Today, we are emphasising that they are beloved, but are in danger of forgetting the relevance of the Gospel to their condition.

What are the essential elements in this paradox that is the *mysterium* of Israel? I want to identify the following components, which if belonging to the mystery are only revealed to us by the Holy Spirit:

- “unbelieving Israel” is “hardened” for a time;

² “The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God’s revelation in the Old Covenant. To the Jews ‘belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ’; ‘for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 839).

- during this time, Israel is “set on one side” awaiting the hour;
- this time is a second exile, or we might say, the “great exile”;
- the exile is both a consequence of sin and an expression of God’s mercy;
- after the “fullness” of the Gentiles comes the “fullness” of Israel.

1. A “hardening” has come upon “part of Israel” for a time

This statement is virtually a citation from Romans 11: 25. In the Greek the word for “hardship” is *pōrōsis*. The same idea had been used earlier in the chapter: “Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened (*epōrōthesan*)” (Rom. 11:7). The “elect” (*ekloge*) of verse 7 are the remnant (*leimma*) of verse 5, the Jews who believed in Jesus.

2. During this time, Israel is “set on one side” awaiting the hour

Paul had begun chapter 11 with the direct question: “has God rejected his people?” (v. 1), and he had given a very definite answer: “Not at all” (*me genoito*)³. But some translations have the same word “reject” (*rejerer*) in verse 15, when Paul writes: “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead.” But the two Greek words in verses 1 and 15 are not the same (*apōsato* in verse 1 and *apobole* in verse 15). That is why TOB translates *apobole* as “mis à l’écart”. Note that *musterion* indicates that the “setting on one side” is related to Jesus the Messiah and to the saving purposes of the Lord through him. Israel remains the chosen people of the covenant, but for this time they will not be at the centre of the Lord’s salvific action.

However this “setting on one side” is not for ever. In verse 25, Paul says “the hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Gentiles comes in”. Perhaps we may compare this to the warning from the prophet Ahijah concerning the division of the kingdom: “And I will for this afflict the descendants of David, but not for ever.” (1 Kings 11: 39).

3. This time is a second exile, or we might say, the “great exile”

Here we move outside the perspective of Romans to bring in other data from the New Testament, particularly from the prophetic warnings of Jesus himself. In Luke 21, Jesus says that “great distress shall be upon the earth [land] and wrath upon this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21: 23 – 24). When we opt for political correctness, we ignore such verses. But what we have to do is first to restore them to their prophetic Jewish context. In the replacement mentality, such texts were taken as confirmation that God was rejecting the Jewish people. But Jesus is fully in the tradition of the Old

³ Paul asks questions 6 times in the letter to the Romans to which this same answer is given. See Rom. 3:4,6; 7:7; 9:14; 11: 1,11.

Testament prophets who inveighed against the people's infidelity and idolatry. Just as Jeremiah said: "I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant." (Jer. 9: 11), so Jesus says: "your house is forsaken and desolate" (Matt. 23: 38; Luke 13: 35) and "there will not be left here one stone upon another" (Matt. 24: 2; Luke 21: 6)⁴. His words in no way imply God's rejection of the covenant people, but warn of the consequences of their infidelity. What Romans has in common with these Gospel passages is the reference to the times of the Gentiles (*kairoi ethnōn*), the concept that underlies Paul's reference to "the fullness of the Gentiles" (*tò plerōma tōn ethnōn*). During this time of the Gentiles, they will rule over Jerusalem and the Jewish people will be exiled in the diaspora. As in the time of Jeremiah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the chosen people is in no way a rejection of their call and of their unique role.

Also relevant are the words of Jesus after his lament over Jerusalem: "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matt. 23: 39). This is a reference to the coming of the Lord in glory. In other words, you will not see me again until the second exile is over.

4. The exile is both punishment and mercy

Perhaps the most difficult words of Jesus for us to understand are his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees reported in Matthew 23. They say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets" (Matt. 23: 30), but Jesus says: "Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers." (Matt. 23: 31 – 32). This last image is one from the harvest: after the threshing, each servant empties his pile of grain into the same measure, and when the measure is full, it is emptied⁵. There is a solidarity in evil that had been accumulating over the generations. In this, there is a parallel to the sin accumulating over the generations prior to the Babylonian exile. Finally the measure is full⁶. "Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation." (Matt. 23: 36).

We find very little discussion of this text in the context of Jewish-Christian relations. The ideas of God's anger and of punishment for sin are not popular today. But when we ignore and eliminate these concepts from our theology, then we empty the fidelity of God in the covenant relationship of an essential component and eviscerate the covenant of its profound dialogical character.

⁴ See also: Jer. 4, passim; 6: 6 – 8; 7: 34; 11: 9 – 17; 17: 27.

⁵ "Chaque serviteur apporte après le battage son tas de grain: tout est versé dans la même mesure, quels que soient le serviteur ou le champ d'origine; la récolte appartient à la même famille." (Louis Ligier, SJ *Péché d'Adam et Péché du Monde: Nouveau Testament* (Lyon: Aubier, 1961), p. 138.

⁶ "L'essentiel est que les fautes des pères et celles des fils s'accumulent dans la même mesure; eles forment un tout, qui appartient au même responsable, Israël." (Ligier, *op.cit.*, p. 138.

The problem has been that in the past the Churches read the anger-and-punishment passages through the lens of replacement judgmentalism. In this, we forgot that the prophetic warnings were delivered by Jewish prophets (including the Messiah) who never for a moment understood their direst warnings as final rejection of their people. Matthew would have believed with the Jeremiah what the prophet expressed later in the same chapter as the promise of the new covenant: “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the LORD, “will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.” This is what the LORD says, “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done.” (Jer. 31: 36 – 37).

The replacement judgmentalism also forgot the Jewishness of Jesus himself, that did not end with his crucifixion. In the New Testament the risen Jesus is described in terms that indicate his continuing Jewishness. Of course, this is involved in the term *Christos*, translating the Hebrew Messiah; but it is also found in a number of other New Testament passages: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.” (2 Tim. 2: 8). “who holds the key of David” (Rev. 3: 7); “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.” (Rev. 5: 5).

It also forgot the total identification of Jesus with his own people. Matthew is the only evangelist who gives us those frightening words from chapter 23, and he is also the only one who gives us the mysterious response of Jesus to the Baptist’s objection to his baptism. John objects to the idea of his baptising the sinless Messiah with his “baptism unto repentance”, a baptism that is only for Israel. But Jesus insists, saying: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matt. 3: 15). In accepting baptism, Jesus is accepting his identification with his sinful people, and so prefiguring his death on the cross, that will accomplish all righteousness. This identification of Jesus with his people is eternal. The identification is not with the faithful remnant, but with sinners. Jesus still identifies with all Israel, including the part that was “hardened”. Thus, Jesus is identified with the Jewish people in their great exile.

In Romans 9 – 11, Paul is grappling with the problem as to how the Messiah could come and the majority of the Jewish people not recognise him. At the end, after he has understood that this forms part of the *mystery*, he is led to a deeper understanding of God’s mercy. So he tells the Gentile believers in Rome, “Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their [the Jews’] disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.” (Rom. 11: 30 – 31). Mercy is the final word. The phrase “as a result of God’s mercy to you” evokes the earlier passages about Israel being made jealous (see verses 11 and 14). But Israel can only be made jealous when the Church loves and honours the Jewish people, and has decisively turned its back on all replacement thinking and contemptuous attitudes.

Paul's final conclusion to this reflection on Israel post-Christ then follows: "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." (Rom. 11: 32).

I need here to insert a reflection in which I have been much helped and stimulated by some writing by Julia Blum, the wife of a Messianic pastor in Jerusalem. She has written a little book reflecting on the love of Adonai for Israel, having chapters on Job, Benjamin and Lazarus. She has been led to understand the whole book of Job as a teaching about God's love for Israel. Job goes through the most appalling suffering, and even his friends say it is happening because of his sin. She sees in Job's experience the experience of Israel, and in the reproaches of his friends the reproaches of the Church. "The more terrible the troubles and trials that besought Israel, the more justified the Church became in her own eyes." (p. 10). "Unexpectedly, Job is not only transformed overnight from a successful man into a man beset by overwhelming grief, but what is much more terrible, yesterday's man of God respected by all is today suddenly rejected as a sinner, an outcast, one thought to be abandoned by God. 'But He has made me a byword of the people, and I have become one in whose face men spit.' (Job 17:6). 'Even young children despise me; I arise, and they speak against me. All my close friends abhor me, and those whom I love have turned against me.' (Job 19:18-19)" (p. 12). "In this sense, the Book of Job is not even so much about the hardships that have come upon him as it is about how extraordinarily difficult (even more difficult than physical suffering!) it is for the one who only yesterday was overshadowed with God's visible blessing to bear this apparent rejection. Up until the very end of the book and his meeting with the Lord, Job tries but can't comprehend the reason for this abrupt major change and why he, upright and God-fearing, has been delivered by God *to the ungodly, and turned... over to the hands of the wicked.* (Job 16:11)" (p. 12).

Blum later states: "The time has come for believers (at least for believers!) to finally realize that in contrast to the hardships that came upon Israel in the *Tenach* and concerning which the Lord Himself repeatedly and explicitly spoke of as punishment, Israel's tribulations following the first coming of Yeshua are not punishment." (p. 28). Here is where I think she does not do justice to the passages in Matthew 23 and 24 to which I have referred. But I do think she is right in seeing the overarching framework as that of God's incredible and ever-faithful love for Israel, his first-born son and the "apple of his eye". This means that when we look at the mystery, we do not see the punishment of those who persecuted the prophets as the principal line in the story. The bottom line is God's love. We must understand mystery in the light also of the letter to the Ephesians.

It may be objected that I am contradicting the teaching of Vatican Two, when the bishops said: "the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today." (*Nostra Aetate*,

para. 4)⁷. The deepest problem of the wrong attitudes repudiated by the Council was the sin of judgment, which is to usurp the role of God as the only judge. Those who charged the Jews with “deicide” were assigning blame for the crucifixion of Jesus. The prophetic warnings of Jesus were fulfilling a different role, warning of the catastrophic consequences of sin and rebellion. They contribute to our understanding of the *mystery*, by which the Gospel has come to the Gentiles through this “unbelief” of the Jews. We are not invited to judge the Jewish people, who have been in exile as a consequence of this “unbelief”, but to understand the mercy of God to them and to all.

The focus in Romans concerning the Jews outside the Church is on their “unbelief”. This “unbelief” is their refusal to believe the witness to the resurrection of Jesus, more than being an accusation of responsibility for his crucifixion.

5. After the “fullness” of the Gentiles comes the “fullness” of Israel

At the heart of Paul’s understanding of the *mysterion* is the inter-connectedness of the salvation of the Jews and of the Gentiles. This is what Gentile pride does not understand. The Gentiles receive the Gospel through Jewish unbelief. This is the “for your sake” in verse 28. And in their turn, the Jews will receive mercy through the mercy experienced by the Gentiles (verse 31). The fulness of Israel must await the fulness of the Gentiles. But then in turn the fulness of Israel will bring immeasurable blessing for all. “Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulness [RSV has “full inclusion”] mean!” (Rom. 11: 12).

Attention to the experience of Israel and the second exile draws our attention to eschatology, as should the term *mystery*. We cannot properly discuss the relation of Jew and Gentile without a focus on the second coming of the Lord. The term *pleroma* draws our attention to the fulfilment, the end. There is an amazing paragraph in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by ‘all Israel,’ for ‘a hardening has come upon part of Israel’ in their ‘unbelief’ toward Jesus. The ‘full inclusion’ of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of ‘the full number of the Gentiles,’ will enable the People of God to achieve ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,’ in which ‘God may be all in all.’” (para. 674).

⁷ “The historical complexity of Jesus’ trial is apparent in the Gospel accounts. The personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. Hence we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole, despite the outcry of a manipulated crowd and the global reproaches contained in the apostles’ calls to conversion after Pentecost. Jesus himself, in forgiving them on the cross, and Peter in following suit, both accept ‘the ignorance’ of the Jews of Jerusalem and even of their leaders.” (CCC, para. 597).