

Paris Workshop: March 2002

How to Pray for Israel

1. Methodology: How to Use the Bible in Our Prayer for Israel

D'abord, il faut dire: cette présentation sera plus théologique que je n'avais pensé au commencement de ma préparation. La raison: c'est que notre prière pour Israël est formée par le cadre théologique que nous avons reçu, soit consciemment soit inconsciemment.

Evangelical world divided into (1) those who believe the OT promises regarding the land and Jerusalem are still valid, and are beginning to be fulfilled in our day and (2) those who believe that the New Testament provides no basis for asserting an ongoing place for the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem in Christian theology. It is clear to me reading the two sides that the dividing line between the two positions is Christ: Jesus the Messiah of Israel.

That is to say, the proponents of continuing validity of the promises to Israel tend to move directly from the OT promises to the present day, without asking what difference the Christ-event has made to our understanding. Their references to Jesus in this framework are extrinsic: it is Jesus who will come back, perhaps Jesus who will fulfil the promises. But these believers move straight from Joshua or Ezekiel to the present day without passing through the first coming of the Messiah. The result is that there is often lacking the idea of any "transformation" in the understanding of the promises and their fulfilment.

The opponents of on-going validity emphasize the total difference made by the first coming of the Lord, and particularly by his death and resurrection. In consequence, they argue, "here we have no abiding city" (Heb. 13: 14) and the only Jerusalem of theological significance is the new, heavenly Jerusalem on high (Gal. 4: 26; Heb. 12: 22; Rev. 3: 12; 21: 2, 10).

The reason for this introduction to "How to Pray for Israel" is that we have to have a right methodology for our appeal to the Old Testament promises. We have to do justice to the valid concerns of both proponents and opponents mentioned: I am convinced that the answer lies in asserting both (1) the ongoing validity of the Old Testament promises concerning the land and the city; and (2) the total difference made by the first coming of the Messiah, in particular by his death and resurrection. The practical question is: what does this mean in practice?

It means that one cannot simply cite Old Testament passages about Israel without asking what difference the coming of Jesus makes to our understanding of them. The coming of Jesus was the climax of a long history of the Lord's preparation of his people. It reminds us that the language of prophetic promise is poetic and multi-dimensional; it is not like a railway timetable. Moreover, prophetic utterances can have several levels of application and fulfilment. So we find that at the time of the first coming of the Messiah, nobody correctly understood the Old Testament promises concerning his coming.

2. Some Guiding Principles

I would like to proceed by enunciating some principles:

1. Prayer for Israel must be rooted in confession of Israel's election.

Here we encounter a major difference between praying for Israel and praying for any other people-group. Israel is the chosen people: Israel is G-d's first-born son (Ex. 4: 22); "the Lord's portion/heritage" (Deut. 32: 9); "the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32: 10).

This prayer is a prayer of love: of love for those to whom the Lord loves. Prayer of Mordecai in longer (Catholic) version of Esther: "And now, O Lord G-d and King, G-d of Abraham, spare thy people; for the eyes of our foes are upon us to annihilate us, and they desire to destroy the inheritance that has been thine from the beginning. Do not neglect thy portion, which thou didst redeem for thyself out of the land of Egypt." (13: 15 – 16).

Parenthesis: Israel here is first of all the whole chosen people. Prayer for Israel is then first prayer for the whole Jewish people, all the descendants of Israel-Jacob. But the gift of the land and the choice of Jerusalem are part of G-d's election of Israel. Prayer for Israel thus has a particular focus on the Jewish people in the land, and on the city of Jerusalem, without excluding the diaspora.

2. Prayer for Israel must be rooted in the biblical promises.

All Christians can agree that G-d made promises to Israel. The promises can be summed up as promises concerning the seed (Gen. 3: 15), concerning the land, concerning a kingdom (2 Samuel 7: 12), concerning a house (2 Samuel 7: 11, 13, 16) and concerning the city of Jerusalem.

Perhaps the most important passage in the New Testament concerning the ongoing validity of these promises comes in Acts 3: 17 – 26. This can be seen as an answer to the question of the disciples in Acts 1: 6: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for this question; but it will happen at a time determined by the Father. This question no doubt expressed a frustration of the disciples: why has not the Messiah done what the Messiah is supposed to do – restore the kingdom and ascend the throne of David?

In Acts 3, Peter addressing the “men of Israel” (Acts 3: 12) says: “ But what G-d foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ [Messiah] should suffer, he thus fulfilled.” (3: 18). The promises so far fulfilled are those concerning the Messiah's suffering, promises that had not really entered into the common Jewish understanding of the Messianic hope. But then Peter continues: “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that G-d spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.” (3: 19 – 21). In other words, the promises not yet fulfilled will be fulfilled above all in the Lord's return on the last day.

In praying for the unfulfilled promises to be fulfilled, we do not have to have a precise understanding of what the fulfilment will look like. Indeed, we need to have a humility in recognising that as “G-d's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Is. 55: 9 – 10), so we are unlikely to understand precisely what fulfilment will mean.

3. Christian prayer for Israel must be rooted in the unbreakable relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and his own people

The situation between Israel and her G-d is not the same after the Jesus-event as it was before. A climax has been reached. The difference is not rejection, as replacement theology taught. Nor is the difference rightly understood as simply the coming of the Saviour of the world. One major difference is Jesus' total identification with his own people, extending to his identification with them in the consequences of their sin and rebellion. Christian prayer for Israel has to be rooted in this total identification of the Messiah with his people – not just with those who accepted him.

This identification is expressed with particular clarity in the Servant Songs in Isaiah. In the first song, we read: “I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” (42: 6). In the second song, the identification of the servant with Israel is explicit: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (49: 3). Once again, the servant is to bless Israel and the nations, though in different ways: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (49: 6). In the fourth song, the identification of the servant with sinful Israel is made clear: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53: 4); “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.” (53: 5); “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (53: 6) “he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.” (53: 8).

Jesus accepts this servant-role first at his baptism in the Jordan. This is the meaning of his reply to the protestations of John: “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matt. 3: 15). It is

also implicit in Jesus' response to the three temptations, in which each time he cites the book of Deuteronomy (8: 3; 6:16; 6: 13), which are not just smart answers from Scripture, but express the total obedience of Jesus to the terms of the Mosaic covenant. They express the refusal of Jesus to use his powers as the Son of G-d in anything other than servant-obedience. This obedience Jesus lived to the limit in his death on the cross, as Paul so graphically states in Philippians: "[he] emptied himself taking the form of a servant ... And being found on human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (2: 7 – 8).

The total identification of Jesus with Israel expressed in his death on the cross extends to the Jewish people throughout the subsequent centuries of their sufferings and exile. This is another aspect of the rejection of replacement theology. Not only are the Jews throughout history not an accursed people, but they remain those with whom the Messiah-Son of G-d has totally identified. The Jewish pattern of seeing the Jewish people as the "suffering servant" is not entirely wrong; it is incomplete.

Thus, Christians praying for Israel have to learn to pray in the spirit of the servant-Messiah pouring out his heart for the people dear to his Father and for ever his own flesh and blood.

4. Prayer for Israel must recognize the essential link between the covenant and Israel's obedience.

The promises to Israel are conditional upon obedience. This is supremely clear in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 28 in effect sums up the teaching found throughout this second book of the Law both regarding the blessings of obedience (vv. 1 – 14) and the curses of disobedience (vv. 15 – 68).

The book of Lamentations expresses the sorrow and dereliction of the Israelite following the devastation produced by disobedience and rebellion. "The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and behold my suffering." (Lam. 1: 18).

Confession of the promises to Israel and of the Lord's fidelity also need to be accompanied by the confession of Israel's sin. This is of course first the responsibility of the Jewish people. But for us Gentiles praying for Israel, it means that as we pray for the fulfillment of the promises to Israel we pray for the obedience and the humble repentance of Israel.

Ps. 25: Confession of God's faithfulness and mercy: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." (v. 10). "'Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distresses. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.'" (vv. 17 – 18). "Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me" (v. 19). Last appeal: "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles." (v. 22).

5. Prayer for Israel must recognise the right relationship between Israel and the nations

The election of Israel is not the rejection of other peoples. The election of Israel is for the blessing of all nations. G-d chooses one to bless all. "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19: 5 – 6). To be a kingdom of priests is to be the priestly people who intercede for all nations.

When Israel sins, G-d permits them to be punished at the hands of pagan peoples, but these peoples who raise their hands against Israel will in turn be punished. "but the land of the Chaldeans is full of guilt against the Holy One of Israel" (Jer. 51: 5); "his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple." (Jer. 51: 11); "I will requite Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the evil that they have done in Zion, says the Lord." (Jer. 51: 24). Concerning Edom and Esau "For the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever." (v. 10); "But you should not have gloated over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted in the day of distress." (Obadiah 12; but cf. Also vv. 11, 13 – 14). Re-Moab and the Ammonites: "This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts." (Zeph. 2: 10).

I want to suggest to you a possible interpretation of the picture of the judgment in Matthew 25: 31 – 46. It has always puzzled me that it is the nations that are gathered before the Son of man on his glorious throne, and then it is very personal behaviour that is cited (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned). Then one day I was struck by the verse “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (v. 40) and “as you did it not ... you did it not to me” (v. 45). I thought: who are “the least of Jesus’ brethren”? Must not this be a reference to his fellow Jews? Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus speak of the Gentiles as his brothers (in Matthew 15 he speaks to the Canaanite woman about not taking “the children’s bread and throw[ing] it to the dogs” (15: 26). In other words, is not the meaning of this picture of the judgment that the nations will be judged according to the way they treat the least of the Jewish people? If this is a valid interpretation, Jesus is refining the words of the Old Testament prophets: the nations will be judged according to their treatment of the Jewish people, but particularly in relation to the least among them.

6. Prayer for Israel must include specific prayer for Jerusalem, which is inseparable from prayer for the coming of the Lord and his Kingdom

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a sub-heading in its section on the second coming of Jesus “The glorious advent of Christ – the hope of Israel” (immediately before para. 674).

To understand the Scriptures correctly, we have to understand that God is preparing his people over time, over centuries. There is a build-up throughout the Old Testament. The call begins with Abraham, who receives the promise of the people and of the land; it advances with Jacob; the people become a covenant people at Sinai; it advances further with David, the capture of Jerusalem, which becomes the City of the Most High, and his dwelling-place. The later call of Jerusalem symbolises the goal, that towards which God is working, the city of God.

As the Old Testament revelation deepens, two new traits begin to emerge that will characterise the two comings of the Messiah. First, the theme of the suffering servant, together with that of the remnant, the *anawim*. (Song of Hannah, song of Mary). Secondly, there are various hints, particularly in the later chapters of Isaiah, of the coming kingdom of the Messiah transcending all we know of present earthly life. This theme is particularly expressed in the promise of **glory** and associated with the idea that the Lord himself will come. We already have this in Ps. 24: “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in.” (24: 7). “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” (Is 60: 1). “the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.” (Is. 60: 2). See also Is. 62: 2; 66: 11. (Is 35: 2, 4, 10). These passages prepare for the New Testament revelation of the Son of man, who will come in all his glory.

At the heart of prayer for Israel is then prayer for Jerusalem, which is inseparable from prayer for the coming of the King in all his glory. This is prayer for the preparation of the Jerusalem on earth, and the descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven. Evangelicals often tend to understand the coming of the King to his city in too this-worldly terms, not recognising the total transformation into resurrection glory. Catholics tend not to think about it at all, just thinking our destiny is in heaven not on earth! Notice in Isaiah 65: 17 – 18 the close association between the promise of “new heavens and a new earth” and “behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing”.

The Holy Spirit teaches the Church to cry “Marana tha” “Come, Lord Jesus”. The groanings of the Spirit for the full accomplishment of the Father’s plan are like the pangs of childbirth. See the link in Romans 8 between the groanings of the whole creation that is in travail (v. 22), the groanings of the Christian, who has “the first fruits of the Spirit”, for the redemption of our bodies (v. 23) and the groanings of the Spirit “who intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (vv. 26 – 27).