

# *“All Israel Will Be Saved”*

## *Supersessionism and the Biblical Witness*

DONALD G. BLOESCH  
*Professor of Theology*  
*University of Dubuque Theological Seminary*

The mystery of the Jews as the chosen people of God is to be understood in light of the wider biblical view that God intends his covenant of grace for all humanity; all peoples are destined to serve the glory of God and to participate in his Kingdom.

### THE SUPERSESSIONIST CONTROVERSY

**I**N THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES the paradoxical relationship between the church and Israel has been painstakingly reexamined in the mainline Protestant denominations as well as in the Roman Catholic Church. The tragically horrendous event of the Holocaust has been the catalyst for the new interest in this problem. A growing number of theologians have argued that the church cannot be considered the saved people of God without the inclusion of Israel, to whom the covenant of grace was originally given. It is further maintained that the ancient covenant with Israel is still in force and that Israel has therefore not been superseded by the church in the plan of salvation. The continuing validity of Judaism is affirmed not simply as a preparation for the realization of the covenant promises in Christianity but as “a viable, integrated and fully adequate response to God’s call for faithfulness as found in the Hebrew Scriptures.”<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Michael B. McGarry, *Christology After Auschwitz* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 7–8.

Franklin Littell sees the myth of supersession, which he claims originated in the early church, as having two foci: "(1) God is finished with the Jews; (2) the 'new Israel' (the Christian church) takes the place of the Jewish people as carrier of history."<sup>2</sup> In the revisionist schema, Israel has its own unique contribution to be a light to the nations; and the church is another light, but not one that surpasses or supersedes Israel.

In defense of the traditional position, the Lutheran scholar Johannes Aagaard argues that the church is the new and only Israel.<sup>3</sup> Because ethnic Israel has become secularized, the Jews have the same calling as other nations—to acknowledge the Messiah of God. The church is the people of the New Covenant and the sole eschatological reality.

To the traditionalist H. H. Rowley it is clear that in Paul's thought the church was not co-elect with the synagogue but had inherited the synagogue's election. Therefore "the Jews who would not accept Christ had forfeited their election, and were branches torn out of the tree."<sup>4</sup>

In revisionist theory, both Judaism and Christianity are looking forward to an ultimate redemption, and their unique witness to this redemption should command mutual respect. One implication is that the Jews' non-acceptance of Jesus as the Christ is to be viewed as an act of obedience to God, not disobedience.<sup>5</sup> Another is that Christianity must surrender or at least qualify its exclusivistic claims regarding truth and salvation.

#### THE MYSTERY OF ISRAEL'S ELECTION AND REJECTION

The mystery of the Jews as the chosen people of God is to be understood in light of the wider biblical view that God intends his covenant of grace for all humanity. All peoples are destined to serve the glory of God and participate in the Kingdom of God. Scripture tells us that for the realization of this universal promise God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the light to guide the nations to true faith and loving service in his name. In the promise contained in the covenant with Abraham, it is expressly said that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3, NKJ). The Book of Isaiah makes clear that Israel has been elected to be a light to lighten the Gentiles (49:6; 42:6; cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23). The last day, which will bring redemption to Israel, will also be the day of judgment and redemption for the nations (Isa. 2:2-4; 25:6-8; Mic. 4:1-4). The eschatological fulfillment will see Egypt and Assyria sharing in the blessings given to Israel (Isa. 19:24-25). On that day

---

2. Franklin H. Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 30.

3. "The Church and the Jews in Eschatology," *Lutheran World* 11 (1964), 270-78.

4. *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), p. 149.

5. A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 104.

the temple of Israel shall be called “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11:17; Matt. 21:13; Luke 19:46).

While there are various covenants articulated in Old Testament history, on close examination they prove to be dimensions or facets of the one covenant of grace, which was instituted not because of Israel’s supposed righteousness but simply because of God’s gratuitous, unfathomable love (cf. Deut. 9:4–6; 10:15).<sup>6</sup> The fruits of the covenant are, however, conditional on Israel’s obedience, for it is said that God will withhold his blessings if Israel tolerates injustices or turns to idolatry (Isa. 5:24–25; Jer. 2:20–37; Amos 5:18–27).

In the midst of covenantal disobedience Israel is promised a new covenant to be written on the hearts of all believers, assuring Israel of God’s unremitting faithfulness to his people (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26–28). This covenant is not entirely new, however, for the same law is affirmed; but it has now become a law of spirit and life, sealed in the innermost depths of our being by the Spirit of God. This new covenant is to be seen as a reaffirmation of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. It is unconditional in that it proceeds out of the free grace and mercy of God, but its efficacy is contingent on faith and obedience. At the same time, faith and obedience are virtually assured because of the way the covenantal promises will be applied to God’s people.

In the New Testament, the covenant is personified and fulfilled in the Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ. The covenant of grace given to Israel is reenacted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Mark 14:24; I Cor. 11:25). The followers of Christ are regarded as the members of the new covenant (II Cor. 3:6), although the covenant with Israel is not annulled (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:17). The covenant of grace made with Israel reaches its fulfillment in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh—Jews and Gentiles (Acts 2:17). The breaking down of the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles takes place in the atoning death of Christ, despite all evidence to the contrary (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11–18).

The mystery of Israel’s election to be a light to the nations is deepened in view of Israel’s subsequent rejection of its Messiah, Jesus Christ. Because of this disobedience in not acknowledging Christ as the culmination of the covenantal promises, a hardening has come over Israel that prevents it from seeing the light. Paul complains, “To this day whenever Moses is read

---

6. The idea of merit frequently intrudes into Rabbinic Judaism, though many scholars continue to hold to the priority of grace. Steinberg contends that the Jews were chosen by God “in part because of the merits of the first fathers, whose righteousness was so great as to win this high calling for their descendants,” Milton Steinberg, “Questions Christians Ask” in *Face to Face: A Primer in Dialogue*, ed. Lily Edelman (Washington, DC: B’nai B’rith, 1967), p. 22.

a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (II Cor. 3:15, 16). While some Jews, including virtually all the apostles, were ready to acknowledge the Messiah, the great majority refused to believe, partly because the Messiah who came was not the Messiah who was expected (Reinhold Niebuhr). Judaism looked forward to a this-worldly kingdom that would liberate the people of God from oppression, but the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus was a spiritual kingdom conquering by the power of suffering love.

In Romans 9–11 Paul delineates a theology of Israel and the church that demands careful examination. Paul identifies believing Israel with the remnant (Rom. 9:27), the company of the faithful acclaimed in Isaiah 10:22–23. "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants" (9:6–7). He likens unbelieving Israel to Pharaoh whom God raised up for the very purpose of revealing his power and mercy so that his holy name might be "proclaimed in all the earth" (9:17). Unbelieving Israel signifies the vessels of wrath made for destruction that are endured so that the riches of God's glory may be poured into the vessels of mercy—believing Israel and believing Gentiles (9:22–24). In discussing the inclusion of the Gentiles in the family of God, Paul cites Hosea: "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'my beloved'" (9:25). Israel pursuing a righteousness based on law did not attain it, whereas Gentiles who saw in Christ the hope of the world received a righteousness based on faith.

What is important to understand is that both Israel's rejection and the Gentiles' election are acts of God that belong to the mystery of divine providence. To be sure, Israel's disobedience provoked God's displeasure, but this very disobedience was sanctioned by God for the express purpose of opening up the blessings of the covenant with Israel to the gentile nations. "Through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:11), and thus God's purposes for the redemption of the world are fulfilled.<sup>7</sup>

In Romans 11 we are introduced to the still deeper mystery that God's rejection of Israel is not final. The covenant made with Abraham is likened to an olive tree that does not wither and die when some branches become barren. These barren branches, representing unbelieving Israel, are broken off; but in their place are grafted in branches from a wild olive tree, representing here the gentile believers. Moreover, the natural branches

---

7. "In the end, Paul comes to understand Jewish disbelief as a mission of mercy entrusted to Israel by God in the last days. Paradoxically, Israel fulfills its ancient calling to enlighten the Gentiles *by means of its own blindness!*" John Koenig, *Jews and Christians in Dialogue* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), p. 56.

that have been discarded can be grafted in again if they do not persist in their unbelief (11:23).

Paul then goes on to confess that the gifts and call of God are irrevocable (11:29). Even if Israel is faithless, God is faithful (Rom. 3:3–4). His rejection of his people is not final but only provisional. In the No of God's rejection is hidden the Yes of his election. Those whom God elected to be his witnesses will by no means be permanently discarded. Indeed, even in their rejection they continue to be signs of the mercy and power of God among the Gentiles. "As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (11:28). God has consigned all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles, to disobedience so that he might have mercy on all (11:32). The way he reveals his mercy, however, will be different—depending on his own plan of salvation that has its source in his own wisdom, which defies the wisdom of humankind.

A hardening will come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles comes in; then "all Israel will be saved" (11:25, 26). Paul foresees not the casting away of Israel but its final redemption in union with the redemption of all elect Gentiles. That this redemption is contingent on faith is made clear in Romans 10:5–17 and 11:23, where Paul is adamant that the way to salvation for both Jew and Greek is the way of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world (cf. Zech. 12:10–13).

When Paul confesses that "all Israel will be saved," he is indubitably thinking of the future restoration of ethnic Israel. Calvin erred when he interpreted "all Israel" to mean the sum total of the complete church, gentile Christians and the remnant of believing Jews. It was the Puritans and Pietists who reclaimed the Pauline hope for Israel as a nation and through Israel hope for the world.<sup>8</sup> This hope was shared by our Lord himself, for Jesus looked forward to that joyous day when his people would acclaim him as the Messiah of Israel and Lord and Savior of the world: "I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:37–39).

Karl Barth interprets Romans 11 as affirming that "God's *mercy* must and shall be revealed to all Israel."<sup>9</sup> This should not be taken to mean, however, that every member of ethnic Israel will finally come to faith, and this holds true for Gentiles as well. God's kindness is revealed in the outpouring of his Holy Spirit upon the nations; but unless they acknowl-

---

8. See Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), pp. 39–82, and Robert M. Healey, "The Jew in Seventeenth-Century Protestant Thought," *Church History* 46, No. 1 (March 1977), 63–79.

9. *A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, trans. D. H. van Daalen (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 145.

edge this, they too will be cut off (11:22). God's kindness will once again be manifested to the Jews; and while Paul foresees the nation as a whole coming to true faith, this does not mean that there will not be some who, having seen the light, go back to the old ways and crucify the Son of God anew (cf. Heb. 6:4–6; II Pet. 2:20). It is possible to quench and grieve the Holy Spirit, but God's sovereign purposes will not finally be thwarted even by human unbelief, though the result may be the humiliation rather than the exaltation of the sinner.

What is also significant in Romans 9–11 is that the church is portrayed as dependent on Israel for the fulfillment of its mission.<sup>10</sup> Israel is the root that sustains the church, and not vice versa (11:18). At the same time, Paul also tells us that in another sense Israel stands in need of the church, for it is through the gospel proclaimed by the church that Israel will come to appreciate anew its glorious heritage and enter into its glorious destiny (10:8–17; I Cor. 1:21–24).

Nowhere in the New Testament is it asserted that the Jewish people as a whole are under some irremediable curse because of their rejection of Jesus Christ. Even in I Thessalonians 2:15, where Paul refers to the Jews as killers of Jesus Christ and of the prophets, his reference is plainly to Jews who are persecuting the church and not to Israel as such. While left desolate because of its intransigence, Israel will be enabled by God's grace to acknowledge and rejoice in the Messiah when he comes again (Matt. 23:37–39). Scripture makes clear that those immediately responsible for the death of Christ, both Jews and Romans, acted out of ignorance (cf. Acts 3:17–18; 13:27–30; Luke 23:34). The real cause of Christ's death was God himself, who decreed that the Messiah must suffer.

At the same time, because of Israel's esteemed place in the plan of salvation, because Israel is "the apple of the eye" of the Lord (Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8; Zech. 2:8), because Israel is the prototype of sinful humanity favored by grace but rebelling against this same grace, because Israel is beloved by the Lord even in its iniquity and rejection, other nations are provoked to jealousy and resentment. There is moreover in the people of Israel an ineradicable transparency to the living God as Lord and Savior (Isa. 49:16) that serves as a painful reminder to outsiders of their own guilt and condemnation by God. The Jews are a living mirror of God's judgment against unbelief but also of God's incomparable grace that confounds human sin.

The Jews are hated by the world not so much because they are thought of as Christ killers but paradoxically because they are Christ bearers. They

---

10. This is also made strikingly clear in Eph. 2:11–22, where the desolation of the Gentiles is attributed to their alienation from the commonwealth of Israel (v. 12).

constitute an irrevocable sign of the divine light that has come to enlighten the world in its darkness, and darkness cannot withstand this light.<sup>11</sup> It is their witness to Christ even in their rejection of him that aggravates the sin within people and nations and creates the suspicion and hatred known as anti-Semitism.

One text often cited to explain the precarious existence of the Jews is Matthew 27:25: "His blood be on us and on our children." It is true that the enemies of Christ among the Jews invited this kind of curse upon their own people, but God's ways are not our ways. If "the blood of Jesus comes upon the children of Israel, it comes upon them as a savior's blood,"<sup>12</sup> for his blood is salvific, not avenging. By means of the shedding of Christ's blood, remission of sins is brought to both Jews and Gentiles. Both are under the sign of the cross; but this is especially true of the Jews, since Christ came to give glory to the people of Israel as well as be a light of revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32).

When we fallaciously make the Jews the scapegoat for the death of Christ, we are guilty of a profound misreading of the drama of redemption as presented in the New Testament. The truer picture is that Jesus Christ himself is the scapegoat for the sins of the world, that God in Christ has taken upon himself the guilt and shame of the world so that all who believe might not perish but have eternal life (cf. Isa. 53:5, 6; Rom. 4:25; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13). The penalty for sin is voluntarily borne by Christ and not simply Christ as man but Christ as the merciful and holy God. Both the Jews and Romans were instruments of God's redemptive purpose, even though they were strangely unaware of their privileged role in the divine plan of redemption.

## JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

While both Christianity and Judaism have common roots in the heritage of the children of Israel as described in the Old Testament, the two faiths began to diverge markedly after the resurrection of Christ and ever more after the destruction of the Jewish temple in A D 70. Rabbinic Judaism, which originated in the Exile, became ever more a religion of law; one scholar sees in the Mishnaic materials "no trace of a tendency to effect reforms" but instead "a veneration for the letter of tradition remarkable

---

11 Franz Rosenzweig sagaciously observed. "Whenever the pagan within the Christian soul rises in revolt against the yoke of the Cross, he vents his fury on the Jew" This is because to strike at the Jews is also to strike at the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world Quoted in *Jews and Christians*, ed George A F Knight (Philadelphia. The Westminster Press, 1965), p 163

12 Franz Mussner, *Tractate on the Jews The Significance of Judaism for Christian Faith*, trans Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1984), pp 196-97

for pedantic insistence on verbal exactitude.”<sup>13</sup> The idea of works and merit, which has a Hellenistic as well as a Judaic base, also became more pronounced in Christianity as it developed into a religion of ritualism and formalism, though the truth of *sola gratia* was again and again rediscovered in reforming movements.

The question that engages many scholars today is whether the Judaism of the New Testament was congruous or incongruous with the gospel of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus and his disciples. While there are definitely strands of continuity between the heritage of Israel and the religion of the new covenant focused on Jesus Christ, there are also striking dissimilarities. What the two religions have in common is a respect for the revealed law of God in the Old Testament, the desire to glorify God in every area of life, the messianic hope of the redemption of the world through the intervention of the living God in history, and the celebration of the momentous events of deliverance in Old Testament history, such as the Exodus and the return from the Exile.

Yet the teachings of Jesus and even more the theology of Paul introduced insights that could not easily be assimilated into Jewish tradition without a drastic reinterpretation of this tradition. Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner sees the un-Jewishness of Jesus in his radical reduction of the Torah to the spirit of love, the anational character of his teaching, and the concept of a God who requires love of enemies and lets his sun shine on both good and evil.<sup>14</sup> The idea of the Messiah who conquers by vicarious suffering and the powerlessness of love is definitely in the Old Testament heritage (cf. Isa. 52:13; 53:1–12), but it could not be harmonized with the Jewish hope for a this-worldly or political liberation. The doctrines of the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God in Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection from the grave were to an even greater degree antithetical to Rabbinic Judaism. The new wine of the gospel could not finally be contained in the old wineskins (Matt. 9:16–17).

Given the radical discontinuity between rabbinic teachings and the teachings of the new covenant, it is not surprising that the supersessionist idea arose that Christianity has displaced Judaism in the plan of salvation. This notion could be read into John 1:17: “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”; and also in Romans 10:4: “Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified.”

Yet there are other passages that show the inseparability of law and

---

13 Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 183. Hagner is quoting Herbert Danby.

14. *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1925), pp. 377–97.



gospel, works and grace. Matthew records these words of our Lord: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (5:17). Paul was adamant that although we are justified by the righteousness of Christ alone received by faith, we are justified for righteousness in daily living. We are called to present our bodies as living sacrifices, "holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1–2), out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ. The ethos of the Old Testament is certainly conspicuous in this Petrine admonition: "As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile" (I Pet. 1:15–17).

Rabbinic Judaism might be described as a covenantal nomism, in which obedience to the law fulfills the conditions of a covenant that has its ultimate origin in God's unsurpassable grace. It can also be depicted as an ethical monotheism in which the belief in one God is to be demonstrated through a life of service to the community of faith.

The Christian revelation does not necessarily call these into question, but it radicalizes the demands of faith to include love of enemies. It upholds, moreover, the justification of the ungodly based on faith in a righteousness wholly extrinsic to the sinner, whereas Judaism is inclined to speak of a justification of those who make progress toward personal righteousness.

Today the overwhelming temptation is to find points of convergence between Judaism and Christianity, especially in the sorry recognition that a churchly triumphalism that tendentiously disparaged Judaism contributed substantially to the virus of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust. Yet a creative syncretism could undermine both the integrity of Judaism as a religion and the uniqueness of the Christ revelation. What we as Christians should strive for is not a synthesis of Judaism and Christianity but their mutual purification and transformation by the truth and power of the gospel of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

One can decry syncretism and at the same time acknowledge the inseparability of the two traditions. I can resonate with the Jewish scholar Franz Rosenzweig who sees Judaism as "the star of redemption" and Christianity as "the rays of that star." For Rosenzweig the church is the successor of Israel in one important respect: By virtue of the gospel the walls between Jew and Gentile are destroyed once and for all and the covenant with Israel is now opened to the world in a way that Jewish faith could not provide.<sup>15</sup> As an evangelical Christian, I would see the star of

---

15. See Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers*, p. 160.

redemption not as the religion of Judaism but as the covenant with Israel reaffirmed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ; the rays of the star signify not Christianity as a religion but the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit.

The revisionists are wrong and the traditionalists and supersessionists are right in this respect: The revelation of God in Christ introduces something indisputably new. It is not simply the Torah but now the Torah personified in a concrete individual that is upheld as the way to salvation. Our hope is not in obedience to the Torah but in God's gracious act of deliverance of those who could never obey perfectly because of the intractable reality of original sin (not acknowledged in Judaism).

Yet supersessionism is wrong to deny or downplay the fact that Christianity represents not the annulment of the heritage of Israel but its fulfillment even in the midst of negation. It also fails to acknowledge that the covenantal promises still apply to Israel even though the covenantal relationship is partially broken and that ethnic Israel still plays an important role in salvation history.

The Epistle to the Hebrews could possibly be designated as a supersessionist book, since the author insists that the Old Testament sacrificial system and priesthood have been superseded by the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his efficacious intercession as our one High Priest. Yet even here Old Testament heroes and heroines are celebrated as models of true faith in God. One passage intimates that the faith of Israel finally apprehends its object through the sanctifying of the church (Heb. 11:40).

While insisting on the basic discontinuity between the revelation of God in Christ and Judaism as a religion, we must recognize that this discontinuity holds true for Christianity as well. The revelation of the Word of God is always a new act and never the possession of any religious institution. This revelation stands in judgment not only over the legalism in Judaic religion but also over the legalism and ritualism in the Christian religion. As Christians we must never boast of the superiority of our religion over the Judaic religion, for we too may be cast off if we do not continue in the covenant (Rom. 11:22). What makes Christianity qualitatively distinct from Judaism is that in the church the Lordship and saving work of Jesus Christ are openly acknowledged, whereas in Judaism these truths are denied. The church can therefore be a positive sign and witness of the redemption offered in Christ, whereas the synagogue can be at best a negative sign of this redemption. Yet the church can become the synagogue where trust in its own principles and laws overshadows the message of free grace, just as the synagogue can become the church where a perception of the unconditional character of grace and the messianic identity of Christ takes place.

Judaism and Christianity might be likened to two moons that reflect the

light of the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2), who, in Christian perspective, is identical with the Son of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. These moons do not possess any light in themselves but point to the light that resides in the living Christ. Both communities are signs of the redemptive mercy and awesome power and holiness of God. At the end of the age the Judaic moon will merge into the Christian moon, but even then the source of light will remain in God and his Word alone.

Again, the two communities might be compared to an orchestral symphony that confronts us with the beauty of the holiness of God as well as the depths of his love. Those instruments representing the heritage of Israel when played by themselves are in discord. On the other hand, there is a palpable incompleteness or imbalance in the symphonic rendition when the contribution of Israel is deleted.<sup>16</sup> It is only when the orchestra functions as the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), the eschatological unity of the two traditions, that we have a perfect or full witness to the Wisdom of God incarnate in Christ.

Neither Judaism nor Christianity is in itself a way to salvation. The way to salvation is God's way to us revealed in Jesus Christ. Our task is to acknowledge that salvation does not lie in rites or ceremonies, in laws or traditions, even in worship that is done in spirit and in truth but in God's miraculous act of condescension in Christ that sets all of our laws and rites on a new foundation. We should strive to live the life of godliness not to procure salvation or even to prepare the way for it but to demonstrate and manifest a redemption already given in Jesus Christ.

#### MISSIONS TO THE JEWS?

Many theologians today argue against missions to the Jews partly on the grounds that in the light of the Holocaust such missions will seem incredible to Jews and partly on the grounds that people are already in contact with the true God in Judaism. Peter von der Osten-Sacken urges the church to give up its missionary attitude toward Israel and try to forge a fraternal relationship with the Jewish people.<sup>17</sup> Van Buren suggests that Christian missions to Jews should be reinterpreted as protecting the Jews as a people and coming to their aid.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the church is betraying its evangelistic mandate if it withholds the gospel of salvation from the very people who gave us the Messiah and

---

16. It can be shown that when Christianity is divorced from its Jewish roots, it either blends into a kind of Enlightenment rationalism or verges toward an ahistorical mysticism.

17. *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 173–75.

18. Paul van Buren, *Discerning the Way* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 180–96.

Savior of the world. Such an attitude could be construed as the worst kind of anti-Semitism because it means deliberately bypassing the Jews in giving out the invitation to the banquet of the kingdom (cf. Luke 14:15–24). Such an attitude could imply that the Jews are incapable or unworthy of receiving the blessings of the new covenant. Or it might suggest that they can best find God by adhering to their own laws and traditions, but this is to reinstate the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile that Christ tore down (Eph. 2:14). Significantly the German Christians, those in the German church who sought to accommodate to Nazism, vigorously opposed missions to the Jews on the grounds of racial contamination.

The New Testament is unequivocal that the Jews too should be included in the Christian mission; indeed, they even have priority over the Gentiles. Paul declared that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The name of the Lord has to be carried "before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Our Lord said to his disciples on the eve of Pentecost: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

I concur wholeheartedly with Markus Barth: "That the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled, that the dividing wall is broken down, that the good news is the same for every sinner and every nation—these facts cannot be kept secret by the Christians, for the Jews have as much right as do the Gentiles to hear of it, to experience it, to enjoy it."<sup>19</sup>

Karl Barth is even more forthright:

... the whole Church of Jesus Christ needs the Jews. She needs their failure: even this has turned into riches for the world; she needs their remaining afar off: even this has enriched the Gentiles ([Rom.] 11:12); she needs their rejection: even this was the means of the world's redemption (11:15)—but she needs even more their full entrance into the faith in their Messiah (11:12), their addition to the Gentiles and Jews who already do believe in him (11:15). For when that happens, what is as yet hidden even from the Church will come to light, then she will receive those greater riches, now only promised to her: then the dead shall rise (11:15), then it will become manifest and evident, that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the end and the new beginning of all things have already taken place, that the Kingdom of God on a new earth and under a new heaven has already begun in secret.<sup>20</sup>

Yet both father and son have profound reservations regarding missions to the Jews understood as an organized strategy of evangelizing. Their

---

19. *Israel and the Church* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969), p. 111.

20. *A Shorter Commentary*, pp. 140–41.

concern arises partly from the fact that the Jews are not to be placed in the same category as pagan nations and partly from the fact that only God converts.<sup>21</sup> What we can do is to share the story of salvation; but we cannot make it comprehensible, for it is based on the wholly unexpected and inexplicable intervention of God in the particular history of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Markus Barth cites the Constitution of the Netherlands Reformed Church after World War II in which the conversation with Israel is mentioned alongside of but not as part of the mission to the nations (Article VIII).<sup>22</sup>

While I empathize with the Barthian position on this question, I would retain the concept of missions to the Jews precisely because this mission differs qualitatively from missions to other peoples. It will involve a confession of indebtedness to the Jews for what they have given the church and the world (cf. Isa. 2:3; John 4:22) and also a confession of guilt for our complicity as Christians in fostering anti-Semitic attitudes through the ages. Unlike other peoples, the Jews are not called to something entirely new and unexpected but rather invited to share the fulfillment of their ancestral pledge made to Abraham.

The prophecy of Paul that “all Israel will be saved” rests on the confident hope that God himself will intervene and pour out his Spirit on Israel in an extraordinary way when the number of Gentiles is complete. Israel’s restoration will depend not on the missionary expertise or apologetic strategy of the church but on an unprecedented act of God in the last days.

Missions to Israel that result simply in the conversion of individuals should nevertheless command the support of the Christian community, for in this way we extend the hand of fellowship to those who are fore-ordained to be our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Such missions attest our faith in the present and future mercy of God and in the eternal validity of the covenant made with Israel. Jewish Christians have a special role in the economy of redemption, for they are a sign both of Israel’s presence in the church and of the presence of Jesus Christ in Israel. They give a poignant testimony to both Israel and the church that the fulness of the Israel of God will not be realized until the eschatological day of redemption. They remind us that both Israel and the church have a common destiny just as they had a common origin. They remind us that the hope of the church and of the world rests on the Messiah of Israel who has come once but who will come again in power and glory to set up the eternal kingdom that shall have no end.

---

21. Karl Barth contends that the key to missions to the Jews lies in making the Jews jealous (cf. Rom. 11:14), and this can happen only when the church leads an authentic existence characterized by caring and mercy. For Barth, true witness entails the union of *kerygma* and *didache* (service).

22. *Israel and the Church*, p. 113.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.