

Understanding Israel and the Church

By Rev. Willem Glashouwer

Both Church and synagogue have continued on through history, all over the world, but many times in a heartrending manner. However, despite the tension within the relationship of Church and synagogue, both share the same root, namely God's covenant-relationship with Israel. More precisely, the Church stands on the root of God's relationship with Israel. Paul, speaking about an olive tree with a root and branches, had to remind the Roman Christians, "You do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Rom. 11:18b).

"The Lord our God, the Lord is One"

The root is the covenant of God with Abraham, with Israel, the revelation of His name YHWH, by which He connected with them, established His alliance with them (see Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 4:13-15). YHWH represents the Lord in His covenant relationship, and is for that reason His greatest revelation to man. It is the eternal Torah, the eternally ever-present, creating Word, which was before creation, stemming from the Father—the Word that became flesh (see John 1:1-18). The root of Israel is the Word of God, the creating Word. That is YHWH in the Old covenant; the Word made flesh, the Lamb of God in the New covenant. That is the Anointed One, the Messiah, and the King. "I am the Root and the Offspring of David," He said (Rev. 22:16b; see also Rev. 5:5; Rom. 15:12). "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). "Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b). "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

Again, the spiritual (and maybe even the physical) root of the Church is Israel, more specifically the new covenant made with the House of Israel and the House of Judah, part of the covenants God made with Israel. And this is still the case in spite of the early infiltration of the Church by elements of Greek philosophy and attempts to detach the Church from her Jewish root and to convert Israel to a non-Jewish theology. Despite her Gentile nature, the Church is grafted into the cultivated olive tree whose root is rich in sap (see Rom. 11:24). But the way we as Gentile Christians over the centuries have expressed our faith, cloaked in Greek philosophical terms that sometimes sounds like blasphemy to Jewish ears has darkened the face of Jesus for them.

Let me give you just one example. Have you ever tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity to a Jewish person, using the words of the ancient Christian confessions of faith, which were deeply shaped by Greek philosophy? The eyes of your Jewish friend probably glazed over! Indeed, however hard you try to explain or grasp this mystery, it remains elusive. In the lands of Christendom over the centuries, Jews chose to die, burning at the stake, with the crucifix of Jesus right before their eyes, rather than accept this foreign Christian god and violate the basic confession of their Jewish, biblical faith: "Hear O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4). The concept of the Trinity is the basic stumbling block between Jews and Christians.

If asked about this matter by Jewish friends, I sometimes take the following approach: "You Jews believe that God is One, don't you?" "Oh yes, we do," they will probably reply. Then I say, "Did you know that Jesus, who was a pious Jew, also believed that? When He was asked what was the most important commandment of all (see Mark 12:28-34), He replied, 'Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one,' quoting the Shema (Deut. 6:4), known by every Jew and enclosed in the mezuzah on every Jewish doorpost. 'And love the Lord your God with all your heart, body, and soul' (see Deut. 6:5-6; Mark 12:28-34; Lev. 19:18). The same answer that every observant Jew would give today."

The astounded response, “Did Jesus believe that?” reminds me how much we as a Church have clouded the face of Jesus for His own Jewish brothers and sisters. Then I say, “But you as Jewish people believe that the Torah is eternal and that God created everything through and by the Torah, don’t you?” “Oh yes, we do!” “So He can do that, and still be one God, can’t He?” “Of course, He can and He did,” they would say. “Now let us look at the things of creation,” I say. “Let us look at the pillar of cloud and fire, and at the burning bush. These are all created things through which God could reveal Himself and still be one God, couldn’t He?” “Oh sure,” they will reply. “And what about the Angel of the Lord, who in Genesis 18:10 and 13 is called Lord, using the four unpronounceable letters of the name YHWH? Angels are created beings. So He can reveal Himself through the Angel of the Lord and still be one God, can’t He?” “Oh sure,” they will say. “Now then,” I say, “if God wanted to reveal Himself in a perfect way to mankind, can He not, by the Torah through which He created everything, also create a human being in order to make God perfectly known to mankind, and still be one God? Cannot the Torah, in that sense as it were, become flesh, embodied in a human being, and God still be one God?” At this point, some will say, “Mmm, I never looked at it that way before. I have to think about that.”

For a better understanding, in Judaism there are “hypostases” of God, five ways that God uses to reveal Himself in creation: “Metatron” (“Sar ha-Panien,” Sovereign Prince before the Face of God); “Memra” (“Word” that comes forth from God); “Shekhinah” (“Divine Presence”); “Ruach ha-Kodesh” (“Holy Spirit”) and “Bath-Kol” (“Voice from Heaven”). Whereas, Christians believe that the ultimate way God chooses to reveal Himself to this world is by incarnation in Jesus: the Word that became flesh.

But no matter the differences in beliefs, one fact remains: The Church is grafted into that old root. The Church that reviled the synagogue and trampled Israel underfoot is merely an engrafted branch. Moreover, the Church has participated over the centuries in persecuting the true children of God even within her own ranks. The Church might, in the end, together with all other religions, even become part of an antichristian body as a new worldwide understanding of what religion is all about starts to arise: man being God, the religion of man. In the endtimes the apostate church herself will become part of a world-religious system that the apostle John calls the whore, drunk with the blood of the martyrs (see Rev. 17:6). Drunk with the blood of Jew and Gentile.

All Israel Will Be Saved

God will not ignore what has been done to His people. The period of grace for the Gentiles will someday end. However, in North and South America, Asia, and Africa, it seems that the period of God’s grace is continuing, and many are coming to faith. Jesus promised that the Gospel would be preached to the ends of the earth before He returns (see Matt. 24:14). Through modern mass media, the Gospel is now going into the whole world, in all main languages, hundreds of hours per day, as never before in history.

At the same time, Israel is beginning to go home. Jesus predicted that as well. “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree [Israel]: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things [happening], you know that it [the kingdom of God] is near” (Matt. 24:32-33a; see also Luke 21:29-33). In addition, the signs of the times that He mentions in His end-time sermon (see Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) have been fulfilled over the last two thousand years, all except for two. And those two, the worldwide preaching of the Gospel and the return of the Jews to Israel, are being fulfilled in our day, before our very eyes. The return of Jesus is at the door! When God’s work of grace among the Gentiles is completed, qualitatively and quantitatively, and the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, has been engrafted, then all Israel will be saved.

We are in the middle of a “cross-fade.” The light over the heathen world is slowly fading, and the light over Israel is slowly coming on. All Israel shall be saved. What do we mean by “all Israel”? Do we mean that every Jew of the last generation living in Israel, before the coming of the Lord, will be saved? Will all those people come to faith in Jesus? Every man, woman, and child? Yes! When this question was posed to Rebecca de Graaf van Gelder, a well-known Jewish believer in Holland, her response was, “What’s the problem? Read Zechariah 12:10–14! Do you object to this? You should rejoice!” Paul says, “And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written” (Rom. 11:26a), and Zechariah says that all the generations, all the clans and their wives, yes, even the land, will mourn when they will look upon the One they (and we all) have pierced (see Zech. 12:10-14).

How is this going to happen? Keep on reading, for Paul refers to things happening “as it is written” (Rom. 11:26). How will it happen? he asks. “As it is written.” The Greek phrase used here means “just as.” Some people, however, stop reading after “And so all Israel will be saved.” Then they explain that in this verse “all Israel” means the Church—all those Gentiles and Jews who believe in Christ—the “spiritual Israel.” But this is a form of replacement theology, in which the Church is considered to be the “real” Israel, the newly chosen people of God, replacing the old unbelieving Israel. But there can be no doubt that in Romans chapters 9–11, Paul is speaking about physical Israel, not about the Church. Israel means Israel. He wrestles with the question of why most of the Jews cannot see who Jesus really is. And then he starts to see how one day they will, and he explains how finally all Israel shall be saved. So we have to read on. This is how it will happen—as it is written! And what has been written? “The deliverer will come from Zion; He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins” (Rom. 11:26b-27) says God. He Himself will do that through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the return of Jesus.

There is in Scripture a clear line showing God working through Israel to reach the world, and not the other way around. Of course, in the future, in the Kingdom, the nations from all over the world will come to Israel and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, bringing their gifts (see Zech. 14). Even today, people from all over the world help and support Israel, for instance, by upholding the Jews and helping them to return home. There is a practical line of assistance from the Gentile world to Israel; but is there a spiritual line as well? Yes, first and foremost—prayer. And sometimes we are allowed, when asked, to give our testimony. Sometimes the Lord will even bless that testimony by opening the eyes of a Jewish person to Jesus, so that he or she becomes a part of the remnant according to the election of grace. But essentially, salvation originates at the throne of God and goes via Israel into the world.

The mystery of Israel’s unbelief is the mystery of the ingathering of the Gentile peoples. More accurately, it is the mystery of God’s “taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself” (Acts 15:14b; see also verses 15-17), and then returning to “rebuild David’s fallen tent.” Then, through Jerusalem and Israel, salvation will go out from Jerusalem into a new earth. At first, there will be a Christian Church, a Bride for the Lamb, made up of Jews and Gentile without any dividing wall (see Eph. 2:11-22), a Queen for the King. After that, all Israel will be saved and will be a blessing in the midst of the earth.

God will soon come to give Israel rest. Three times we have learned about a divine “until.” Jerusalem is trodden underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Israel is temporarily and partially hardened until the fullness of the Gentiles, the fullness of the Christian Church (and only God knows when that point has been reached) has come in or has been engrafted into the root, into the new covenant made with Israel. And the Jewish people will not see Jesus until they will say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” And one day they will say just that.