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THE PROMISES TO NATIONAL ISRAEL IN THE PREACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT APOSTLES

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The Old Testament abounds with promises to national Israel regarding the restoration of a remnant, the re-establishment of a theocratic government headquartered in Jerusalem, and the resultant restructuring of the human and material universe. Implicit always within this scenario was the assumption that Israel, in a physical sense, was to be the center of the world. (Later, the Rabbis were prone to speak of Jerusalem as the “navel of the universe.”)

In pre-Christian Judaism, this assumption was hardly questioned. Nor was it questioned so long as early Christianity was composed of Jewish believers, for these could claim to be the spiritual heirs of those to whom all the promises had been entrusted. But, with the shift from the early Jewish church to one made up largely of Gentiles, the issue became acute.¹ What place were the Gentiles to occupy in the community of God as portrayed by the prophets? This question, of course, occasioned Paul’s response in Romans 9-11, the only direct and extensive treatment of the question in the New Testament.

So, the issue was focused. Traditionally, Christian interpreters have ranged around three possible ways of answering the question.

The first view understands the inclusion of the Gentiles to be an extended hiatus in God’s primary program for the Jewish people. The rise of the Christian faith has in no way imperilled or even significantly altered those prophetic promises to national Israel. After the present interregnum has run its course, the original plan for a physical reconstitution of empirical Israel will be resumed. This view has come to be termed “dispensationalism.”

A second approach to the subject is that which interprets the promises to national Israel as having been entirely fulfilled in the Church. On this view, there is no reason any longer to expect either a future resumption of a territorial Israelite hegemony or a spiritual revitalization of its people.

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Finally, there are those who maintain that the promises to national Israel are spiritually reinterpreted to the Church, but not so as to exclude God's continuing Old Testament people. This Israelite component is retained either by focusing on her genuine inclusion in Paul's "all Israel," on spiritual grounds (Romans 11:26), or by recognizing a residual element in the promises so that, in some sense, Israel as a national entity will yet participate in the life of the age to come.

In sum, the first position underscores the discontinuity between national Israel and the Church so that the promises to one can in no way be construed as belonging to the other. The second position views the history of Israel and the history of the Church as one and the same continuum, so that the promises applied to Israel become applied to the Church, but in a purely spiritual way. The third position understands the relationship between Israel and the Church as comprising both continuity and discontinuity, so that promises applied to Israel are at least partially applicable in a spiritual sense to the Church as well, but not to the total exclusion of a physical fulfillment for the Jews.

What the positions would seem to have in common is the awareness that the early apostles and writers of the New Testament have re-interpreted the Old Testament promises addressed to national Israel. The only question at stake is whether this re-interpretation has precluded the continuation of national Israel as an integral part of God's plan.

It is necessary, at this point, to turn from these generalizations to an examination of the biblical data, to test the validity of the three alternatives. How did the New Testament apostles interpret the promises earlier made to Israel? It is impossible to offer here a thorough treatment of this topic; nonetheless, a look at a few representative passages will be sufficient to indicate the thrust typically employed by the apostles.

In the first place, the birth of the Church, according to Luke's description, takes place to the accompaniment of signs and wonders which the prophet Joel had assigned to future *Israel*. Joel 2:28, 29 paints a portrait of the Golden Age when God's Spirit shall be so poured out that all age, sex and class barriers will be obliterated. Even young people, females, and slaves will join in that new adventure. The point of Peter's quotation of Joel in Acts 2:16-21 is that the prophecy was being fulfilled in the phenomenal experiences of those first Christians on the Day of Pentecost. For, he says, "This [the unusual behavior of the believers] is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel. . . ." Therefore, at least this portion of Joel's prophecy no longer awaits the future; it has been fulfilled in a somewhat unexpected manner. It is not Israel *qua* national Israel which enters into the fulfillment but, rather, that small portion of Israel which accepted Jesus as the Messiah—that is, spiritual Israel. Or, putting it another way, it is only *Christian Jews* who become the recipients of the benefits foretold by Joel.

One also notes a rethinking of old categories in James' speech at the Jerusalem congress, described in Acts 15. James supported Peter's advocacy of the Gentile inclusion, on equal footing with the Jews, in Christ's body. In so doing he cited two verses from the Epilogue of Amos (9:11,12), but he so reoriented the thrust of the passage that it takes on new meaning commensurate with the newness of the hour.

The Tekoan prophet, in the original setting, had announced a future

restoration of the Davidic kingdom.² At that time, to the accompaniment of peace and material prosperity, the Israelites would dispossess the remainder of the Edomites and of the other nations (*goyim*) of the world. In other words, glory would accrue to national Israel at the expense of the rest of mankind.

However, James elevated the position of the non-Israelite when citing this passage. It is true that he retained something which leads to a turning of the nations (Gentiles) to the Lord. That is, the restoration of Jewish fortunes is said not to lead to a subduing of the Gentiles but, rather, to an inclusion of them in a seeking of the Lord. The logical conclusion would be that Gentiles are on equal footing with the Jews in the new community of faith. James, it seems clear, is simply employing scriptural authority to validate what has already been sanctioned in practice in the ministries of Peter and Paul.

The *locus classicus* in the New Testament for a treatment of national Israel in apostolic proclamation is Romans 9-11, which features the Pauline "philosophy of history." What significance, it was being asked, did the streaming of the Gentiles into the Church have for God's Old Testament people, who were turning deaf ears to the Gospel?³ It is apparent that this question troubled the apostle as it did others and demanded resolution. Paul wants to hold two factors in balance throughout the discussion: 1) His fellow-Jews have a continuing role to play in God's program. 2) Gentile Christians share equally in the blessings accorded to the faithful descendants of Abraham.⁴

In the context of that discussion, Paul naturally and repeatedly adverts to the Old Testament. In 9:25-26 he referred to the promise of Hosea involving the people of Israel. Hosea had been summoned by God to announce the severance of the relationship between God and his people. This message was poignantly symbolized in the names given to his children, who had resulted from his marriage to Gomer, the harlot. The second child, a daughter, was named *Lo-Ammi* ("not my people"), which proclaimed the fact that Israel's inveterate apostasy had carried her beyond the bounds of covenant-status. Her role as God's covenant partner (typified by Gomer) was to be terminated.

But this is not the final message which Hosea has to offer. There was to be a new beginning for Israel. In the aftermath of Israel's rejection of Yahweh and Yahweh's consequent rejection of her, there would spring forth new life, just as the phoenix rises from the ashes. A righteous remnant was to be restored.

The new wrinkle which Paul introduced, against that backdrop, is that, in the present time, "my people" and "sons of the living God" have undergone redefinition. According to verse 22, the obstinate Israelites represent the "vessels of wrath made for destruction." Correlatively, the "vessels of mercy," which have been "prepared beforehand for glory" (v. 23), are comprised of *both* Jews and Gentiles (v. 24). So, once more, unforeseen to the Old Testament prophets, Gentiles have gained a share in the promises which were limited to Jews prior to the coming of Christ.

Other references, scattered through the New Testament suggest such a refocusing. For example, the way in which the followers of Jesus are designated in I Peter 2:9 is strongly evocative of titles applied to the Israelites in the Old Testament. "Chosen race," "royal priesthood," "holy nation," "God's own people" are distinctively Israelite appellations. This does not imply that the new organism is exclusively non-Jewish (the wording of 1:1, "to the exiles of the dispersion," would controvert that), but that both believing Jews and Gentiles make up this newly-defined society of the redeemed.

The foregoing are among the clearest examples of those lines of evidence in the New Testament which converge to demonstrate that a reinterpretation of the promises to national Israel has taken place. A passage which portrays this paradigmatically is Hebrews 8:6-13. Here the new covenant and Christ as the new mediator of this covenant are juxtaposed with the old covenant, which is deemed "obsolete" (v. 13). In support of this point, the writer quoted the memorable text found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. As it stands in Jeremiah, the announcement of the new covenant singles out the "house of Israel" and the "house of Judah" (31:31) as the new covenantors. It is clear however, according to the tenor of the whole Letter to the Hebrews, that believers in Christ are those who have been called into this new covenantal relationship. Indeed, the very term applied by the early Christians to their sacred corpus of literature—the *New Covenant* (Testament)—which they somewhat audaciously added to the received canon (our Old Testament) strongly suggests that they were laying claim to Jeremiah's prophecy.

It seems clear that the early Christian apostles made use of a "spiritualizing" hermeneutic in which the promises originally given to Israel, involving land and people, were considerably reshaped in terms congruent with the new shape of things wrought by Christ. Thus, a "de-localizing" tendency was making itself felt. The revised version of the "chosen people" concept was that of an incorporation of a larger whole. New territory had been annexed. The New Covenant was embracing both Jews and Gentiles and was doing so on the basis of a new act of God in history: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The trajectory of such thought might have logically led to the total displacement of Old Testament Israel by the Church. Indeed, St. Paul came quite close to saying this when he anticipated the salvation of "all Israel" (Romans 11:26), which is dependent upon the full number of the Gentiles coming in (v. 25). But the full complement seems clearly to include at least a portion of Israel as well, for the "hardening" of Israel is to endure "until the full number of Gentiles come in."⁵ He made this even more explicit in 11:1, when he vehemently denied that God has rejected his people (the Jews) in favor of the Gentile believers.⁶

And yet, Paul appears to apply the term "Israel" exclusively to the Christian community in Galatians 6:16 ("Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the *Israel of God*"). The implication would be that the Church has swamped Israel, that Israel (as national Israel) is without a future, and that the name which originally belonged to the one people can now be automatically transferred to the other people.

But the force of the verse may not be quite that unequivocal. Peter Richardson points out some problems with this usual interpretation of the verse, suggesting that it be repunctuated in accordance with a parallel expression in *Shemoneh Esreh* as follows: "Peace upon them, and mercy upon the Israel of God." In that case, "mercy" would be applied to a group called the "Israel of God" and "peace" would be applied to believers in Christ. Richardson asks, "Who is this group? We suggest that it is those within Israel to whom God will show mercy—all those Israelites who are going to come to their senses and receive the good news of Christ."⁷

What can be said is that whereas the promises to Israel given in the Old Testament have by no means been voided, they have certainly been

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revamped in the early Christian kerygma. While Israel is not excluded from salvation, that is viable only insofar as faith in Christ is exercised. Whereas the Jew still has a future, that future is made possible only by what Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant has accomplished. Furthermore, that future no longer involves the realization of territorial ambitions. The act of God in Christ means that the promises are no longer valid for Israel as a nation but now apply to faithful Israel, constituted by faith in Jesus as the Messiah and comprised of both believing Jews and Gentiles.

It is important to point out, in conclusion, that this progression of thought, involving a considerable loosening in the meaning of "Israel," is legitimated by the Old Testament itself. Indeed, there is ample precedent there for the way in which the New Testament applies the concept.⁸ In the Old Testament, "Israel" had various connotations. It could refer to the twelve tribes as a whole, or to the tribes of the northern kingdom (Israel, as over against Judah), or, in a more selective way, as we have seen, to the ideal or true Israel (the remnant). So, it is not arbitrary for Paul to distinguish between empirical and spiritual Israel in Romans 9:6: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." The *evangelium* which the apostles proclaimed was that all Jews and Gentiles who profess Christ belong to Israel.

NOTES

1. This shift and its consequences are schematically profiled by Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1969). The early Church moved through the following stages: I. Jerusalem Christianity (largely Jewish) II. Pauline Christianity (Jewish and Gentile) III. Post-Pauline Christianity (largely Gentile). It is evident that the successes of Paul's missionizing was the catalyst in the transformation.
2. Whether the "booth" (*sukkah*) in 9:11 refers to a reconstruction of the temple or to the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom as a whole is incidental for our purposes; for, in either case, national Israel (or Judah) is the referent.
3. Johannes Munck succinctly verbalizes the problem:

The unbelief of the Jews is not merely a missionary problem that concerned the earliest mission to the Jews, but a fundamental problem for all Christian thought in the earliest church. Israel's difficulty is a difficulty for all Christians, both Jewish and Gentile. If God has not fulfilled his promises made to Israel, then what basis has the Jewish-Gentile church for believing that the promises will be fulfilled for them? It must not be forgotten that this transference of Israel's promises to the Gentiles was not, at the time of the apostles, the simple matter that it has become for the Gentile church.

(*Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, pp. 34, 35.)
4. W. D. Davies speaks of "Paul's refusal utterly to sacrifice his nation to logical consistency" (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*. London: SPCK, 1962, p. 85).
5. "The whole tenor of Paul's use of the metaphor of the olive tree is that while natural branches—Jews—have been broken off the olive tree and wild branches—Gentiles—grafted into the people of God, it is God's sovereign pleasure yet to bring the natural branches to faith and go graft them back. . . ." (George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, p. 539).
6. In Acts 28:20 we see this principle matched by experience: "It is because of the *hope of Israel* that I am bound with this chain."
7. Peter Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 82. Again, "This means that Galatians 6:16 does not presuppose that the Church has taken over the name Israel for itself" (p. 83). "To prevent the Galatians from moving . . . to a new Christian exclusiveness and sectarianism, he adds his prayer for mercy on God's faithful people" (p. 84).
8. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, II, pp. 319ff., discusses the typological looking forward of the Old Testament beyond itself as inherent within it.