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Brothers in Hope. The Bridge: A Yearbook of
Judaeo-Christian Studies, Vol. V

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

1970

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Recommended Citation

Wyschogrod, Michael, "Israel, the Church, and Election" (1970). *Brothers in Hope. The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Vol. V. 7.*

<https://scholarship.shu.edu/jcs-bridge-V/7>

Michael Wyschogrod

ISRAEL, THE CHURCH, AND ELECTION

IN THE Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," the Catholic Church addresses and instructs her faithful. In this document, the non-Christian religions are spoken *about*, not spoken *to*. In a strict sense, therefore, it is not a document that requires a response from those thus spoken of. But those about whom we speak can also speak about us; indeed, it is to be expected that they will do so. In this age of instantaneous communication, we must be aware that he about whom we are talking hears us and that we are therefore talking to him as well as about him. Yet, the distinction between being talked about and being talked to is not thereby obliterated. To overhear a conversation about oneself remains not an altogether painless experience. Parallel talks about each other may, however, be the prelude to the truly reconciling act of one addressing the other. It is in this spirit that I wish my comments understood.

I

THE people of Israel pursues its course in history in the faith that it is the people of God. Because God loved Abraham, He chose him and his seed as the people of His Covenant. Because this people is a human family with all the frailties and failings of man, the people of Israel has never ceased to prove unworthy of its election, rebelling against the mission laid upon it by God, more often than is seemly to say. God, in His infinite mercy, nevertheless continues to love this people above all others. To it, He has given His name so that He is known to all the families of the earth as the God of Israel.

Although God is both the creator and ruler of the universe, He

reveals Himself to man, not as the conclusion of the cosmological or teleological proofs, but as the God of Abraham who took the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt and whose people this nation remains to the end of time. He thus remains inaccessible to all those who wish to reach Him and, at the same time, to circumvent this people. Because He said: "I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12:3), He has tied His saving and redemptive concern for the welfare of all men to His love for the people of Israel. Only those who love the people of Israel can love the God of Israel. Israel is thus God's first-born, most precious in His eyes.

From this, two great dangers follow, both of which have come to pass. The first is Israel's vain pride in its own election and the second is the nations' jealousy at that same election. This twofold drama is prefigured in the tale of Joseph and his brothers, but so is the reconciliation that awaits us at the end of time.

Many times, Israel has found it hard to believe that its election is not the fruit of its virtue, that the endless love God bestows on this people is not richly deserved. Uncannily expert in the failings of the nations, often remembering only its faithfulness and rarely its unfaithfulness, turned inward by the hostility of the peoples among whom it lives, Israel tends to forget that its election is for service, that it is a sign of the infinite and unwarranted gift of God rather than any inherent superiority of the people.

Hated on all sides by those who contest its election, Israel looks at times with contempt at a humanity that is not only unwilling to grant its claims but insists on expressing hatred for the God of Israel through the crucifixion of Israel's body. Thus the two reinforce each other: The more Israel is hated, the less it lives up to its divine calling; the less it lives up to its divine calling, the more ludicrous and offensive its claims of divine election become. All this is not to say that had Israel proved more worthy of its election it would not have incurred the hatred of those whom God did not elect. Israel must, nevertheless, come to terms with its failure, with the misuse to which it has put its election. While the role assigned by God to Israel, that of the favorite son, was indeed a difficult one, it could have been fulfilled because election—God's favor—is not a temptation at which man must fail.

II

THE unfaithfulness of Israel is, however, only part of the truth, though it is the part Israel likes to forget and the nations like to remember. The other part of the truth is Israel's faithfulness:

*I remember the affection of your youth,
Your bridal love:
How you followed me through the wilderness,
Through a land unsown.*

(Jer 2:2)

If it is true that Israel is not worthy of its election, it is also true that God's election is not in vain. Not only has He transformed Israel's resistance into an occasion for the glorification of His name, but He has also chosen a people that, side by side with its resistance, acts as the willing servant of God, traversing a wilderness populated by those not willing to acquiesce in the exercise of sovereignty that is God's election of Israel. The prophet tells us:

*Israel is the Lord's hallowed portion,
His first fruit of the harvest;
All that devour him shall be held guilty.
Evil shall come upon them,
Says the Lord.*

(Jer 2:3)

Israel's record is thus not all negative. Starting with Abraham's love for his God which was so great that he was willing to sacrifice his only son, and not ending with those Jews who, holding their children by their hands, walked into Hitler's gas chambers, grateful for the opportunity to sanctify God's name, Israel has shown that obedience is also a human possibility, that the image of God in man makes man not only the descendant of Cain but also of Abel.

Just as Israel's record is mixed, so is that of the nations. Instead of accepting Israel's election with humility, they rail against it, mocking the God of the Jews, gleefully pointing out the shortcomings of the people He chose, and crucifying it whenever an opportunity

presents itself. Israel's presence is a constant reminder to them that they were not chosen but that this people was, and that this people remains in their midst as a thorn in the flesh. Minute by minute, the existence of Israel mocks the pagan gods, the divine beings who rise out of the consciousness of all peoples but which are gentile gods because they are deifications of man and the forces of nature rather than the true, living God of Abraham.

The pagan mind knows very well that the God of Israel demands compassion for the lowly and the suffering, and that this attitude is incompatible with the honor of the warrior and the pleasure of victory, the stuff of which gentile history is made. The eros of the gentiles is threatened by the existence of Israel because this people, living in exile and lacking all the outward manifestations of the state, the normal instrument of national existence, survives the mightiest nation states, many of which have long disappeared from history, while Israel, against all human calculation, endures. Israel is thus a living witness that the God who chose it is the Lord of history and that His purpose will be achieved. Refusing to cherish gratefully the blessing that is promised to all nations through the election of Israel, a blessing which according to the divine word is the purpose of Israel's election, the nations rise with the full anger of their uncircumcision against the God of the Covenant and the people of the Covenant.

III

GRADUALLY something emerges which is to have the profoundest effect: the Church. The Church transcends national boundaries, substituting a community of faith for one based on language and soil. In the Church, the vocabulary of Israel is used—covenant, election, suffering servant, and redemption—and the book that Israel hears as the word of God is for the first time heard by a people that is not of the seed of Abraham. Can anything but joy fill the heart of Israel as it observes the mysterious way in which the God of Israel begins to be heard by the nations? Is it not the faith of Israel that, in the fullness of time, the God of the patriarchs will become the God of all peoples and, if this is not just an idle dream, must Israel not be ready to perceive signs of this even in the travail of history?

Maimonides pointed out that Christianity and Islam "served to clear the way for King Messiah to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord," since through them "the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics—topics of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far isles and many peoples, uncircumcized of heart and flesh."¹ There is, then, at least, a segment of the nations that collaborates with Israel in its mission.

But the Church claims to be the new people of God, Abraham's sons according to faith. Where the old Israel was an elected community, according to the flesh, the new Israel is a community of faith open to all men, whatever their ancestry. From the point of view of the Church, it appears, the election of Israel is thus superseded in God's plan by a new election. Does this mean that the old Israel, the sons of Abraham according to the flesh, ought to disappear from the stage of history? This is not clear. It would seem that the answer is "Yes" because the Church, with the exception perhaps of the very first decades, did not insist that Jews who embraced Christianity retain their identity as Abraham's offspring. Instead, Jews who entered the Church intermarried and their descendants quickly lost knowledge of their origins.

IV

HAD the Church believed that it was God's will that the seed of Abraham not disappear from the world, she would have insisted on Jews retaining their separateness, even in the Church. The fact that Paul asserts that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor freeman, neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28) does not rule out such a special role for the children of ancient Israel in the Church, just as the abolition in Christ of the difference between man and woman does not prevent Paul from insisting that women remain silent in the assembly. Even in Christ, men are men and women are women; only in an ultimate, perhaps eschatological, sense are they one. The Church could have asserted the same of the difference between Jew and Gentile. Since the Church did not assign to the Jew

1. *The Code of Maimonides: The Book of Judges*, tr. Abraham M. Hershman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. xxiii.

who became a Christian such special status, it can be inferred that—quotations from Paul (Rom 11:28–29) to the effect that God does not repent of the gifts He makes notwithstanding—the Church seriously holds that its election superseded that of the old Israel. The existence of the Jewish people as the seed of Abraham seems, therefore, to her no longer a demand of God.

Israel must, of course, reject this view. All attempts to transform its election into a universal election of all men in faith can be interpreted by Israel only as the beginning of that movement toward the universal which, fully developed, culminates in the universal truth of a philosophy antithetical to the concreteness of the God of Abraham. The philosophical component in Christianity, its deep involvement with Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and the myriad problems brought about by this involvement, is thus not merely an accident of intellectual history, but rooted in the Christian kerygma itself.

The substitution of a universal election of faith for the national election of the seed of Abraham lays the groundwork for a universalization that must, in due course, look to philosophy with its even more universal structures. In a sense, the Christian doctrine of election is a demythologization of the Jewish doctrine of election, which Christianity interprets as the concrete symbol of a possibility open to all men. For this reason, the Christian mind was driven to an ever greater concern with philosophy, a tendency that, while not totally absent in the history of Judaism, never reaches the proportions it does in Christianity.

v

THE Church's claim of being the new people of God—a claim the Vatican II Declaration under discussion specifically reiterates—is, from the Jewish point of view, another example of the nations' protest against the election of the stock of Abraham. Just as Joseph's brothers rebelled against the favor shown by their father toward this one child of his, so the nations refuse to accept the election of Israel. And just as Joseph was not guiltless in the matter in that he did not accept his election as he should have, in humility, in fear and trembling, so Israel has not often made it easy for the nations to accept

its election. Just as Joseph suffered for his deeds, so has Israel; just as Joseph retained the election, proving worthy of it, so has Israel. The question that remains is this: What is Israel to make of the Church's claim that it is the new people of God?

We have already dealt with the negative moment of the answer to this question: Israel cannot fail to see in this claim an act of rebellion against the word of God, however much guilt Israel shares in this rebellion. But that is not all Israel must see. To be envious of the election of Israel, the Church must seek the God of Israel, the Church must love that God. This, from the Jewish viewpoint, is the overwhelming significance of the Church's claim to be the new people of God. The nations, as represented by the Church, seek the God of Abraham. This is a fact that has never impressed itself into the Jewish consciousness. Persecuted throughout its history, surrounded by paganism on all sides, a paganism that had nothing but contempt for the God of Abraham, Israel has never grasped that there is a segment of the gentile world into which the word of the God of Abraham has penetrated.

Because the Christian is a human being and, like the Jew, not sinless, he often falls short of that ultimate humility which accepts the will of God in love even where God's will is the election of someone other than himself. Short of that ultimate perfection, a perfection that almost surpasses the human, the Christian is addressed by the God of Jesus who is the God of Abraham. This God is a God of covenant: He relates Himself to a people through a covenant that makes that people His people and Him their God. Access to this God is only through a covenant by means of which a people becomes the people of God; once this is perceived, the Church arises as the people of a new covenant. Christianity, therefore, expresses the longing of those not included in the Covenant with Israel for election by the God of Israel.

VI

HENCE Israel must ask itself how it envisages the relation of the nations to its God. Traditionally, this has been answered in terms of the Noachide laws. They, in turn, were sometimes interpreted in

terms of natural law: All that is required of the nations is that they obey the moral law as dictated by human reason. If this is all that is required of the nations (though, from another point of view, this is more than man is capable of when not aided by God), it would follow that God's relationship is only with Israel and that the nations cannot have their own covenant with Him. This, however, is a biblical theology altogether unacceptable: It ignores the promise to Abraham that through his election the nations, too, will be blessed; it further ignores the covenant with Noah which is not natural law but a covenant in its own right. Maimonides insists that non-Jews fulfill their obligations under the Noachide laws only when they receive them as commanded by God. To be commanded by God is to be addressed by Him, and it is therefore incumbent upon Israel to welcome the covenant of the nations with the God of Israel.

From the human point of view, it is not difficult to understand why a people as uniquely related to God as Israel is, cherishing its election in spite of, or because of, the suffering this election has entailed, is reluctant to entertain the possibility that God may be willing to address other nations and be their Father as well. Because the relation between Israel and God has been so concrete, the mechanisms of human jealousy come into play. God's faithfulness to Israel is thus often thought to imply unconcern with other peoples. But God's willingness to address others and to love them in no way diminishes His love for Israel. Israel must therefore work, hope, and expect the day when many peoples shall go and say:

*Come! Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
To the house of the God of Jacob,
That He may teach us His ways
And that we may walk in His paths.*

(Is 2:3)

VII

FOR their part, the nations who seek the God of Israel must meditate on the mystery of their non-election. Surely non-election does not equal rejection. Ishmael and Esau, the sons of non-election, are suf-

fused in the divine word with a compassion in some respects more powerful than the love of the sons of election. Is it not possible that those who love God so much that, even in their non-election, they submit with love and serenity to the destiny chosen for them by God, are very dear to Him indeed? Not to be the favorite son of a human father is a painful experience but the non-election of God is never a finality, only one way of being touched by the finger of God. If, in the election of Israel, there is also chastisement of a sinful Israel, in the non-election of the nations there is also the father's love for all of his children. In the end of days, there will be a reconciliation of all the families of the earth without division. To foreshadow that day, the Jew must speak humbly of his election, the Gentile with love of his non-election, both waiting together for the final redemption of creation.