

CHRISTIAN MISSION TO THE JEWS
IN THE LIGHT OF THE BIBLE

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I. Christian mission to the Jews has been a special effort of the church ever since the Church Fathers in their "ADVERSUS JUDAEOS" writings made a theological anti-Judaism an inherent part of Christian theology. Because of the understanding of the medieval church as a sacred institution the aim was acceptance of baptism (even by force) as initiation rite for a new member.

The churches of the Reformation with their new understanding of ecclesiology shifted the focus from acceptance of baptism to acceptance of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Protestant Orthodoxy understood this as acceptance of the Christian doctrine which was revealed by God in the Bible. What was considered to be "the teachings of the Bible" was developed into an elaborate dogmatic system believed to be "right and pure" and the purpose of Bible study was to supply the necessary proof-texts. This way a critical examination of the dogmatic presuppositions based on exegesis did not take place.

The development of the historical-critical method in Biblical studies during the 19th century did not change this picture. The orthodox wing of Protestant theology remained unaffected by the new approach to the Bible whereas exegetes belonging to the liberal wing were mostly interested in linguistics, history, religion and later in archeology. As important as these efforts may have been for a historical understanding of the Bible, the immediate theological result was meager. Consequently, the scriptural foundations for the traditional Christian understanding of Judaism and of a special effort to convert Jews were never examined.

As a result, particularly in pietistic circles with their special interest in mission and conversion, the traditional orthodox questions were simply continued: Who is saved? Answer: The one who accepts the "teachings of the Bible" or the "teachings of Jesus as the divine doctrine revealed for the sole purpose of salvation." This way the logical inference has always been: Jews with their rejection of Christ are not saved. Traditional Christian doctrine is used as a gauge to determine who will enjoy salvation and who will not.

This picture changed considerably under the influence of Dialectical theology. Historical-critical study of the Bible became theologically interested. This was particularly true for the Old Testament. The direction of the theological

discussion with regard to the Bible was reversed. Instead of applying dogmatic systems to the Bible, Biblical concepts were discovered and placed on the desks of systematic theologians with critical questions attached.

This development makes it possible and mandatory today to ask with regard to the topic of this paper: What does the Bible say theologically about Old Testament Israel? More specifically: With their rejection of Jesus as the Son of God did the Jews become like gentiles (or even worse)?

II. This question should be approached with a discussion of the Biblical covenant theology. Israel as God's chosen people described her relationship to her God in terms of a covenant. There are many aspects of this covenant relationship. But of particular importance in this context is that the Yahweh-Israel covenant in the Old Testament must be understood as a relationship between two parties of unequal status. A superior, in this case the God of the Old Testament, grants a covenant to an inferior, Israel.

As a result the Yahweh-Israel covenant cannot be adequately described unless one sees that this covenant means different things to the two unequal parties involved. Yahweh in his authority grants a covenant, and however we define the specifics, he assumes the responsibility to give. Israel on the other hand receives, and if she has anything to give it is obedience. Her first act of obedience is to faithfully receive this covenant and to enter into this unique relationship.

This covenant came to Israel as the word of God, and during the severest crisis of this covenant relationship, during the Exile when Israel complained:

"My way is hid from the Lord,
My right is disregarded by my God," Isa. 40:27,

or when the Exiles explained the covenant relationship in terms of a divorced marriage, Isa. 50:1, a prophet exclaimed that "the word of our God will stand forever," Isa. 40:8. It is inconceivable that Yahweh could ever break this covenant or dissolve this unique relationship with the people of Israel. This covenant is an "everlasting covenant," Gen. 17:7.13.19: Exod. 31:16; Lev. 24:8 (cp. also Gen. 9:16) that cannot be revoked by Yahweh.

On the part of Israel, however, the covenant can be broken, Gen. 17:14; Lev. 26:15.44; Deut. 31:16.20. But this cannot result in total elimination of the covenant. The Israel-Yahweh relationships would have been violated, but the Yahweh-Israel relationship would still be in force. The history of the Yahweh-Israel covenant as described in the Old Testament is the history of this covenant in terms of:

An everlasting covenant made by Yahweh once and for ever;
but constantly broken and violated by Israel.

There are two passages in the prophetic tradition that could be construed as a revocation of the covenant relationship:

a: Hos. 1:9; "Call his (the prophet's son) name 'Not my people,' for you are not my people and I am not your God." The phrasing of this word of God is a reversal of the Covenant Formula which became very prominent during the 6th century when as a result of the catastrophe of the year 587 the covenant theology was in a deep crisis: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" (or in reversed order), Deut. 26:16-19; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11.

This announcement of the prophet Hosea sounds very harsh, but the following prophecy of salvation in Hos. 2:14ff makes it appear in a different light. The deep disturbance in the Yahweh-Israel-relationship referred to in Chapter I is only an episode in Yahweh's unchangeable desire to have a covenant with Israel.

b: Jer. 31:31-34. This passage seems to presuppose that the old covenant with the forefathers is revoked, and that in the light of this a new one is promised. This text, however, does not show prophetic style and language, rather it is cast in sermonic prose style of the exilic period. This suggests again that Jer. 31 presupposes the events of 587 and was written by people who believed that the destruction of Jerusalem with the temple and the ensuing exile was the end of the Sinai covenant. But the message of the prophet Deutero-Isaiah which began with the words "comfort, comfort my people" proved them wrong. The catastrophe of the year 587 was not the end of the covenant rather an episode within the covenant.

This is the traditio-historical background for the new covenant in the New Testament, I. Cor. 11:25. The new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ does not replace the Sinai-covenant, rather based on the old covenant it adds a new dimension so that non-Jews can be included. The principle of membership is kata pneuma over against the traditional kata sarka. The controversy between these two groups which is reflected in Gal. 4:21-31 is a controversy within God's covenant. Both groups are "Sons of Abraham." The Apostle Paul states explicitly that God has not rejected his people, Rom. 11:1. At the end of this chapter he explains that the controversy between the two wings in Abraham's family or of the people of God will be resolved as a matter of the ESCHATON at the close of the age, "until the full number of the gentiles come in." v.25.

Against this biblical background two conclusions must be drawn with regard to a Christian concept of mission to the Jews:

a. It is theologically wrong and un-biblical to group Jews with their rejection of Jesus Christ as Son of God together with the gentiles, or to repeat statements like: "Because of their rejection they are worse than heathens." This is secular anti-semitism read into Christian theology. Christian mission is aimed at non-believers, who do not know the God of the Bible.

b. Conversion of the Jews to Jesus Christ as the Son of God who brought Israel out of Egypt is part of the Christian eschatological hope. Any special effort aimed at the conversion of Jews would be an attempt to establish eschatological conditions prematurely.

III. Christian mission to the Jews has always been based on Jesus' last instruction to his disciples according to Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..." Matth. 28:19. It should be noted, however, that the Greek text says: "make disciples of all the ethnē." Here we must presuppose the linguistic tradition of the LXX according to which ta ethnē is used as designation for all the gentile nations (gōyîm) as distinguished from Israel. For Israel the LXX chose a rarely used word, Laos ('am). This usage is clearly reflected in the Hymn of Simeon:

A light for revelation to the gentiles (ethnōn)
and the glory to thy people (Laos). Luke 2:32.

Israel did not consider herself an ethnos. This is indicated by the Old Testament tradition. In the so called Table of the Nations in Gen. 10 the Hebrew gôy is used and in the LXX ethnos. Here we find the nations of the world representing a sinful mankind listed as descendants of Adam and Eve. A certain political and historical order is followed. What establishes a nation in this list has nothing to do with race, culture or language. Rather it is the manifestation of a people as a political power in the area in question with a certain organization (usually a state) under a certain authority (usually a king). The principle of order is regional. The sons of Japheth are the nations in Asia Minor, North-Syria and North Mesopotamia, the sphere of influence of the former empire of the Hittites, vs 2-5. The sons of Ham represent the nations of the Egyptian sphere of influence, vs 6-20. The sons of Shem are the nations between these two regions, vs 21-31.

We would expect to find Israel included in the third group. But Israel is not mentioned here. Instead we find in v. 21 the name of an obscure forefather of Abraham, Gen. 11:10-27. This means two things with regard to Israel:

- a. The origin of Israel as God's chosen people is not understood mythologically, rather the origin of Israel lies in the historical reality of the nations of the world.
- b. The entity that later was called "God's chosen people," ('am yhw; LXX Laos) that was brought out of Egypt by Yahweh and lived in a covenant with her God to become a blessing for all mankind was not an ethnos like the rest of the human race.

This characteristic of Israel is continued in her way through the historical reality of this world. After the occupation of the land she did not what the other Aramaic people did who settled with her, she did not organize a state under a king. Statehood would mean becoming an ethnos. For that reason Gideon, Judg. 8:22f, and later Samuel, 1 Sam. 8:6, reject such a proposition. In the exilic period the deuteronomistic writer in his comprehensive review of the history of Israel puts all the blame for Israel's catastrophe in 587 on the kings as the manifestations of statehood. Never again did the biblical people of God play an active role as state and ethnos. The brief episode with Gedaliah, Jer. 40-41:3, was nipped in the bud and the reports about the wars of the

Maccabees were not included in the Old Testament of the Palestinian canon.

This broad tradition seems to suggest clearly: As people (whatever this term means) Israel is not a nation or ethnos; Israel is an entity sui generis, 'am yhwh, Laos. The Old Testament seems to suggest: Whenever Israel assumes the role of a political entity theological scepticism is in order.

Returning to our consideration of Jesus' instruction of Matth. 18:19, according to which the disciples of Christ are sent as missionaries to all the ethnē of the world the conclusion must be: Within the context of the entire Bible Biblical Israel or the Jews are not included. Within Biblical theology mission to the Jews would be a contradiction in term (Isa. 49:5-6 and Matth ^{6:10} 10:6 are an entirely different context).

And what about the traditional question of the Protestant Orthodoxy: Are the Jews saved (bypassing Christ)? This should be left to God's final judgment when he will be judging about the salvation of all mankind, Jews and Christians included. Reverence to God suggests that we do not interfere.