

NSW Studies Group

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- Christ- our Redemption
- The Priesthood of All Believers
- Christ, the High Priest of the Sanctuary
- The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit
- Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

The Priesthood of All Believers

Alister McGrath has written:

Evangelicalism has, at least in principle, accepted [the] emphasis on Scripture as the absolute authority in all matter of doctrine. Yet during the course of its history, evangelicalism has developed certain or set ways of interpreting Scripture. These need to be checked out, rather than accepted uncritically. Furthermore, in more recent times charismatic individuals have arisen, demanding that we interpret critical passages *their* way, thus interposing themselves between evangelicals and Scripture. Such a development can be resisted, particularly though an appeal to the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.¹

Of course, McGrath is correct, meaning, as he evidently does, that each believer has unique access to God and therefore needs no one to mediate Christ to him or her. Thus, John wrote,

²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it ... ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 Jn 2:20-21, 27).

The precise nature of the problem addressed by John is not clear, but the solution to it is. It is the anointing by the Holy One (the Holy Spirit) which removes the need for an intermediary, for 'for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more' (Jer. 31:34). Forgiveness has removed the great barrier to knowledge of, and so access to, God.

Understandably, the Reformers insisted on this in the face of the dominance by the Roman Catholic Church's 'priesthood', in particular, the *magisterium*² of the Church.

Against such distortions Luther protested that 'our baptism consecrates us all without exception and makes us all priests.... We all have the same authority in regard to the word and the sacraments, although no one has the right to administer them without the consent of the members of his church.' In particular, 'those who exercise secular authority have been baptized like the rest of us.... They are priests and bishops. They discharge their office as an office of the Christian community', and so may advance the reform of the church. All human callings are acceptable before God. 'Every shoemaker can be a priest of God, and stick to his own last while he does it.' 'By virtue of his priesthood, the Christian exercises power with God, for God does what he asks and desires.'

This doctrine was fundamental to the whole Reformation. In Calvin it was more firmly grounded in the one priesthood of Christ.³

¹ Alister McGrath, 'The Importance of Tradition for Modern Evangelicalism' in Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Eds), *Doing Theology for the People of God, Studies in Honour of J.I. Packer*, Apollos, Leicester, 1996, p 163f.

² The teaching office of the Church.

³ David F. Wright, 'Priesthood of All Believers' in Sinclair B Ferguson and David F. Wright (Eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Inter-Varsity press, Leicester, 1988, p 530. See Calvin's *Institutes* 2.15.6; 4.1.12; 4.19.28. Luther's comment on 1 Peter 2:5 highlights the issue for the Reformers:

'Therefore those alone are the holy and spiritual priesthood, who are true Christians and are built upon this stone. For since Christ is the bridegroom, and we all are the bride, the bride has all that the bridegroom has, even his own body. For if he gives himself to the bride, he gives himself to him. Now Christ has been anointed the high and most exalted priest of God himself; he also sacrificed his own body for us, which is the office of the high priest. Besides, he prayed on the cross for us. And in the third place, he also preached the Gospel and taught all men to know God and himself. These three offices he has also given to all of us. Therefore, since he is a priest and we are his brethren, so all Christians have it in their power and charge, and the obligation rests upon them, to preach and to come before God, and one to pray for another, and offer himself up to God. And in spite of the fact that one does not raise his voice to preach or to speak he is

What concerns us now, however, is not whether each believer has direct access to God, which is accepted, but the meaning of the phrase ‘the priesthood of all believers’, in particular as it represents the various statements in the Scriptures which are alleged to support it. Perhaps the most important of these is 1 Peter 2:4-10.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: ‘

See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘

The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’

⁸and ‘

A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Peter has been urging holiness of life (1:13-21) and a sincere love of the brethren (1:22-2:3) all based on the reality of the new birth which has come to the readers (1:3, 23; 2:2). His reason lies in the new nature of the people to whom he is writing: They are ‘living stones’ to be built into ‘a spiritual house’, and that spiritual house is the place where ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus’ are to be offered. Of course, all this depends on their relationship to *the* living stone (verses 4, 6-8).

The readers are to be the place where true worship is to be offered. The word has come to them and caused them to be born anew (1:23-25) and so they stand in contrast to those who ‘stumble because they disobey the word’ (2:8). Rather, the readers are those who offer spiritual sacrifices because they are ‘a royal priesthood’ (2:9).⁴ The question, then, is,

nevertheless a priest.’

Or, as Lenskie put it, ‘Credit Luther with bringing this great scriptural fact to light once more and let no self-constituted priesthood ever insert itself between us believers and God!’ (R.C.H. Lenskie, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1945, p 90).

⁴ The source of this description, Exodus 19:5-6, will be discussed below. At present, we merely note that 1 Peter does seem to have been written to Gentiles so that the language used first of Jews is now given an expanded application; cf. Carson, Moo and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 425. The view that 1 Peter was written to Christian Jews seems now to have been almost totally abandoned, though cf. D.W.B. Robinson, *Faith's Framework, the structure of New Testament Theology*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996, pp 107-109. The logic of Robinson's theological arguments still needs to be addressed by those who argue against a Jewish readership.

‘What does it mean to call the readers ‘a royal priesthood?’ since, if it is true of them, by extension, it is true of us.

The Creation

Psalm 8 asks the question,

³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, The moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
⁴What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? (Ps. 8:3-4, ASV)

In the face of the vastness of creation, what *is* Man? In Psalm 144:3-4 the writer answers that Man is ‘like a breath; [his] days are like a passing shadow’ but for David in Psalm 8 that only increases the wonder. He continues:

⁵Yet you have made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honor.
⁶You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Ps 8:5-8)

His understanding of the dominion of Man is directly paralleled by the account of the creation of Man in Genesis.

²⁶Then God said, ‘Let us make Man in our image, according to our likeness; and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ ²⁷So God created Man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

²⁹God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

¹Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Gen. 1:26- 2:3).⁵

⁵ The *NRSV*'s use of inclusive language obscures what is, I believe, a significant point being made and so the *NRSV* text used here has been modified.

The usual assumption that Adam is a name for a particular person is not appropriate at this point. *Adam* is the Hebrew word for Man and the account goes on to explain that Man (mankind) comprises both male and female. It is to both male and female, Man/*Adam*, that dominion is given. Furthermore, they are to exercise this dominion, to be God's 'vice-regents'⁶ in the context of the Sabbath rest. The significance of this is reinforced by the detail that the seventh day of rest is blessed and hallowed (made holy). Man/*Adam* is to be understood within three contexts: his vocation (dominion), his marriage (Gen. 1:27c; see 2:21-25) and the Sabbath⁷.

Genesis 2:4-25 is sometimes regarded as a second account of the creation, but that view is hardly correct. It is, instead, another view and an expansion of what has already been established.

⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground — ⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. ¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.'

⁶ See William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel, Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament*, Apollos, Leicester, 1989, p 17. Dumbrell says further, in *Covenant and Creation* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), 'By creation, man is then the visible representative in the created world of the invisible God' (p. 34).

⁷ See Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp 34-36.

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen. 2:4-25).

This account of the creation of Man deals with the event in two sections. The first is the creation of the male, who is given specific duties; the second is the creation of the female, whose responsibility is to be the complement of the male in order that he may fulfil his role.

He is to 'till' and 'keep' the garden (2:15). At this point the description of the creation may be seen as pregnant with meaning.⁸ The garden, for instance, is called the garden of *Eden* (2:15, cf. 2:8, where it is described as 'a garden *in Eden*'), meaning a garden of 'delights'. Later, the psalmist identifies 'delights' with the presence of God. Thus

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps. 16:11).

You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence. (Ps. 21:6).

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

⁸They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your *delights*.

⁹For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Ps. 36:7-9).

It seems to me that the description of the garden of Eden is that of a sanctuary, the holy place where Man and God are one in communion and where Man finds his identity and vocation in worship. **Barth** says

The general nature of Paradise is that of a sanctuary. Not man but God is the Possessor and Lord of this Garden. Man finds himself in a place appointed for this purpose by God and fenced off from the other earthly places. He is specially brought there and given rest — an indication that the establishment of Paradise is a distinctive spatial parallel to the institution of the Sabbath as a temporal sanctuary in the first saga. The duty of man in this place is to cultivate and keep it — literally, to serve and watch over it — and it is no fancy if we see here the functions of the priests and Levites in the temple united in the person of one man. And as the tabernacle and later the temple had their centre — not their geometrical but their virtual and functional centre — in the Holiest of Holies, so Eden had its centre in the two trees specially planted by God alongside all the other trees, namely, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ... he is here in God's sanctuary.⁹

Barth's observation that 'we see here the functions of the priests and Levites in the temple united in the person of one man' is based on the interesting detail that the Hebrew verbs translated by 'to till' and 'to keep' (Gen. 2:15) are only found together on three other occasions in Scripture, namely at Numbers 3:7-8; 8:26 and 18:5-6. On each of these occasions the reference is to the duties of the priests and the Levites in the Tabernacle.¹⁰

⁸ See, for example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 1, p. 249ff. and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word, Dallas, 1987, p. 66ff.

⁹ *CD*, III, 1, p 253f.

¹⁰ The words do, of course, carry the normal meanings of 'tilling' (עבד) and 'keeping' (שמר) but are also used individually for the 'serving' (eg. Num. 4:23-24, 26) and 'guarding' (eg. Num. 1:53; 3:28) the Tabernacle.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the task given to the man was that of priest in the sanctuary of Eden. That is why he was created (cf. Gen. 2:5). As priest he is, of course, not involved with sacrifice; that is only a factor later. Here the man has the task of leading the creation in worship. The later imagery of the mountains and hills bursting into song and the trees of the field clapping their hands (Isa. 55:12) and the very stones shouting out (Luke 19:40) and Paul's description of the whole creation subjected to futility and groaning in labour pains as it waits for the revealing of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19-23) bears out this understanding of the role of the man in Eden.

It may be observed that the priestly role is given to the *male*. In Genesis 2, the woman is specifically not present when the details of the man's duties are set out. However, it is also plain that without her he cannot fulfil his responsibilities. She is given to him as one who is his complement — she is 'bone of [his] bones and flesh of [his] flesh' (Gen. 2:23) — his essential and appropriate fulness for the task (Gen. 2:20).

In the light of the first command given to them both, to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen. 1:28), it may be argued that together they were to extend the borders of Eden until the earth is filled with worship, so that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Hab. 2:14; cf. Isa. 11:9). This worship is later described as involving the nations.

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; (Acts 17:26-28).

All the nations were in Adam and as such were intended to search for God and find him and so to participate in the great worship of creation.¹¹

Sin And The Nations

The immediate response to the intrusion of sin into creation was the declaration to the serpent by God that

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. (Gen. 3:15).

The principle that the purpose of God will not be frustrated is then seen to be worked out in the person of Abel, a man of faith who was righteous, in Seth, in whose time 'people began to invoke the name of the LORD' (Gen. 4:26) and then in Noah, 'a righteous man, blameless in his generation [who] walked with God' (Gen. 6:9). These represent the seed of the woman. But, as is known, 'the seed of the serpent' persisted in its rebellion and the story of the building of the tower of Babel describes the deliberate rejection of the command to fill the earth:

Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' (Gen. 11:4).

¹¹ See below.

As a result, the nations were scattered; ‘the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth’ (11:8). The nations now fill the earth, but for the present it is without the worship.

The call of Abraham answers to this situation:

²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

That Abraham was a man of worship is seen on a number of occasions (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:3-4, 18) but the main example is in his obedience when commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). His naming of the place ‘the LORD will provide’ (22:14) refers top far more than the immediate provision of the sacrificial lamb (22:8). It is a declaration that the promise of God, and so the purpose of God, stands. In Abraham all the nations of the earth *will* be blessed!

N.T. Wright has argued that, at least in Rabbinic Judaism, Israel saw itself as being, in Abraham, God’s intended true humanity.

The world was made for the sake of Israel, ... Israel is, or is to become, God’s intended true humanity. ... As later tradition put it, Abraham will be God’s means of undoing the sin of Adam. This broad theme is given significant detail by a set of recurring motifs, in which commands given to Adam in Genesis 1:28 reappear in a new guise:

1:28: God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

12:2f: I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you ...

17:2, 6, 8: And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.... I will make you exceedingly fruitful; ... And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan ...

[He also records Gen. 22:16ff; 26:3f, 24; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:3f.]

Thus at key moments — Abraham’s call, his circumcision, the offering of Isaac, the transitions from Abraham to Isaac and from Isaac to Jacob, and in the sojourn in Egypt — the narrative quietly makes the point that Abraham and his family inherit, in a measure, the role of Adam and Eve. ... We could sum up this aspect of Genesis by saying: Abraham’s children are God’s true humanity, and their homeland is the new Eden.¹²

This is consistent with the announcement to the redeemed Israel that

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Ex. 19:5-6).

¹² N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p 21ff. See also N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London, 1992, p 262ff.

Israel is the focus of the priestly leadership of creation. The Tabernacle and then the Temple are possibly to be regarded as expressions of the worship which takes place within the creation. The high priest was to wear an ephod which had pomegranates on it (Ex. 28:33f) and the Temple had pomegranates on the pillars (1 Kings 7:18, 20, 42). Far from being mere general fertility symbols¹³ these could be indicative of the fruitfulness of the creation, and in particular of the land God gave to Israel. Indeed, the rich fruitfulness of the land is directly associated with the worship by the people:

Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. ⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰*You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.* (Deut. 8:6-10).

The Apostle Paul put it that God had given to Israel 'the worship' (Rom. 9:4). The reason for this was later to be expressed in his own ministry to the Gentiles. Israel was to be engaged in the priestly role which had been given to Adam at creation, so that the nations may come and be caught up in the worship of the Creator. Israel is the focus and the prophets recognise this. Surprisingly (to us) large sections of the Old Testament prophets are devoted to issues affecting the nations, for example Isaiah 13-19, Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 28-32; Obadiah and Nahum are totally concerned with other nations. Jeremiah was specifically told that he was going to be 'a prophet to the nations' and that by the word of the Lord in his mouth nations and kingdoms would plucked up and pulled down, destroyed and overthrown, built and planted (Jer. 1:5, 9-10).

The prophecy of Isaiah sets the pattern most clearly. Having castigated Israel for its misuse of the worship which had been given (1:10-15), God calls on Israel as his estranged children (that is, not as those who do not know him) to return to true worship and to the experience of forgiveness and restoration (1:16-19, 27). Then the prophet describes what he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³Many peoples shall come 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.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:2-4).

The startling reality was, however, that just as Adam denied his vocation in Eden, so also did Israel. The prophet Jonah points out the extreme reluctance of Israel to see the nations blessed (contrary to Genesis 12:1-3). Even when forced to fulfil the role of prophet to the nations they are angered rather than pleased by the response. Ezekiel describes the same problem in 36:16-21. Israel had been judged and exiled because of its moral pollutions and

¹³ John Gray, *I & II Kings*, (OTL), SCM, London, 1977, p 185.

idolatry, but when they came to the nations among whom they had been scattered the result was still that the name of the LORD was profaned.

If that was so, then God himself must intervene to fulfil his purpose for the nations. This, he says, will take place when Israel is restored.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, *and bring you into your own land.*

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your GOD. ²⁹I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. ³²It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

³³Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. ³⁴The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. ³⁵And they will say, '*This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.*' ³⁶ Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it. (Ezekiel 36:22-36).

Adam at last

The promised restoration of Israel, with the nations in view, has been raised by the prophets in their general comments, but there are two passages of Scripture which set the agenda for the plan of God more directly. They are Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42:1-9 (the first of the servant 'songs'). Their significance is seen when Jesus is baptised, since the words spoken by God the Father to Jesus are taken from them.

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

²The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying,

³'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.'

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

⁵Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'

⁷I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘*You are my son*; today I have begotten you. ⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. ⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’

¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. ¹¹Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling ¹²kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2).

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, *in whom my soul delights*; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

... ⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, (Isaiah 42:1-6).

The Messiah/Son/King of Psalm 2 is commanded to ask the LORD *for the nations*; the servant is to be *a light to the nations*. Of course, the servant has already been identified as ‘Israel’ in Isaiah 41:8-9, but the picture is clarified when the title is, by implication, given to Jesus at his baptism.

Luke’s description of Jesus is that of a man whose life derives from the activity of the Holy Spirit and who never violates his true being. When the angel spoke to Mary, he told her that her pregnancy would be the result of the Holy Spirit coming upon her. The child to be born ‘will be called Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). In this he is Adam (see Gen. 2:7 cf. Job. 27:3; Psalm 104:29-30) and this identification is made explicit in Luke’s genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38). ‘Adam was the Son of God’!

The genealogy follows the account of Jesus baptism where the Father declares Jesus to be ‘my Son, the Beloved, with [whom] I am well pleased’ (Luke 3:22). The reader is doubtless expected to recognise the source of the quotes and the contexts which they represent. If Jesus is declared to be the Son and is anointed by the Spirit then it is plain that he is the king who is to ask God and so receive the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession.¹⁴ He will be *the* light to the nations.

Following his baptism, then, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. If he is Adam then he must endure the same assault which brought the first man down. So just as the original temptation called the word of God into question (‘Has God said ...?’) so the same is true here; ‘If you are the Son of God ...’. And, furthermore, if the issue of history is that of worship, then that is expressed in the suggestion that Jesus may indeed have the nations as his own; all he need do is worship the devil. Unlike Adam, he insists that

It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ (Lu. 4:8).

¹⁴ The principle applied here has been enunciated by C.H. Dodd:

‘The method included, first, the *selection* of certain large sections of the Old Testament scriptures, especially from Isaiah, Jeremiah and certain minor prophets, and from the Psalms. These sections were understood as *wholes*, and particular verses or sentences were quoted from them rather as pointers to the whole context than as constituting testimonies in and for themselves. At the same time, detached sentences from other parts of the Old Testament could be adduced to illustrate or elucidate the meaning of the main section under consideration. But in the fundamental passages it is the *total context* that is in view. and is the basis of the argument.’ (*According to the Scriptures*, Fontana, London 1952, p 126.)

In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2 (Lu. 4:18-19) and proceeded to claim that all that that prophecy had anticipated was true in the presence of the hearers (Lu. 4:21). But precisely what was the prophecy claiming? In Luke's form it reads

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Isaiah has already identified the problem which lay behind this promise. It was, according to Isaiah 58:6, that the true fast which God required from, but did not find in, Israel was that of loosing the bonds of injustice and letting the oppressed go free. So one will come who be all that Israel was but refused to be. I am suggesting, then, that when he sets out on his anointed ministry, Jesus is Israel.¹⁵ He is setting out to claim the nations, not merely as a trophy of battle but as the gathering of those who will, at last, offer true worship to God. In order to do this, of course, all the evil which has held the nations in guilt must be removed. If the whole world lies in the evil one (1 John 5:19), then the scope of Jesus ministry is plain. Matthew records Jesus being named 'for he will save his people from their sins' (1:21), which would accord with the restoration of Israel to its intended role. John, on the other hand, recounts John the Baptist as calling Jesus 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).

Thus, when Jesus is about to face the Cross, he declared,

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:31-32).

If the cross was the judgement of the world, when all evil was defeated, then it was also Christ's triumph, out of which he would draw all people to himself. This is delineated in the book of the Revelation, where the twenty-four elders sing a new song:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; ¹⁰*you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.* (Rev. 5:9-10; cf. 1:6; 7:13-15).

Now at last there is a royal priesthood! And they are pure. In the face of the false prophet and those whom he has enticed, John records that

Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. ⁴It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless. (Rev. 14:1-5).

¹⁵ Cf. the otherwise strange use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15, 'Out of Egypt I have called my Son'. Again, Jesus is Israel and is about to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15).

Here is the worshipping community. And it comprises the redeemed from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Now while that may mean that the worshipping community is the locus of the healing activity for the nations promised for Abraham and his descendants, I remain to be convinced that they thereby become members of Israel. On the one hand, humanly, Israel can now be regarded as merely one of the nations. When Peter and John are forbidden by the Jewish leaders to preach, the church saw that as consistent with Psalm 2 which said that ‘the nations’ are raging against the Lord and his Messiah (Acts 4:25-26). On the other hand, the nation of Israel never ceases to be the nation Israel. But the worshipping community is not found in Israel; Israel is found in the new community. This is the thrust of Ephesians 2:11-22.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’ — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands —¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself *one new humanity in place of the two*, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Israel and the nations stand side by side in the new humanity, the new Man¹⁶. Christ has fulfilled Israel, so that now the nations come to him. And the result is Israel and the nations together built into a holy temple in the Lord, the place where God dwells.

The Action Of The Kingdom Of Priests

‘The great Commission’ of Matthew 28:18-20 has for some two hundred years been regarded as a command for the whole church.¹⁷ In its context it is a command to the

¹⁶ The contrast made between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15 has not been discussed, but is making the same point as I am making, although in Romans Paul is approaching the topic soteriologically and in 1 Corinthians eschatologically.

¹⁷ ‘In the last decade of the 18th century William Carey launched his powerful plea for missionary witness in the non-Christian world. This plea marked the beginning of the great century and a half of missionary proclamation at the tapering end of which we now find ourselves. If we were to select a single effort by Carey which would be considered pre-eminently influential in sending the modern missionary movement on its way it would doubtless be the publication in 1792 of his booklet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. The first section of his book, which also constitutes its theological argument, is entitled, ‘An Enquiry whether the Commission given by our Lord to His Disciples be not still Binding on Us’. Lamenting the want, in his own time, of the zeal and perseverance that characterized the early Christian obedience to Christ’s command, Carey takes direct issue with ‘an opinion existing in the minds of some, that because the apostles were extraordinary officers and have no proper successors, and because many things which were right for them to do would be unwarranted for us, therefore it may not be immediately binding on us to execute the commission, though it was so upon them’. Christ’s command, said Carey, is binding on men today as it was binding on the apostles. If this be not true, he argued, then the command to baptize should also be restricted to the apostles, then all such ordinary ministers who have endeavored to carry the gospel to the heathen have acted without warrant, and whoever goes now to preach the gospel to them goes without authority if he have not a special commission from heaven. Then also the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world’ must be limited to the apostles. The command has not been repealed, there continue to be subjects to obey it, there has been no counter revelation to nullify it, and nothing stands in the way of obeying it. Therefore, Carey concludes, Christ’s mandate remains in effect and requires the obedience of Christian

eleven disciples (see verse 16) and one which, I believe they fulfilled. The similar commission at the end of Mark is fraught with difficulties, so that, since it is so similar to Matthew's account anyway, we may perhaps not focus our attention on it. There are no commands concluding Luke or John, unless we want to make much of the command of Jesus in Luke 24:49, where he ordered the disciples *not* to go and preach, at least not yet. Neither is there a command in Acts 1:8. Yet the concern for the nations is not forgotten.

Matthew's record describes Jesus announcing that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. As a result the eleven are to go and make disciples of all nations. Of course, this should be seen as nothing less than the Messiah/Son/King of Psalm 2 sending them out to gather the nations, his inheritance. Nor is he sending them out to do his work, He is with them and they are actually participating in his action.¹⁸

The eleven were the apostles, men with a unique and unrepeatable status in the church (see Eph. 2:20). Did they go? We may answer with both 'yes' and 'no'. No, we have little record of them actually doing very much at all, since the book of Acts really focuses on Peter and Paul. Certainly, at one point, we are told that the apostles did not leave Jerusalem when the persecution became fierce and all the others were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Yet in the scattering of the church the word was preached (Acts 8:4).

Even had the apostles themselves left Jerusalem, physically it was impossible for them to complete the task but through the apostolic message (see Acts 2:42, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching') which had come to the believing community and by which it had become a kingdom of priests, the great commission was being fulfilled. Furthermore, just as Jesus had said that he would be with them so Romans 10:17 declares that 'faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ'. In the going and the speaking, Christ is speaking and evoking faith and obedience in the hearers.

Similarly, in Acts, the 'hero' of the story is 'the word'. It was 'the word of God which grew mightily and prevailed' (Acts 19:20). Within Acts it is doubtful that the word is to be identified directly with Jesus; that is a Johannine approach. The word in Acts is very similar

men and women.' (Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Mission*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1961, p 16f.) Boer's does not support Carey's thesis.

¹⁸ A similar point may be made with regard to the close of Luke's Gospel (24:44-49). There the statement is made that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations'. Notably, the word translated as 'forgiveness' is ἄφεσιν (*aphesin*), the same word used twice by Jesus in the reading from Isaiah in Luke 4:18, where it is translated as 'release'. Within the context of both sections lies the anointing by the Spirit, proclamation (κηρύσσω) and ἄφεσις, with the suggestion that there is to be continuity between Jesus' ministry and that of the disciples.

to the Old Testament language of the word of God being in the mouth of the prophet, which would explain the choice of Joel 2 for the testimony on the day of Pentecost.

What must be stressed is that it was not obedience to the great commission which motivated the early church. Indeed, there is no reference to it. On the contrary it was not law (even good old evangelical law) but grace which was the driving force. There are three statements in the New Testament, all by Paul, which indicate that within the early church, or, at *least* in Paul's own experience, there was a drive for proclamation which was more than simply obedience. Three statements are:

... by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum *I have fully proclaimed the good news* of Christ. (Romans 15:19).

I became [the church's] servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known*, ... (Colossians 1:25).

But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through *me the message might be fully proclaimed* and all the Gentiles might hear it. (2 Timothy 4:17).

The italicised words need our attention. A literal translation¹⁹ of Romans 15:19 reads 'I have fulfilled the gospel'²⁰; of Colossians 1:25, 'to fulfil the word of God'²¹; and of 2 Timothy 4:17, 'to fulfil the proclamation'²². These statements would indicate that it was not the command of Christ which was fulfilled but the gospel which, in Paul's case, came to him 'by revelation' (Gal. 1:12).²³ The gospel, the word and the proclamation, all one and the same thing, contain such a dynamic that the one who receives them 'cannot but speak of the things which he has seen and heard' (Acts 4:20). This, I suggest, is the reason why those who were scattered abroad when Saul persecuted the church continued to proclaim the word (Acts 8:4). Likewise, this explains Paul's claim that it is Christ who speaks in him (2 Cor. 13:3).

¹⁹ I acknowledge that literal translations do not always convey the substance of what is said; often they merely sound authoritative though their quaintness. In this case, however, the consistent pattern, along with the thrust of what has been said so far, would seem to justify the observation.

²⁰ Gk. *πεπληρωκένα τὸ εὐ ἀγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*

²¹ Gk. *πληρῶσαι τὸ ν λό γον τοῦ θεοῦ*

²² Gk. *τὸ κήρυγμα πληροφορηθῆ* The use of a different verb does not seem to alter the significance of the argument. Cf the lexicons.

²³ Paul was not unique in this. Indeed, I suggest that this was the meaning of Jesus's statement in Matt. 16:16-18.

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'

The rock, I would argue, is neither Peter (though his role at Pentecost, Samaria and Caesarea is often overlooked), his faith or his confession of Christ (both of which are of undoubted significance in the post-Pentecost foundation of the church); rather it is the revelation of the Son by the Father which is the foundation for all that Jesus will do. See Matthew 11:25-27.

The Royal Priesthood

So we should ask, where is the focus of worship? We have seen that throughout history there have always been those who worship. In particular, Israel in the land which God gave to it, was a clear declaration that the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob ought to be worshipped. But we must say that the principle focus of worship was Christ himself. Jesus told the woman of Samaria,

But the hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. (John 4:23).

The true worship of the Father was revealed in him.

But then the focus of worship was expanded to include the church, the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17). The church is the body, the bride of Christ, and so participates in the worship led by the last Adam. Thus Peter's description that the church, as a royal priesthood, offers acceptable worship 'through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 4:5).

It is from the church that the word of Christ goes out. The priestly community is also the prophetic community (and also the kingly community) and the result of the proclamation is described as nothing short of, humanly, spectacular:

He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' (Gen. 15:5).

And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. (Gen. 17:2).

After this I looked, and *there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.* (Rev. 7:9).

Not only is there a priestly community, gripped the by the word of Christ, but there is also, though them, a vast number of men and women from every conceivable background all caught up into Christ. And the climax of history is presented in terms of the fulfilment of all that God the Father had purposed and planned through his Son. It is nothing less than the nations, purged of all unbelief and impurity, all present in the sanctuary and participating the great worship.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 21:22 — 22:2).

Plainly this goal, the *telos* of history, cannot be brought about by our actions. It is totally dependent upon the Father and the Son and the Spirit in their union accomplishing all

that they had determined. But, while it does not depend on us, it is nevertheless our privilege to participate in this great work. We cannot bring about the priesthood of all believers; that lies in God's call. But we can rise up in faith and be 'the people of God', those in Christ who are in the new Man, and who are so gripped by the gospel that we cannot but speak of all that we have seen and heard.

Christ, the High Priest of the Sanctuary

In our previous study we approached the subject of the Priesthood of all Believers from the direction of the nature of Adam as priest in the sanctuary of Eden and of our coming to fulfilment as a priestly race in the last Adam. This study will trace some of the same subject matter, though focussing on the way in which Christ, the last Adam, is indeed the Great High Priest in the sanctuary of God. However, at the beginning, I want to stress that while this paper may at times analyse information it is essentially an exposition which draws from me a response of gratitude as pure as I am capable of this side of the appearing of Christ and which, I suggest, ought to be approached in the deliberate and conscious attitude of faith and worship. This is because if Christ is indeed the High Priest in the Sanctuary, then he is so now. The title is far more than an excuse for 'theologising'; it is a recognition of the great status which he now has.

Our Great High priest

Roughly two thirds of the uses of the phrase 'high priest' in the Bible occur in the New Testament and of those two thirds almost one third (19 out of 68¹) is in the letter to the Hebrews. Furthermore, it is only in the letter to the Hebrews that the title 'high priest' is applied to Jesus; elsewhere it is the title of the leader of the religious side of the Jewish state, with one exception in Acts 19:14 where a person, evidently in Ephesus, named Sceva has assumed the title, probably for its local significance.

Within the Old Testament, the title is used sparingly in the accounts of early Israel. In fact, it occurs only twice in the Pentateuch, at Numbers 35:25, 28, where it speaks of the national significance of the death of the high priest, since his death marked the occasion when someone who had fled to a city of refuge for unpremeditated manslaughter may leave the city without threat. Later, some rabbis suggested that the death of the high priest was an atonement for the injustice of the manslaughter,² thus seeing the liberty of the one who fled as a matter of religious significance.

However, while the title may be used sparingly, quite plainly the role of Aaron, Moses' brother, and his sons was a matter of importance within Israel. When Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, took action against the blatant immorality described in Numbers 25:1-3, God promised him a 'covenant of perpetual priesthood' (Num. 25:13), apparently indicating that the dignity of the high priestly office was to belong to him and to his descendants.

By 'high priest' we are no doubt to understand initially the special leadership role of Aaron and his sons, although they are generally referred to as priests. Nonetheless, a great amount of attention is paid to the way Aaron and his sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, were chosen and how Aaron was to be provided with vestments (Ex. 28:1-43). The conspicuous feature of the vestments is probably the provision of the golden rosette

¹ NRSV.

² W.O. McCready, 'Priest, High', in Geoffrey Bromiley (Ed), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume Three*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, p 961.

inscribed with the words, 'Holy to the LORD' (Ex.28: 36-38). Aaron must wear this on his turban because he is taking upon himself 'any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donation'.

The ordination of Aaron and his sons was to be an elaborate ritual, described in Exodus 29 though not actually carried out until Leviticus chapters 8-9. The duties they were given focuses particularly on the sacrifices to be offered. Leviticus 1-7 describe the various types of offerings and sacrifices and the way that Aaron's sons were to offer the blood, cut up the sacrificial animal and organise the presentation of the offering, whether an animal or bird or grain to be burned or distributed.

The high point of the sacrificial system was the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16. The presence or absence of the title 'high priest' is seen to be somewhat irrelevant since the instructions are quite explicit: only Aaron may enter 'the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark' (Lev. 16:2) and he may only do this once a year (Lev. 16:29-34). This day is a momentous event in Israel:

³³He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the LORD had commanded him.

(Lev. 16:33-34).

Möller and Payne³ say of this event:

In accordance with its name, Yom Kippur was designed to effect atonement. The blood of sacrifices, suffering death in the place of sinful men, symbolized the propitiation of God's wrath first of all against Aaron and his priestly family (Lev. 16:6, 11); for even the high priest stood before God as a death-guilty sinner (v. 13). On this day, with the exception of the miter, he does not wear the insignia of his high-priestly office but dons white garments, which in their simplicity represent the earnestness of the situation. The repetition of the bath, both in his case and in that of the other persons engaged in the ceremony (vv. 4, 24, 26, 2X), was necessary, because the mere washing of the hands and feet (Ex. 30:19f.) would not suffice on this occasion (cf. Nu. 19:7ff., 19, 21). Correspondingly, the flesh of the sin-offering animals was not permitted to be eaten but had to be burned (v. 27) because it was sacrificed also for Aaron's sin (compare Lev. 16:27 with 6:23; 4:11f., 21; Ex. 29:14; Lev. 8:17; 9:11; 10:19). Atonement is further wrought for the sanctuary, which has been defiled by the contamination of Israel (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16:16-20, 33; cf. also Ezk. 45:18-20). In particular, the holy of holies is mentioned (Lev. 16:33), then the holy place (vv. 16b, 20, 33), and then the altar (vv. 18, 20, 33). With the way thus prepared, a climactic atonement takes place for all the transgressions of the congregation since the last Day of Atonement (cf. vv. 21f., 30, 34). Particularly significant is the departure of the sin-laden scapegoat (vv. 8, 10, 20-22; cf. Lev. 14:7, 53; Zec. 5:5-11; and numerous parallels in other religions), not as a sin offering (for God's people are not to sacrifice to demons, Dt. 32: 17). but symbolizing the sending back to its satanic source the guilt of Israel. Thus Delitzsch correctly called the Day of Atonement 'the Good Friday of the Old Testament.' Furthermore, even as salvation requires both God's redemptive activity and man's response of faith, so also the ritual of atonement remained ineffective unless accompanied by sincere repentance (cf. Num 15:30). As the Talmud later cautioned. there could be no forgiveness for a man who sinned, counting on Yom Kippur for atonement (*Yoma* viii-ix). In

³ W. Möller and J.B. Payne, 'Atonement, Day of' in Bromiley, *ISBE* Vol. 1, p 361.

comparison, however, with the consciousness of sin that had been aroused, how great must God's grace have appeared when once in each year a general remission of sins was vouchsafed!

Small wonder, then, that Micah exclaimed,

¹⁸Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency.

¹⁹He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

²⁰You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old. (Micah 7:18-20).

'Unswerving loyalty' (Mic. 7:20) is God's covenant faithfulness, his *chesed*, by which he keeps his people in covenant relationship with him, and reflects the character of Israel's God detailed in Ex. 34:6-7 ('abounding in *chesed* ... keeping *chesed*') and Psalm 103:8-14.

⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

¹⁴For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

Were it not for God's *chesed*, Israel could not remain in covenant relationship, since they are but dust. We should note that the language used here of sins being sent away 'as far as the east is from the west' and the language of Micah of sins being cast 'into the depths of the sea' is substantially the same as the action of sending the goat bearing sin into the wilderness, thus obtaining the *remission* of sins.

What must be observed is that apart from the ministrations of the high priest there would be no Day of Atonement. Only the high priest could enter into the holy of holies, and then only after he had made purification for sins. Wenham's⁴ comment is helpful:

... [Leviticus] Chs. 11-15 have disclosed that all men are liable to contract uncleanness, through food, through death, through sex, or through disease. As we have seen, uncleanness is not necessarily morally culpable; it does not always require a sacrifice to eliminate its effects. But it does make a person unfit to enter the sanctuary. Yet the uncleanness rules are so wide-ranging that inevitably someone is going to infringe them unwittingly and thereby pollute the sanctuary and make it unfit for the presence of God. The main purpose of the day of atonement ceremonies is to cleanse the sanctuary from the pollutions introduced into it by the unclean worshippers (cf. 16:16, 19). Without a purpose such as this there would have been little point in the high priest putting his life at risk by entering into the holy of holies. The aim of these rituals is to make possible God's continued presence among his people.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, (NICOT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 227f.

The high priest's duties are at the risk of his life. The insignia on his turban also reminds him that he is bearing in his own body the sins of the people.⁵ Unless there is atonement, both priest and people will die.⁶

It is the significance of the duties which explains the high demands made on the person of the priest. Leviticus chapter 21 sets out various items which indicate the great distinctiveness of the high priest. He may not even take part in the burial of his closest relatives (vss. 11-12); his duties take precedence even over that.⁷ His choice of marriage partner has clear limits and he must not be a person with bodily deformity. It does not mean that bodily deformity is evil; it does mean that 'holiness finds physical expression in wholeness and normality'.⁸ Alongside this is the duty of the priest to decide on the nature of various skin diseases and so to decide whether an afflicted person may rejoin the worshipping community.

We must understand that all these elements of the high priestly life and duties relate to the fact that he leads the worship of Israel. Others, the Levites, take part but he is the leader and, whatever his character or conduct, he is to be honoured (see later in Acts 23:1-5).

It is notable that the first reference to priests in regard to Israel is the reference to the whole nation as a royal priesthood in Exodus 19:6. As we have seen in the previous study, Israel's role is explicable in terms of the priestly function of Adam in Eden. The high priest is, then, the one who leads the worship of the worshipping community. The world will know nothing of true worship apart from Israel and will know nothing of true worship apart from the actions of the high priest.

The Priest and sacrifices

The subject of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament is often regarded as somewhat bewildering because of its complexity. Yet an examination of the role of the high priest in Israel demonstrates that his task is almost totally that of officiating at the altar. Some comments on the essential features of sacrifice are therefore needed.

Sacrifice highlights the demand of God for perfection in creation. As Israel stands in the place of Adam, so she must be pure and those items which express the relationship to God must likewise be pure. The sacrifices must be unblemished and the one who officiates must likewise be whole in every way.

Further, the choice of what is acceptable for sacrifice is determined by the fact that God had chosen Israel for his own people and therefore certain animals represent the holiness of the nation.

In Purity and Danger (1966), Mary Douglas analysed the whole ritual system enshrined in the laws of Leviticus in a way that for the first time showed them to be a coherent and meaningful whole, not a 'hotch-potch' of unrelated ceremonies, laws and regulations. She insisted that it is necessary to understand the whole ritual system and not just parts of it, or more precisely to understand the parts of it in the light of the whole. This may be illustrated by her approach to the food laws. Earlier commentators picked on certain elements in the food laws as suggestive of a

⁵ ?1 Peter 2:24.

⁶ ?1 Tim. 4:16.

⁷ ?Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60.

⁸ Wenham, *Leviticus*, p 292.

particular interpretation. For instance sheep were clean because they reminded man of his divine shepherd, while serpents were unclean because they recalled the agent of the fall. But multitudes of animals in the list found no easy explanation of this type, for example camels, eagles, grasshoppers, etc. Douglas drew attention to that feature in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 that the biblical writers seem to concentrate on, namely the means of locomotion of the animals, how many feet and what type of feet they have. From surveying the lists as a whole she deduced that the animal world mirrors the human world. Just as there are three principle divisions among men, Gentiles, Jews and priests, so there are three classes of animals: unclean, that cannot be eaten; clean, i.e. edible; and sacrificial beasts. Her theory of correspondence between the human and the animal kingdoms is confirmed by other texts scattered through the Pentateuch.

These insights are corroborated in the earliest commentaries on these laws. For example, the second century BC Letter of Aristeas sees the behaviour of clean animals as models of human conduct. Acts 10 links the preaching of Peter to the Gentiles with eating unclean animals. In other words, as soon as men of all nations could belong to the people of God, those food laws which had symbolized Israel's election and served to separate her from the nations became irrelevant too.⁹

The matter of selection by God in the choice of the sacrifice is mirrored in the words of Hebrews 5:4,

And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

It is conspicuous that it is *God's* choice. When the appointment of Aaron is described, in Exodus 7:1, Aaron is designated as having a 'prophetic' function. Even when Israel is called to leave Egypt to worship God (Ex 3:12; 4:23 etc) there is no indication of Aaron's later role. In Exodus 19:22, priests are mentioned but we are probably to understand them as being left-overs from the corporate life of Israel in Egypt.¹⁰ It is only in Exodus 28-31 that Aaron is chosen to lead the worship of Israel. The choice of Aaron is followed by the description of the event of the golden calf, in which Aaron led Israel, not as priest but as head of the people in Moses' absence, in their corrupt behaviour. However, this in no way called the choice of Aaron and his sons as priests into question. They may do their task well or not and they may die because of their impurity (see Leviticus 10:1-3) but they could not cease to be priests. Their holiness was not intrinsic but the gift of God.

I have noted the way that the high priest is to 'take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offerings that the Israelites consecrate as their donations' (Ex. 28:38). He is to enable the worshipping people to come before God without fear and to present their sacrifices. These sacrifices are often associated with the hand of the guilty party being laid on the head of the sacrificial victim (Lev. 1:4; 3:2, 8; 4:4, 15, 29, and especially 16:20-22). By this Israel could see that it was identified with the animal and that what was done to the animal was symbolically done to the worshipper. There is an identification between the worshipper and the victim.¹¹ By this identification, the victim stands not only in the place of the worshipper,

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, 'The Theology of old Testament Sacrifice' in Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J Selman (Eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible*, Paternoster, Carlisle, 1995, p 78f.

¹⁰ Later, Joshua reminded Israel that their ancestors had served other gods 'beyond the river *and in Egypt*' (Josh 24:14).

¹¹ Wenham, 'Theology' p 77, 79.

but *as* the worshipper. The story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:13 points to this principle.

¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Isaac was to be given to God in order that God's purpose for history might be fulfilled. And he was. The sacrifice of the ram was in place of Isaac, but that did not mean that Isaac was excused from his calling. Rather the provision of the ram simply pointed to Isaac's continued role in the plan of God. In the death of the ram Isaac was totally set apart for God as much as he would have been had it been his own blood that was shed by Abraham.

All this pointed to the fact that in Israel, sacrifice was dynamic. It was dynamic because it actually effected the propitiation of God and it did that because God, the propitiated, had established that it would do so.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. (Leviticus 17:11).

Propitiation

There is no general agreement concerning the word 'propitiation'. In Heb. 2:17, the Greek word, ἡ λώσκεσθαι (*hilaskesthai*)¹² is variously translated as 'to make a sacrifice of atonement' (NRSV), 'to make expiation' (RSV), 'make atonement' (NIV), 'to make propitiation' (ASV) and 'to make reconciliation' (AV). A related noun ἡ λαστήριον (*hilasterion*), found at Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 9:5 follows from the above, with the exception of the AV which uses 'propitiation'. I John 2:2 and 4:10 use the word ἡ λασμός (*hilasmos*), with the same results. While the meaning of these words has been debated extensively¹³, the general meaning seems to be that these words refer to the restoration of a relationship between God and men and women, a relationship which has been damaged by guilt which has called forth the wrath of God. It is the factor of God's wrath which is central.¹⁴

There is a word, related to these, which does not occur in the New Testament but which is important in the Old Testament — ἐξιλάσκομαι (*exilaskomai*). It is the usual Old Testament verb for 'to make atonement' and represents two areas of Old Testament thought. The first is what Leon Morris¹⁵ calls 'the non-cultic use' and is basically the offering of an atonement, that is, the removal of wrath, by the offering of a gift' and this area applies as much to the details of human relationships. Thus Genesis 32:20, where Jacob hopes to appease his brother.

and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.' For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.'

¹² Used elsewhere only at Luke 18:13, in the prayer of the tax-collector, 'be merciful to me a sinner'.

¹³ See F. Büchsel et al, *TDNT*, III, pp 301-323; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Tyndale, London, 1965, pp 144-213.

¹⁴ eg. *Apostolic Preaching*, p 147ff.

¹⁵ p. 161ff.

The second, 'the cultic use', focuses on the fact that in the sacrifices of Israel the wrath of God is removed by the offering of a gift, and it is in this area that we should notice that the word ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) is used for the mercy-seat over the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:17).

The reason for mentioning these things lies in the fact that Hebrews 9:5 mentions the mercy seat and Romans 3:25 says that

God put [Jesus] forward as a sacrifice of atonement [*hilasterion*] by his blood, effective through faith. (Romans 3:25).

Douglas Moo observes

... a strong case can be made for taking the word as a reference to the OT 'mercy seat,' the cover over the ark where Yahweh appeared (Lev. 16:2), and on which sacrificial blood was poured. For this is what the word refers to in its one other NT occurrence (Heb. 9:5), as well as in 21 of its 27 LXX occurrences. Particularly significant are the several occurrences of the word in the description in Lev. 16 of the 'Day of Atonement' ritual. According to this text, the high priest is to enter the 'Holy of Holies' once a year and sprinkle on the mercy seat (= LXX *hilasterion*) the blood of a sacrificial victim, thereby 'making atonement.' In the OT and Jewish tradition, this 'mercy seat' came to be applied generally to the place of atonement. By referring to Christ as this 'mercy seat,' then, Paul would be inviting us to view Christ as the New Covenant equivalent, or antitype, to this Old Covenant 'place of atonement,' and, derivatively, to the ritual of atonement itself. What in the OT was hidden from public view behind the veil has now been 'publicly displayed' as the OT ritual is fulfilled and brought to an end in Christ's 'once-for-all' sacrifice. This interpretation, which has an ancient and respectable heritage, has been gaining strength in recent years. It is attractive because it gives to *hilasterion* a meaning that is derived from its 'customary' biblical usage, and creates an analogy between a central OT ritual and Christ's death that is both theologically sound and hermeneutically striking.

To be sure, there are objections to taking *hilasterion* as a reference to the 'mercy seat.' Some claim, for instance, that the imagery would have been foreign to the Gentile Christian church in Rome; and Paul would hardly have used imagery that he knew they would fail to understand. However, arguments based on what the Gentile congregation in Rome would, or would not, have been familiar with are precarious. Paul's letters furnish abundant proof that he expected his Gentile readers to be fully conversant with the OT. Surely he could expect his Gentile readers in Rome to have some knowledge of the Day of Atonement ritual and the significance within it of *hilasterion*.¹⁶

A similar principle may be found in the Gospel of John. In John 1:29, John the Baptist announced Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. If we ask which 'lamb' he was referring to, we find that it is difficult to answer since very few sacrifices in the Old Testament involved a lamb. A lamb may be offered as a 'sin-offering' in Leviticus 4:32 or a 'guilt-offering' in Leviticus 5:7, but the lamb is not a prominent feature; it is one possible sacrifice among others. The most prominent 'lamb' sacrifice is the Passover (see Exodus 12). My suggestion is that John's intention was not to draw attention to one particular sacrifice but to all the sacrifices in Israel. In as much as Jesus said that 'whoever commits sin is the slave of sin' (John 8:34) and Matthew records that

¹⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (NICNT) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, p 232f.

‘You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’ (Matt. 1:21), I assume that the Passover is a prominent idea, but that deliverance is seen not in terms of political salvation but in terms of salvation from guilt. John the Baptist’s phrase would then be a summary description. All that Israel knew was to be fulfilled in Jesus.¹⁷ This is in line with Paul’s comment that ‘our passover lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed ...’ (1 Cor. 5:8). What does that imply? It implies that ‘the death he died he died to sin, once for all’ (Rom.6:10) and therefore, both Romans and Corinthians must be pure, individually and corporately.

Could I possibly suggest that *hilasterion* refers not *either* to the mercy seat *or* to the propitiating sacrifice but to the whole event, epitomised in the activities of the day of atonement.

¹The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died. ²The LORD said to Moses:

Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. ³Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. ⁵He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

⁶Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. ⁷He shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting; ⁸and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer it as a sin offering; ¹⁰but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

¹¹Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a sin offering for himself. ¹²He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain ¹³and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die. ¹⁴He shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. ¹⁶Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. ¹⁷No one shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement on its behalf,

¹⁷ This may be affirmed if it is true that the Gospel of John does in fact affirm that Jesus’ crucifixion took place at the time when the passover lambs were being slaughtered. Conservative scholars, attempting to bring the Gospel of John into line with the Synoptic Gospels usually argue that there is no difference between the Synoptic accounts of the death of Jesus and that in John’s Gospel. It is, however, not impossible, that John is arguing in 19:28 that Jesus was crucified on the same day as the passover lambs were being slaughtered.

and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar. ¹⁹He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

²⁰When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. ²²The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

²³Then Aaron shall enter the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen vestments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. ²⁴He shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making atonement for himself and for the people. ²⁵The fat of the sin offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar. ²⁶The one who sets the goat free for Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward may come into the camp. ²⁷The bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire. ²⁸The one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward may come into the camp. (Lev. 16:1-28).

The sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat expresses the whole action of atonement. There is a detailed preparation, involving provision of a ram, a bull and two goats, plus some crushed incense. The bull is for the atonement of the sin of Aaron and one of the goats for the atonement for the sin of the people. The other goat, the scape-goat, was representative of the total removal of the sin of the congregation. The incense, evidently, was in order that the smoke of it would hide the presence of God from Aaron as he sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat. In these activities Aaron, usually dignified in his office by fine vestments, may only wear simple designated clothing.

The high priest also had to wear a special set of vestments for most of the ceremony, listed in v. 4: a shirt, shorts, sash, and turban all made of linen. In other words a simpler, less flamboyant dress than usual must be worn by the high priest. His proper high priestly uniform is described in Exod. 28. Beautiful colored materials, intricate embroidery, gold and jewelry made him look like a king. On the day of atonement he looked more like a slave. His outfit consisted of four simple garments in white linen, even plainer than the vestments of the ordinary priest (Exod. 39:27-29). The symbolic significance of these special vestments is nowhere clearly explained. Undoubtedly they draw attention to the unique character of the occasion. On this one day the high priest enters the 'other world,' into the very presence of God. He must therefore dress as befits the occasion. Among his fellow men his dignity as the great mediator between man and God is unsurpassed, and his splendid clothes draw attention to the glory of his office. But in the presence of God even the high priest is stripped of all honor: he becomes simply the servant of the King of kings, whose true status is portrayed in the simplicity of his dress.¹⁸

The significance of Aaron's activities is sometimes overlooked. While it is correct to focus on the purification for sin, both his own and that of the people, that is only a

¹⁸ Wenham, *Leviticus*, p 230.

subsidiary purpose. After those dramatic actions are described, verses 23 and 24 recount the real climax. Aaron is to take off the linen vestments, wash himself in a holy place and then to offer the burnt offering of the ram.

This is the climax. The burnt offering has been described as the most important sacrifice¹⁹ and it is certainly the first sacrifice described in Leviticus (ch 1). It was the most common of the sacrifices, being performed every morning and evening and more often on holy days.²⁰ As ‘the most common sacrifice’ it must not be assumed that it was ‘common-place’. As the most common sacrifice we should recognise it as the regular, if not the only, form of worship. In other words, the sacrifice of bull and goat was with a view to the sacrifice of the ram. Aaron’s function on the day of atonement was to ensure that all Israel could worship. Without the atonement Israel could not come before God. Without the high priest there could be no atonement.

Christ our great high priest

Why is it that, within the New Testament descriptions of Christian ministry, no person is ever described as a priest? There are some denominations which have maintained the title for their elders and the Anglican reformers explained their decision to retain the title as, first, being consistent with the practice of the church from antiquity and, ‘second, because of the etymological argument that the English word “priest” is properly derived from *presbyteros* (=“elder”) and not from *hiereus* (=“sacrificing priest”)’.²¹ Paul does describe his own ministry as an apostle in priestly terms in Romans 15:16, but there is no title involved. There are good reasons why the title is absent. First it may well be that the existence of the Temple (until AD 70) and the Jewish sacrificing priests may have meant that the title would have involved some confusion (as it still does in some areas²²). Secondly, the New Testament authors, whom we assume to have all been Jews, themselves never used the title because of their understanding, expressed most clearly in Hebrews, that all the sacrifices and sacrificial system of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus told the disciples that he had ‘not come to abolish [the law or the prophets] but to fulfil [them]. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished’ (Matt. 5:18). To the extent that this refers to the moral law, as would seem obvious from Jesus’ choice of illustrations in the chapters which follow, then we must conclude that the law of God still stands. However, there is a question in my mind: what does Jesus mean when he says that the details of the law will remain unaltered *until*²³ all is accomplished? That would seem to imply that even yet the moral law will pass away *at some point*.

¹⁹ Philip P. Jenson, ‘The Levitical Sacrificial System’ in Beckwith and Selman (Eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p 28.

²⁰ Wenham, *Leviticus*, p 52.

²¹ Steve Walton, ‘Sacrifice and Priesthood in the New Testament’ in Beckwith and Selman (Eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p 150.

²² Walton says, ‘An interesting sidelight on this is the modern Roman catholic tendency to use “presbyter” as the term for their ordained ministries, rather than “priest”. Robert Taft, a Roman Catholic liturgical scholar, observes, “I was made a priest at my baptism: I was made a presbyter at my ordination”. In this Taft displays a NT understanding which it is difficult to fault.’ (Beckwith and Selman (Eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p 150f.)

²³ εως ου

But what would it mean if the reference to the law and the prophets was a reference to the whole system of statutes and ordinances which included the moral law but also included the other elements which cannot be separated from the moral law, namely, the priestly sacrificial system? If this is the meaning then we could see that Jesus is saying that he has come to bring Judaism to its climax, its consummation. In this way the meaning of 'until all is accomplished' is simply that there is coming a point when all will be accomplished and then the law will be finished.²⁴

I have elsewhere argued that the Synoptic Gospels are presented as the closing documents of the Old Testament. Consonant with that suggestion is the present argument that these Gospels present Jesus as the climax of all that God has been doing up this point. *He* is the climax, not only of Israel's role but of history itself. If, therefore, the role of Aaron is significant, as taking up all that Adam was but refused to be, then Jesus is *the* priest in the sanctuary. The law, which is not simply about ethics but about worship, finds its whole rationale in him.

I observed earlier that in the New Testament the only place where the title of 'high priest' is given to Jesus is the letter to the Hebrews, and I want to examine that letter. But there is more than that letter, since the function of the high priest in the Old Testament is reflected in other places without the precise title being used. For example, 1 Peter 2:24 says

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

As I suggested above²⁵, this may be a reflection on the role of the high priest as described in Exodus 28:38,

... Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations.

There are other comments which we will examine later, but for now we must look at the letter to the Hebrews since it is that letter which fills out the comments in other places.

For the writer, the theme is Jesus, and in particular the way in which he brings Judaism to its climax. This would be especially significant if, as seems the case, the first readers were sorely tempted to leave their confession of Christ and return to the legal and other safety of Judaism.

The letter commences with the declaration that the Son is God's final and definitive word. God created all things through the Son and all for him - he is the heir. Chapter one verses 3-4 sets out a full statement of the theme.

³He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

The first matter, developed further in chapter 2, is that Jesus is the true man. He is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being'. Thus the one of whom he speaks is a human being, fully and gloriously (2:9) and it is this man who

²⁴ Interestingly, Jesus does not say that the prophets will pass away when all is accomplished, although that is a reasonable assumption too, since the prophetic function is to point to the fulfilment.

²⁵ See footnote 5.

sustains all things by his powerful word. Then, this man ‘made purification for sins’ then ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.’ The matter of ‘purification for sins’ completed, he sits down with God, but the addition of the clause, ‘having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs’ seems, at first sight, a little strange. Why does the writer introduce the subject of angels and then proceed to list a number of Old Testament verses pointing to the superiority of the Son over the angels? Some have suggested that worship of angels was a matter to be dealt with here, as in Colossians (2:18), but that seems unlikely since this letter really does not deal with that as a topic. What is the explanation? It is

surely in the juxtaposition of angels to prophets. Though it is not a common notion today, it seems clear that in the New Testament period the idea was current that angels were present at the giving of the Law. The closest thing to this in the Old Testament is perhaps Deut. 33:2, the LXX version of which says, ‘at his right hand were angels with him’ (cf. especially Gal. 3:19 and Acts 7:53). The point is, then, that the contrast is between the revelation mediated by angles, viz. the law, and that mediated by the Son.²⁶

Jesus climaxes the prophet revelation and, as greater than the angels (as man!) is thus the climax of the Law. To this extent, then, the Law and the Prophets do pass away because all is fulfilled.

How are Law and prophets fulfilled? To answer this question we must note that the purpose of the incarnation is set out in two statements in chapter 2.

⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (2:9).

¹⁴Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. (2:14-17).

The first indicates that the purpose of his being made lower than the angels was ‘the suffering of death’; he will die (‘taste death’) for everyone. The second indicates that his role is to liberate ‘the descendants of Abraham’ from the fear of death and that would involve him in being ‘a merciful and faithful high priest’. Hence the two themes, later expounded of Christ²⁷ as both high priest and victim. As high priest he is ‘is to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people’. The fear of death is the fear of God’s

²⁶ Ian D. Pennicook, *The Shadow and the Substance*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p 12. See also, Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, p 104.

²⁷ Floyd Filson (‘Yesterday’ *A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13*, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series N° 4, SCM, London, 1967, p 36) points out the, perhaps surprising, feature that Hebrews does not seem to use the title ‘Christ’ as indicating ‘Messiah’. It is not Jesus’ messianic role which is significant in the argument, as compared with, say, Matt. 16:16 and John 4:25; 20:31 etc.

judgment and by making the sacrifice of atonement the people will be delivered from that fear (read 'threat' as well as the consequent 'dread').

Having said that 'Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him'(3:1-2), that Christ 'was faithful over God's house as a son' (3:6) and having begun with the assertion that he made purification for sins (1:3), the writer (after a related but distinct exhortation) concludes

¹⁴Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:14-16).

This is his goal; he wants to encourage the readers to persevere and to find in Christ, their great high priest, the grace which they so deeply need.

Chapter 5 commences by pointing out that just as high priests in Judaism did not choose the honour for themselves (see above), neither did Christ. He was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son ...' (5:5; Ps. 2:7) and 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (5:6; Ps. 110:4). The introduction of Melchizedek is an important point. Jesus, as a high priest²⁸ forever according to the order of Melchizedek' has entered the inner shrine behind the curtain on our behalf and, as a result, we have a hope that actually penetrates to the holy of holies. (The wonder evoked by such a statement for those whose understanding of the work of the high priest on the day of atonement was clear should be apparent.)

The authority of the writer's point rests on the clear statement of Psalm 110 (as it does elsewhere on Psalm 95 and Jeremiah 31:31-34 etc). This is the word of the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:7). Although the details about Melchizedek are slight in the Old Testament²⁹, this figure is significant because

- (i) he resembles the Son of God (7:3; note that the Son does not resemble Melchizedek) and
- (ii) he received tithes from Abraham, the father of Levi, the one whose progeny became priests in Israel. Now when God indicates in Psalm 110 that one will be a priest after Melchizedek's order he is saying that the Levitical priesthood will be shown to be only provisional. And this is indeed what is seen.

²³Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; ²⁴but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer

²⁸ Note that 'priest' and 'high priest' as titles of Jesus are not contrasted.

²⁹ Leon Morris (*The Cross in the New Testament*, Paternoster, Exeter, 1965, p 285) quotes Sigmund Mowinckel: 'When the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of his having neither father nor mother, this is scarcely an invention of the author based on the fact that the Old Testament does not mention his family, but rather an ancient tradition which survived in Judaism and was really intended to express his close relation to the deity. (*He That Cometh*, Oxford, 1956, p 75).' Cf A.S. van der Woude, 'Melchizedek' in Keith Crim (Ed), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, Abingdon, Nashville, 1976, p 585 f, where evidence of a Melchizedek tradition in the Qumran documents is discussed.

sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

¹Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.' ⁶But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. (7:23- 8:6).

Even the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness pointed towards this. Moses was told to make the sanctuary according to the pattern which he was shown, that is, Moses saw the original. The worship of Israel was always only a representation of the real worship, it is 'a sketch and shadow of the heavenly' worship.

Of course, a better covenant means the total and permanent forgiveness of sins rather than the year by year repetition of the day of atonement, and it was this cessation of the Law which was anticipated by Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant. Hebrews chapter 9 focuses on this matter. The presence of the sanctuary shielded by the tabernacle indicates that the goal of true worship still lies beyond the worshippers. The fact that they will need to repeat the sacrifices shows that even with the work of Aaron on the day of atonement the people may still not worship in total intimacy; they are still excluded from the presence. However

¹¹But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), ¹²he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (9:11-14).

It is here that the two themes of chapter 2 come together. As our great high priest, Christ did more than make participation in the community of Israel a possibility ('sanctified those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified'); *he* was the sacrifice and the blood taken into the sanctuary and sprinkled on the mercy seat was his own. Verse 12 should probably be translated, '*having obtained* an eternal redemption' rather than with the NRSV, '*thus obtaining*'.³⁰ It was his death which obtained the eternal redemption. It was on the basis of his death and as evidence of it that the blood was taken into the holy place.

Verse 14 is staggering.

³⁰ εὐρόμενος, an aorist participle from εὐρίσκω.

¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

First there is the description of the true man³¹ who can and must do nothing apart from the Spirit. Then there is the deep inner-Trinitarian work which is described. Recalling the principle that in the New Testament the word 'god' refers to the Father (unless the context makes that identification impossible), the writer here says that Christ, the Son (1:2), offers himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit. In other words, this eternal redemption has been effected completely through the work of the Triune God. Finally there is the recognition that by means of his death the old system, which effectively held the people out of the great worship, is finished. The blood of Christ purifies the conscience from dead works to worship³² the living God.

Under the old system of worship, Aaron, having sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat came out of the sanctuary in order to lead the people in worship. They still needed him, since the sanctuary was still enclosed by the outer tent. They needed him because the sacrifices would need to be repeated year by year. So while ever the outer tent still stands the way into the sanctuary is still cut off from the worshippers (9:8). However, Christ, having obtained an eternal redemption does not need to come out again. He remains in the presence of God and 'ever lives to make intercession for them' (7:25). In the person of the high priest, the worshippers are now present in the sanctuary (cf. 6:19-20). They now have access to God (cf. Rom. 5:2) and the fear of death in the presence, and because of the presence, is gone. They still await the reappearing of their high priest, but not in order that he may again deal with sin. Instead they wait for him 'to save' them in the day of judgment (9:27-28). This day of judgment is, for them, not a day to be feared but to be eagerly anticipated, since it is on that day that their freedom from guilt will be declared and no longer contested.

The word 'sanctified', although often associated with a process of growth in godliness, is used in Hebrews as a declaration that the worshippers are now 'set apart', perfectly qualified to stand in the presence of God. They are acceptable as worshippers because of the 'once for all' sacrifice of their great high priest.

¹Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? ³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me;

⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

⁷Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'

(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).

⁸When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will

³¹ See above.

³² λατρεύειν

that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' ¹³and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (10:1-14).

It is the continual presence of the high priest in the sanctuary which means that

¹⁹we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh). ²¹And since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (10:19-22).

What is it that provides such confidence? For a Jewish audience Hebrews spells this out clearly. Now as those who, as Gentiles, have been grafted into the stock of the promises made to Abraham and who share with the New Israel in the new humanity (see Romans 11:17, 24; Eph. 2:13-15), we also understand that we have one who ever lives to intercede for us.

When Paul, the *Jewish* theologian, writes to the Romans, he insists that the Spirit 'intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words', and 'it is Christ Jesus who died, yes who was raised, ... who indeed intercedes for us'. This intercession, while not couched in terms of the Tabernacle or Temple ritual, still speaks of the high priestly role which is, finally, Trinitarian. The accusations of guilt and its consequent debilitations are constantly countered by the truth of justification (and sanctification, see Romans 6:22-23!). Let the accuser roar of ills that I have done; I know them all, ten thousands more — Jehovah findeth none! We have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2).

Furthermore, if he ever lives to intercede for us, then we are not only delivered from the fear of death, but also from the fear of life. Our high priest remains in the sanctuary, so that *we* remain in the sanctuary. In the language of Romans 8:31-39, we are totally secure, not because of our own, intrinsic righteousness, but because of *his*

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What does it mean to say that Christ is our great high priest in the sanctuary? Simply it means this. We are a people who have been set free from our guilt and so made free to worship, not in any cultic sense but in the wonder of intimacy with the Father. Abba, Father is the cry of worship, of love and adoration and trust. It is the cry of dependence which knows that he hears us.

Furthermore, if Christ is our high priest, then we are those whose cry is heard and so those who are able to face even the most savage attack, knowing that our survival does not depend on our ability to withstand but on his to keep. But if that is so, then we are those who are bold to approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). The language of 'high priest' may be Old Testament and Jewish. That is inescapable since God has chosen to work through the processes of the history of Israel and so to use the language appropriate to that. But the reality is that God will have his worshipping community. They will not be those who worship because they are cowed into unwilling submission but they are those who worship because they are broken and won by redeeming love. They are those for whom forgiveness is not a mere status but a dynamic reality and whose sacrifices are wet with the tears of gratitude and joy. These sacrifices are the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving which are won from them by the high priest who is tender and gentle, understanding our weaknesses, having been tempted in every way that we are tempted, yet without ever succumbing. Therefore,

... since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2).

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The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit

Christians, with the advantage of apostolic hindsight, are able to see that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is in reality Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are, then, both able and obliged to understand that the blessing of God which is given is essentially the triune God himself coming to creation and to Man. It is out of the definitive revelation which has come in the person of Christ that we are to see that, however the Old Testament language may only vaguely state it¹, the Holy Spirit was always the agent by which the blessing of the triune God has come.

So it is that we understand that the creational blessing is continually communicated through the Holy Spirit. The breath/wind/spirit of God which blew ‘at hurricane force’² over the face of the waters, although not described in personal terms at that point, was none other than the one who is later described as the one who may be grieved (Eph. 4:30) and who intercedes for us ‘with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom. 8:26) yet whose mind, at the same time, is clearly focussed on the will of God (Rom. 8:27). The creation exists when God sends forth this Spirit (Ps. 104:30; cf. Ps. 33:6).

What we know of ‘Providence’, God’s sustaining his creation and bringing it to the goal he has set, is in terms of the way the Holy Spirit is in action. Thus the Psalmist wrote,

²⁴O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. ²⁶There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷These all look to you to give them their food in due season; ²⁸when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. ²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. ³⁰When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. (Psalms 104:24-30).

We are surely to understand by this that ‘their breath’ (verse 29, Heb. *rucham*) is none other than ‘your spirit’ (verse 30, Heb. *ruach*) which has been and is constantly supplied to the creation. It is perhaps notable that when God came to Adam and Eve after their sin he did so in ‘the cool of the day’ (RSV), or ‘the time of the evening breeze’ (NRSV) and that the word for ‘cool’ or ‘breeze’ is *ruach*. Rather than the focus being on the time of God’s appearing, the attention is on the wind of God’s presence. Of Genesis 3:8 Calvin says,

¹ By this I mean that the revelation of God in the Old Testament does not come as overtly trinitarian. Until the incarnation, no believer in Israel would have concluded that God was Trinity. For example, Philo, the first century AD Jewish philosopher and theologian, argued that the words ‘Let us make Man ...’ were an indication that God, whom he calls ‘the Father of the universe’, was including the angels in his action of creating man. Philo’s reasoning for this is overwhelming: When God created the plants and the irrational animals, which are devoid of vice because devoid of mind and reason, he did so alone, but when he created man he says said “‘Let us make man”, which expression shows an assumption of other beings to himself as assistants, in order that God, the governor of all things, might have all the blameless intentions and actions of man, when he does right attributed to him; and that his other assistants might bear the imputations of his [ie. man’s] contrary actions.’ (‘On the Creation’ XXIV, 75, in C.D Yonge (trans), *The Works of Philo*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1993, p 11.)

² G.C. Bingham, *The Day of the Spirit*, Blackwood, NCPI, 1985, p 15.

I do not doubt that some notable symbol of the presence of God was in that gentle breeze ... Therefore, Moses, in here mentioning the wind, intimates (according to my judgment) that some unwonted and remarkable symbol of the Divine presence was put forth which should vehemently affect the minds of our first parents.³

In the light of Genesis 1:2, the only previous use of *ruach*, why should we not suspect that the wind which brought creation into being was God's presence and that that presence is still there, even after there is sin in creation. God continues to come to the creation by his breath/wind/spirit.

It is when Man is considered that the presence of God to him is described as being by the *ruach*. When he is yet inanimate dust, God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath (Heb. *n^eshamah*) of life; and the man became a living being' (Gen. 2:7). The word *ruach* is not used here, but elsewhere it is plain that the biblical writers understood that it was indeed the *ruach* of God which was the controlling factor. Thus Ecclesiastes 3:21, 'Who knows whether the human spirit (*ruach*) goes upward and the spirit (*ruach*) of animals goes downward to the earth?', and Job says 'my breath (*n^eshamah*) is in me and the spirit (*ruach*) of God is in my nostrils' (27:3) and later his adviser Elihu says, 'The spirit (*ruach*) of God has made me, and the breath (*n^eshamah*) of the almighty gives me life' (33:4).

The blessing of God is that Man is created in complete union with the triune God. He lives as a 'living being' because he is qualitatively different from the animal world. His life has come because God has blown his own spirit into Man and, we may add, continues to sustain him the same way. Man 'lives and moves and has his being' not merely *from* God but *in* him.

It is this which highlights the devastating nature of the fall of Man. His mortality, in contrast to the previous possibility of eating of the tree of life and living forever (Gen. 3:22) lies in being 'sent forth from the garden of Eden' (3:23), cut off from the tree of life. Genesis 6:3 describes the curse, 'My spirit (*ruach*) shall not abide in man forever ...'. God's presence is still there but death lies at the end. Cain's fear, 'my punishment is greater than I can bear ... I shall be hidden from your face ... and anyone who meets me may kill me' (Gen. 4:13f) implied the same thing. To be cut of from God's face was to be liable to death.

Two elements emerge from the Old Testament account of Israel's history. The first is that God's presence by his wind/breath/spirit was continuous, not in contradiction to the curse but in fulfilment of the eternal purpose which cannot be frustrated. This is seen in Exodus 31:3 and 35:31, where Bezalel is described as 'filled with the spirit of God' so that the tent of meeting may be completed in a fitting manner and Numbers 11:17ff indicates that Moses functions as leader because the spirit of God is upon him and that the elders must be and will be filled in a similar way. The judges, leaders and the prophets are men filled with the spirit of God in order to carry out their particular tasks (see Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25 etc; 1 Sam. 10:6; 16:13; Ezek. 2:2; 12, 14, 24 etc). Micah declared

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. (Micah 3:8).

³ A Commentary on Genesis, Geneva Series, London, Banner of Truth, 1965, p 161.

Secondly, what is conspicuously lacking in these statements is the notion that any of these people has had his immortality restored. The *ruach* of God will still not abide in them forever. Whether sinner or saint, all will end up in the same situation:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

It has been observed that within the Old Testament, apart from Daniel 12:2 and 13, there is no specified idea of immortality or life after death.⁴ Yet perhaps there is another way of looking at that issue, namely, through the various prophetic promises which point to the future action of God. For example, Isaiah 11:1-3 looks forward to the appearance of the shoot from the stump of Jesse, that is, to the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, and does so in terms of one on whom the spirit of the LORD shall rest. Isaiah 32 has a similar theme; a king reigning in righteousness though only after a terrible judgment which will lead to 'a [the] spirit from on high [being] poured out on us' (verse 15). Isaiah 44:3 promises 'Jacob' that refreshment will come as God pours out his spirit and his blessing.

It is in Ezekiel that there is the great promise of the transformation, when those under judgment will receive a new spirit (36:26) which is nothing less than God's own spirit (36:27). In the following chapter (ch. 37), Ezekiel recounts the vision of the valley of dry bones, where Israel (verse 11) is restored to life. The breath of God comes and the dry bones are powerfully re-vived (verse 14).⁵ Zechariah promises that the great transformation would take place, 'not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts' (4:6).

The great promise of Joel 2:28-32 is significant because it is this prophetic word which Peter sees as the explanation of all that has taken place on the day of Pentecost.

²⁸Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. ³⁰I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³²Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

We may ask why this promise is given. Are there not already prophets in Israel? Are there believers in Israel in whom the spirit of God has not been working? Or is the emphasis on 'all flesh'? Is Joel promising that both Israel *and* the nations will receive the spirit. In the light of Isaiah 2:2-4 this latter question should surely be answered in the affirmative. But also in the light of Isaiah 2:2-4 we may suggest that Joel is promising that and far more. Isaiah is anticipating the total transformation of the nations. Joel is seeing that the gift of the spirit is related to the shaking of creation itself (cf. Hag. 2:6-7).

⁴ Uncertainty concerning the date of the book of Daniel should make us hesitant to build an Old Testament doctrine of resurrection upon these verses. At least, it makes me hesitant.

⁵ It should perhaps be noted that revival is not merely with the restoration of the past state or blessings in mind. Re-vival is always with the *telos* in view, so that possibly the main feature should be seen as 'pro-vival'. The restoration always has the future in mind. If that is so then the aim of restoring first-century Christianity would hardly be in mind. If God grants refreshing to the church it must be with the the pure bride of Revelation 21 as the focus.

If this latter is the case, then the promise of the spirit is not merely a promise with local, ecclesiastical, significance but the promise of a renewed creation.⁶ What God did for Adam when he breathed into him the breath of life, he will do again. Adam, Man, will again know the intimacy of the Spirit of God, that is, Man will once more know his full humanity within the blessing of creation.

The Gospel of John, I believe, demonstrates this. In many ways the Gospel leads us to a climax and no less in the way the Holy Spirit is described. The Gospel commences with what is regarded as a deliberate reference to the creation account in Genesis 1:1, ‘In the beginning...’, and affirms, as does Genesis, that it was the Word by which all came into being. The ‘prologue’ is followed immediately by the account of the ministry of John the Baptist who

declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’³⁰This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me”.³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’³²And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.’³³I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” (John 1:29-33).

The word used by Isaiah for ‘rest’ in Isaiah 11:2 (LXX, ἀναπαύσεται, *anapausetai*) is different from that used by John (‘remain’ is μένω, *meno*), but the import is the same; Jesus is the one of whom Isaiah prophesied (cf. Isa. 42:1, ‘I have put my spirit upon him’, LXX, ἔδωκα τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐς αὐτόν, ‘I gave my spirit upon him’ with John 3:34, οὐ γὰρ ἐκ μέτρου διδωσιν τὸ πνεῦμα, ‘he gives the Spirit without measure’). As the shoot from the stump of Jesse, Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

To Nicodemus Jesus indicated that the restoration of the kingdom depended upon that very thing, that is, the great transforming work of the Holy Spirit: ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit’ (John 3:5, see verses 6-8). Later in the same chapter, John indicates that in giving the Spirit without measure to Jesus, the Father has given all things into his hands (John 3:34-35)⁷ The ‘all things’ represents the Greek πάντα (*panta*, neuter plural) and agrees with John 6:37, ‘Everything (πάντα, *pan*, neuter singular) the Father gives me ...’. Later, in Colossians 1:16 Paul wrote that ‘all things (τὰ πάντα) have been created through him and for him’. We may conclude here that the gift of the Spirit upon Jesus is with a view to him baptising with the Spirit which, in turn, is with a view to him receiving the whole creation.

The promise of John 7:37-39 is prominent:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”.’³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

⁶ It goes without saying that, if this is the case, those churches which place so much emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit may, in fact, be *understating* the significance of all they claim.

⁷ For the Father’s giving to the Son see also John 5:21-22, 26-27, 36; 6:37, 39 etc.

While this is not a direct quote from ‘the scriptures’ it is not hard to see the implications of Jesus words. The appeal to the thirsty recalls Isaiah 55:1, which is in the context of the application of the everlasting covenant of God’s ‘steadfast, sure love for David’ (Isa. 55:3) which in its turn is in the context of the sure word of God and the restoration of creation (Isa. 55:10-13). Likewise, the reference to streams of living water recalls the vision of Ezekiel, where the restored Jerusalem becomes a source of restoration of the barren land and of healing (Ezek. 47:1-12; cf Rev. 22:2, ‘the healing of the nations’). I am suggesting that this promise also links the giving of the Spirit with the restoration of creation, however much there may be a particular application for believers.

In the upper room discourse Jesus again promises to send the Spirit, but in doing so he identifies the presence of the Spirit with his own presence and the presence of the Father. While we may legitimately understand this promise as coming to each believer personally, in the light of what I observed above about the nature of Man and the presence of the spirit of God, we must surely wonder whether the coming of the triune God to the believers is not primarily to be understood in terms of the restoration of Man to his created being and function.

In John 7:39 we are told that the Spirit was not yet given for Jesus was not yet glorified. When we examine John 20, however, we are faced with Jesus ‘giving’ the Spirit to the disciples. Although Jesus does say to Mary Magdalene, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (John 20:17), the giving of the Spirit is presented as being the personal action of the risen, present Jesus.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’.²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ (John 20:19-23).

This climactic giving of the Spirit I take to be John’s account of Pentecost.⁸ From within the framework of the Gospel there is no doubt that this is the moment which has been anticipated since the announcement by John the Baptist. More than that, the language used to describe the giving of the Spirit, namely, ‘he breathed on them’, is directly reminiscent of the account of the creation of Man in Genesis 2:7. There the LXX reads καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ τὸ πνοὴν ζωῆς, ‘and he breathed into his face the breath of life’; John has καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Λάβετε πνεῦμα ἅγιον, ‘and saying this he breathed and said, ‘Receive [the] Holy Spirit’. The fact that Genesis does not use

⁸ There are a number of complex problems which arise when the Gospel of John is compared with the Acts of the Apostles, but I suspect that, of all the solutions offered, this is the most satisfactory. Other solutions include (i) that, since πνεῦμα ἅγιον is anarthrous, this is not a reference to the personal Holy Spirit; and (ii) that there are, in fact, two impartations of the Holy Spirit, this one preceding and anticipating Pentecost. To (i) I would respond that this is a simplistic approach to the Greek. The presence or absence of the article is first a matter of grammar and not of theology and πνεῦμα lacks the article in a number of places. To (ii) my response is that the overwhelming thrust of John’s Gospel leads us to see this giving of the Spirit as a climax, not only of the Gospel but of the Old Testament promises, so that to attempt to relate it in this way to the Acts is to fail to do justice to the Gospel of John. We should surely begin by treating John and Luke separately. However the question must remain open.

‘spirit’ here has already been dealt with; the common feature is that both accounts describe the action with the word ‘breathed’ (ἐνεφύσησεν) and it is this, I contend, that demonstrates that, when Jesus breathed the Spirit into the disciples, John intends us to see it as the act of re-creation. This is what was done in the first creation, was lost at the fall and which the prophets had anticipated would be re-done. The ‘in the beginning’ of John 1:1, therefore, assumes an even greater significance.

If, then, this is the significance of the gift of the Spirit, not only for John but for the whole of the New Testament, then we are able to see that what is described in the book of Acts is quite staggering. The gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was of more than local significance. In that giving, the blessing of God had been restored and from that giving men and women moved out in the fullness of the blessing. As those ‘in Christ’ as a result of the gift of the Spirit they and we are ‘a new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul’s comment that we are those ‘on whom the ends of the ages have come’ (1 Cor. 10:11) shows that he, too, intended us to see that we are standing at the climax of the purpose of God. To receive the Spirit and to ‘go on being filled with the Spirit’ is to move out in the fullness of the blessing of the triune God, functioning consistently with all that he is about in history.

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Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god”. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is LORD of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring”’. (Acts 17:22-28).

When in Athens, Paul addressed the council of elders. He did so in response to the request for an explanation of his strange teaching concerning ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ (Acts 17:18-19). Yet, when he explained his teaching he did so by returning to the subject of creation and then to the way that the ‘unknown god’ is in fact the creator of all the nations¹ and so the judge of all the nations; the resurrection is the seal on this.

It has been pointed out that there are certain Jewish elements in Paul’s teaching, especially in the reaction to the Greek idolatry.² But this story is hardly being told as an example of the battle between Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism. If Paul speaks from a Jewish perspective, it is surely because (i) he is a Jew; (ii) he understands that the God of creation has worked through the history of Israel in order that the nations may ‘grope for him and find him’ (vs. 27) so that (iii) the Jewishness of his reaction is not an ethnic but a godly response. God’s concern, and so Paul’s, is that the nations may find God. Certainly, Paul does not say, or even imply at this point, that these Greeks will come to God and at the same time have a new and definitive relationship with Israel. It could be argued that, in spite of Israel’s role in the plan of God, in the final analysis Israel will be simply one of the nations who make up the whole of humanity in the consummation.

But if this is so, what did Paul mean when he closed the Galatian letter with the blessing:

¹ It has been questioned whether Paul’s meaning is in fact ‘every nation of men’ (RSV; ASV; NIV) at all. The Greek πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων (*pan ethnos anthropon*) may be translated as ‘the whole race of men’ and if this is so then Paul would be referring to ‘the sum of all the inhabitants of the earth’ (M. Dibelius, in I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* p. 287). However, Marshall then concurs with Stählin that ‘this latter idea is biblical, and that the New Testament is concerned more with the fate of men as a whole than with the individual nations’ (ibid). If this understanding of the New Testament priorities has conditioned the translation then I would call it into question. Within the context, however, it certainly makes sense; see also F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, p. 357f. Lumby, on the other hand, suggests that the idea of the nations all coming from one ancestor would carry an unacceptable implication to the Greek audience, for whom racial distinctions, between Greeks and Barbarians for example, were fundamental (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 312; also F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, p. 336f). This observation serves neither side of the argument.

² See James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 232. Dunn also draws attention to the fact that Paul does not mention Jesus by name in this speech; he is simply ‘a man whom he [God] has appointed’ (vs. 31).

As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal. 6:16).

—‘*and upon the Israel of God*’? This phrase has caused some bewilderment as a glance at the commentaries and other studies will show. Our ability to get into Paul’s mind at this point is distinctly limited. Some have argued that the better translation would be ‘*even the Israel of God*’ (the Greek *καί, kai*, being capable of both translations), implying perhaps that ‘those who will follow this rule’, namely the point he has been so strenuously making in the letter that what matter is not the Jewish rite of circumcision or its lack but a new creation, are (now) the Israel of God.³ On the other hand, other translations seem to imply a distinction between the two by ‘*and the Israel of God*’.⁴ The point, then, would be that ‘the Israel of God’ could be Israel, either as the Jews who had come to Christ or as ‘elect Israel’, since Paul has made the distinction in Romans (that not all who are physically Jewish are children of Abraham (Rom. 9:6-8). Or again, if ‘the Israel of God’ is a reference to Israel as a whole, then we may perhaps note a parallel with Romans 9:1-5, where Paul explains his deep concern for ‘Israel’.

¹I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

This anguish for Israel would then find some conclusion in Romans 11:26, ‘and so all Israel will be saved’, where the meaning would be that

For all his demoting of the law and the customs, Paul held good hope of the ultimate blessing of Israel. They were not all keeping in line with ‘this rule’ yet, but the fact that some Israelites were doing so was in his eyes a pledge that this remnant would increase until, with the ingathering of the full tale (*πλήρωμα*) of Gentiles, ‘all Israel will be saved’. The invocation of blessing on the Israel of God has probably an eschatological perspective.⁵

A firm, or at least firmer, conclusion on this point will require us to approach the topic from another angle, one which will allow us to examine Paul’s comments against a background far wider than merely their immediate contexts. We need to ask what is the context in which Paul finds himself and so writes his letters? How does he understand himself, in the light of all that God has been doing in history and in the light of the person and work of Christ? The need for this is apparent when we recall the way Paul addressed the Athenians.

The Nations And Creation

Returning to Acts 17, then, we note that Paul addressed the Athenian elders principally on the topic of their worship. They were worshipping ‘an unknown god’ and Paul proceeded to identify him, in particular as the god who required no shrines built by human hands to house him, since he stands as the creator of all things who ‘gives to all mortals life and breath and all things’ (Acts 17:24-25).

³ Either directly or by implication, so the RSV, NIV, and JB.

⁴ NRSV, ASV, AV, NASB, NEB, Weymouth..

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* p. 275.

There follows from this description of God the reference to the fact that

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’. (Acts 17:26-28)

Why did Paul move from the general statements about God to the fact that he created the nations? As I noted above (*n.* 1) there may not be a reference to the individual nations at all in this passage. Grammatically, that may probably be the case.⁶ But, while that may be so, there is still Paul’s self-conscious apostolic identity to be considered. He was an apostle to the Gentiles, to the nations (Gal. 2:8-9 etc). Whatever the immediate reference to the Athenians may have been, Paul nonetheless gives us to understand that a nation is an identifiable group, distinguishable from other groups, to which he has been called to preach the gospel. The world is *not* one big nation. Furthermore, it would seem that (*contra* Stählin and Marshall⁷) the whole of the scriptures lead us to conclude that the nations are as much the focus of God’s saving activity as are any individuals. Indeed, a focus on individuals may be as much a product of ‘Enlightenment’ thinking as anything else, with the scriptures having a more corporate view of humanity.

First, the word ‘Gentiles’ requires some explanation. To most it simply implies non-Jews and this is the way it is used in Galatians. It stands over against, in that case, ‘the circumcision’ (Gal. 2:9). But it does not tell us the meaning of the word, only the way it is used. The word ‘Gentile’ is of Latin origin. The word ‘gens’ indicates a Roman clan, or group of families linked together by a common name and their belief in a common ancestor. Members of ‘gens’ were ‘gentiles’ and were thus members of small identifiable groups.⁸ ‘Gentes’, clans, was the word used in the Latin Vulgate to translate from the LXX the Greek ἔθνος (*ethnos* pl. ἔθνη) meaning ‘nation’. (This in itself would seem to indicate that the word εἰθνοῶ did not refer to a large group but to a (relatively) small self-contained, distinct unit of people.) In its turn, ἔθνος was the word used to translate the Hebrew גּוֹיִם (*goy*, pl. *goyim*⁹), also meaning nation.

There are other words in both the Old and New Testaments used in relationship with these two words. They are the Hebrew אִם (*am*) and Greek λαός (*laos*, pl. λαοί, *laoi*) both of which mean ‘people (s)’. Generally(!), we may say that these words are interchangeable.¹⁰

⁶ It was standard to translate πᾶς (*pas*) as ‘every’ or ‘all’ when it stood outside the article-noun construction, as here in Acts 17:26, and as ‘whole’ when within the article-noun construction. That rule is now being questioned, see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiomatic Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968) p. 93-95.

In this verse there seems good reason to translate it with Dibelius (above, *n.* 1). The Greek text reads ἐποίησεν τε εἰς ἔθνος πᾶν τὸν οὐρανὸν κατοικεῖν ἐπιπαντὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς, which the NRSV translates as ‘he made *all* nations to inhabit the *whole* earth’, yet the constructions are the same. Πᾶς and παντὸς are both outside an article-noun construction, πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων being anarthrous. Since the latter phrase could hardly mean ‘every face of the earth’, why should the first phrase, *of necessity*, mean ‘every nation’?

⁷ See *n.* 1.

⁸ ‘Gens’ in N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Eds), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Clarendon press, Oxford, 1970, p. 462.

⁹ *Goyim* is also the modern, derogatory, Jewish word for non-Jews.

¹⁰ Cf. (with reference to אִם) ‘The LXX uses ἔθνη for the plural in the Pentateuch, Joshua and Judges; elsewhere both ἔθνη and λαοί are used.’ (E. J. Hamlin, ‘Nations’ in G. A. Buttrick (Ed), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Volume 3), Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 515.

So then, if we are to examine the subject of Jew and ‘Gentile’ in the scriptures, it follows that we are doing more than a mere word study.

The first uses of גִּוִּים / ἔθνος in the Old Testament are in Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 and 32.

⁵From these the coastland peoples spread. These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their *nations*.

²⁰These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

³¹These are the descendants of Shem, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

³²These are the families of Noah's sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

Genesis chapter 10 is a list of the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Comparison with Genesis 11:10ff will show that the list in chapter 10 is not a list of individuals but of ‘nations’.¹¹ Without pretending to be a technically complete list, Genesis 10 explains that all the nations are descended from Noah. However, the story did not begin with Noah and Genesis chapter 5 describes the line from Adam to Noah.

If we go back to Genesis 1:28, where God commanded Adam¹² to fill the earth, we may conclude that this command had, to some extent, been fulfilled in the words of Genesis 10:32. If this is so, then we could conclude that, whatever the *immediate* meaning of Paul in Acts 17:26, ‘from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth’.¹³

What is the significance of such a conclusion? The answer to that question lies in the scope of biblical revelation. How does history end? We must return to this later, but Revelation 20:3 and 20:7-8 describe the dragon being thrown into the bottomless pit, ‘so that he would deceive the nations no more’ and being released ‘for a little while’ with his intention ‘to deceive the nations’ but instead being thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:24 then announces that the nations will walk by the light of the holy city, that is, by the light of the glory of God which is expressed by the Lamb. Instead of the false bride, Babylon, receiving the tribute of the nations, ‘the glory and honour of the nations’ will be brought into the holy city (Rev. 21:26) and those nations will be healed as the leaves of the tree of life are applied to them (Rev. 22:2).

All this takes place in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). In other words, the nations *are* in Adam and are not a new item brought in as a result of the fall. And if they are in Adam in the first creation, then they appear in all their glory in the last, the new, creation.

¹¹ It would seem that Genesis 11:1-9, the story of the tower of Babel, is anticipated in verse 32 and that the story of the tower of Babel provides a theological reason for the deep divisions within the nations. The idea of divisions through language is taken up in Zeph. 3:9, though without any explicit thought that the nations would cease to exist, only that as a result of the removal of the curse of language differences the nations will call upon the name of the LORD. This seems to be a deliberate reflection of Genesis 4:26.

¹² *Adam*, verses 26-27.

¹³ See also Deut. 32:8, ‘When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods...’

The Nations and Israel

How can the writer of the Revelation arrive at such a conclusion? Certainly it was truth which was 'given' but equally certainly he was very conscious of the Old Testament antecedents for all he was saying, for there are something like 470 allusions to the Old Testament in the book. So to discover the ground from which the details of the Revelation were taken we need only go to, what were then, the only scriptures available to the writer, the Old Testament. (That is not to say that some or all of the documents which now comprise the New Testament were not written or even available, only that they had not been compiled into a single collection. Obviously many documents, especially the letters of Paul, had been collected early and were regarded as standing with 'the *other* scriptures' (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Indeed, Paul's letters along with other New Testament documents provide apostolic insight into how the issues in the Old Testament are to be understood.)

If the first references to the nations are in Genesis 10, and if they carry the implications which I have suggested, then how is the concern for the nations expressed? The answer lies in Genesis 12, where, following the scattering at the tower of Babel, the action of salvation history commences.¹⁴ The terms of God's call to Abraham are important.

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (Genesis 12:1-3)

Here is the second reference to 'nation'. Using the same words as in Genesis 10:31-32, God promises to make Abraham 'a great nation' (*goy*) and so to 'bless all the families of the earth', that is, of the earth which was cursed in Genesis 3:17. The same word, אָדָמָה (adamah) is used in both places although translated as 'ground' in Genesis 3:17 and 'earth' in Genesis 12:3. 'Adam' (אָדָם) meaning 'Man' comes from the same root as 'ground' and in this promise of blessing we may possibly see the way that many in Israel understood that 'Abraham will be God's means of undoing the sin of Adam'¹⁵ and so that Abraham's descendants will be the nation by whom all other nations are restored to their creational place.

In Romans 4, Paul explains the significance of the promise to Abraham.

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ⁶So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

⁷Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸blessed is the one against whom the LORD will not reckon sin.'

⁹Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness'. ¹⁰How then was it reckoned to him?

¹⁴ Of course, salvation history is the action of God from before the foundation of the world and, even within human history, could be said to begin with Genesis 3:15, but as identifiable *history* the call of Abraham provides the starting point.

¹⁵ *Genesis Rabbah* 14.6, quoted in Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 21.

Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, ¹²and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations’, according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be’. ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness’.

²³Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our LORD from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

We must examine Romans again later, but for the moment this chapter must occupy us. The subject is justification by faith but, in the process of arguing the point, Paul insists that Abraham was declared righteous ‘before he was circumcised, thereby enabling him to become the “father” of both Jewish and Gentile believers’¹⁶ (verses 10-12). Abraham is Paul’s ‘ancestor according to the flesh’ (vs. 1), that is, he is writing as one who is Jewish, but Abraham is also the father, the ancestor, of all those who believe without being circumcised (vs. 11) and of those who believe and are circumcised (vs. 12). The issue is that it is faith and not circumcision or its lack which is crucial if one is to be descended from Abraham. The picture implied is of a variety within the whole body of Abraham’s offspring (cf. Gal. 3:29).

Paul says that the promise which came to Abraham was ‘that he would inherit *the world*’ (vs. 13). There is no specific statement in the Old testament which supports the scope of the inheritance envisaged here. Instead there is the promise of numberless descendants (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 18:18), possession of the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:14f, 17; 15:7, 18-21; 17:8), and that the nations of the earth shall be blessed (or bless themselves) through Abraham (Gen.12:3; 18:18) or his ‘seed’ (Gen. 22:18). The linking of these promises to Abraham with the creation mandate to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28) would give us the picture of the means by which ‘Man’ (*Adam*) was to fulfil the mandate, namely through Abraham.¹⁷

There is also the point that, in the period between the Testaments, Jewish theology had broadened its view of the promise to Abraham to include the whole earth. For example,

¹⁶ Moo, *Romans*, p. 256

¹⁷ Also, of course, Jesus is described as ‘the heir of all things’ (Heb. 1:2).

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
 and no one has been found like him in glory;
 he kept the law of the Most High,
 and was taken into covenant with him
 he established the covenant in his flesh,
 and when he was tested he was found faithful.
 Therefore the LORD assured him by an oath
 that the nations would be blessed through his posterity;
 that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth,
 and exalt his posterity like the stars,
 and cause them to inherit from sea to sea
 and from the River to the ends of the earth.
 To Isaac also he gave the same assurance
 for the sake of Abraham his father. (Ecclus. 44:19-22)

But there is also the picture in Scripture of the way that the promise to Abraham was intended to encompass the whole earth *through* the nations. Later, this is worked out in Israel's commission to be 'a kingdom of priests' or 'a royal priesthood' (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Israel is to be the nation which mediates the presence of God to the nations.¹⁸

As Abraham's family grows the interest in the nations continues to be an issue. For example,

As for the son of the slave woman [ie. Ishmael], I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring. (Gen. 21:13; cf vs. 18).

And the LORD said to [Rebekah], 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.' (Gen. 25:23).

God said to [Israel], 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you'. (Gen. 35:11).¹⁹

When blessing his sons, Jacob said that

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples [מִן־אֲמֹלִים *am*] is his. (Gen. 49:10).

With the emergence of the nation Israel, we are confronted by the plan of God to bless the nations through Abraham's descendants. As noted above,

... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6).

This declaration is intended to define the role of Israel. Israel is not called 'holy' because of its moral qualities. Indeed the reverse is true; the Torah which demands moral qualities from Israel does so because Israel is holy. To call Israel 'holy' means that God has set Israel apart for himself. The moral qualities which are to be exhibited are the qualities of the one who called her 'out of darkness into his marvellous light'. But further, Israel is a holy nation in order to be a priestly kingdom.²⁰ This title refers to the way Israel is to be the nation

¹⁸ This almost certainly the thrust of the book of Jonah.

¹⁹ Whatever the meaning of 'a company of nations shall come *from you*', the interest in a multiplicity of nations is still present. See also Genesis 48:19.

²⁰ See my discussion of this topic in 'The Priesthood of all Believers', the Saturday Morning Study for April 1997.

which leads the worship in which other nations will participate. The nations round about will come to Israel, not to be part of them but to be partners with them in worship.

Israel's whole life as this nation was lived in the context of the nations round about. The land of Canaan was populated by nations whose practices were an abomination. For example, after listing various prohibitions, the LORD instructed Israel,

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. (Lev. 18:24).

If Israel breaks covenant with God, the judgment will include being scattered among the nations:

And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. (Lev. 26:33).

The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known. ⁶⁵Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit. (Deut. 28:64-65).

Far from Israel being a blessing to the nations around about, she would be reduced to nothing greater than slaves for whom there is no buyer (Deut. 28:68). In other words, the nations, far from being attracted to Israel and so to Israel's God, would be repelled by the faithless nation which, in essence, was no different from themselves.²¹

The history of Israel records this very thing. Judges chapter 2 sets the agenda for the whole book. Thus,

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you. ²For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars." But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! ³So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.' (Judg. 2:1-3).

Likewise, the establishment of the monarchy in Israel is related to the desire of the people to be *un-holy*:

'You [Samuel] are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations' ... ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you' (1 Sam. 8:5, 7-8).

The ultimate judgment of exile was expressed by Ezekiel in the very terms anticipated by Moses.

The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period. ¹⁸So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. ¹⁹I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. ²⁰But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned

²¹ The parallel which may be drawn today is obvious. Let the church say what it will; if it does not live in the reality of its salvation the world will be completely uninterested in its message, if not even contemptuous.

my holy name, in that it was said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land'. (Ezek. 36:16-20).

⁹Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies.

¹⁰You made us turn back from the foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil.

¹¹You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations.

¹²You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.

¹³You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us.

¹⁴You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.

(Ps. 44:9-14).

The Nations and The Prophets

In all the judgment which Israel experienced as a result of her refusal to be the holy nation and priestly kingdom, the purpose of God for the nations is never lost. Nor is the concern of the godly for the nations:

¹May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah*

²that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

³Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁴Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. *Selah*

⁵Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁶The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

⁷May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him. (Psalm 67)

Alongside this is the desire that nations that forget God should be judged. This desire is not vindictive; rather it derives from the passionate concern for the name of God which was so manifestly lacking in Israel under judgment. The picture is large; the nations are under judgment because they have *forgotten*²² God.

The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. (Ps. 9:17).

The nations 'live and move and have their being' in him. They may lack Israel's special revelation but they cannot deny their essential being any more than Israel can.

Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you! (Ps. 82:8).

This explains the prophetic interest in the nations. Isaiah, for example, commences his book with a description of the sin of Israel (chapters 1-5) followed by the call of the prophet and his consequent message of judgment (chapter 6). Yet the description of Israel's sin is introduced in terms of Israel as the worshipping community (1:10-17) and Isaiah word has as its focal point the restoration of Israel *so that the nations will be able to participate in the worship* (2:1-4).

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come 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'. For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate

²² See, perhaps, the analysis of Don Richardson, in *Eternity In Their Hearts*, (Regal Books, 1984) where he argues that what lies behind the religions of today is a clear sense of the presence of the one true God.

for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

This picture is of the nations coming to Israel, to Zion, in order to learn Torah, because Torah is flowing out from the renewed Israel. The result is the restoration of the nations, that is, they remain distinct groups but without the fierce divisions which have existed since the fall and since the tower of Babel.

Within the announcement of judgment on Israel is the recognition that God will use Assyria to accomplish his purpose. Hence, Isaiah 10:5-11.

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! ⁶Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. ⁷But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. ⁸For he says: ‘Are not my commanders all kings? ⁹Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not Samaria like Damascus? ¹⁰As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, ¹¹shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?’ (Isaiah 10:5-11).

Furthermore, when the judgment of Israel is complete, Assyria will itself be called to account.

When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride. (Isa. 10:12).

Chapters 13-23 are directly concerned with the nations. Babylon (13:1-14:23), Assyria (14:24-27), Philistia (14:28-32), Moab (15:1-16:14), Damascus (Syria) (17:1-14), Ethiopia (18:1-7), Egypt (19:1-25), Babylon again (21:1-10), Dumah (21:11-12), Arabia (21:13-17) and Tyre (23:1-18). It is the ‘oracle concerning Egypt’ (19:1-25) which reveals the overall goal.

An oracle concerning Egypt.

See, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

²I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, one against the other, neighbor against neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom;

³the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their plans; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead and the ghosts and the familiar spirits;

⁴I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master; a fierce king will rule over them, says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts.

⁵The waters of the Nile will be dried up, and the river will be parched and dry;

⁶its canals will become foul, and the branches of Egypt’s Nile will diminish and dry up, reeds and rushes will rot away.

⁷There will be bare places by the Nile, on the brink of the Nile; and all that is sown by the Nile will dry up, be driven away, and be no more.

⁸Those who fish will mourn; all who cast hooks in the Nile will lament, and those who spread nets on the water will languish.

⁹The workers in flax will be in despair, and the carders and those at the loom will grow pale.

¹⁰Its weavers will be dismayed, and all who work for wages will be grieved.

¹¹The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish; the wise counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. How can you say to Pharaoh, ‘I am one of the sages, a descendant of ancient kings’?

¹²Where now are your sages? Let them tell you and make known what the LORD of hosts has planned against Egypt.

¹³The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of its tribes have led Egypt astray.

¹⁴The LORD has poured into them a spirit of confusion; and they have made Egypt stagger in all its doings as a drunkard staggers around in vomit.

¹⁵Neither head nor tail, palm branch or reed, will be able to do anything for Egypt.

¹⁶On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts raises against them.

¹⁷And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the plan that the LORD of hosts is planning against them.

¹⁸On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

¹⁹On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border.

²⁰It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them.

²¹The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them.

²²The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

²³On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

²⁴On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'.

Verses 1-15 describe the judgment of Egypt. However, the remainder of the oracle describes the healing of Egypt. Motyer's comment is helpful.

The true bearing of the oracles which have focused on Egypt is that Egypt is a 'case in point' of the Lord's purpose to unite the world in his worship. True religion heals wounds between people. The late eighth century BC was full of the tension between the two would-be superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, but what worldly ambition sunders religion based on revelation (as above; *cf.* 2:2-4) unites. This is the third stage in the spreading kingdom of peace: first a few cities (18), then a whole country (19), now the whole world. The emphasis here rests on the oneness people feel with each other and the free expression they give to it.

The *highway (m^esilla*, 'a causeway or raised road', visible and unmistakable) expresses possibility of access. The free, mutual movement between *Egypt* and *Assyria* shows *the Egyptians* and *the Assyrians* enjoying it. *Worship together* expresses the ground of their unity, the magnetism which unites them: they accept each other because each has been accepted by the Lord (*cf.* Rom: 14:1-3).

The final 'In that day' section is the capstone. The fellowship they feel (23) is objectively ratified as the Lord says *Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork and Israel my inheritance*. At the start Judah was an object of fear to the Egyptians (17). This is correct, for true acknowledgment of the Lord means acknowledgment and submissiveness to those who are already his people (*cf.* 1 Cor. 14:2~25). But the convert at once enjoys a co-equal membership. The three titles *people*, *handiwork* and *inheritance* have always belonged to Israel. In Egypt the word once was 'Let my people go' (Ex. 5:1), but now *Egypt is my people*. Nothing could more wonderfully signalize what God has wrought.²³

²³ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, 1993, p. 169f.

Isaiah's point is that Israel, Assyria and Egypt stand side by side as partners in the great worship of creation. Neither does anything more than participate in the promise made to Abraham, who was, as Paul pointed out, a Gentile when the promise was given and believed.

Later, Isaiah recounts the salvation of Israel, whom he describes as 'Israel my [ie. God's] servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham my friend' (41:8). In so forcibly calling Israel the 'servant' (cf. also verse 9), Isaiah has set the parameters for the language of the first 'servant song' of chapter 42. Whatever the later implications, initially the servant is Israel and the purpose of being chosen is to 'bring forth justice to the nations' (verse 1) and to 'establish justice in the earth' so that 'the coastlands wait for his teaching' (Torah, verse 4; cf. 2:1-4). To the servant God then says,

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. (Isa. 42:6-9)

The servant will be instrumental in opening the eyes of the blind and bringing the prisoners out of the dungeon—these things are the nations being healed. The restoration of Israel has the nations in view. Thus,

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Isa. 49:6).

It should be noted that the deep suffering of the servant taking the sins of *many* and so making *many* righteous (53:11-12) is undergone before 'many nations' whose kings 'shut their mouths because of him' (52:15).

There are many references in the other prophets which make a similar point. Jeremiah is appointed 'a prophet to the nations' (1:5), 'to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to *build and to plant*' (1:10). As expected, the main thrust of his prophecy is the judgment of Israel but, again, Israel's restoration has its effects among the nations.

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD'. It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. ¹⁷At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will. (Jer. 3:15-17)

If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, ²and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives!' in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast. (Jer. 4:1-2).

Chapters 45-51 are also devoted to the nations, with a large section, appropriately in view of the historical context, given over to the Babylonians. But, even allowing for the disjointed chronology of the finished book, these chapters must be understood in the light of the passages just quoted above. Note also Ezekiel chapters 27-32, Obadiah and Nahum and, of course the prophecy of Jonah. That book, of all others, indicates the problem of the refusal of Israel to function within the purposes of God for the nations, in that case, Nineveh. It is

God's intention to save the nations, but Israel, the nation with the word of God, flees from its responsibilities. Nonetheless, even if they must be taken into the depths they will be a light to the nations and the nations will be saved.

How will the nations be saved? The answer to that lies in the person of Israel's king. The nations come to Israel, not to join Israel but to submit to her king. Psalm 2 is perhaps the clearest statement of this.

¹Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

²The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying,

³Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us'.

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

⁵Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill'.

⁷I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.

⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling

¹²kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

This is a command to the kings of the rebellious nations to submit to Israel's king set on Zion, the one who is the LORD'S anointed, his son. As we noted above,

The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. (Ps. 9:17).

Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you! (Ps. 82:8).

These are the nations who belong to God and who were present in the loins of Adam. They belong to him as their creator and will return to him when he brings Israel back to himself and through them the truth of his holiness (see Ezekiel 36:22-23) and universal kingship is declared, for

The LORD is king! Let *the earth* rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! (Ps. 97:1).

The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

²The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

³Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! (Ps. 99:1-3).

It only remains to see how this takes place.

The Nations and Israel's king

There are many more statements in the Old Testament which could have been raised to support the picture I have just presented. But of more significance than merely stating the promises is examining their fulfilment.

One point needs to be stressed at the outset. These promises regarding Israel and the nations find their primary fulfilment in Christ. Of course, promises which are fulfilled are different from predictions which come true.²⁴ Predictions usually demand some sort of literal completion; promises are filled with the possibility which God has for them. Take, for example, the promises of the return to the land, the inheritance which God had promised through the prophets to Israel/Judah under judgment. The nations will know that 'I am the LORD' when Israel is restored and purified.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. ³²It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

³³Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. ³⁴The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. ³⁵And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.' ³⁶Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it. (Ezekiel 36:22-36)

If this was a prediction requiring a literal fulfilment then we *may* assume that the restoration of 'Israel' as a recognised nation in its own land in 1948 was the goal, although only if we overlook some of the glaring moral weaknesses which still remain there. Modern Israel is an agglomeration of ethnic Jews.²⁵

However, as a promise, the fulfilment is far richer than this. Indeed, the fulfilment of the promise is only recognised when it takes place because the details and the methods of the fulfilment are not clear from the promise itself.²⁶ That is why I would claim with Paul that 'in [Jesus Christ] every one of God's promises is a "yes"' (2 Corinthians 1:20).²⁷ The promises are only fulfilled in Christ. This is the thrust of Hebrews 12:18-24.

²⁴ I owe this observation to Adrio König.

²⁵ This says nothing concerning any future developments.

²⁶ We could point out that the various strands of the Old Testament promises are not tied together in the Old Testament itself. The Jewish scholars of Jesus' day, all experts in the scriptures, still asked if John the Baptist was 'the Messiah, or Elijah, [or] the prophet' (Jn. 1:24; cf. Matt. 16:13-14). They expected that any fulfilment would be multi-faceted.

²⁷ For the meaning of this statement in its context, see Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 108f.

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.') ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The inheritance of Israel is no longer something tangible, such as Mount Sinai or its associated 'physical' manifestations of the presence of God. The inheritance, still, of course, described using the language of the promises, is found in the heavenly Jerusalem and the worship which goes on there and in Christ, the mediator of a new covenant which has blood far more effective than even that of Abel.

The incarnation, life and ministry, death, resurrection ascension of Christ and the subsequent gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, known as these are through the apostolic testimony, are of such significance that we stand in awe as we watch the way God the Father fulfils his promises through his Son. If the nations are to be blessed then it must be as they come to Christ.

Jesus and the Nations

What was the relationship of the Jews of Jesus' day to the Gentiles? To answer that question, we must recognise that Judaism was the result of centuries of self-conscious reflection on the way God had dealt with Israel. From the time of the return from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple, the Jews began to evidence an exclusivism which turned their neighbours into adversaries. Ezra 4:1-3 records:

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ²they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.' ³But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, 'You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.'

Later, Ezra was confronted by the fact of intermarriage by Jews with 'the peoples of the lands with their abominations' (Ezra 9:1). His evaluation was:

...we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹²Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.' ¹³After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴shall we break your commandments again ...? (Ezra 9:10-14).

The commandments are now being associated with national distinctiveness and it is this which we eventually see expressed in the group known as the Pharisees.²⁸ And this is where we come to understand the apostle Paul, since he claimed to have been

circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:5-6).

His description of his former life is consistent with what we know of the Pharisees from elsewhere. Tom Wright offers the following description of Saul of Tarsus the Pharisee:

Saul's persecution of the church, and the word 'zeal' with which he describes it, puts him firmly on the map of a certain type of first-century Judaism. It gives us access to quite a wide database with which to plot the sort of agendas he must have been following, agendas which make sense of his activity in persecuting the church even beyond the borders of the Holy Land itself. It reveals Saul of Tarsus not just as a Jew, but as a Pharisee; not just as a Pharisee, but as a Shammaite Pharisee; not just, perhaps, as a Shammaite Pharisee, but as one of the strictest of the strict. Who were the Shammaites? A division had taken place within Pharisaism in the generation before Saul of Tarsus. During the reign of Herod the Great (36-4BC) there arose two schools of thought within the already powerful movement, following the two great teachers of the Herodian period, Hillel and Shammai. We know them through dozens of discussions in the Mishnah (the codification of Jewish law, drawn together around AD200), where almost always Hillel is the 'lenient' one, and Shammai is the 'strict' one. Their followers, likewise, argue issue after issue in terms of lenient and strict practices.

By the time the Mishnah was written, around the end of the second century AD, the Hillelite position had already won the day, as indeed it does in most of the Mishnah itself. However, between the time of Hillel and Shammai in the later first century BC, and the time of the great Rabbi Akiba in the early years of the second century AD, there was still a good deal of controversy between these two branches of the Pharisees. Saul would have grown up in a world of fierce debate and party loyalty. Not only was he a Jew in a world run by pagan *goyim*, Gentiles, not only was he a Pharisee in a world where (from the Pharisees' point of view) many Jews were seriously compromised with aspects of paganism, he was a Shammaite, a hard-line Pharisee - what we today would call a militant right-winger.

But what precisely were Hillel and Shammai lenient and strict *about*? The Mishnah and the other later rabbinic writings give us the impression that they are lenient or strict about the personal observance of the commands of Torah. Things were not, however, quite so simple in Paul's world. The key issue at stake between 'lenient' and 'strict' interpretations of the law was not just a matter of religion. Nor was it just about private or personal piety. The key issue was as much 'political' as it was 'theological'. It was about aims and agendas for Israel: for the people, the land, and the Temple.

The question, as for many Jews in most of Jewish history, was: what line do we adopt *vis-a-vis* the present political situation? The Hillelites, broadly speaking, pursued a policy of 'live and let live'. Let the Herods and the Pilates, and indeed the Caiaphases, rule the world - let them even rule Israel, politically - just as long as we Jews are allowed to study and practise Torah (the Jewish law) in peace. The Shammaites believed that this wasn't good enough. Torah itself, they thought, demanded that Israel be free from the Gentile yoke, free to serve God in peace, calling no-one master except YHWH, the one true God, himself.

This is what it means to be 'zealous for God' or 'zealous for the traditions of the fathers' in first-century Judaism. We use the word 'zeal' to indicate warmth of heart and spirit, eagerness for a cause. That is a not inaccurate summary of one part of its first-century meaning, too. But whereas for the modern Christian 'zeal' is something you do on your knees, or in evangelism, or in works of

²⁸ For a description of the origins of the sect of the Pharisees see S Westerholm, "Pharisees" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 609ff.

charity, for the first-century Jew 'zeal' was something you did with a knife. Those first-century Jews who longed for revolution against Rome looked back to Phinehas and Elijah in the Old Testament, and to the Maccabean heroes two centuries before Paul, as their models. They saw themselves as being 'zealous for YHWH', 'zealous for Torah', and as having the right, and the duty, to put that zeal into operation with the use of violence. 'Zeal' thus comes close to holy war: a war to be fought (initially, at any rate) guerrilla-style, by individuals committed to the cause.

We should not imagine that such revolutionary activities were confined to a few hotheads, or to one short period (such as that leading up to the war of AD66-70). There is ample evidence of revolutionary activity throughout the first century before Jesus and the first century after him. And the people involved in it included, surprising though this may be to some, the majority of the Pharisees, namely, the Shammaites. The Jewish revolutionaries in this period were thus not simply political revolutionaries, unconcerned with religious or theological issues. As with some contemporary Muslim extremists, their reading of their sacred texts, fuelled by prayer and fasting, generated their revolutionary zeal in the first place and sustained it once it was up and running. Archaeology has shown that the revolutionary 'Sicarii', the 'dagger-men', who died in the last stand on Masada, were deeply pious Jews.²⁹

What was the attitude of these Shammaites towards Gentiles? Simply it was that for Gentiles to know the blessing of God they must come within the exclusivist boundaries of Judaism. And those boundaries were delineated by the Jewish dietary laws, the keeping of the Sabbath and the ritual of circumcision. It was these boundaries which we see the Apostle Paul later standing so vigorously against.

When we read of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, we hear Jesus criticise them:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. (Matt. 23:13, 15).

This was the real picture (though I should add that in the first century AD most Jews lived comfortably among Gentile communities; they were the *Diaspora*). The Pharisees have not understood the true nature of the kingdom and by their efforts to win converts they actually exclude others from the kingdom while locking them into the tight confines of Judaism. In fact, the word 'convert' is a translation of the Greek προσήλυτος (*proselyte*) which refers to a Gentile who has converted to Judaism, and it seems that the primary requirement for being a proselyte was (for males) circumcision.³⁰ Before I examine the way the Apostle Paul dealt with this issue, we should consider the way the Gentiles are presented in the Gospel accounts.

Jesus' descriptions of the Gentiles are consistent with the general tone of his day. Gentiles were not part of the people of God. When dealing with a problem of relationships in the church,³¹ the disciples are to treat recalcitrant members as Gentiles and tax collectors (Matt. 18:17).

²⁹ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 26-27.

³⁰ A fuller discussion can be found in T. R. Schreiner, 'Proselyte' in G. Bromiley (Ed), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 1005-1011.

³¹ There are only two uses of the word 'church' in the Gospels, both in Matthew, at 16:18 and 18:17 (though note the NRSV's insertions to avoid using the word 'brother' at 18:15 and 21). I suggest that both are explicable in the light of the Old Testament descriptions of the people of God and need not, therefore, be seen as anachronisms. See I. H. Marshall, 'Church' in J. B. Green etc (Eds) *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 122ff.

Jesus' contacts with Gentiles were distinctly limited. This may seem somewhat strange in the light of the Old Testament anticipation and of his own professed aim of 'fulfilling the law and the prophets' (Matt. 5:17-18). Although he did meet the occasional non-Jew he nonetheless told his disciples to

Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matt. 10:5-6).

How do we explain this? The answer is best seen in the way the Gospels themselves present Jesus' ministry.

For example, Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus. He is 'the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1). The Jews in general might have forgotten, but the Apostle Paul firmly reminds us that Abraham was a Gentile. Furthermore, the genealogy includes two Gentile women, Ruth and Rahab. Matthew is the one who records that it was wise men from the east who were the first to come to worship 'the king of the Jews' (Matt. 2:1-12). In the Sermon on the Mount there is the recognition that Gentiles do not know how to pray and so should not be the paradigm (Matt. 6:7-8), although later Jesus strongly castigates the Pharisees for actually focussing on themselves in *their* devotions (Matthew 23, esp. vs. 5).

There are a number of miracles of healing described in Matthew chapter eight. The first (Matt. 8:1-4) involves Jesus *touching* a leper (thus rendering himself *unclean*, see Lev. 5:3 and cf. Matt. 9:18, though the result is that the leper is made *clean*) and the second (Matt. 8:5-13) shows Jesus healing the servant of a centurion, an officer in the Roman forces. There is also the healing of the Gadarene demoniacs (Matt. 8:28-34). Although some geographical uncertainties exist, the area was predominantly Gentile as evidenced by the presence of the herd of pigs.

When Jesus heard that the Pharisees were conspiring to kill him, Matthew records that Jesus quietly left the area and ordered those whom he healed not to make him known. Matthew makes it clear that his quietness is consistent with Isaiah 42:1-4, a passage which twice records that the servant will bring blessings to the Gentiles (Matt. 12:18-21).

There are other items in Matthew's Gospel which could be considered but the question raised earlier can surely be answered more easily. When Jesus told the disciples not to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Matt. 10:5-6) he was not prohibiting blessings to the Gentiles but determining the method by which they would come. The various healings etc which the Gentiles experienced were anticipatory of the full blessing which would come through a renewed Israel. Jesus' primary ministry was to Israel *in order that* Israel would be restored to its role among the nations.

But there is more, for what also becomes plain is that Matthew understands Israel as reaching its goal in Jesus himself. After establishing that Jesus is the descendant of Abraham (and of David), Matthew linked the return of the baby Jesus from Egypt with Hosea 11:1, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Matt. 2:15). Superficially a strange quotation, I suggest that the meaning is that Jesus is the seed of Abraham, the son (cf. Ex. 4:22-23) who will be the source of the restoration of creation (Gen. 12:1-3). He is Israel. If this is so then ethnic Israel must accept Jesus as the Messiah or forfeit its covenantal privilege. Rejection of Jesus will mark the end of Israel. This is the thrust, surely, of Matthew 23-25; the climactic judgement identifies the destruction of the temple (which equals the destruction of the nation) with the end of the age and with the coming of Messiah (23:3). But there are

those in Israel who are faithful servants; five wise bridesmaids who look forward to his coming and stewards who manage his gifts well (Matt. 25:1-30). But nonetheless, on that day of judgment, Israel will fare no differently than any other nation.³² Thus:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the *nations* will be gathered before him, and he will separate *people* one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. (Matt. 25:31-33).

The story in Matthew continues with Jesus warning the disciples that even they would all desert him (Matt. 26:31), followed by Peter's vehement denial of Jesus (Matt. 26:69-75) and then the total and vicious rejection of him by the leaders of the nation. They are specifically rejecting their Messiah (Gk. Χριστός, *Christos*, Matt. 27:17, 22). Just as Israel profaned the name of God (in this case, it is 'God with us', 'Emmanuel', see Matt. 1:23), so too do the nations, represented by the Roman Governor's troops:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ³⁰They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matt. 27:27-31).

So, how does Matthew end his Gospel? He who came to 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21) has his people and from them the nations will be blessed. So Matthew 28:16-20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matt. 28:16-20).

Abraham's seed, Israel himself, is now moving out, in full authority, with and through his people, to claim the nations and to bring them once again into submission, which is nothing less than immersion into the Triune God himself.

The Gospel accounts, each in its own way, all present a similar picture. Mark's climax³³ is the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God by a centurion (Mk. 15:39 cf. 1:1³⁴). Luke's Gospel concludes with the recognition that

...it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Lu. 24:46-47).

John's Gospel establishes from the commencement that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate and that, as such, all creation derives from him (John 1:1-5). He is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). By his death he will draw all to himself

³² This is consistent with Acts 4:25ff where the quotation from Psalm 2 concerning the nations in rebellion against the LORD and his Messiah is shown to include 'Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel' (vs. 27).

³³ Leaving aside matter of the disputed endings.

³⁴ Some MSS lack the phrase 'the Son of God' in Mark 1:1.

(John 12:32) and the Gospel ends with Jesus sending the disciples in the same terms and with the same power as he himself had. If he takes away the sin of the world, then the disciples will bring that blessing as they go:

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (John 20:21-23).

We must next turn to the way the subject is revealed in the post-Pentecost world.

The Nations and the Plan of God

The Christian church is mostly comprised of Gentiles. The reality is that, while there are many Jews who have come to Christ, for all sorts of reasons, few of us know any of them. Issues, then, of Jew and Gentile in the church with their respective sensitivities rarely become of more than antiquarian interest for most Christians. Yet this is not the way the New Testament describes the church. Large sections of the Acts and the letters are given over to describing and resolving tensions between the two groups. What is more, in the story of Acts, there are *no* Gentile believers until the end of the tenth chapter! More than one third of the book is given to presenting the new reality of a body of Jews (plus Samaritans in chapter 8) who now believe in Jesus as the Messiah who is also YHWH (Acts 2:36; cf. 2:21).

Acts commences with Jesus giving the apostles instruction concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1-5), a theme taken up by the apostles, including Paul, all the way through the book (see Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Whatever it was that Jesus said, Acts 1:6 indicates that the apostles understood it as having a focus on Israel. It seems unlikely that their question is unrelated to the subject; rather Jesus does not deny their question, he simply dismisses their interest in timing and states the issues of the kingdom.³⁵

He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:7-8)

Their focus is Israel; since we do not know the precise details of what was taught, although we can readily work out what it was from the Old Testament and the Gospels (Luke's in particular), it may well be that their question was perfectly in order. If the kingdom is restored to Israel, then Israel can again function fully in the plan of God.

Alternatively (or perhaps also), their question may betray the attitude which becomes evident later in Acts that the kingdom of God is to be found in Israel and that for Gentiles to enter the kingdom involves their entering Israel. The apostles certainly show no interest in 'going' as the story unfolds. In Acts 8:1 Luke emphatically says that the apostles did not leave Jerusalem when the church was scattered and in Acts 10 Peter is virtually forced to go to Cornelius with the gospel.

... he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?' (Acts 10:28-29).

Peter may have come 'without objection' but he evidently came also without expectation, or at least the Jewish believers who came with him did.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. (Acts 10:44-46).

Likewise the other apostles seem put out by Peter's eating with 'uncircumcised men' (Acts 11:2-3). It may be that the phrase 'uncircumcised men' is another way of saying 'non-Jews'

³⁵ See James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 9ff.

but it may also be another way of delineating the issues facing the church. Jewish believers are ‘circumcised believers’. I will return to this shortly.

The story of Acts continues with the spread of the gospel to Antioch (Acts 11:19ff). Sadly the manuscript evidence is not clear. We are not sure if Luke wrote that they spoke to ‘Hellenists’ or to ‘Greeks’.³⁶ The contrast with what has gone before probably indicates that once Cornelius and those with him had become believers and received the Spirit it was now to be expected that others would move out beyond the confines of Jewish audiences.

Of course, the Gentiles now stood alongside the Jews and the Samaritans as having not only become believers (a not unimportant term in the New Testament but one which has become devalued somewhat in today’s language) but they also had, with them, received the Spirit! This meant that all of them now stood in the climax of history. The giving of the Spirit was no mere icing on the cake of salvation, it was the purpose of salvation.³⁷

Acts 13:4ff describes Paul (Barnabas and Saul) preaching before the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus (vs. 7) who subsequently believed (vs. 12). But even here it seems that Paul’s primary focus was still on the Jews, many of whom evidently believed. It was not until the Jews in Pisidian Antioch publicly rejected the message that

... both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.’⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. (Acts 13:46-49).

This paragraph is highly significant. The quotation is from Isaiah 49:6 (the second ‘servant song’). The servant, Israel, is to be a light to the nations, and this is what we see in these two Jewish believers. Ethnic Israel may reject their Messiah, but the purpose of God is for all the nations, so ‘as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers’.

Paul is now clearly the apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 22:21; 26:17-18). After the first ‘missionary journey’ Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch ‘called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles’ (Acts 14:27).

At this point a critical issue arose in the life of the church, one which demanded Paul’s attention many times in his writings. It is the matter of circumcision and the Gentile believers. It is this which I anticipated above when looking at the language used by the apostles in

³⁶ If it was the former (with the *NRSV* and the *UBS*³) then they were possibly preaching to Greek speaking Jews; if the latter, then to Gentiles. Cf Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, 1971, pp. 386-389. He concludes that here the rare word *φΕλληνισταρα* (*Hellenists*) ‘is to be understood in the broad sense of “Greek-speaking persons,” meaning thereby the mixed population of Antioch in contrast with the *ζΙουδαϊδοι* of ver. 19.’ (p. 388f). Dunn, on the other hand, argues that the original word was *Ελληνα* (*Greeks*).

³⁷ I must refer to the Study, ‘*The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit*’ (August 1997, elsewhere expanded and printed as ‘*Why I am not a Pentecostal*’) for a discussion of the climactic nature of the gift of the Spirit. I argued there that the gift of the Spirit is the restoration of men and women to their pristine purity. To receive the Spirit is to be in Christ is to be a new creation. As such, then, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, Samaria and Caesarea is no mere paradigm to be applied to later situations (others may or may not receive the Spirit in the same manner). Instead these occasions are evidence Christ has now ‘opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers’.

Acts 11:1-3. The problem was not that Cornelius was a Gentile; many Gentiles had become Jews (proselytes) but that he was uncircumcised. So Acts 15:1-5 sets out the agenda of many Jewish Christians.

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

In other words, Gentiles must not only become one with the Jews, they must become members of Israel if they are to be in the kingdom of God.

There was 'no small dissension' over the matter. In fact Paul regarded the issue as crucial to the truth of God. However, in Acts 15 Luke is at pains to show that it was Peter whose contribution was central to the 'resolution' of the problem. Faith is all that is required.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.'⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' (Acts 15:7-11)

Gentiles received the Spirit, which means that God cleansed their hearts by faith. In this God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, the point made by Peter earlier in Acts 11:12, 15, 17.

The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. ...¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them *just as it had upon us at the beginning*. ...¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us *when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could hinder God?

Peter has been conscious since his visit to Caesarea that the issue is one of faith and that any recourse to the elements which make Jews distinctive is ruled out emphatically. James, as 'presiding elder' (?), then gave his decision, though being careful to urge Gentiles to maintain a sensitivity to Jewish concerns. (Acts 15:19-21).

Interestingly, in Acts 16:1-3, we then have the account of Paul having Timothy circumcised. Although no reason is given, the placing of this account is important. Paul the apostle to the Gentiles is himself sensitive to the Jewish concerns and so Timothy, who is the son of a Jewish woman (see 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15), ought not treat the Jewish requirements lightly, even if, in the long run, they are not of eternal consequence (See Gal. 6:15).

Paul himself is apparently content to go along with Jewish ritual, even though he knows now it has only relative value. To the Jew he will be as a Jew (1 Cor. 9:20) even if that means going into the temple in Jerusalem and participating in the activities there

(Acts 21:17-26). This was the occasion when his previous ministry among the Gentiles was raised as an excuse for a riot and Paul's consequent arrest. But the passage resonates with the uncertainty which the Jewish believers retained about Gentiles.

When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly. ¹⁸The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present. ¹⁹After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. ²¹They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. ²²What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. ²⁴Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. *Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law.* ²⁵But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." (Acts 21:17-25).

It is not hard to see them as scared of Paul. He is clearly a man who functions in full liberty and who exposes their weakness by doing so. Furthermore, he is plainly able to state his position with authority. Nonetheless, Paul agreed to their request and so the story developed.

Eventually he arrived in Rome, a prisoner still. Three days after arriving

... he called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, 'Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. ¹⁸When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor — even though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, *since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.*' ²¹They replied, 'We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you. ²²But we would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.'

²³After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. ²⁴Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. ²⁵So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

²⁶"Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

²⁷For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn —
and I would heal them."

²⁸Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.' (Acts 28:17-28).

Not only does the book of Acts conclude with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God (28:30) but it does so with the mission to Gentiles as a fundamental part of it. Ethnic Israel's dullness leads to the gospel being preached to the Gentiles.

Paul and the Jew–Gentile Question

To a certain extent we can see the Jew–Gentile question appearing in some form or another in many of Paul's letters. The participants are not always named, but it is not hard to see Jews as the ones being offended when some Corinthians eat meat offered to idols for example. Of course, it is not the Jew–Gentile question which is of on-going significance but Paul's response to it. So the matter of liberty and how we use it is of more importance than the original question, especially when, as I have suggested, for most of us the presence of Jewish Christians is not even suspected far less a problem in church life. Still, Paul's letters were real letters and so an examination of the letter to the Romans against its immediate background is not out of place.

Why did Paul write Romans? The answer seems to be hidden in Romans 15:23-25.

But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you²⁴ when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. ²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints...

Paul is on his way to Jerusalem with relief funds but after that he wants to go west to Spain, using Rome as a base as he had once used Antioch. Knowing the Roman church as he does (although he has never visited them) he writes to them, providing a theological rationale of his missionary endeavours.

It seems that in Rome there is a strain among the believers which is somewhat the opposite of that problem he dealt with in the Galatian letter. Among the Galatian churches there was the pressure to get the Gentiles to recognise that 'righteousness' meant membership of the people of God, with which there was no argument, but that the implication was that it meant that Gentiles should be circumcised in order to be righteous, that is, to be justified. The Judaisers were thus insisting, as in the Acts 15 council, that Gentiles should come within the boundary markers of ethnic Israel.

In the Roman church there was the opposite problem of the danger of Gentiles writing-off the Jews. The long section of Romans 14:1–15:13 seems to say that the opinion was prevalent that if Jews maintained their dietary laws they were not only second class citizens within the church but were actually outside the church and the Gospel. So:

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’;
¹⁰and again he says,
 ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’;
¹¹and again,
 ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’;
¹²and again Isaiah says,
 ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
 in him the Gentiles shall hope.’
¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in
 hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:1-13).

The letter to the Romans is written from the standpoint of the overall purpose of God, which we have seen so prominently throughout the Scriptures, and therefore deals with the subject of the righteousness of God as ‘God’s covenant faithfulness’.

‘Righteousness’ is essentially a legal term, referring to a relationship to the law. To be righteous is to be consistent with the law and to be justified (literally, though unhelpfully, ‘righteo-fied’) is to be made consistent. But how can we say that God is righteous, especially if we understand the law of God as being the expression of his own nature? My definition of ‘the righteousness of God’ would then be this: *The righteousness of God is his total consistency with his own nature which he both expresses and expects, and which he works for us in Christ.*³⁸ But how do we see God’s righteousness worked out in the affairs of history? Tom Wright’s approach is helpful:³⁹

The righteousness of God ... [is] essentially the covenant faithfulness, the covenant justice of the God who made promises to Abraham, promises of a worldwide family characterised by faith, in and through whom the evil of the world would be undone.⁴⁰

Keeping in mind the way the purpose of God is revealed to be accomplished through Israel, Romans 1:16-17 makes good sense.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’

The gospel, the power of God to salvation (that is, of the whole world) is for the Jew first and also for the Greek. It is for both because Romans 1:18-32 details the fact that *all* are under God’s wrath. Thus, ‘You have no excuse, whoever you are’ (Rom. 2:1) and

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality. (Romans 2:9-11).

The same universal approach is seen in Romans 2:12-16, where the first use of the word ‘law’ (Gk. νόμος, *nomos*) is found in the letter.

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law

³⁸ This definition takes into account both the subjective and objective elements of the genitive in Romans 1:17.

³⁹ And has been largely adopted in what follows. See *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 231-257.

⁴⁰ *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 234.

to themselves. ¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2:12-16).⁴¹

In this section, ‘the law’ is obviously the Jewish law, the *Torah*. Here the point is possibly worth making that ‘law’ for modern readers has been subsumed under the canopy of ‘legal obligations’. It has been suggested (validly, I think) that *our* view of law is more the result of Luther (and Calvin) reading the attitude towards salvation by medieval Catholicism into Paul than from any true understanding of the Judaism of the time of Jesus and the early church.⁴² But when Paul speaks of law he speaks of *Torah*. Thus, in Romans 2:13 he refers to those who *do* the law. But how does one do the law? In spite of contemporary Judaism, Paul insists that circumcision is not keeping the law. He actually contrasts the two in Romans 2:25.

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

On the contrary, in Romans 9:30-32 he makes the point that keeping the law always meant faith.

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; ³¹but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. ³²Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,

The reason for this is simply that this is what Abraham did. In chapter four Paul devoted his attention to the way Abraham was justified by faith.⁴³

Well, if Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith and if a Jew has no privilege through his observance of circumcision, then what advantage is there?

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ²Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (Romans 3:1-2).

Jews had the oracles of God, that is, they had the revelation of God, so that, in Israel, the nations could see the truth of God. This is what the prophets had said in Isaiah 2:2-4 and Zechariah 8:20-23.

But, if that was their privilege, what if (ethnic) Israel proved to be unfaithful to its commission? Does that somehow nullify God’s faithfulness (that is, his *hesed*, his steadfast love, Rom. 3:3-4)? No, God will be faithful to his own purpose (that is, will be righteous) no matter what. If this is so, then Israel’s privilege does not mean that they are better off, since even the Old Testament indicates that Israel, and so all, are under sin (Rom. 3:10-18).

⁴¹ Some translations insert brackets around verses 14-15, in an attempt to avoid the possible reading that some will be acquitted on the day of judgment (vs. 16). While that may be helpful, there is no manuscript evidence to support it.

⁴² Frank Thielman (*Paul and the Law*, p. 22) says that it is easy to ‘miss the significance of a subtle hermeneutical step that [Luther and Calvin have] taken. Often in the course of discussing Paul’s letters, these Reformers place the Roman Catholic Church, its scholars, such as Thomas, and its hierarchy in the role that Judaism occupies in Paul’s statements about the law. Paul’s statements about justification by faith apart from works of the law are taken, without hesitation, to be statements about the medieval system of salvation by meritorious works’.

⁴³ See the suggestion below on the letter of James.

In this light, we can see the *other* purpose of the law in Romans 3:19-20. *Torah* silences all who claim to be members of the people of God through their own merit. It exposes their failure to see that God has always demanded faith. That is why Abraham is discussed in chapter four and, of course, simple reflection on *Torah* will reveal that the central feature of Israel's worship was not the obedience of the people but the sacrifices which were God's gift to his people in order to keep them in consistent with his revealed character and within his purposes. Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness and so, by implication, was the faith of Israel.

In Romans 5:12-21, Paul deals with the contrast between Adam and Christ. He insists that there was law before there was *Torah* (verse 13). Law, as the revelation of God's eternal being, was a principle of creation; so why was *Torah* given? The answer to that question is found in Rom. 5:20. Law came in, either *in order to* increase the trespass (purpose), or *with the result that* (result) the trespass was increased. Either way, Wright's comment is helpful.

The point is not that the creator decides, arbitrarily, to save some and condemn others. Rather, he sees that the only way of rescuing his world at all is to call a people, and to enter into a covenant with them, so that through them he will deal with evil. But the means of dealing with evil is to concentrate it in one place and condemn—execute—it there. The full force of this condemnation is not intended to fall on this people in general, but on their representative, the Messiah.⁴⁴

The gifts given to Israel, and in particular the law, are thus to be seen as having a clear and direct purpose. Paul's list of the gifts given to Israel in Romans 9:1-5 is therefore significant.

Three features of 9:1-5 are important for our present purposes. First, Paul's evident grief at the failure of the Jews to believe must always be kept in mind. This shows on the one hand that their failure is not, in his mind, a mere accident which only appears to cut them off from salvation, but does not do so really; and, on the other hand, that his approach to the issue is not that of the armchair theologian calmly dissecting someone else's fate, but that of the vitally involved human being, with all his natural sympathies alert and operative. The hints of parallels with 7:7-25 reinforce this point: Paul looks at 'his flesh' in rebellion against the gospel, and in himself ... he identifies with them.

Second, the list of Jewish privileges in 9:4f. is not arbitrary, but echoes precisely those privileges which, throughout Romans up to this point, Paul has shown to be transferred to the Jews' representative Messiah, and, through him, to all those who are 'in him', be they Jewish or Gentile. Sonship, glory, covenants, law, worship, promises, patriarchs: all has become the glory of the church in Christ. This intensifies the irony—and, for Paul, the agony—of the present situation.

Third, the climactic privilege is that from the Jewish race, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. ... The Jews are the people of the Messiah, but they are this according to the flesh. And the Messiah to whom they belong is not merely 'theirs', but is also 'God over all, blessed for ever'. ... the Jewish Messiah is God over all, Jew and Gentile alike. Within the very heart of the Jewish privilege there lies the vocation which proves the Jews' apparent undoing: that the Messiah, who encapsulates her destiny in himself, is God's means of salvation not for her alone but for the whole world. More specifically, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the Messiah in his death brought to a head the sorry tale of Israel's own acting out of the sin of Adam... As long as Israel clings to the fact of ancestral privilege, she cannot but miss out on God's intended universal salvation... The God who made promises to Israel is also the creator of the whole world; but if that is so his promises cannot be confined to Israel alone, and to imagine that they are is to deny his very character.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 239.

⁴⁵ *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 237f.

The importance of this is spelled out in Romans 9:30-10:4. *Torah* had its purpose, but Israel's failure was to mistake *Torah's* purpose for the goal. In other words, law became an end in itself, so that law was never really understood.

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; ³¹but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. ³²Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³as it is written, ‘

See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

¹Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ²I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 9:30-10:4).

To say that Christ is the end of the law, then, does not mean that law is finished. Rather, it means that he is the goal of *Torah*. When he comes *Torah's* purpose is accomplished. Paul's anguish for Israel is that in rejecting Christ in favor of *Torah* they had in fact rejected *Torah*. Wright again.

The *Torah* really is the νόμος δικαιοσύνης, the boundary marker of covenant membership; but it is so in a paradoxical fashion, since it can only be fulfilled by faith, not by the ‘works of the law’, the badges of Jewish membership (Sabbath, dietary laws, circumcision) which kept Jews separate from Gentiles. The result is that Israel has stumbled over the stumbling stone, which in one sense is clearly the *Torah* and in another is clearly the Messiah, or the preaching about him. Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah simply is the logical outworking of her misuse of the *Torah*, her attempt to treat it as a charter of automatic national privilege. But this ‘fall’ was itself, it appears, part of the plan of God, who gave the *Torah* (there is no suggestion here that the *Torah* is a bad thing) and who, after all, sent the Messiah. Here is the irony of Romans 9-11, foreshadowed indeed in Galatians 3 and Romans 5-8 but now spelt out in detail: Israel's disobedience is already actually part of the covenant plan, part of God's intention from the beginning. The *Torah* has indeed concentrated sin in Israel, and now we see its full extent. As well as ‘ordinary’ sin—the *breaking* of God's law—which was the problem in ch. 7, Israel is now shown to be guilty of a kind of meta-sin, the attempt to confine grace to one race. The result of this idolatry of national privilege is that Israel clings on to the terrible destiny—of being the place where sin was concentrated—which she was meant to allow her Messiah to bear on her behalf.

...Israel, already charged in 7.13-20 with ignorant *sin*, is now also seen to be ignorant of the δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ 10.2—that is, of God's own covenant faithfulness and its nature and shape, in other words of what God was righteously, justly and faithfully doing in her history. She was bent, instead, on pursuing τὴν ἰσθμὴν ἀνδικαιοσύνης, that is, a status of covenant membership which would be for Jews and Jews only. In doing so, she did not submit to God's own covenant plan: because Christ all along was the secret goal of *Torah*, the τέλος νόμου, so that her rejection of Christ and her abuse of *Torah*, turning it into a charter of racial privilege, were really one and the same thing. The notorious crux of 10.4 can, I think, be reduced to these terms: that the *Torah* is neither abolished as though it were bad or demonic, nor affirmed in the sense in which the Jews took it. It was a good thing, given deliberately by God for a specific task and a particular period of time. When the task is done and the time is up, the *Torah* reaches its goal, which is also the conclusion of its intended reign, not because it was a bad thing to be abolished but because it was a good thing whose job is done... The Messiah is the fulfillment of the long purposes of Israel's God. It was for this that *Torah* was given in the first place as a deliberately temporary mode of administration. In the Messiah are fulfilled the creator's paradoxical purposes for Israel and hence for the world. He is the climax of the covenant.

There is therefore something brought to an end by Christ. The cross brings to a halt any suggestion of Jewish national privilege, as Paul says with characteristic brevity in Galatians 2.21 ('if covenant membership were though Torah, Christ died in vain. ... within this bringing to an end of Jewish national privilege he also brings to an end the process of concentrating *sin* within Israel ... This means that the *παντί* of 10.4b can be given its full weight. If has fulfilled God's purpose for Israel (that she should be the means of dealing with the world's sin), then Gentiles can now be welcomed into covenant family. But if he has brought it to its goal, and hence its terminus Israel's ambiguous vocation to be the people in whom sin was to concentrated in order that it be dealt with, then Israel too is free, when she acknowledges him as Messiah, to enjoy covenant membership without, any longer, the former ambiguity.⁴⁶

Torah, as the boundary marker of Jewish identity or, dare I say it, of Israel, is finished. 'When I reach my goal I stop travelling; not because my journey was a silly idea but because it was a good idea now fully worked out'.⁴⁷

Now *Torah's* first purpose is clear and operative. Both Jew and Gentile are set free to obey the law in faith. The following passages make this plain.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4).

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. (Rom. 6:11-12).

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. ²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'?

²²All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings.

²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

⁴⁶ *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 240-242.

⁴⁷ *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 244.

¹So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

⁸But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Colossians 2:8-3:11).

If we were to ask what parts of the Old Testament law Christians today should keep, we would be asking a question for which there is no answer. If the goal of *Torah* has been reached then the Christian, Jew or Gentile, is not concerned with Jewish laws which have served their purpose. The point is that now we are free to obey the law, of which *Torah* was but a temporary expression. And the law we now are free to keep is not written on tablets of stone but on the heart. This is so simple, for it what the prophets themselves had anticipated. Jeremiah 31:31-34 for instance:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Why should this intimacy with the law be so? It is because that is the way men and women were created. Romans 2:12-16 is the reason for the promise of Jeremiah and not its result. Because Man is the image of God, it to the image of God that he is to be restored. And if Man is the living and personal image of God, so the law is the written, preceptual image of God.⁴⁸ Because external law always works wrath through guilt (Rom. 4:15), justification brings the restoration of law as the internal drive of the (re)created Man.

Much attention in the New Testament is given to Israel and the *Torah*. But there is more. The covenant to which God is faithful with Israel is itself a factor in the overall covenant of creation.⁴⁹ So Israel's Messiah is, in fact, 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). If he is the climax of Israel's covenant, he is so because he is the climax of the covenant of creation. He is 'Adam at last'.

So in him the nations find their true identity. They do not find it in Israel, rather in partnership with Israel they find it in the one new man (Eph. 2:15). The passage Ephesians 2:11-22 reflects the historical reality.

⁴⁸ A. Motyer, 'Law' in W. Elwell, (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, 1984, p. 624.

⁴⁹ See Geoffrey Bingham, *Love's Most Glorious Covenant*, Redeemer Baptist Press, 1997; W. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, Baker, 1984.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’ — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

But now the historical reality gives way to the eschatological reality. Now there is the people of God and that people is his ‘peoples’,⁵⁰ in unity but with the richness of their diversity.

From one ancestor came the nations. The vision of Revelation 21 and 22 is that the nations are present again, unified in the last Adam, presenting right worship in the new Jerusalem, which is nothing less than the presence of God himself.

⁵⁰ Thus Rev. 21:3. Other manuscripts have ‘people’.

ADDENDUM 1. — The Future of Israel

Romans 9-11 is a passage which has puzzled many. Demanding our immediate attention is the phrase in Romans 11:26, 'and so all Israel will be saved'.⁵¹ Some have suggested that this refers to the salvation of the Gentiles who thus fill up Israel. The reference to Israel would not be to physical Israel but to Israel as a designation for the people of God. But is Israel ever a designation for the whole people of God, the new humanity? I think not. Instead, I suggest that Paul's meaning is simply found within the passage itself.

In Romans 9:1-5 we have seen that Paul laments the failure of Israel to believe in her Messiah. That failure does not, of course, mean that the plan of God has failed or somehow been frustrated. On the contrary, God had always indicated that mere physical descent from Abraham was not in his mind when expressing his purpose through Abraham's seed. His intention was always that there should be the children of promise (Rom. 9:6-8), a group distinct within the children of the flesh. This is consistent with the promise of the two seeds in Genesis 3:15.

But who constitutes the children of promise? Romans chapter 11 answers this question. God has his remnant, but the mystery lies in the way that remnant comes to be revealed. Ethnic Israel rejects the Messiah and, as we have seen, this results in the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. But the gospel was always intended to include the Jews in the blessing so that Paul understands that the salvation of Gentiles will actually provoke Jews to jealousy for their, until now, lost heritage. As a result, through the salvation of the full number of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25) all Israel, not nor ever intended to be ethnic Israel, will be saved. Why should this be so? It is because God who is faithful to the covenant of creation is also faithful to the covenant within the covenant, so that Israel is beloved for the sake of their ancestors (Rom. 11:28). Hence the promise stands that

Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.

²⁷And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins. (Romans 11:26-27).

Who can comprehend this? God has intended mercy to all (Rom. 11:30-32) but far from men and women or nations being able to analyse or manage this plan, all we or they can do is worship in stunned amazement.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴'For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?'

³⁵Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?'

³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).

⁵¹ See the comments above which relate this to Paul's closing words in Galatians.

ADDENDUM 2. — A brief discussion concerning our approach to the letter of James.

I want to stress that what follows is only a suggestion and is offered to raise the possibility that the issues of Jews, Gentiles and the People of God may actually not only be reflected in the New Testament but explain why one of the books of the New Testament is included at all.

1. The account in Acts regarding the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas involves the problem of John Mark and his failure to accompany them all the way on the first missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40). As it stands in Acts, the disagreement seems to be as much a question of disagreement between very strong personalities (especially Paul) rather than a matter of such great principle.

2. In the account of the Council held in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29) the problem of submission to the Jewish law was evidently resolved, with Paul, Peter and James being in agreement. In his summary, James does, however, maintain a public concern for the Jews and their sensitivity to the law (15:19-21) and this picture is repeated in Acts 21:17-26. Within Acts, this picture is quite consistent.

3. In the letter to the Galatians Paul relates the account of his relationship with James from another angle. He insists that what he preaches is an unchangeable gospel (1:6-9) and that it is so because it is not a human invention nor did he receive it from any human source—‘I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1:10-12). In the section 1:18-2:10 Paul indicates that on his first Jerusalem visit, three years after his conversion, he stayed with Cephas/Peter and met no one else besides James. The fourteen years later he again went up to Jerusalem, with Barnabas, indicating that it was the Jerusalem Council that is being described or at least that this visit took place prior to the split between the two men. He says that

² I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.

³ But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

⁴ But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us--

⁵ we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.

⁶ And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) --those leaders contributed nothing to me.

⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised

⁸ (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles),

⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

¹⁰ They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:2-10).

In this section Paul seems to go further in his description of James. He is one of the acknowledged leaders but 'what they were made no difference to' Paul and they contributed nothing to him (vs. 9).

Here there seems to be the hint of friction between Paul and the others, since he had said that there was still pressure for Titus 'to be circumcised, though he was a Greek' (vs.3). In the face of 'false believers' (lit. *false brothers*) Paul would not modify the truth of the gospel 'even for a moment' (vs.5).

Who were the false brothers? Were they unbelievers who appeared as brothers or were they actually brothers who it turns out were false to the gospel by which they had been saved (Acts 15:7-11)? In the long run it probably does not matter. Or, was James among them? In verses 7-10 James and Cephas and John are forced to acknowledge Paul's calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, albeit with the request that he remember the poor, something he was eager to do anyway (is the impression that Paul found their suggestion strange? As if he would have not cared for the poor perhaps?). But then, in the next paragraph, verses 11-14, Paul describes his strong disagreement with Peter over the matter of the truth of the gospel, namely that Peter no longer had to maintain his Jewish distinctiveness *vis-a-vis* the Gentile Christians.

The first thing to observe is that Peter withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles when representatives from James came. The strong impression is that this took place after the events described in the previous paragraph and that although James had given Paul the right hand of fellowship (vs. 9) he was still eager to maintain Jewish purity. Second is the sad fact that 'the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy' (Galatians 2:13).

So is this the reason why Paul and Barnabas split up? Was it that the issue of John Mark's inconsistency was merely a catalyst in a problem which was deeply rooted and concerned the truth of the Gospel. The proximity of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 and the Council in Jerusalem *may* lend weight to this.

If this is the case, then may we not suspect that Paul sees James not merely as the leader of the Jerusalem church but as the leader of the Jewish wing of the church and one who was at all times eager to maintain the place of circumcision among both Jews and Gentiles. Thus the law for James would really relate to Jewish distinctiveness as much as to moral issues.

4. Now, and here I freely acknowledge that the lines are being stretched, how are we to understand the letter of James? (I am assuming that the James in Acts 15 and Galatians is the author of this letter.) It is admitted that the letter raises more questions than it answers: for example, what sort of situation is being addressed when James writes,

You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:2).

What church in the New Testament period may we imagine having murder as one of its problems?⁵² This not to say that we cannot reason from this to the Sermon on the Mount and discuss murder as the inward disposition even before it is the outward action, but that seems to do little justice to the letter as we have it.

⁵² It is not impossible that the author is using hyperbole.

Then there is the identity of the recipients. Who are they? Are they Jewish believers? The language of 1:1 would seem to imply as much.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Again, surprisingly, the mention of Jesus Christ in this opening verse is one half of all the references to him in the letter. The only other reference is in 2:1, where the identity of the one in whom they believe does not really affect the substance of the exhortation. The same exhortation may just as easily come from a prophet in the Old Testament.

The mention of 'our ancestor Abraham' (2:21) would seem to point to the recipients being Jewish, and we may compare Paul's statement in Romans 4:1 that Abraham was 'our ancestor according to the flesh'. Plainly Paul's language there could not have theological ancestry in mind and I am presuming that the same applies in James.

But these questions are taken over by the question of the role of law and or works in James. Over against the clear insistence by Paul that justification is by grace through faith, that language of James is strong: 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' (2:24). What is more, the person whom James relies on most to prove his point is none other than Abraham, the very man whom Paul uses to prove that justification is by faith alone.

Is that why James urges compliance with 'the law'? In 1:22-25 he treats 'the word' and 'the perfect law, the law of liberty' as one and the same, elsewhere calling the law 'the royal law' (2:8). In the face of only two, rather innocuous, references to Jesus, there are the following uses of the word 'law' in James;

But those who look into the perfect *law*, the *law* of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. (1:25)

You do well if you really fulfill the royal *law* according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. (2:8)

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the *law* as transgressors. (2:9)

For whoever keeps the whole *law* but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (2:10)

For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the *law*. (2:11)

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the *law* of liberty. (2:12)

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the *law* and judges the *law*; but if you judge the *law*, you are not a doer of the *law* but a judge. (4:11)

Admittedly, there are really only three sections where law is mentioned, but nonetheless in such a small letter, eleven uses of the word does seem to indicate a priority of sorts, especially when added to what appear, superficially at least, to be statements contradicting Paul, or at least, against Paul, insisting on observance of the law for Jews. No matter how we treat these statements, the problem has always been to attempt to reconcile Paul and James since they are, on the face of it, in contradiction.

So *a* suggestion could be that James' letter stands as a document which expresses the other side of the question. This is how a Christian Jew whose priority is the law, responds to the apparent libertarianism of Paul.

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