

THE STATE OF ISRAEL IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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CHRISTIANS cannot look at Israel from a purely human point of view, for they must see Israel as an essential part of God's plan for men. In a sense, of course, every nation is a part of God's plan; human history is governed, or at least supervised, by God, and all the national groupings that arise in the course of history fall under his Providence. But Israel belongs to the plan in a unique way, not just as one people among others, but as *the* People of God. Israel has no significance as a nation except in a divine perspective. For Israel is the Chosen People, chosen as a people, loved by God as a people.

The life and destiny of Israel then is a *mystery* in the strict sense. This is a word which is often abused, but I am using it as the Fathers of the Church used it to mean 'that which plays a part in the realization of God's plan'. This is the sense in which the Fathers could call the events of the Old Testament mysteries; the episode of Jacob and Esau, David's flight from Saul and later from his sons, the sufferings of the prophet Jeremias. All these were stages in the realization of God's plan, types and figures of fulfilment to come, types and figures of Jesus Christ. Christian thinkers have always been aware that Israel was a mystery in this sense. But in the last two decades our attention has been increasingly directed to the fact. We have realized, for instance, that anti-semitism has a theological significance for us: it is an attack upon God, upon charity, upon the continuity of biblical revelation; an attack in fact upon the roots of Christianity itself. Must we not also say then that the recent establishment of a free Jewish state, the re-emergence of a Jewish nation—and that in the Land promised to them by God—is theologically significant? an answer indeed to the innumerable prayers addressed to God by the Jews since the occupation of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D.? There is no valid reason to think that such fervent and continuous prayers should remain forever unanswered. In this article I shall

¹ The substance of a paper given at a study week-end on 'The Jewish People and Ourselves' at Spode House, Hawkesyard Priory in October 1956.

try to show that we must regard the re-establishment of the Jewish state in a theological light, as part-realization of the Old Testament promises made by God to Israel.

The Bible contains numerous such promises. Amos for example prophesying well before the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of Israel, says: 'In that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen: and I will close up the breaches of the walls thereof and repair what was fallen: and I will rebuild it as in the days of old. . . . And I will bring back the captivity of my people Israel: and they shall build the abandoned cities and inhabit them: and they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine of them: and shall make gardens and eat the fruits of them. And I will plant them upon their own land: and I will no more pluck them out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God.' (9, 11, 14.) The verses can obviously be given a very explicit application to the situation in Palestine today, where the Jews are rebuilding their cities, growing new vines and trees. Again there are the promises of a return from dispersion about which Père Demann wrote a few years ago.² The great text of Ezechiel (37, 1-14), for instance, the famous verses about the bones, in which are prophesied the resurrection of the People and its gathering into one single body alive with the breath of God himself.

These texts often mingle strictly historical perspectives with messianic and eschatological ones. By historical perspectives I mean that these texts evidently refer to the historic restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile. As far as this aspect is concerned, the texts have already been fulfilled in the return of the Jews from Babylon. If, since the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and the disaster of the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 A.D., pious Jews have continued to use the texts as the basis of their prayers, it cannot be because they contain any immediate historical promise for the present time. Most of the texts however have a more 'open' perspective, going beyond the immediate historical data: this I call their messianic perspective. A certain number are even eschatological in the full sense: for instance the announcement of a new David, a shepherd who will feed the children of Israel, who will reassemble them and take care of them; or the striking passage from chapter 65 of the prophecy of Isaias which mixes eschato-

2 'The Return from the dispersion according to the Bible' in *Cahiers Sioniens* No. 10 (1950).

logical and historical texts: 'For behold I create new heavens and a new earth. . . . Behold I create Jerusalem, a rejoicing, and the people thereof, joy. . . . They shall build houses and inhabit them: and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruits therefrom. . . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion and the ox shall eat straw; and dust shall be the serpent's food.' (65, 17-25.) This evidently foreshadows complete and universal restoration, the peace of the final Sabbath, when all the nations will mount to Jerusalem, not in any geographical sense, but by being converted to the true God. Inasmuch as these promises of restoration and return have an eschatological perspective, the Jews, and ourselves, still await their realization. They are promises made to all nations. The messianic perspective of the texts raises more difficulties. As Christians we believe that this perspective, these promises are specially for us. They are promises which are fulfilled and are being fulfilled not in the old Israel, but in the new Israel, the Church; and this not in an immediately material way, but in a deeper, more spiritual way. Thus, the Promised Land, the Land flowing with milk and honey, is no longer a material country, but the Kingdom of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit within and amongst us; and the promise to reassemble the dispersed children of Israel is fulfilled in Christ, in the mystical Body of Christ, according to St John: 'It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people . . . and not only for the nation, but to gather together in one the children of God that were dispersed' (11, 52). It is not only that the Church has taken the place of Israel in God's plan, and has received promises superseding those made to the old Israel. The Church is Israel renewed, and therefore the heir to the old promises too. St Paul shows this quite clearly when he uses the simile of the grafting of the olive, where we see that it is the same stem and yet there is something new, a new branch modifying the whole life of the tree. All that was valuable in the old Israel has been absorbed by the Church, as the vitality of the wild olive renews and transforms the original tree. I know full well that the Jews object to this conclusion, but the Christian cannot avoid it. The Mosaic Law is outdated: the Fathers of the Church are emphatic, and St Paul also: 'For we are the circumcision, who in spirit serve God' (Phil. 3, 3).

Granted all this, one may ask whether Israel, as the Jewish People and descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, does

not remain the bearer of certain promises of revelation. In my opinion, this is the central problem. Is the Church today the only bearer of the promises of God, or is Israel, that is, the many million Jews dispersed throughout the world as well as the one and a half million in the Holy Land, still a true bearer of certain promises of God? It is not just a question of the Jews, like other nations, being included in the providence of God in his universal desire to save all men. But it is a question of whether the Jewish People, as a people, represented by that part of its members which is the Jewish nation in the State of Israel, can be the bearer of a divine promise.

Everything essential is said by St Paul in his Epistle to the Romans: 'For I would not have you ignorant, brethren, of this mystery (lest you should be wise in your own conceits) that blindness in part has happened in Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles should come in. And so all Israel should be saved. . . . As concerning the gospel, indeed, they are enemies for your sake: but as touching the election, they are most dear for the sake of the fathers.' (11, 25-29.) If we consider only these verses, St Paul's reasoning might be as follows: the promises of God are not vain, they are realized in the conversion of the Gentiles, the new Israel. But other passages, especially verses 11 to 16 of the same chapter, clearly promise the final conversion of the Jewish People: 'I say, then: have they so stumbled that they should fall? God forbid! But by their offence salvation is come to the Gentiles, that they may be emulous of them. Now, if the offence of them be the riches of the world, and the diminution of them the riches of the Gentiles, how much more the fullness of them? . . . For if the loss of them be the reconciliation of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? For if the first-fruit be holy, so is the lump also.' This seems to me to be a proof that the Jewish people is the bearer of a divine promise, guaranteed by revelation, a promise of final conversion.

If however we now try to interpret the establishment of the state of Israel as a fulfilment of such divine promises, we meet certain difficulties. As I see it, the promises of God have little to do with the state of Israel in its present form. In all his former dealings with the Chosen People God liberated them *that they should be his People*. God did not deliver his People that they

might plant vineyards in the Holy Land instead of making bricks in Egypt, or write holy books and celebrate the Liturgy in the Temple of Jerusalem instead of trading in Babylon. He did not liberate Israel for liberation's sake. In this connection it is interesting to note that the religious orthodox minority do not accept the state of Israel, as they expect a restoration to come from the Messiah and not through secular means. The present Jewish state is not a religious state. It does not want to be.

And yet it is impossible for religion to be completely ignored. We may well think that God wished to bring back a representative cross-section of the Jewish people to the Holy Land *in order to bring it face to face with grace there*. I use the term 'a representative cross-section of the Jewish people', but in biblical terminology this signifies Israel. Numerical considerations are not important in the Bible. When a few Greeks have been converted St Paul will say that Achaia has heard the word of God. When the élite of the nation are sent to Babylon, it is Israel that has gone into exile. Today the Jews who are living in the Holy Land can be considered, from the biblical point of view, as representative of the whole people, and can call themselves 'Israel'. And restoration to the Land of Promise, even though under secular auspices, may well be a distant preparation of the whole people for the final encounter with grace.

This will principally happen in two ways. There is first the problem of the Messiah, for we now have a restoration without Messianic intervention. The Orthodox Jews base their opposition to the new state on this very fact. It is indeed an abnormality from the Jewish point of view. Often, on the Jewish side, the Messianic texts are interpreted collectively, but not all texts can be interpreted in this way. Secondly there is the problem of the Temple and the Liturgy. It is conceivable that some day the Jews will hold the Old City of Jerusalem. They will hold the site of the Temple. Naturally they will not continue to lament at the Wailing Wall as they did under the Turks. The question of the restoration of the cult will arise. This is practically impossible to solve. Will animal sacrifices be restored? Certainly not. Even before the coming of Christ the sacrifices were interpreted in a spiritual manner, especially among the Essenes. So the Mosaic Law will have to be re-interpreted in the light of the findings of Jewish and Christian scholars through the ages: the difficult question of the

cult, the function of the Temple itself, and the Priesthood which no longer exists. It is generally believed that an assembly of Rabbis from all over the world will study and interpret the Law to suit the present situation. It seems to me that then the symbolic meaning of the Temple, what one might call *the Sign of the Temple*, will for the first time become a central question. For on this site with its mosques, the Word of God was spoken, the Word concerning the Sign of the Temple, announcing that in future the only true Temple would be the Body of Christ: the historical Body of Jesus, born of Mary, dead on the Cross and risen, and the Body of the Church, the Communion of Saints, the Mystical Body which is the Church. At the moment when the Jewish people find themselves on the horns of this dilemma and seek for a solution, the confrontation with grace will take place. According to St Paul the sole purpose of the Law was to bring men to the realization that it cannot be observed in its fullness, and that man can only be justified by the grace of Jesus Christ. This is the impasse to which we may expect the restoration of Israel will lead: the impossibility of observing certain demands of the Law concerning the cult and the Priesthood; and of understanding certain prophecies concerning the Messiah unless Jesus Christ is accepted.

‘Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord.’ (Matt. 23, 38-39.)