

## The Church and Israel

The church is historically rooted in the Jewish faith. Salvation comes from the Jews. Holy Scripture is a collection of books written by Jews. Whoever wants to understand the Christian faith will inevitably be confronted with Israel. Our history is unthinkable without Jewish people and their influence, not only since the German people burdened itself with terrible guilt.

The Middle East conflict seems to force even aloof observers to form an opinion. It is unusual for a week to pass without Israel appearing in the headlines. In the church and in theology the Jewish people's present meaning is unquestioned. A hot discussion is carried on over the commission of the body of Christ.

Those who see themselves as "spiritual Israel" in Israel's place contest that the Jewish people has a different future from non-Jews. This view sees a hope for Jewish persons only if they join the Christian church and give up their Jewish identity. On the other hand, theologians who adhere to Paul's words, "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:19) see that even in the future God will continue to differentiate between Israel and the Gentiles. Eschatology without Israel is biblically untenable.

However, it is surprising that even Christians who hold fast to Israel's continuing significance seldom speak of the connection between a future revival of non-Jewish peoples and the people of Israel. But it is just this indissoluble connection which is Paul's main concern in the central chapters of Romans: The spiritual condition of the Gentiles depends directly on the spiritual condition of Israel – yesterday, today and in the future.

In a first step the apostle shows how salvation was able to come to the heathen only through the fall of Israel (Romans 11:1-11). Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah of Israel. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24), he taught his disciples. Therefore Paul, as well, always had to preach the gospel first to the Jews. Not until they rejected Jesus as messiah and savior of Israel was the way free to non-Jews (cp. e.g. Acts 13:36).

For Paul this was not merely a theological curiosity. Peter was rightly criticized, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3). Not until Paul determined that a great many Jews rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ could he proclaim, "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles" (Acts 28:28).

In a second step Paul shows that this was true not only for the past. In the present, as well, the Church is spiritually dependent on the Jewish people. The apostle uses the old biblical picture of the olive tree and its branches in order to illustrate this (Rom. 11:16-24).

In the Orient of antiquity the olive tree was a decisive economic factor. In the Bible, its fruit and the products made from it stand for riches, luxury and blessing. In addition to daily nourishment, it delivered light, cosmetics and healing. Therefore oil is a symbol of God's spirit and his gifts of grace.

The prophet Jeremiah depicts Israel as a "green, beautiful, fruitful olive tree". Paul expresses the riches of this olive tree more concretely: To Israel belong the adoption as sons, the

presence of the living God, the covenants, the word of God including transmitting it to others, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs and the Messiah (Rom. 9:4f).

Paul makes clear to his non-Jewish readers that they are merely branches of the olive tree. “You do not support the root, but the root supports you” (Rom. 11:18). A non-Jewish disciple of Jesus is grafted as a wild branch into the olive tree. He is only a secondary partaker of the root and the sap of the olive tree.

It is fascinating that today in our congregations we are already seeing in a practical way that in Christ the dividing wall has been broken down and God has reconciled the two – Jews and Gentiles – in one body through the cross (Eph. 2:11-18). But this no more cancels the functional difference between the Gentiles and Israel than the difference between man and woman. It is important that we comprehend this apparent contradiction and perceive it as an enriching and fruitful tension.

This leads to a third point: The spiritual future of the non-Jewish world is also directly connected with the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. Proceeding from the historical sequence that the fall of Israel became salvation for the heathen, Paul portrays a breath-taking perspective which by far exceeds the salvation of all Israel. “If their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!” (Rom. 11:12).

Here Paul shows us an aspect of salvation history which retains its validity up to the present day. The heathen not only profited in the past from the break between God and his people, they will be blessed much more when the relationship between Israel and its God will have been healed. Three verses later, Paul says the same thing with different words, “If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (Rom. 11:15). The expression “life from the dead” is found only in this New Testament text. It is traditionally interpreted as a reference to the resurrection from the dead. But the question remains why Paul then did not use these words.

In Romans 6:13 the apostle uses a very similar expression, which is likewise found only in this one text. He challenges his readers to offer themselves to God “as those who have been brought from death to life”. A literal translation is, “as those who have been brought out of death and are living”. This refers to persons who have been “awakened”, who have entrusted their lives to the savior Jesus and thus can be certain of eternal salvation.

On the basis of these parallels I assume that Paul predicts a revival of hitherto unknown dimensions for the non-Jewish peoples, when God’s relationship with his people is healed. The “riches” which the heathen world experienced through Israel’s fall was the emergence of the worldwide church of Jesus as we know it today. “Greater riches” could be worldwide church growth such as we now dare not imagine even in our wildest dreams.

However, the key to this is not new mission strategies, more money for evangelization or more spiritual prayer methods, but God’s dealings with his people Israel. Therefore it is urgent for everyone who is suffering because of the unsaved condition of this world to study the topic of Israel. And it is therefore so important that we as the church of Jesus fulfill our Biblical commission regarding the Jewish people.

But what is this commission? There are many discussions about preaching to or instructing Israel, and this is not only between liberals and those who are faithful to the Bible. It is likewise discussed in circles which take seriously the Holy Scriptures as God's word. In any case it should be undisputed that we Gentile Christians have a commission to make Israel jealous (cp. Rom. 10:19, 11:11 and 11:13-14).

This is not a matter of our convictions or experiences, but of our lives and our dealings with a Christian history saturated with guilt. This is a challenge which we cannot simply take upon ourselves. We can only kneel before our Lord and plead that he work the impossible in us through his Holy Spirit.

© Johannes Gerloff, Christian Media Association KEP in Germany (2.9.05)  
translation by Susan Wiesmann  
[www.israelnetz.de](http://www.israelnetz.de)