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The Significance of the Mystery of Israel for the Church

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THE phrase "mystery of Israel" presupposes a particular point of view. It implies in the first place some kind of continuity between the Israel of which the Scriptures speak and the Jews of today: the wealthy Jews of America; the Jews who fight fanatically for a small Middle Eastern country, so difficult to cultivate; the tens of thousands of Jews exterminated in German gas chambers; the Jews who live in our midst. Yet the continuity is far from self-evident. From early times the Church has acted as though the Israel of the Scriptures ceased to exist with the destruction of the Temple and the scattering of the remaining Jews. That they continue to exist in dispersion is regarded as an anomaly without particular religious significance.

The second presupposition is that there really is a *mystery* about Israel, about the Jews, and that this mystery is of the utmost significance for the Church. This presupposition is no more self-evident than the former one, because it is possible to explain the Jewish phenomenon in ways that leave no mystery. Many learned books have been written to prove that the Jews are a specific race with special marks and characteristics. Most people are convinced that the Jews can be defined and explained satisfactorily in biological terms. Yet it is a highly significant fact that no one has succeeded in finding out this seemingly obvious biological definition. The failure is all the more remarkable in view of the amount of time and energy devoted to the attempt, especially by the Nazis.

Another explanation is the so-called socio-economic one. Some hold that the particularity of the Jews, originally occasioned by their nationality and religion, has been perpetuated and preserved by social and economic circumstances and laws. The Jews were compelled to remain a separate entity and accordingly developed distinctive traits. These traits accentuated their separateness and prevented their losing their identity among the peoples with whom they lived. This explanation interprets the strange phenomenon of anti-semitism as basically an economically-conditioned attitude.

Still another explanation is sometimes put forward. It is the commonly used religious explanation. The Jews, it is maintained, are those who hold doggedly to a literalistic and mistaken interpretation of the Old Testament. The Jews are those who deny the Christ. But such an explanation does not account for Jews who no longer espouse the Jewish religion and yet remain Jews. Since they are not Christians, the suggested explanation touches only what they have in common with the majority of mankind. Their particularity remains unaccounted for.

It is not surprising that some have reached the conclusion that the Jew, as such, does not exist at all. This is the conclusion of Jean-Paul Sartre's stimulating book, *Réflexions sur la Question Juive* (1947). His thesis is that the anti-semitic world makes and preserves the "Jew." The Jew is a projection of other people's minds. The Jew is explained in a psychological way and fundamentally explained away. Many philo-semites, many humanists and even many Jews indulge in similar though less ingenious explanations. The Jew is not different from other people. If a Jewish problem exists, it is a product only of the perverse stupidity of others. This opinion is held by the greater part of Christendom. One need only recall, by way of illustration, the point of view and, I would add, the misunderstanding shown by the American churches when the question of Israel was raised at Evanston (ignoring for the moment the political implications which also played a role).

It is not possible to prove that these various explanations or rationalizations are simply mistaken. They may be valid enough in their own realm. To maintain that they do not provide the fundamental explanation, that is, explain the total phenomenon, is to make a judgment which cannot be considered objective, and to speak of the "mystery of Israel" might be considered fundamentalist and obscurantist. Despite this charge I believe that one must be obedient to Scripture. If I venture to speak of the mystery of Israel as related to the Jewish problem and to expect a fundamental answer to the question in the Old and New Testaments, I am conscious that ultimately the question and its answer cannot be demonstrated rationally. They must be based on faith.

The Old Testament answers the question about the origin of the people of Israel clearly and unambiguously. Out of all the nations God set apart a people to be used for His work. It was God's act that made them a nation. God chose this people and made a covenant with them, having willed to use this particular group. Election in both Testaments means that God chooses to use a man or a group of men for His work and for the sake of others. God's revelation of Himself to this people, His acting in and through it, the salvation He gives it, is revelation and salvation for the whole world including those who were not chosen. It is a complete mistake to set the so-called particularism of the Old Testament against the universalism of the New. God's saving will is universal and concerns all men and nations, but His will works through particular election; through the particular election of Israel for the sake of the Gentiles; the election of particular individuals out of Israel for the sake of the whole Israel; the election of Jesus Christ for the sake of all men; the election of the Church for the sake of the world. In each particular election God's will for the non-elect others is revealed. The word to Abraham ran: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The prophetic word was:

It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the

hills; and all nations shall flow unto it . . . for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more [Isaiah 2:2 ff].

This is the scarlet thread that runs through the whole of the Old Testament. Of His free grace, God chose Israel to be a medium of revelation for others and the exemplar of God's saving will and faithfulness.

The Gospels manifest this scarlet thread with even greater clarity. The promise that salvation will come through Israel to the Gentiles, to those who are not-Israel, seems fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Israel is still the elect nation. Jesus Christ comes to Israel in order that He may come through Israel to others. Even without a detailed examination of the biblical texts it is evident that Jesus came in the first instance to the Jews. This does not mean simply that He worked among them in their geographical area or that he spoke first to them in the order of time, but that his mission was in the first place exclusively to them: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). The disciples are in the beginning told explicitly not to go to the Gentiles: "Go not unto the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5, 6). But then the unforeseen and incomprehensible happened: Israel rejected its Messiah. Jesus came that the Gentiles might take part in Israel's salvation, but the Jews to whom it belonged in the first place, repudiated this salvation, and excluded themselves from it. This is clear even before the death of Jesus. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, but ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." But this word of exclusion is not the last word. The promise is still to be heard beneath the words of judgment: "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" (Matthew 23:37-39).

After the death of Jesus we find the same pattern. Salvation is preached first to the Jews. The Gentiles participate in it as well, because in Christ the wall of partition between Jews and non-Jews has been broken down. But the apostles work primarily among the Jews, because salvation is first to them, though it is also to the Greek. The Gentiles have been added. They are now permitted to join in (Ephes. 2:12). It is apparent that the apostles still expected and hoped that even at that point the Jews would accept their crucified Messiah. They did not think that the Jews had become exceptionally guilty or that they were especially wicked by reason of their responsibility for the death of Jesus. They were too deeply convinced that the Christ *had* to suffer. In the eyes of Paul, the great guilt of the Jews is not that they crucified the Lord, but that after the resurrection they would not accept Him as the Christ.

It is important to extend this thought more fully. The so-called guilt of the crucifixion has played an ugly role in history, and has caused a great deal of suffering. How often Christian anti-semitism has found self-justification in the text: "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). Books are still written with a view to determining who was responsible for the crucifixion. It is quite true that Jesus was crucified by the Jews, who were the only men of that time who knew the true God, and were, humanly speaking, the most pious. Here man at his very best rejected the overture of God. This has been said and written by countless theologians. We give expression to it in our hymns and repeat it in our confessions of guilt. How then can Christians continue to talk about the guilt of the crucifixion as they do? In this respect, the Jews were not especially guilty. Moses Mendelssohn, a great Jew in Germany in the 18th century, once said that he could not feel himself responsible for the just or unjust judgments passed by his forefathers centuries ago in Jerusalem. He was quite right, because the decision for or against the Christ has to be made in the present time.

This is exactly the problem with which Paul wrestled. How was it possible after the resurrection for the Jews to reject Jesus as the Christ? In view of what Paul has said in the Epistle to the Romans, chapters nine to eleven, the comfortableness of the Church in the face of this problem is almost inexplicable. Where Paul saw a burning question, a mystery of God, the Church has taken refuge in pseudo-solutions. The only people who were really consistent were the Gnostics of former times and the "German Christians" of Hitler's era. Both groups consistently and openly rejected the Old Testament and therewith the whole biblical order of salvation. The church has managed to do the same, without the same rigorous consistency and openness. Of course, the church has recognized the Old Testament and the special place which Israel has in that covenant, but it has dismissed the possibility that this special place has any validity beyond the time of Jesus. It is assumed that the role of Israel has ended and been transferred to the church as the new, spiritual Israel, or that Israel's role after the crucifixion is to be the symbol of rejection and of God's punishment. But this assumption can be made only by those who either do not take Paul seriously or else spiritualize his words so much that they become harmless. Paul did not believe that the church was simply substituted for Old Testament Israel, else there would have been no problem for him. All that would have remained for him to understand would have been how it was possible for the elect, to whom the promise was made, to be rejected. On the contrary, Paul is absolutely certain that against all the appearances of his time, God did not, even in the moment of radical unbelief, cast away the people whom He had chosen from the beginning as His own (11:2). Even in disobedience they remain an elect people, "for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (11:29).

We have observed that election is always election for the sake of others. This character Israel does not lose even in disobedience. In its stumbling,

it is still there for the sake of others (11:11). This is the mystery of Israel, that through its fall salvation is come to the Gentiles. When the goal has once been reached, when the Gentiles in their fulness shall have come in, then Israel too will return to God and all Israel shall be saved (11:26). This is not meant as an explanation of the disobedience and unbelief of Israel. Man's *No!* to God, as Karl Barth has said, is always incomprehensible, the impossible possibility. Or as Franz Werfel has said so movingly, it is not that God wills this people to be disobedient to ensure their playing a villainous role, or that the providence of God condemns them to reject Him in order that the world may be saved (*Zwischen Oben und Unten*, p. 284). The enigma of the sin of Israel remains. But Paul knows that God will use disobedience not less than obedience in His design. By the wrong that Israel does, God will work good. Therefore Paul concludes this part of his Epistle with an exultant song of praise and thanksgiving for the mercy and wisdom of God (11:33 ff.).

We live in the same age as Paul. What was true for him remains true for us. We are hereby justified in extending the line he has drawn into our own times. Today, *post Christum*, the chosen Israel still exists, or more concretely, the Jews of our day constitute that Israel for which Paul had great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart (9:2). The reason why there are still Jews, after many years in dispersion, is that they are chosen and have a special place in God's design. This is why it is impossible to supply a rational definition of what a Jew is. A Jew is one who belongs to this chosen people. What makes a Jew a Jew is God's election. It is a *character indelibilis* belonging to all Jews, orthodox, assimilated and Zionist Jews, for all live in the same disobedience to God in not recognizing Him in the Son, and God keeps His faithfulness towards all. For this reason, total assimilation cannot succeed. Individuals can be absorbed in the nations and individuals can as a pledge of Israel's final salvation proleptically fulfil its destiny by acknowledging its Messiah (11:1). But the Jews as a whole remain the hardened and disobedient Israel, the unfaithful with whom God keeps faith. Israel still is what it was in the Old Testament—exemplary revelation for the nations. The Jews in our midst are the living sign that God's grace is greater than human disobedience. Man tried to run away and time and again seems to succeed in doing so, but God keeps him and wants him, even if he does not want God.

Here perhaps we have an explanation of anti-semitism. Just as the phenomenon of the Jews has a mystical and even an irrational character, so also has anti-semitism. It is, for example, quite incredible that thousands of decent, rational people in our time believe the nonsense that Jews slaughter little children for their paschal meal, or the ridiculous tale of the international conspiracy of "the Wise Men of Zion." May it be that the anti-semitism of us all—for none, not even the Jew himself, is entirely free from it—is essentially a revolt against the sign which Israel is, the sign of disobedient man and the free, sovereign grace of God? If we adopt this

suggestion, we must be careful not to transgress the bounds set by the Scriptures. It is transgression to attempt, as Werfel does, to *explain* the disobedience of the Jews or to attempt to explain the sufferings of the Jews. To believe that the latter are due to the punishment of God is to transgress, even if at the same time we hold that this punishment is a form of God's faithfulness whereby He tries to bring the Jews back to Himself. For to make a one-to-one relationship between suffering and punishment for sin is to be guilty of a theodicy already repudiated in the Book of Job and explicitly rejected by Jesus's answer to the question of the disciples concerning the man blind from his birth (John 9:1). The New Testament mentions only the hardening of the heart and the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment, and nothing else. There is, it is true, a close connection between sin and the suffering of the Jews—the persecutions, pogroms, gas chambers and displaced person camps but this connection is not Golgotha. It is the sin of others, non-Jews, and we can only hope and pray that God will forgive even this guilt and use it in His design. Rufus Lears's book, *Israel: the History of the Jewish People*, makes the Christian reader feel deeply the tremendous guilt the Christian churches have incurred.

The Jews in our midst are also the visible sign of the "not-yet." The Church of Rome is not the only church which tends to forget that the church here and now is something provisional. *Our* church also lives in the time between the times, in the time in which we live not yet by sight but by promise. The visible pledge of this promise is the Jews. *All* Israel shall be saved. The Jews do not acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, but in faith we know that when He returns in glory, they will recognize and accept Him. Israel exists both as a sign to us that we still await the fulfilment, and as a guarantee that the end of history will be the end disposed by God.

I believe that this understanding of the mystery of Israel has very great theological and practical implications for the Church. A full elaboration of them is impossible, not only for want of space in this article, but also because the Church has only begun in the last decade to think out the problems posed by a more scriptural understanding of Israel. At the moment there are many more questions than solutions. The situation could hardly be otherwise seeing that Israel in its existence *vis-à-vis* the Church has been forgotten by the Church. The ministry of Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was entirely aimed at the Jews for the purpose of provoking them to emulation (Rom. 11:14). If the Church is elect, it is so for the sake of others, for those who are not yet the Church, and that means in the first place for Israel. One could say that in all that it is and does the Church is a continuing mission to the Jews. This does not mean that it should try more intensively than heretofore to convert the Jews, in the ordinary sense of the word "convert." It does not even mean that the first task of the Church is to fight anti-semitism, important though this fight be. Rather, it must re-think its entire theology in the light of its understanding of the mystery of Israel. In all its thinking and acting it must take Israel seriously, not as disobedient Israel but

as elect Israel. It has to give an account of its doctrines to Israel, whether the latter will listen or not.

In the first place, a new and better understanding of the Old Testament is necessary. It has never been taken with sufficient seriousness by the Church from sub-Apostolic times. While in theory it has rejected the heresies of Marcion and the Gnostics, it has neutralized the Old Testament in a different way. None of the Church Fathers really understood the mystery of Israel and therefore could not have an adequate understanding of the Old Testament as a whole. It is true that they read and interpreted it industriously, for they acknowledged its authority for them, but they spiritualized it by way of the allegorical method and thereby falsified it. They were anxious to preserve its spiritual and eternal meaning, but they had no real understanding of the revelation of God in the concrete history of Israel. Even today it is generally assumed that the Old Testament is inferior in significance to the New. It is regarded as merely provisional and preparatory revelation of which the New Testament is the fulfilment. Why then do we lack the courage to carry forward the logical implications of this assumption? If the assumption is valid, does it not mean that the Old Testament is really of no importance now, not because we reject it, as did Marcion and the Gnostics, but because it is not necessary? Does this conclusion not follow, if the Old Testament expresses the same ideas as the New Testament, only less clearly and less recognizably? As if it were a question of ideas in Scripture!

Our task is to re-learn the Old Testament and to think in a Jewish way. But to do that is to throw into jeopardy the whole scheme whereby we set the New Testament over against the Old. It ceases to be possible to play off the Law against the Gospel, the wrath of God against His mercy, the Old Covenant against the New Covenant, the Old Israel against the New Israel. It becomes necessary to emphasize more clearly that the covenant with Israel is a covenant of grace, and that in that covenant God says to the Jew that He wants him and He wants to be his God, his Thou. Is that not the same Gospel which comes to us in Jesus Christ? If the covenant is so understood, does not the Jewish Law stand in a new and more certain light? It becomes possible to see that in the Law God's covenant with Israel is made concrete in history. We begin to understand how the Jew can thank God for the gift of the Law. For the law is grace and proof that God does not leave man alone in his ordinary daily life.

Considering the mystery of Israel and all that it represents, it becomes necessary to question whether the doctrine of the atonement is customarily presented in an adequate way. Is not Jesus Christ and His cross the full and luminous disclosure of precisely that election of man of which Israel is sign and witness? In both events stands the same God, as the doctrine of the immanent Trinity ensures our saying. If that is so, how can we speak as if Jesus Christ in His love reconciled a wrathful and righteous God? We ought also to be more careful of the way in which we speak of Jesus Christ

as God. Is not the Jew partly right when he accuses us of a hidden ditheism? Jesus pointed the way from Himself to God Whom He revealed in the entirety of His being and words. But too often we place Jesus Christ beside the Father in such a way that the Son obscures the Father, and the former becomes, at least in our devotion and piety if not in our theology, a second and more important God. We must say more clearly and less ambiguously than before that in Jesus Christ we adore no other God than the one God of Israel.

Further, since the Law is concerned with grace made concrete in daily historical life, does it not throw much clearer light upon our world than is customarily realised in our Christianity? Have we, perhaps, followed Augustine too closely with his *deum et animam scire cupio* and neglected daily life, here and now, through excessive preoccupation with the salvation of our souls? Throughout Scripture, throughout the New Testament, but especially throughout the Old Testament, faith in a hereafter which is content with heaven is discountenanced. Any attempt to flee into eternal blessedness by leaping over the historical world and temporal existence is rejected. The Old Testament is concerned with God's kingship over the world and this concern is a fundamental concern for justice, including social justice. If this truth is really thought out, we shall be in a much better position to appreciate the significance of the kingly office of Christ, the thought of which is now so often vague and without content.

These questions represent only a few of those with which we are faced in confrontation with Israel. They could be multiplied many times, for there is no theological doctrine which is not in some way affected by our understanding of Israel and the Old Testament. A decided re-orientation in this respect is certainly due. May it not be that the Church has presented Israel with a version of Christianity which Israel as Israel could not possibly accept? It may be that an affirmative response to the Gospel on the part of the Jews has been lacking not only because of "hardness of heart" but also because they have been unable to recognize the Torah in the Christian presentation of the Old Testament, or the Messiah in the Christ presented by the Church. Jesus Christ is in Himself so great a stumbling block that Christians should not put unnecessary obstacles to an acceptance of Him in the way of the Jew.

Finally, here are a few practical suggestions as to what the Church today should do in regard to the Jew. What is needed most of all is understanding of him. He is not to be viewed as an object, but to be taken seriously as a human being, as our neighbour. We must try to penetrate and understand something of the problematic situation in which every Jew in a non-Jewish world is caught, even though he may scarcely be conscious of it himself. I speak now of the situation resulting from the emancipation of the Jews, of the ambiguity in which every Jew, at least every non-religious Jew, lives. On the one hand, he longs to disappear and to become as others, to lose his Jewish identity. On the other hand, he has a deep-rooted feeling of

solidarity with Jewry, an almost irrational sense of belonging to it. It may be only a partly conscious adherence, even when it has lost all positive content for him. The Church must be conversant with this problematic situation when it meets and talks with the Jew. While the assimilated and secularized Jew wants to be addressed simply as a human being and not as a Jew, and while he thinks it ridiculous if one tries to argue with him or to convert him on the basis of the Old Testament, he cannot even envisage the possibility of his personal adherence to Christianity, because his Jewish consciousness is far too strong for that. The Jew in general is not hostile towards the Church. He often feels a kind of sympathy for it, but for himself the possibility of becoming a Christian is ruled out. He can have a high regard for the non-Jewish believing Christian, but the Jew who becomes a Christian and is baptized is in his eyes a deserter. If indeed the church lives in order to provoke the Jews to envy and to bring them to Christ, it may well be that the best and most biblical way of doing that is not to carry out a mission among the Jews, at least not at the moment. It may be that non-Jews, including Christians, have become so guilty towards Israel and stand before it with such unclean hands, that for quite some time they cannot expect to be listened to.

In this respect the Church must clear away all unnecessary obstacles, beginning with anti-semitism. The Church has to fight it not only on humanitarian grounds, but also in order that the Church may remain the Church. The first requirement is not merely that the Church pronounce judgment on anti-semitism, necessary though this judgment is. Its first task is to fight in its own teaching and preaching its hidden "Christian" anti-semitism. In doing this it cannot be too watchful. Jews can detect it much more easily than non-Jews. We must be particularly careful in our Sunday Schools. Many children after instruction in Sunday School for several years do not realize that *Israelite*, a name they know from their religious teaching, is the same as *Jew*, a name horribly coloured through the usage of their school-friends. What is said in teaching and sermons about the Pharisee is often more caricature than reality. Learned scientific works on the subject are of little avail since they do not reach the congregation or even the ordinary minister. Our teaching about the Crucifixion and the guilt of the Jews is often of a kind that engenders a pious anti-semitism. The time has now come for the Church to cast off this arrogance, and to go beyond merely confessing that there is room in the Church for the Jew as well as the Gentile. In reality the situation is the other way around. There is not only room for the Jew, but for the non-Jew as well. Israel belongs there in the first place, and others may participate with Israel. Perhaps it would be wise to refrain from calling the Church by the names, "the true Israel" or "the spiritual Israel," which are not biblical in any case.

I know that all that has been said is preliminary and sketchy. The latter part of the essay provides a few examples of the practical implications of the mystery of Israel for the Church. The entire thought and practice of

the Church ought to be re-considered. As long as Israel is seen as if existing side by side with the Church, everything in the Church is made questionable. Indeed, we should allow everything, even Christianity itself, to be subjected to this questioning, because it could be that the Church as it exists at present, more Greek-pagan than Jewish, makes it impossible for the Jews to recognize in the Lord of our Church the Messiah of Israel. The fulfilment of the greatest promise lies in the confrontation of the Church with Israel, because the salvation of all Israel is intimately connected with the manifestation of the Kingdom of God.