

THE CONCEPT OF THE "ELECTION OF ISRAEL" IN THE  
PAGAN-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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*memoriae Ch. Wirszubski magistri optimi virique doctissimi*

Towards the end of his article, "The Second Temple Period in the Light of Greek and Latin Literature," Yoḥanan Hans Levy says:<sup>1</sup>

"We have thus learned that the conflict between Israel and Greece-Rome was not a sort of accidental skirmish between two peoples... but rather a major war between two methods of thinking. The animosity of the Greeks and the Romans was a response to the concept of *the election of Israel*. As a result of its adherence to "Ata Beḥartanu" ("You have chosen us"), Judaism earned the hostility of the two nations that ruled the lands of the ancient world.<sup>2</sup> The prophecy of Balaam about them was fulfilled: 'I see a people that dwells alone, that has not made itself one with the nations' (Numbers 23:9)."

This is true of the period that preceded the entrance of Christianity into the polemic with the pagan world, and its displacement of Judaism. From then on, the Church firmly disputed the election of the Jews.

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1. *Studies in Jewish Hellenism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1960, p. 14.  
2. For the idea of election in Judaism, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages; Their Concepts and Beliefs*. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), Vol. I, p. 525ff.

At first, the Church denied the exclusiveness of the election of the Jews, for it was an obstacle to missionary activity among the pagans; later on, the Church argued that the Jews' election was merely a temporary one, that is, valid only until the appearance of Jesus. Henceforth God turned from Israel of the flesh, and transferred his election to the Christians, the "true Israel", Israel according to the spirit. Because of the pagan polemic with the Christians, the absolutely negative view of the pagans prevalent earlier was changed (in the middle of the second century C.E.).

One can trace several variants of the pagans' attitude. Levy points them out in the concluding pages of his article, "The Emperor Julian and the Building of the Temple,"<sup>3</sup> although his discussion is directed towards another matter:

"In the opinion of Julian, the god of the Jews is the god of the Roman Empire, the many-named god whose principal name is Helios... We saw that Christianity was his (Julian's) main concern. The people of Israel itself was in his eyes a contemptible and powerless nation, but great importance was attached to it because of the relation of its doctrine to the teaching of Jesus, since the Christian religion is composed of the beliefs of Judaism, and the culture of the Greeks... He (Julian) ridicules, indeed, the 'fables' of the Bible, and the lack of culture and education revealed in them, and demonstrates that the correct opinion about the supreme god whom the Jews worship—differs from the tradition of Moses and the prophets, but he makes clear again at the end of his words that these objections do not concern the existence of Judaism as a religious institution based on holy laws: its regulations are equal to the regulations of the religions of the 'Hellenes,' because both are based on the keeping of the injunctions of the forefathers, and on *the worship of a national god attached to his place*. In Julian's opinion, the Jewish religion is not distinguished from other religions with respect to its laws except for its second Commandment denying the existence of other gods. However, even this distinction exists only outwardly, and the emperor himself indicated the way to resolve this contradiction, noting that Moses mentions the 'sons of the gods' (Genesis 6:2), meaning thereby the angels of the nations. Julian thought that the doctrine of the angels could reconcile the opinion of the Jews concerning the one and only god with the Greek belief in 'gods of the nations,' subject to the rule of the creator of the world."

Let us now examine the sources, and see what can be concluded from them. Celsus, the second century pagan polemicist, said:<sup>4</sup>

"... It is possible that *from the beginning the different parts of the earth were allotted to different overseers, and are governed in this way by having*

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3. Levy, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-245, and the footnotes there, especially n. 112.

4. *Alétes Logos*, V, 25, in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, transl. H. Chadwick, Cambridge, 1965. For the purpose of this argument I have reversed the order of his words.

been divided between certain authorities. In fact, the practices done by each nation are right when they are done in the way that pleases the overseers; and it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning. Now the Jews became an individual nation, and made laws according to the custom of their country; and they maintain these laws among themselves at the present day, and observe a worship which may be very peculiar but is at least traditional (*patrio*).<sup>5</sup> In this respect they behave like the rest of mankind, because each nation follows its traditional customs, whatever kind may happen to be established."

In these words about the division of the world among overseer-gods and the position of the Jews, and in his further remarks, Celsus indirectly presents his new interpretation of the election of the Jews. It is true, he says, that they are a special people possessed of a distinctive ritual and special laws; but, in observing them, the Jews behave just as do all other peoples who observe the laws and injunctions prescribed for them by the god who rules them. In this manner, Celsus placed Judaism within the framework of the polytheistic religions; he isolated Christianity as dissentient and lawless — and with one stroke expunged the Jews' pretensions to the election which the Christians claimed as their own, in their capacity as heirs of the Jews. Origen<sup>6</sup> rejected the Jewish aspect of Celsus' theory just as he rejected the theory as a whole. He asked: to whom did Zeus assign the Jewish nation and its land? Was it Zeus who wanted Judea's ruler to make laws for the Jews, or was this done against his will? No matter how one replies to this, the answer will be unsatisfactory.

Origen knows well that the first alternative is impossible in light of the attitude of Jewish law towards the gods of the nations. Origen says further that we cannot dismiss this and argue that the world was not divided by one god among overseer-gods but that each of them rather received his share by chance, because by saying this we abrogate to a certain extent<sup>7</sup> the providence of the supreme god.

In the beginning of the second book of his *Demonstratio Evangelica*,<sup>8</sup> Eusebius replies to the Jews' claim that the prophets were sent to them, and that the Messiah will come to them, and will fulfill all the

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5. Cf. *ibid.*, V, 41: "If indeed in accordance with these principles the Jews maintained their own law, we should not find fault with them but rather with those who have abandoned their own traditions and professed those of the Jews." Cf. Tacitus, *Historiae*, V, 5 (transl. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb), (New York: The Modern Library, 1942): "this worship, however introduced, is upheld by its antiquity."

6. *Contra Celsum*, V, 26.

7. Or "in a large measure" according to a reasonable emendation of the text.

8. *Demonstratio Evangelica*, II, 1, 1; cf. *ibid.*, II, 1, 2; 1, 4; 1, 24; 1, 26.

promises of the Scriptures. Eusebius does not deny that the Messiah's coming, as foreseen by the prophets, will bring about the redemption of Israel, but he is not prepared to agree that only the Jews might hope for great benefits from his appearance and that the fate of the Gentiles would be bad and bitter. In Eusebius' opinion, such a view contradicts the evidence of Scripture, which he quotes to support the position of the Church. Other Christian writers emphasize the temporary nature of the election of the Jews, an election that came to its end with the Jews' rejection of Jesus. Julian,<sup>9</sup> on the contrary, comes forth with great ardour to defend the Jewish claim, and it is not difficult to guess that he does it not from "love of Mordechai" but rather from "hatred of Haman." For he says<sup>10</sup> that:

"Moses says that the creator of the universe *chose out the Hebrew nation*, that to that nation alone did he pay heed, and cared for it, and he gives him charge for it alone. But how and by what sort of gods the other nations are governed he has not said a word—unless indeed one should concede that he did assign to them the sun and the moon (cf. Deuteronomy 4:19). However of this I shall speak a little later. Now I will only point out that Moses himself and the prophets who came after him and Jesus the Nazarene yes and Paul also, who surpassed all the magicians and charlatans of every place and every time, assert that he is the god of Israel alone and of Judaea, and that *the Jews are his chosen people*. Listen to their own words, and first to the words of Moses: 'And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Israel is my son, my firstborn. And I have said to thee, Let my people go that they may serve me' (Exodus 4:22). And a little later, 'And they say unto him, the God of the Hebrews hath summoned us; we will go therefore three days' journey into the desert, that we may sacrifice unto the Lord our God (Exodus 4:23). And soon he speaks again in the same way. The Lord the God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee saying, Let my people go that they may serve me in the wilderness' (Exodus 5:3). But that from the beginning God cared only for the Jews and that *he chose them out as his portion*, has been clearly asserted not only by Moses and Jesus but by Paul as well; though in Paul's case this is strange. For according to circumstances he keeps changing his views about God, as the polypus changes its colours to match the rocks, and now he insists that the Jews alone are God's portion, and then again, when he is trying to persuade the Hellenes to take sides with him he says: 'Do not think that he is the God of the Jews alone, but also of Gentiles: yea of Gentiles also' (Romans 3:29; Galatians 3:28)."

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9. The Emperor Julian, who lived and ruled a little after Eusebius' time, knew the latter's works and treated them and their author with demonstrable criticism and hostility. See my article, "The Emperor Julian and Pagan Reaction", in *The Great Man and His Age: Lectures delivered at the Eighth Convention of the Historical Society of Israel, December 1962* (ed. by the Historical Society of Israel, Jerusalem, 1963). (Hebrew)

10. *Contra Galilaeos*, trans. W.C. Wright, Loeb Classical Library, 99E-106C.

In other places, Julian makes it abundantly clear that he thinks the Jews did not receive special treatment and many gifts from God; on the contrary the pagans enjoyed, and are enjoying God's benevolence in all spheres of life to a much greater extent.<sup>11</sup> He insists, however, that from the point of view of Scripture, the claim of the Jews is correct, whereas the Christians distort it intentionally. *This reliance of Julian on Scriptural proof is, of course, aimed at cutting out the supports on which Christian theology rests, that is, the Bible.* Julian therefore proves, citing many verses, that—in opposition to the Christians' interpretations—the Law of Moses is eternal (*Cont. Galil.* 319 D-E), and that according to it there is no basis to add a god-logos as his son to the god of Israel. Julian also disputes the right of the Christians to abolish circumcision, on the basis of an allegorical interpretation, showing that according to the Torah, the foreskin of flesh must be circumcised (*Cont. Galil.* 351 A-B). In addition, Julian dissents from the interpretation of the Christians of key verses such as Genesis 49:10—“Until there come what is reserved for him” (*Cont. Galil.*, 253D); Isaiah 7:14—“Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (*ibid.*, 262C), etc.

Julian presents two more polemical points against Christianity, whose differences are subtle but significant. What does he say?:<sup>12</sup>

1) “But consider whether God has not given to us also gods and kindly guardians of whom you have no knowledge, gods in no way inferior to him who from the beginning has been held in honour among the Hebrews of Judaea, the only land that he chose to take thought for, as Moses declared, and those who came after him, down to our own time. But even if he who is honoured among the Hebrews really was the immediate creator of the universe, our beliefs about him are higher than theirs, and he has bestowed on us greater blessings than on them, with respect both to the soul and to externals...” (141 C-D)

2) “For the Hebrews have precise laws concerning religious worship, and countless sacred things and observations which demand the priestly life and profession. But though their lawgiver forbade them to serve all the gods save only that one, whose ‘portion is Jacob and Israel an allotment of his inheritance’ (cf. Deuteronomy 32:9); though he did not say this only, but methinks added also ‘thou shalt not revile the gods’ (Exodus 22:28 according to the Septuagint); yet the shamelessness and audacity of later generations, desiring to root out all reverence from the mass of the people, has thought that blasphemy accompanies the neglect of worship.” (238 B-C)

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11. For this, see my article in Hebrew, “Jews and Their Law (*Torah*) in the Pagan-Christian Polemic in the Roman Empire” in *Tarbiz*, Vol. XL, no. 4, July-September, 1971.

12. The following selections are from the translation of *Contra Galilaeos* prepared by W. C. Wright, in the Loeb Classical Library.

3) "Wherefore it is natural ['fit' might be a more accurate translation here] to think that the God of the Hebrews was not the begetter of the whole universe with lordship over the whole, but rather, as I said before, that he is confined within limits, and that since his empire has bounds we must conceive of him as only one of the crowd of other gods. Then are we to pay further heed to you because you or one of your stock imagined the God of the universe, though in any case you attained only a bare conception of Him?..." (100C-106D, E)

4) "Now except for the command 'Thou shalt not worship other gods', and 'Remember the sabbath day', what nation is there, I ask in the name of the gods, which does not think that it ought to keep the other commandments?..." "But as for the commandment 'Thou shalt not worship other gods', to this surely he adds a terrible libel upon God. 'For I am a jealous God', he says, and in another place again, 'Our God is a consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24). Then if a man is jealous and envious you think him blameworthy, whereas if God is called jealous you think it a divine quality? And yet how is it reasonable to speak falsely of God in a matter that is so evident? For if he is indeed jealous, then against his will are all other gods worshipped, and against his will do all the remaining nations worship their gods. Then how is it that he did not himself restrain them, if he is so jealous and does not wish that others should be worshipped, but only himself? Can it be that he was not able to do so, or did he not wish even from the beginning to prevent the other gods also from being worshipped? However, the first explanation is impious, to say, I mean, that he was unable; and the second is in accordance with what we do ourselves..." (152D-159E)

5) "For if the anger of even one hero or unimportant demon is hard to bear for whole countries and cities, who could have endured the wrath of so mighty a God, whether it were directed against demons or angels or mankind?" (161A-168B)<sup>13</sup>

Like Celsus, Julian interprets the election of the Jews to mean the Jews' having a national god who does not differ at all from the gods of other nations, all of which gods are subjected to the rule of the supreme god. The second Commandment does not deny the existence of other gods, as Y. Levy asserted, but rather prohibits their worship. This prohibition has nothing wrong in and of itself, but it seems to be something to wonder at in the polytheistic-syncretistic atmosphere. Such a view of the god of Israel represents the absorption of Judaism into the pagan pantheon while excluding Christianity; it blurs the contradiction between polytheism and monotheism, and turns the latter into an organic part of the former. There is no need to say that for Julian the polytheistic creed remains the true and comprehensive one, and that it encompasses the Jewish deity claimed to be the sole god.

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13. For the angels, see 290B-E; cf. also 115D-E and 148B-C.

But there is a possibility that the Jews, followed by the Christians, will refuse to accept this placement of the god of the Bible as no more than a secondary deity in the pagan hierarchy since aside from expression confining the god of Israel to Eretz-Israel, and designating him as being of the people of Israel, there are also to be found in the Bible expressions attributing supreme and universal powers to him. In this case, Julian is forced to present the monotheistic concept as the opponent of the polytheistic, and to show that the latter is preferable to the Christians' monotheistic view. Julian argues that the pagan spirit of tolerance is more in keeping with the god of all than is the jealousy revealed by the god of the Bible. It is true that the Bible too forbids the cursing of other gods, yet what, Julian asks, is the sense and reason behind the antagonism of the god of Israel — if indeed he be the supreme god — to the worship of the gods who are subordinate to him? <sup>14</sup> Did not he himself appoint them to rule and lead the nations of the world?

In that case the second Commandment is absolutely faulty, since it proves that both Jews and Christians cling to erroneous concepts about God which damage his image and derogate from his majesty. The conclusion then is that polytheism has the upper hand in any case, and therefore all the pagans who deserted polytheism for monotheism erred and should make good their mistake by returning to their ancestral faith.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Cf. *Contra Galilaeos*, 148C: "But if Moses first pays honour to a sectional god, and then makes the lordship of the whole universe contrast with his power, then it is better to believe as we do, and to recognise the God of the All, though not without apprehending also the God of Moses; this is better, I say, than to honour one who has been assigned the lordship over a very small portion, instead of the creator of all things."

15. The translation of the Bible into Greek lent it a philosophical quality on which Philo based his interpretations. Julian, too, approaches the Bible as a philosophical-theological text. Spinoza, on the other hand, examines Scripture on what he believes is a higher level: in the natural light of philosophy. There are, nevertheless, some interesting parallels between his interpretations and those of Julian concerning the subject. For example, Spinoza says (in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, translated by R. H. M. Elwes, Chap. II, pp. 36-37): "...as to His nature, Moses only taught that He is merciful, gracious, and exceeding jealous, as appears from many passages in the Pentateuch... further, that by reason of His power He was without equal, and unique. Moses admitted, indeed, that there were beings (doubtless by the plan and command of the Lord) who acted as God's vicegerents — that is, beings to whom God had given the right, authority, and power to direct nations, and to provide and care for them... We must remain in doubt whether Moses thought that these beings who acted as God's vicegerents were created by Him, for he has stated nothing, so far as we know, about their creation, and origin. (Cf. Julian, *Contra Galilaeos*, 96C-D). He further taught that this Being... had chosen for Himself alone the Hebrew nation (see Deuteronomy, 10:14-15), and a certain strip of territory (see Deuteronomy 4:19; 32:8-9), and had handed over to the

As occurs with regard to other subjects, the form and content of the literary polemic on the election of Israel is determined by the specific requirements of the political-police-administrative conflict of the time. Since Judaism served the pagans and Christians alike as a weapon for the purpose of their ideological conflict, we witness the modification of their attitudes towards Judaism and Jewish traditions in keeping with the interests of the parties concerned, even when this involved the relaxation of formerly firm positions, or the offering of mutually contradictory explications.

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care of other gods substituted by Himself the rest of the nations and territories...”, etc. (Spinoza 38-39) (And in paragraph 41 [Elwes, Chapter II. p. 39], Spinoza makes a point from the matter of the prophet Jonah). Spinoza comes close to the pagan position when he distinguishes (*ibid.*, pp. 179-181) faith and action or conduct; in the sphere of faith he favours wide liberality, and he thinks that a man should be judged only according to his deeds. On the other hand, he tries to explain away (*ibid.*, pp. 53-54) the duality found in Paul with reference to the election of Israel, and even to utilize his words, just as he takes the trouble to prove that the election of the Jews was only temporary. This point corresponds exactly with the claim of Christian theology. From a Jewish point of view, these words are of more weight than his attitude towards Jesus or his sharp attacks on the Pharisees and the Rabbis.

\* The italicized phrases in the textual quotations have been emphasized by the present writer.