

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIANS' SELF-UNDERSTANDING  
IN THE SECOND PART OF THE FIRST CENTURY

by

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History has to be written afresh in every age, because of the fact that the significance of historical episodes can be properly understood only in the light of their final development. In the same way as various strata of the Pentateuch (designated by the symbols J, E, D and P) are to be viewed as re-interpretations of Israel's past in the light of new challenges of a later age, so is the New Testament a re-interpretation of the existence and the faith of Israel in the light of a new historical situation brought about by the coming of Jesus and his Church. The inner meaning of a particular situation in history can be perceived only when it comes alive in a new situation in which it is existentially relevant and demanding.

*The Earliest Church as the Eschatological Congregation*

The earliest Church regarded itself as the Congregation of the end of the days, in which the fulfilment of Israel's hopes was taking place, but by no means as a new religion different from Judaism. She remained loyal to the Temple cult and to the Law. As she considered herself as the true Israel, as the goal of Israel's salvation history, the fulfilment of the Law was the condition of participation in salvation, insofar as it was the condition of membership in the People of Israel.

Therefore, the earliest Church of Jerusalem was hesitant to receive Gentiles into the Congregation of Salvation. Was the Gentile convert not obliged to adopt circumcision and consequently the Law, so as to belong to the Jewish people ;in order to become a member of the eschatological congregation representing the "true Israel"? Here is the starting-point of the conflict over the issue whether Gentile Christianity had the right to exist free from the Law. The main question arising for the future was: How will the eschatological transcendent character of the Congregation assert itself against her ties with the empirical Jewish people, without breaking her link with the history of salvation.

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## *The development toward the Ancient Church*

The Church's original consciousness of being a non-worldly eschatological society belonging to the sphere of the coming glory underwent a peculiar transformation, in consequence of the delay in the expected fulfilment. The future salvation comes to be seen less in the completion of the history of salvation and the transformation of the world, than in the life beyond death of the individual. The Christian faith is becoming a religion of salvation and consequently is going to conceive herself as a new religion existing side by side with the Jewish religion and the heathen religions. The use of the word "Way" in Acts (9:2; 19:9, 22; 22:4; 24:22) points to this change. The very fact of Luke writing a history of the earliest Christian Church shows how far removed he is from the self-concept of being the eschatological Congregation, which would not have been interested in history-writing. To Luke, the continuity of the Church with Israel is a historical one. There is only one people of God; in the days of old this people was formed exclusively from the Jews; now, through the preaching of the name of Christ, Gentiles are being added to the people of God, which is from now on the congregation of all those who hear the voice of Jesus, irrespective of whether they come from among the Jews or from among the Gentiles. The Gentiles are not being substituted for the unfaithful Jews, but the Gentiles are joining the faithful children of Israel. Therefore Luke tends to forget the rejection of Jesus by his own people in his joy that as a result of this rejection the Gentiles have been admitted to the Church, the people of God.

### *Some remarks on St. Paul*

The idea of the unity and solidarity of all mankind is one of the main tenets of Paul's theology, but it does not prevent Paul from giving all due attention to the election of Israel. It is true that the new eschatological People of God of the New Testament is no longer limited to one particular earthly nation such as ethnic Israel but embraces all the people of the earth. Nevertheless the individuals out of the Nations are only "joint heirs and fellow members" of the "Israel of God", i.e. the Judaeo-Christians who have become obedient hearers of the Gospel.

In the renewed mankind created in Christ, coming out of Israel and out of the Nations there is no longer any "wall of separation": the stone wall in the Temple of Jerusalem which separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of Israelites is now demolished – or better, transcended. Ethnical, sociological or biological realities are no longer relevant to membership of the People of God.

Paul remained a Jew after his adhesion to the resurrected Christ

and his passionate controversy against the non-believing Jews is no more than a *querelle de famille*. According to Paul there is a representative obedient remnant of God which testifies to the fact that ethnic Israel is still embraced in the irrevocable election which is founded in the immutability of God. Paul believes that after the ingathering of the full numbers of Gentiles all Israel will be incorporated in the eschatological Ecclesia.

The breach between Jews and Jewish Christians occurred after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D., when Jewry had to compensate for this heavy loss by a more centralised and intolerant religious attitude. The Pharisees who became the dominant group dealt severely with all internal opposition, and one is tempted to compare the elimination of their opponents from the leadership to purges in Communist Eastern Europe. The famous anti-Christian insertion in the prayer of the Eighteen Benedictions made it impossible for Jewish Christians to take part in the worship of the synagogue. The Jews were forbidden all intercourse with Jewish Christians.

This situation is clearly reflected by the Fourth Gospel. Attacked by the Synagogue, the Christians reacted by opposing Judaism as such. In Paul and Matthew the opposition took place *within* Judaism. At the time of the last redaction of the Fourth Gospel, the Church and the Synagogue are radically distinguished: the rupture with Judaism is complete. John's attitude towards the "Jews" is not missionary but apologetic and polemic, intended to counter Jewish propaganda and substantiate Christian claims. John uses the expression "the Jews" in a pejorative way, indicating that the Jews of his own time are the spiritual descendants of the Jewish authorities who were hostile to Jesus during his ministry. Moreover the concrete historical element is but a symbol, a sign. For John, the drama which took place within the Jewish people around 30 A. D. represents the universal drama of faith and refusal. The refusal of the Jews is thus the symbol of all refusal, while the faith of those Jews who came to believe is the symbol of all Christian faith.

In John, the basic and living conception of the "Israel of God" is superseded, the antinomies and tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the way opened for the establishment of the Church Universal.

No single author in the first two generations of Christianity has given a definite solution concerning the relationship between the Church and Israel. It would be a tragic mistake to neglect one trend of thought and to found our theological synthesis on a restricted basis. Authors, even those divinely inspired, must be seen in the light of their time and of their individual background, and in any evaluation of the theological content of their thought one must rely on the excellent Talmudic principle: "These and those are words of the Living God".

Summary by Coos Schoneveld