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The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship

50° anniversario della Dichiarazione conciliare *Nostra Aetate*:
passato, presente e futuro delle relazioni ebraico-cristiane

PLENARY SESSION

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The Covenant as a conversation which continues into the future

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(Translated by Murray Watson)

I am using the term "covenant" here in its biblical sense—as the relationship instituted by God with humanity (Noah, Gen 9), with Israel (Abraham, Gen 15 and 17), with Moses (Exod 19-34, and renewed after the split which led to the exile, Jer 31:31-34) and, according to the New Testament, extended in and through Christ to the nations also.

As is well known, our Christian terminology of Old and New Testaments draws upon the category of pact/covenant—*diathēkē,* in the Greek of the Septuagint. For almost twenty centuries, the idea has prevailed in Christian circles that the covenant concluded with Abraham and Israel was unquestionably linked to Christ, but in such a way that Israel was declared to be excluded from the covenant, because of its refusal to acknowledge Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

An obvious example of this way of thinking (commonly designated by the term "substitutionism") can already be found in the *Letter of Barnabas* (late 1st to early 2nd centuries CE). Here, the argument is already framed in these terms: "Now, let us see if the inheritance belongs to our people, or to the older people, and if the testament (covenant, *diathēkē)* pertains to us or to them"[1].

Hidden behind the formulation of "our people … or the older people" is "us … or them"—the contrast drawn between the Church (predominantly or exclusively made up of "Gentiles") and Israel. The Old Testament is interpreted with reference to the "new" people of God, which inherits not alongside, but in place of, Israel, which is characterized as "old," since it is considered surpassed and no longer in force.

One of the results that we can attribute to the reflections our churches undertook after the Shoah—and only *after* the Shoah!—is the fact that substitutionism has now been abandoned. The beginnings of this revision of the Christian interpretation of Israel "after Christ" can be dated back to the 60s of the last century: to *Nostra Aetate* in Roman Catholic circles, and to similar processes in the Protestant world.

As one Protestant example, let me quote the Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland, from 1980:

[1] *Letter of Barnabas* 13:1.

> …for centuries, the word "new" in biblical exegesis has been used against the Jewish people: the new covenant was understood in opposition to the old covenant, and the new people of God was understood as a replacement of the old people of God. Right up to the present day, Christian theology, and the churches' preaching and work, have been marked by a lack of attention paid to the permanent election of the Jewish people, and by its condemnation to non-existence. In this way, we also have made ourselves guilty of the physical elimination of the Jewish people.
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> Therefore, we wish to examine once more the inseparable connection of the New Testament with the Old Testament, and learn to understand the relationship of the "old" and the "new" from the standpoint of the promise: as something proclaimed, as something brought to fulfillment, and as something whose validity is affirmed. "New" does not, therefore, imply the replacement of the "old". Hence we deny that the people Israel has been rejected by God, or that it has been superseded by the church.

Catholics might recall the words of John Paul II about "the covenant never revoked" (Mainz, 1980).

The fact that Christians understand themselves to be the recipients of a covenant of grace that God has welcomed them into can no longer be interpreted as a repealing of the same covenant of grace made with Israel.

Abandoning substitutionism immediately underscores the need to sketch out a new theological understanding of our relationship to the Hebrew Bible, to Judaism, and to Israel. This is the challenge that we have faced since the 80s of the last century.

The study document *Church and Israel: A Contribution from the Reformation Churches in Europe to the Relationship between Christians and Jews,* approved by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CCPE, GEKE) describes the current situation in this way:

> The various endeavours to clarify the relation between the Church and Israel, especially in connection with the issue of the 'covenant' and with regard to speaking about the 'people of God,' are stages in an unfinished process of theological reasoning. They have enriched the Church, its theology and its spirituality. They have provided stimuli for the internal dialogue between the churches; and they have encouraged people to reflect together on a positive view of Israel.
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> Therefore, the Church must continue this process and seek further possibilities for defining and understanding its identity in relation to Israel. Every answer found in this process must be judged by whether, on the one hand, it does justice to the statements made in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments about Israel's election by God and the election of the Church in Jesus Christ, and, on the other, whether it takes seriously the special way in which God relates to his people Israel.

In terms of what the Catholic magisterium on one hand, and Protestant synods on the other, have affirmed, what reception have these statements received in the concrete life of the churches on every level—from preaching to catechesis, from the formation of future ministers to the area of liturgy? Here as well, I would like to discuss this from a Protestant perspective. Several different churches (and this is a step that follows upon the acknowledgement of Christian anti-Judaism) have inserted a statement about Israel in the prologues to their ecclesiastical ordinances—precisely where, referring back to their statements of faith, the identity of the Church is expressed in summary form. For example, in 1996, the aforementioned Evangelical Church of the Rhineland inserted the following statement into the fundamental articles of its ecclesiastical ordinances: "[The Evangelical Church of the Rhineland] bears witness to the fidelity of God, who remains faithful to the election of the people Israel. Together with Israel, they hope for a new heaven and a new earth". Similar statements have been made by other regional churches in Germany.

If this is the task that lies ahead of us, then I would like to highlight some questions which seem unavoidable to me. I will limit myself to mentioning four of them:

1. To what degree:

- have these new perspectives actually and concretely impacted the life of the churches?
- has the process of renewal and conversion implied by these statements been carried forward?
- has the discussion around Israel changed, in places where Judaism was previously commonplace: preaching, catechesis, theology, liturgy, publishing?

2. Today, how do we understand the relationship between the Scriptures of Israel and the New Testament?

The 1980 Rhineland Synod stated:

> We profess our gratitude that the Scriptures (Luke 24:32, 45; 1 Cor 15:3ff.)—our Old Testament—provide a common basis for the faith and actions of both Jews and Christians.

This is doubtless true and to be emphasized but, on the other hand, one cannot avoid the fact that these shared Scriptures have provided a point of departure for two distinct hermeneutical stances: the Jewish one (which sees the Torah as the high point of the Scriptures) and the Christian one (which shifts that high point to prophecy, interpreted as an announcement of the Messiah). The very tables of contents of the Jewish Bible (with its three-part division into Torah, Prophets and Writings) and of the Christian Old Testament (Law, Historical Books, Poetic and Wisdom Books, and Prophets) presuppose, and at the same time suggest, two differing hermeneutical stances.

3. Once we have abandoned substitutionism. How might we positively understand the relationship between Israel and the Church, between the Church and Israel? The previously-mentioned study-document of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe mentions several models, including the ones proposed below:

- two ways of salvation—the Sinai [covenant] for Israel, and [the covenant] through Christ for the nations?

- a single covenant, already established with Israel by God and never subsequently revoked, into which we also have been inserted, like a branch grafted on to a tree (Rom 9-11)?
- Christianity as the fulfillment of the "pilgrimage of the peoples to Zion" announced by Isaiah?
- a single people of God, which includes both Israel and the Church?

The strengths of each of these models are obvious, as well as the questions which remain open. We cannot delve into the merits of each of them here; the point is that we have still have work to do.

Up until this point, Jewish-Christian dialogue has concentrated more on questions of a biblical, theological, cultural and spiritual nature. Israel, however, is not only a religion or a culture or a spirituality, but a people, in a concrete (and not metaphorical) sense. If we, as Christians, wish to understand our conversation-partners in a way that is not merely abstract or ideological, then we must also take into consideration the dimension of their peoplehood, and thus the question of the State of Israel. It seems to me that this dimension has been largely left out of many Jewish-Christian dialogue contexts. The Synod of the Rhineland spoke in these terms: "The continuing existence of the Jewish people, its return to the Promised Land, and also the establishment of the State of Israel, are signs of God's faithfulness toward his people". As one German theologian (B. Klappert) has said, this means speaking only of signs (and not fulfillment)—but of signs nonetheless. How do we seriously engage with this reality of Israel, in the midst of rampant anti-Zionism, the indifference of many people, and the Christian Zionism of the fundamentalists?

This is what it seems to me that I was meant to address, within the limits of the time which has been assigned to me.