

## **GOD'S COVENANT OF GRACE, ISRAEL, AND THE ATONEMENT**

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### **Introduction and Summary**

With Scripture I wish to stress the centrality of Christ. The Old Testament is the preparation for the coming of Christ, and the New Testament announces that Christ has come, has redeemed the world, and offers his salvation to everyone.

God made a covenant of grace with all humanity which embraces all creation. At the heart of the covenant is God's call for men and women to enter into fellowship with himself. Sin has entered the world and spoiled all creation so that for reconciliation with God to take place there must be atonement and reconciliation involving death and resurrection.

In order to accomplish his purpose of redeeming the world and calling men and women into communion with himself, God chose Israel. In and through Israel God has revealed and continues to reveal himself to the world. As God's servant, Israel is made, in a unique way, to share in Christ's atonement for the world, being made, as a nation, both to die and rise with Christ — as we all must. As a nation, Israel died in AD 70 and was resurrected in 1948 as the modern state of Israel. Israel in her sinful refusal to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ continues to witness to God in his mercy and judgement. In our times, the state of Israel and the Jewish people remain central to God's redemption of the world, and therefore must be central in the Church's mission to the world.

Sin entered the world through Adam and death passed over upon everyone; salvation and life come only through Jesus Christ.



## **The Centrality of Christ**

"In the Person and work of Christ the Fatherly will of God for communion with man is actualised in incarnation and reconciliation, and it is in the light of that fulfilled communion that all else is to be interpreted."<sup>1</sup> Christ and his saving work are central to the message and preaching of the Apostles.

### ***Christ is central to the book of Revelation***

The book starts with, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." It contains three sections and each section commences with a Christophany. With the second Christophany in chapters 4 and 5, we see "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne."<sup>2</sup> Only the Lamb can break the seals and open the Book of Life, the Book of Destiny. Christ is the key to all our Christian understanding of the events of history and to the way that God is present and active in the world.

### ***Christ is central to the whole of the New Testament***

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>3</sup> "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."<sup>4</sup> Peter said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."<sup>5</sup> Paul said, "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."<sup>6#</sup>

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1 T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (James Clarke, London: 1959), LV-LVI.

2 Revelation 5:6.

3 John 14:6.

4 John 14:7.

5 Acts 4:12.

6 Ephesians 1:22.

***Our understanding of Christ and of what he does follows the order in which we came to know him***

Our understanding of Christ follows the order of our salvation. As John Calvin made clear in his Catechism, Q 14,<sup>7</sup> Jesus Christ is the foundation for faith. Our salvation is grounded in him. Our Christian understanding and theology commences and continues with Christ. In that light, Karl Barth often said to his students, "I know no God but the man Christ Jesus." In this, Barth was saying with New Testament authority that he dismissed any theology that was not Christ-centred. He was also affirming with the New Testament that "all God's fullness dwelt in Christ."<sup>8</sup> Jesus was and is God.

***The person of Christ: hypostatic union***

In Christ, God assumed our flesh and blood and became man. He was God and man in one person. We cannot separate nor yet identify his divine nature and his human nature, his divinity and his humanity. He is one person. Between his divinity and humanity, as the Early Church and the Reformed Fathers said, there is a hypostatic union, that is, a union in one *hypostasis* or "person." Our minds cannot grasp how Jesus can be both God and man in one person. We accept that in faith. Our faith and our theology are grounded on that fact.

***The Old Testament is a preparation for Christ***

All that God did in the Old Testament — his covenant of Grace, his revelation to his people, his promises, and salvation — anticipate and prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ in whom everything that went before was fulfilled. Christ is the "locus" or focal point (*scopus*) of all Scripture and of all God's purposes for humanity. God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament is a necessary preparation for a right understanding of Christ in his person and saving work. As we read in Luke, on the road to Emmaus Jesus, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets . . . explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."<sup>9</sup> In the coming of Christ, however, and with the knowledge that we are

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7 Torrance, *School of Faith*, 7.

8 Colossians 1:19.

9 Luke 24:27.

given in the New Testament, we are enabled to look back and understand in greater spiritual depths what is revealed in the Old Testament. Throughout the Bible, Christ is central in all our understanding of the Christian Faith.

### **God's Covenant of Grace with all Humanity**

God in his love made a covenant of grace with all humanity, calling men and women into fellowship with himself. The word "covenant" does not occur in the early chapters of the Bible. The creation narratives simply say that God saw all that he created and it was good. He affirmed it. The Reformers were right to conclude, based on God's revelation in Christ, that in affirming all that he created, God made with all creation a covenant of grace.

#### ***God's covenant embraces all creation***

God's covenant with men and women embraces the whole of creation. God first created the natural world, and then men and women, so that men and women had a good, safe, comfortable place in which to live. His covenant with all creation meant that men and women should not live in an alien environment. God's covenant with all humanity and all creation was reaffirmed in his covenant with Noah, and reaffirmed from time to time through the course of Old Testament history.

#### ***God manifests himself through creation but reveals himself only through his Word***

In so far as the covenant embraces not only humanity but all creation, so "the whole universe of creaturely existence, visible and invisible, is brought into a relation with God in whom it is appointed to reflect his glory and be the sphere of his revelation."<sup>10</sup> It is God's will and decision that creation is the sphere in which he chooses to reveal himself and his love, for it is his gracious will that we should live in fellowship with him as members of his family, he as our Father and we as his dear children. As Calvin put it, "God wrapped himself up in earthly signs and symbols and representations as the means through which in his mercy and gentleness he draws near to men, reveals his Presence, and adapts men to

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10 Torrance, *School of Faith*, LI.

receive his truth. Thus the whole of creation is a mirror, a theatre, a world of signs, which God uses in the fulfilment of his covenant relations with men, as the tools and instruments of his Word.”<sup>11</sup>

When Adam sinned, the gates were opened and sin came in like a flood and spoiled all creation. As Paul said, “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.”<sup>12</sup> Because each man sinned as Adam sinned, each man was guilty for his own sin. Adam was simply the first among equal sinners. That meant that God’s covenant of grace with humanity and all creation could only be fulfilled through atonement, through the putting away of sin by God and his loving restoration of man to fellowship with himself. Reconciliation with God is the purpose of God’s covenant of grace and belongs to its heart. God’s covenant of grace and reconciliation belong together in Scripture.

Man in his sin is still aware of the presence of God. But in his estrangement from God because of sin, he is unable clearly to discern the voice of God and find his own way back to fellowship with God. Man can only recognise the presence of God and hear his voice in creation with the help of God’s revelation through his covenant of grace that is fulfilled in Christ. Only through God’s Word spoken and revealed in Christ can we discern clearly God’s voice through his created world.

### ***The covenant finds its fulfilment and is sealed only in Christ***

Covenant and creation can only be understood in the light of incarnation and atonement. Atonement in Christ, and its prefiguring in all the Old Testament sacrifices, is an essential part of the covenant itself and of its fulfilment.

The New Testament uses two words for God disclosing himself to his people — *phaneroo*, which the Authorised Version (AV) translates “manifest,” and *apokalupsis*, which the AV translates “revelation.” *Phaneroo* is God speaking and revealing himself through creation or in the course of life, but man is unable clearly to hear. Because of sin there is a veil over his mind and heart. He remains in bondage to sin. Although God speaks and manifests his presence, man does not hear for salvation. As Paul said, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven

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11 Ibid., LII–LIII.

12 Romans 5:12.

against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”<sup>13</sup> *Apokalupsis* is when the veil is removed so that man can, as it were, see and hear God, and at the same time he himself is uncovered. He sees himself as a sinner before God and is “born again.” Revelation only takes place through the Word spoken in the Old Testament to and through Israel, and only clearly in and through Jesus Christ. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”<sup>14</sup> Only in Christ is the veil removed and salvation takes place. Revelation and reconciliation, revelation and new birth, always go together.

### **The Purpose of God's Covenant**

With man's disobedience, sin swept in like a flood threatening to destroy humankind and all creation, but God in his love refused to let his creation go. In his love he was determined to overcome sin and restore humankind to fellowship with himself and restore all creation. The goal of the covenant was, and is, the restoration of humanity to fellowship with God. At the heart of the covenant is God's determination to restore humanity to fellowship with himself. Covenant and redemption belong together in the Bible.

### ***God's covenant with Israel***<sup>15</sup>

In his love and determination to redeem humankind and all creation God chose a particular people, Israel, so that in and through them he might redeem the

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13 Ibid., 1:18–19.

14 Jeremiah 31:33.

15 Karl Barth has studied and written more than any other theologian of whom I am aware about God's covenant of grace with Israel and all creation. I commend and encourage you to read his *Church Dogmatics*. Concerning Israel and the Church, see *Church Dogmatics* II/2 *The Doctrine of God* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1957), 3–506, particularly 195–305; and *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1956), 3–78. For the relation of creation and covenant, see *Church Dogmatics* III/1 *The Doctrine of Creation* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1958), 42–329.

world. Within God's wider covenant with all humankind and all creation, he made an inner covenant with Israel in order to work out the redemption of the world and fulfil the loving purpose for his wider universal covenant with all humanity and all creation. God's covenant with Israel was both for Israel's sake and for the world's sake. When God delivered Israel out of Egypt it was so that Egypt and the whole world might know that the Lord is God. David said to Goliath that God would give him into David's hand, and he would be slain so that "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel."<sup>16</sup> King Hezekiah prayed that God would deliver Jerusalem from the hand of Assyria "so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God."<sup>17</sup> That is a common theme in the Psalms where the Psalmist says, "The Lord reigns, let the earth tremble";<sup>18</sup> or in Isaiah, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth."<sup>19</sup> Through the course of Israel's long history God revealed himself to Israel in his love, judgement, mercy, and forgiveness, and through Israel to the world.

***Israel was chosen to be a representative nation***

God did not call Israel because she was more numerous than other nations,<sup>20</sup> nor because she was more righteous.<sup>21</sup> God chose her because Israel was a sinful nation like the other nations of the world. If she was not sinful, she could not represent the other nations of the world. Through the course of Israel's long history, God revealed himself to Israel — and through Israel to the world — as a God of love, mercy, forgiveness, and judgement. He revealed himself as a God who is holy, and who in his divine holiness bound to himself a sinful people, whom he would never let go. Such was his determination to purge sin and to redeem his people, recreating them for fellowship and communion with himself.

The Bible uses remarkable language about the relationship of God to his people. It speaks of God's relationship with Israel, and God's relationship with the people

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16 1 Samuel 17:46.

17 2 Kings 19:19.

18 Psalm 99:1.

19 Isaiah 12:5.

20 Deuteronomy 7:7.

21 Deuteronomy 9:1–6.

of the world, as a covenant of marriage which can never be broken. A covenant is different from a contract. A contract is external to the contracting parties, where the two parties make a mutual agreement with conditions attached. Marriage is a covenant where two people are called to give themselves totally, or unconditionally, to one another in love. In human marriage both the man and the woman are responsible for maintaining the covenant. Their covenant is bilateral. The covenant which God makes with his people, however, is unilateral. God initiated it, and God forever maintains it. It is an unconditional covenant of grace in which God promises his people to be their God, to make them cherished members of his family, and to bless them. Israel is called to respond and acquiesce to God's covenant.

***God's covenant of grace with Israel and the world is unconditional and everlasting***

If Israel does joyfully acquiesce and obey God, she will enjoy all the blessings of the covenant, and so will the world. If Israel does not and rebels against God, she will not enjoy God's blessings. She will suffer and be banished temporarily from the Promised Land, but God will not break his covenant with Israel. The Lord said, "Yet, in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord."<sup>22</sup> This is affirmed many times in the Old Testament. Israel's *enjoyment* of God's blessings is a consequence of her obedience. It is the same with God's covenant of grace with all humanity. The enjoyment of God's blessing requires obedience. His covenant with Israel and the world, however, is unconditional and everlasting.

***The covenant is not external***

God's covenant of grace with Israel is not something external to her life and being. It does not simply call for Israel's acquiescence and obedience. It enters into her life and affects her entire life and being. This is essential to our understanding of God's covenant. Husband and wife in their commitment to each other in love

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22 Leviticus 26:44-45.

become, in the language of Scripture, “one flesh,” one whole person. The man discovers his manhood through this — and only this — woman (his wife), and the woman discovers her womanhood only through this man (her husband). The entire life and being of both is altered and changed through their covenanted union one with another. Henceforth what affects one affects the other. Their life and destiny are forever intertwined. God’s relationship with his people in his covenant of grace is a deeper and more intimate covenant of marriage. It is everlasting and affects the whole life and being of his people. Israel and God, by God’s choice, are wrapped together in the same bundle of life. The same is true of Christ and all humanity. When God became man in Christ, he became man for all eternity, and all humanity became joined with Christ in the same bundle of life.

### ***External signs and seals***

The signs and seals of God’s covenant with Israel were circumcision and Passover, the covenant meal. Circumcision was the older sign given to Abraham and prior to the giving of the Law. Passover was given through Moses.

***Circumcision.*** Circumcision was the sign cut into the flesh of the covenant people. There are many references to circumcision in Scripture, but it was only gradually through the years that the meaning of the sign was unfolded. Although it is not clearly stated, I believe that we are right to draw the following implications concerning its meaning for Israel:

As a sign that could not be erased, it was a perpetual reminder that God’s covenant with Israel was an everlasting covenant.

As a sign that could not be erased, it was a perpetual reminder that Israel was sinful and deserved to be cut off, to die, because of her sin. Israel, however, was not cut off. The sign helped them to anticipate the day when God would himself come in Christ and be circumcised, cut off, die, for his people.<sup>23</sup>

As a sign cut into their flesh, it was a sign that the covenant was not, as it were, external to the parties participating in the covenant. It involved on God’s side, God forever becoming man to be one with his people and in Christ being cut off for his people. On Israel’s side, it meant the people becoming changed or altered in their being and existence as the Word became flesh in them. That is

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23 See Colossians 2:9–12.

what is meant in Jeremiah 31:33. There we read, "This is my covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law [my Word] in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." In Deuteronomy we read of this change of life resulting from God's covenant with Israel. The Lord says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."<sup>24</sup> That is the interpretation of the sign in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup> In Colossians, circumcision means a "putting off of the sinful nature."

As a sign cut into the flesh, it meant that as a people united in covenant with God, Israel must be cut off, die to herself and her sins. Only so, could she be cleansed and enabled to receive a new life and live in fellowship with God.

**Passover.** We will simply note that the Passover feast involves blood and the killing of a lamb. Because of the blood sprinkled on the lintel of the door and the meal that was eaten, the angel of death passed over the people of Israel and they lived by God's grace. Atonement had been made for their sins. The lamb anticipated Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."<sup>26</sup>

### ***There is only one covenant of grace***

God confirmed his covenant of grace with Israel on different occasions; for example, with Abraham, Moses, and David. On these different occasions the covenant was revealed in greater depths, and different aspects of God's covenant were affirmed as God worked out his purpose of redemption for Israel and the world. Ultimately there is only one covenant of grace with Israel and the world. The one covenant of grace was totally fulfilled and is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son and Word of God.

The confirmation of the covenant with Moses is particularly important in that God gave to Israel, through Moses, both the Law (the Ten Words) and the Laws of Worship (the liturgical laws). So we have the twin ministries of prophet-priest represented by Moses, and liturgical-priest represented by Aaron. It is important

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24 Deuteronomy 30:6 and also 10:16.

25 Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11.

26 John 1:29.

to recognise that these God-given liturgical acts had no efficacy in themselves. It was God who appointed them. They pointed beyond themselves, witnessing to God who alone can cleanse and forgive the sin of his people, and as such anticipated Christ. In both Old and New Testaments atonement is an essential part of the one covenant of grace and its fulfilment.<sup>27</sup>

The Ten Words are intensely personal and cannot be separated from the Person of God. They are a partial revelation of God and reveal how God wanted his covenant people to live and behave. The Laws of Worship, with the five great offerings, were given because Israel was unable to keep the Ten Words and required constantly to seek God's cleansing and forgiveness. The offerings involved blood in the killing of bulls, sheep, goats, or birds, and helped people to look forward to Jesus Christ, to understand why he came and what he did in sacrificing himself as an atonement for sin. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. For sins that were not covered by animal sacrifice, sins that were done deliberately and which in the language of the AV are called sins of a "high hand," the sinner had to cast him or herself on the mercy of God. This was the case with King David concerning his sin with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

### ***God's servant***

God's covenant with Israel was a call to serve. It was through Israel, as God's servant, that God chose to reveal himself to the world and call the world into fellowship with himself. The word "servant" occurs almost 800 times in the Old Testament. It is not always used of Israel, but frequently is. We read, for example, "O Israel my servant, Jacob I have chosen . . . I said, 'You are my servant: I have chosen you and have not rejected you . . .'"<sup>28</sup> and ". . . do not fear, O Jacob my servant . . . You will be my people, and I will be your God . . .";<sup>29</sup> and "This is what the Sovereign Lord says, 'When I have gathered the people of Israel from the nations, where they have been scattered, I will show

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27 See T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: the Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Paternoster, Milton Keynes and InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 2009), 17–21.

28 Isaiah 41:8–9.

29 Jeremiah 30:10–22.

myself holy among them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own Land, which I gave to my servant Jacob."<sup>30</sup> Quite clearly from these and other passages about Israel, God's covenant with Israel was a call to serve. Israel, God's covenant people, is God's servant, called to make known and further his will to redeem the world.

### ***Servant Songs***

Now let us turn to what are called "The Servant Songs" in Isaiah:<sup>31</sup>

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope . . . I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.<sup>32</sup>

God says,

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob, and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.<sup>33</sup>

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . . Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong.<sup>34</sup>

Note what is said of the servant in the Songs. The servant is the one who fulfils God's mission of redemption. It is redemption not only for Israel but for the whole world. He accomplishes redemption through suffering and death, which he bears on behalf of others. He is raised from the dead and exalted by God.

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30 Ezekiel 28:25.

31 Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-9; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

32 Isaiah 42:1-4, 6.

33 Isaiah 49:6.

34 Isaiah 53:4-6, 12.

Those who had rejected him are constrained to recognise that he had suffered for their sins.<sup>35</sup>

Who is this servant whose suffering and death accomplishes salvation not just for Israel but for the world? What was in the mind of the prophet when he spoke these words? As my brother Tom has rightly said, most likely the prophet thought of Moses as the archetype of the servant of the Lord. In the mind of the prophet, Moses, more than anyone in his person and work, foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah. Moses led Israel out of Egypt. When Israel sinned, Moses prayed for Israel, standing before God "in the gap on behalf of the Land,"<sup>36</sup> that God in his wrath would not destroy Israel because of her sin.

It was because Moses stood in the gap, because he interceded for Israel in its great sin, acting as the representative and mediator of the people before the wrath of God, that God consented to renew the covenant, reissue the warrant of the covenant in the decalogue, and take Israel to be his people in covenant mercy and pardon. Nor can we forget the fact that at last Moses is cut off from entry into the Promised Land and disappears like a scapegoat into the mountains to be buried by God in an unknown grave, while Israel under Joshua crosses the Jordan to enjoy the promised deliverance. It is surely the figure of Moses, his intercession and vicarious suffering for Israel, that ultimately lies behind the conception of the servant in Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>37</sup>

In the Servant Songs, is the servant Israel or is he Christ? Scholars are divided, despite the fact that Israel in the first and second Servant Song is stated to be the servant. Many of an evangelical persuasion have argued that these songs cannot refer to Israel. They argue that they are prophecies about Christ.

I believe that we must say that they refer *both* to Israel and to Christ. As a prophet, Isaiah was preaching to Israel in his day. Israel is God's servant. Through the Lord's covenant, Israel is united with the Lord in a way in which no other nation is. The Lord has revealed himself to Israel and bound her to himself

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35 J. Y. Campbell, "Servant," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1950), 224.

36 Ezekiel 13:5; 22:30.

37 Torrance, *Atonement*, 42–43.

in a covenant of love and marriage that is unique among the nations.<sup>38</sup> As a nation, Israel is united with the Lord in the same bundle of life and is made to participate in whatever the Lord does.

These remarkable prophecies in the Servant Songs, however, clearly cannot just refer to Israel. They can only be fulfilled in and by Christ. Through his suffering and death alone can Israel and the world be redeemed. Because of her unique relationship with the Lord, Israel is called not only to be the bearer of God's Word to the world, but to participate through the Holy Spirit in Christ's atonement for the sin of the world. She is made as a nation to share in Christ's death and with Christ to become a scapegoat. This becomes clearer when we turn to the New Testament.

### **God's Covenant in the New Testament**

Peter in Acts 3 states quite clearly that through Israel "all peoples on earth will be blessed."<sup>39</sup> In his sermon in Acts 2, Peter says two remarkable things.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, he says it was by "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" that Jesus was handed over to be put to death. That is, he says that *Christ's death was God's doing*. God planned it and brought it about. On the other hand, Peter says, "You, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross, but God raised him from the dead." That is, he says that *Christ's death was man's doing*. It was what man did in his sinful rebellion against God. How can we reconcile these two statements?

Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him to be a slave in Egypt, "Don't be afraid . . . You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."<sup>41</sup> God graciously overruled their sin and made their sin his saving act, for the saving of many lives. God overruled for good.

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38 Psalm 147:19–20.

39 Acts 3:25–26.

40 Acts 2:23–24.

41 Genesis 50:20.

It is likewise with the death of Christ. The sin of putting Christ to death on the cross was the greatest sin of all. All sin boiled over in that act of rebellion by humanity against God. But God over-ruled the greatest sin of all and made it his saving act for the world. Not only so, but he undid the past, put it right, rectified it, and made it his saving act from the foundation of the world.<sup>42</sup>

No one can undo the past. When you and I sin, we cannot undo what we have said and done. Only God can, and God does. When we seek God's forgiveness and surrender our lives to God, we can still suffer the consequences of our sin, but the wonderful thing is when God forgives, he undoes the past. He makes our sin a positive means of blessing for us and for those we have sinned against, and a testimony for others. An astonishing act of grace!

Israel was chosen by God to represent the nations, and chosen (and here we need to put our hand over our mouth in awe before God) to put Christ to death. In so doing she was not more sinful than the other nations. She was simply chosen to be our sinful representative. God lovingly, graciously, overruled that sinful act for the salvation of the world. What is more, God overruled all Israel's past sins down the long years of her history (and he continues to do so), so that we have learned from them for our salvation, and they have become a blessing to us and to the world. We would not have learned of God's resistance to sin, his judgement, mercy, and forgiveness, apart from Israel's sin. Apart from Israel's sin, we would not have the Old Testament. God has overruled Israel's and the nations' sin of putting Christ to death by making it his saving act for the world. No wonder that Paul says, "Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles."<sup>43</sup> Jesus himself said, "Salvation is from the Jews."<sup>44</sup>

### ***Death and resurrection central to salvation***

God's concern in his covenant of grace with Israel and all humanity was redemption for everyone. Death and resurrection were therefore central. Only through dying to sin and rising to a new life could the redemption, which God accomplished in Christ, be enjoyed. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 we read, "For

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42 Revelation 13:8.

43 Romans 11:11.

44 John 4:22.

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."<sup>45</sup> Christ's atoning death did not take place independently of humanity, any more than it took place independently of Israel. As God bound Israel to himself in an everlasting covenant, so in Christ, God bound the whole of humanity to himself in an everlasting covenant of grace. God in Christ, in his becoming man, united himself, identified himself, with each one of us. Hence when Jesus died, all of us were made to share in his death. Our death is not just something natural. It is because of our sin that Christ died for us. Hence, all of us, having shared in his death, will die, as Paul says.

But if we died with Christ, we will also rise with Christ through his resurrection. Here however we have the mystery of sin. Even in the resurrection, sin can interpose between a person and Christ. Whereas all are made to share in his resurrection, not all will rise to the new life of righteousness within God's Kingdom. As Jesus said, "Those who have done good will rise to righteousness and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."<sup>46</sup>

God's covenant of grace with Israel was such that God in his love would never let her go despite all her sin. Israel's hope for redemption lay in God's steadfast keeping of his covenant, and in his loving determination to redeem her. Here we are speaking of Israel as a nation, not of individual Israelis or Jews. Redemption could only be brought about by Israel's dying to sin and rising to a new life. In his covenant of grace Christ identified himself with Israel. He became Israel. In the Old Testament Israel is likened to a vine. Jesus said in John chapter 15, "I am the true vine."<sup>47</sup> Because of her union with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, when Jesus Christ died, Israel as a nation had to die. Because of God's covenant of grace and love, Israel was made to share in Christ's death. The death as God's servant was necessary for Israel's sake "so that she might be pardoned, healed, and restored to fellowship with God. The covenant thus mediated would be transformed to extend far beyond the bounds of Israel, for all nations would

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45 2 Corinthians 5:14.

46 John 5:29.

47 John 15:1.

come at last under its light and salvation and share in the fellowship it bestowed between God and man."<sup>48</sup>

If Israel had welcomed Christ as her Redeemer, in dying she would have been raised in Christ as a new nation and as a holy people of God living in fellowship and communion with God, "a light for the Gentiles."<sup>49</sup> Israel, however, continued in her rebellion against God. In her sin, because God would not let her go, Israel shattered herself on the rock of God's grace, love, and faithfulness. She died as a result of Christ's death, but did not rise to a new life of righteousness and as "a light to the Gentiles." In AD 70 she was destroyed as a nation, and because of sin, banished from the Promised Land — not for 70 years as in the first captivity in Babylon, but for nineteen hundred years.

With Christ's death and resurrection, and with Israel's death (despite Israel's continuing sin), God's covenant of grace was transformed and extended far beyond Israel. Life and salvation in Christ was offered to the world. His covenant embraced all nations. Salvation was for everyone. God wanted all to enjoy fellowship and communion with himself, and God had made that possible in Christ.

God's inner covenant with Israel, despite her sin, remained, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."<sup>50</sup> Israel is still God's servant and God's witness to the nations. The continuing practice of circumcision in the New Testament and by the Early Church witnesses to that fact.<sup>51</sup>

Israel as a nation participated in Christ's death. But Israel as a nation had to rise from the dead and be raised through Christ's resurrection. Israel was resurrected in 1948, having as a nation been dead for some nineteen hundred years. The acted parable of the cursing of the fig tree<sup>52</sup> which was Israel, was fulfilled in AD 70 when Israel ceased to be a nation. In the later parable, Jesus said when you see the fig tree that has been dead from the root become green

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48 Torrance, *Atonement*, 346.

49 Isaiah 42:6.

50 Romans 11:29.

51 Luke 2:22; Acts 16:3.

52 Matthew 21:18–20; Mark 11:18–20.

again, then know that summer is near.<sup>53</sup> When Israel is restored to the Promised Land as a nation, then "summer is near." What that means we do not know except that, from what Jesus said, it is a sign that God is about to do something momentous in his world. Israel's restoration as a nation to the Promised Land, under the hand of God, keeps us on the tiptoes of expectation.

At present, Israel the nation remains sinful and does not know the salvation of Jesus Christ. Paul says "they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge."<sup>54</sup> Israel, however, is still God's covenant people and servant. "For God's gifts and call are irrevocable."<sup>55</sup>

For those who have eyes to see, Israel in her sin and as God's covenant people witnesses to God today before the nations in the following very powerful ways:<sup>56</sup>

- 1 Israel witnesses to God's continuing covenant of grace not only with Israel but also with the world.
- 2 Israel's death and resurrection witnesses to the bodily death and resurrection of all humanity.
- 3 Israel witnesses to the historical nature of divine revelation. We know God by what he has actually done in history, and in his incarnation.
- 4 Israel witnesses to salvation as a gift of God's grace. She witnesses to the fact that despite our antagonism and rebellion against God, God is a God of both judgement and mercy.
- 5 Israel witnesses to man's continuing sin and rebellion against God, despite God's love, patience, and mercy. Israel continues to be a sinful nation, yet God's servant.
- 6 Israel witnesses to God as a Person whom we actually encounter in history.
- 7 Israel witnesses to the fact that there is a hidden process of judgement going on all through history and every nation has to give account to God.

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53 Mark 13:23-31; Luke 21:29-33.

54 Romans 10:2.

55 Romans 11:29.

56 The following 9 clauses are largely quoted from my article. See David W. Torrance, "The Witness of the Jews to God: Their Purpose in History," in *The Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David W. Torrance (Hansel Press, Edinburgh: 1982), 2-12.

8 Israel witnesses to the coming day of the Lord, to a new creation when Christ will come back to the earth in mercy, judgement, and renewal.

9 Israel, as we have already indicated, by her very presence in the Promised Land, witnesses to the fact that God is about to do something great and dramatic in history.

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that in his love and in faithfulness to his covenant, God would gather Israel from the nations to which they had been scattered and bring them back to the Promised Land. Back in the Promised Land the Lord said, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."<sup>57</sup> After they had been restored to the Land they would come to faith in God.

When Israel returned to the Promised Land and was resurrected as a nation in 1948, something profound began to happen to Jewish people. Since that time, more Jews have been coming to faith in Jesus Christ than since the days of the Early Church. Forty five years ago there were no Messianic congregations in Israel. In 1973, at the time of the Yom Kippur war, there were five Messianic congregations in Israel. Today there are over 100. There has, in the last few years, come about in Israel a greater awareness of Messianic Jews and a greater openness to the Gospel despite the opposition of the ultra-Orthodox. According to a recent documentary film, if New Testaments were today offered free in a market place in the UK, nine out of ten people would decline the offer, whereas today in Israel nine out of ten people would accept the gift of a New Testament. It is possible that world-wide there are over two hundred thousand Jews today who believe in Jesus. Because more than half are integrated into Gentile churches, it is impossible to know exact numbers.

As Gentiles it is our responsibility to pray for Israel and take the Gospel of Christ to the Jewish people in a way that is appropriate, not as to a pagan people, but to those who worship the same God. We have a God-given responsibility to take the Gospel to the Jew. The Church's mission to the world must have at its heart the taking of the Gospel to the Jews. Recall the words of the Apostle Paul:

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57 Ezekiel 36:25-26.

Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! . . . For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?<sup>58</sup>

When Israel comes to faith in Jesus Christ it will be like a new Pentecost. There will be a great leap forward in world mission.

There is only one way of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles, and that is through Jesus Christ and his atoning work. Jews and Gentiles are loved equally by God. God's choosing of Israel to be his servant was in order to bring about the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. Only in Jesus Christ is there salvation.

### **Christ is the Elect One, the One Chosen and Elected by God**

In Christ, Israel and all humanity are elect. For God in his love and grace has chosen to call all humanity into fellowship with himself. He does not want any sinner to perish, but for all to turn to him in repentance and to receive the salvation that he has accomplished for everyone in Christ. We are called to be diligent and make our calling and election sure.<sup>59</sup> If we do not, we will be lost and perish without his salvation. Only those who receive Christ and his new life of righteousness are truly among the elect. That is to say, there is an inner company of the elect, namely those who love the Lord, within the wider company of the elect of all humanity. In the same way, within the elect of Israel as a nation, there are the inner elect, the inner remnant who truly believe in Christ. Paul in Romans anticipates the day when "all Israel will be saved."<sup>60</sup> By "all" I do not think that he means every single Jew. He seems to anticipate that one day a majority of the nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus Christ and be saved. Much remains a mystery to us.

Jesus has warned us about the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction.<sup>61</sup> He has revealed to us the Father's will to call

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58 Romans 11:11-12, 15.

59 2 Peter 1:10.

60 Romans 11:25.

61 Matthew 7:13-14.

everyone into communion and fellowship with himself in Christ and warned us in his parables and in his teaching of the need to receive his forgiveness and salvation.

In conclusion, I will seek to gather up what I have said. According to Karl Barth, "The history of humanity is the history of God's covenant with man."<sup>62</sup> It is the history of humanity's sin and of God's loving determination to redeem humanity and restore humanity to fellowship and communion with himself. With that purpose he chose Israel with the result that, "The whole history of Israel in all its stages is the revelation of man's sin, in shameful identification with the sin committed by Adam in Genesis 3."<sup>63</sup> Israel was not more sinful than the other nations, nor yet was she less so. She was chosen by God in her sinfulness to represent the nations and to teach the nations in their sin of the way that God deals with sin in his love, holiness, judgement, and mercy, culminating in his atonement in Christ for Israel's and the world's salvation.

All other people after Adam have only repeated in some form the original sin of Adam. Between all of us there is a formal relationship with Adam, but there is a vast difference between our relationship with Adam and our relationship with Christ. Our relationship with Adam only dimly prefigures, and is a preliminary shadow, of our relationship with Christ. Between the two relationships there is the "greatest and most fundamental disparity."<sup>64</sup> Adam cannot bring us to Christ nor help us to understand Christ. It is only through Christ that we can understand Adam and the nature of humanity's sin. For Christ in his grace embraced Adam and united Adam and all humanity with himself in his work of redemption.

Although Adam's sin opened the way for sin and death to pass over and embrace all humanity, each person in his or her freedom has sinned. We are not held to account by God because of Adam's sin but only by our attitude to Christ and whether or not we receive his gift of salvation. In the Roman Empire many became slaves because they were captured in a war that was not their

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62 Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, trans. T. A. Smail, *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers*, no. 5 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 25-26.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

responsibility. If we saw twelve such slaves in a Roman court, we could not blame them for being slaves. The war that had taken place was probably not their responsibility. It was not their fault that they were captured and enslaved. If, however, someone came into the court, laid down a large sum of money and said "If anyone gives me his or her name, they can be free," anyone who continued to be a slave would be a slave on their own responsibility. Christ has paid the ransom. Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, God has redeemed us. God in Christ has worked out the redemption of the world. It is ours simply to receive it with gratitude. Those who do not wish to receive it are rendered guilty and are judged by their refusal of Christ's salvation.

May we all grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and make his salvation known to the world. To Christ be glory both now and forever! Amen.<sup>65</sup>

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65 2 Peter 3:18.