



The “Mystery” of Israel and the Church

Reinaldo Siqueira
Professor of Hebrew Scriptures

Israel and the Church are usually seen as two contrasting and opposite realities. Most Jews consider the Church to be an idolatrous and oppressive religious entity, originated from an apostate and heretic Jewish sect. After taking over the entire occidental world, it became Israel’s archenemy through its religious persecutions and theological teachings. As for most Christians, Israel is normally viewed as being rejected for not accepting the Messiah, and remaining in history as a people only to be a living example of God’s wrath toward those who reject Him. For these Christians, the Church replaced Israel and is now God’s people. So, Jews and Christians have lived as two opposite and enemy religions, each one with its one set of beliefs and practices—on one side is Israel; on the other, the Church.

These opposing and “not very friendly” points of view have prevailed for the past two millennia of common Jewish and Christian life and history in the Western World and Civilization. However, the last decades of archaeological discoveries of the world of New Testament times, and the theological reflection that has followed, have now challenged these “common” points of view, both on the Jewish and the

Christian sides. Under the new light, the New Testament’s teaching about the relationship between Israel and the Church now dares us to rethink old ideas and concepts that have been well established for ages, as can be illustrated by the two examples that follow.

First, we now know that Judaism at the time was not a monolithic religion, but rather it was composed of many religious groups, also called “sects,” each one with its own theological interpretation and overtones. Among these groups, one can number the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Zealots, the Essenes, the Hellenists, the Apocalyptic, Baptist, and Charis-

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matic Movements, to refer just to a few. Many of these groups had their representatives both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora. The great majority of Jews, however, did not belong to any of these groups, but just lived their lives as common Jews, observing the basic aspects of their Jewish identity and faith. Most of these religious groups strived to get converts from among the Jewish populace. Many of these “sects” preached and believed that they were the real and only representa-

tives of Israel. The Essenes, for example, had completely separated themselves from the rest of the people of Israel. For them, their community of faith was the real Israel, the only object of God’s favor and consideration, while the rest of the nation was hopelessly lying down in apostasy and sin. There was no hope anymore for the nation, and the only hope for anyone was to abandon and forsake the people and join the Essene covenant community in order to be saved. Such an extreme attitude is not found in the New Testament.

The Christian group (usually called “the Way” or *HaDerekh*, see Acts 9:2; 16:17; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) never cut itself from the rest of Jewish community, as did the Essenes, nor developed a theology of separation and exclusiveness like the Essenes’. Jesus lived, moved, preached and ministered among his fellow countrymen. He never dissociated himself from his people and from the Jewish institutions—the nation, the Temple, the synagogue. Born in Judea, he lived in Galilee, and traveled around his country many times mingling with his people on all levels (see Matthew 2:5-11; 21-23; 4:12-16, 23; 9:35; etc.). He went around the synagogues of the land, preaching,

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teaching and healing (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:14-16; etc.). He participated in the temple services in Jerusalem and its annual festivals, all through his life (Luke 2:41-49; John 2:13-25; 5:1, 14; 7:14; 10:22-23; etc.). Jesus’ disciples and followers, also, never separated themselves from the rest of their nation. In Jerusalem, the Christian disciples kept worshiping at the temple even some 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 3:1, 10-11; 4:1-4; 5:12-16; 21:23-27). Paul and other apostles, when traveling in different countries of the Roman Empire, worshiped and frequented the Jewish synagogues (Acts 13:14-43; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10-12, 17; 18:4, 24-26; 19:8; etc.).

The profound ties that united the Christians of the time with the rest of the community of Israel at large can be seen in the events at the end of the life of Paul, when he arrived at Rome as a prisoner: “And when we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. And it happened that after three days he called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, ‘Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground to put me to death. But when the Jews (or Judeans) objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar; not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason therefore, I requested to see you and speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel’” (Acts 28:16-20). Here is Paul, at the end of his life, brought prisoner to Rome.

As a Christian, he calls the Jewish leaders of the city to present himself to them and give a report of what was going on. He calls them “brethren” and presents the reason of his situation as being “for the sake of the hope of Israel.” This was in-

deed a time when to be part of the Church was also to be an integrative part of Israel.

Second, the very origin and meaning of the word “Church” is Jewish and it is used in the New Testament to indicate God’s faithfulness and unbroken covenant with Israel. In the beginning of the Common Era, most Jews who lived in the Roman Empire spoke Greek, the international language of the time. In many Jewish communities of the diaspora, the reading of the Torah was done directly from the Jewish Greek version of the Bible, called the Septuagint. This usage of the Greek language in the Jewish communities of old had a profound impact on the Jewish culture and history. The word “Synagogue,” for example, is Greek, meaning “an assembly” or “a place for an assembly.” The word “Church” also belonged to the Jewish religious universe of the time. In its origin, it comes from the Greek word *Kuriakon*, which means “that which belongs to the Lord.” However, in English, “Church” is almost always used to translate another Greek word, the word *Ecclesia*. This word in the Septuagint was the most common Greek translation for the Hebrew word *Qahal* (“congregation”), in reference to the congregation of the Children of Israel, especially in the context of the conclusion of the covenant with God at Sinai. So the expression *Yom haQahal*, the “Day of the Congregation,” refers to the day when God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai, and made them into His holy people. This expression is rendered in the Septuagint as the *Hemera Ecclesia*—the “Day of the *Ecclesia*,” the “Day of the Church” (see Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 18:16). Israel, the Covenant People, was the “*Ecclesia* of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 23:1-3, 8). So, the word “Church,” *Ecclesia*, was not something new that Christians invented in order to make opposition to the Jewish “Synagogue,” indicating thereby that a new and different religion had appeared. Rather, it was of common usage in the Jewish circles of the

time and belonged to the vocabulary of the Synagogue. It was used in reference to the “congregation” of those who had the faith of Israel and were part of the covenant with God. It was from within such a context that it appears also in the New Testament. This can be seen in the words of Jesus at Matthew 18:15-17: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church [*Ecclesia*]; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” In these words, Jesus is speaking from a perspective inside Judaism only the Christian Church did not exist yet! The “Church” referred to here is the local Jewish congregation. The procedure follows the Mosaic Law, the Torah: So that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (see Deuteronomy 19:15). The ultimate outcome, in case of a stubborn attitude, is to consider the wrongdoer as a Gentile, a “goy,” a tax collector, someone who does not belong to the Jewish community anymore. “Church,” as applied to Israel, is also the case in the words of Stephen in Acts 7. While reviewing Israel’s history, Stephen spoke about Moses who “was in the Church [*Ecclesia*] of the desert, with the Angel that spoke with him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us” (Acts 17:38).

Instead of separation and enmity, “Israel” and “Church” in the New Testament speak of unity and love, and of the faithfulness of God toward His people, in a Divine “mystery” that knows no boundaries. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in the Messiah Jesus” (Ephesians 2:11-3:6).