

NEW COVENANT ISRAEL AS A MULTI-ETHNIC DIASPORA

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I am a non-Jewish Hungarian who believes in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of JHWH. In my cultural context this statement begs all kinds of questions. I come from a part of the world where ethnic conflicts and national rivalries have been a “natural” part of life. Central-Europe has never been the kind of melting-pot as the United States. Not even the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the powerful, multi-ethnic pre-WWI empire of the region, assimilated ethnic groups into one large cultural entity. Being a post-WWI Hungarian I am also painfully aware of the struggles of smaller nations to survive and the frustration of seeing their histories being written by larger and more powerful nations. I have inherited, as most Hungarians, the still hurting pain of our national tragedy, the Trianon treaty of 1920, when we lost two-thirds of our territories, and as a result three-million Hungarians found themselves outside our borders. Paradoxically, I also lived half of my life in a Communist system whose ideology was a sort of internationalism and a denial of the importance of ethnic identity.¹ Obviously, resistance to the system involved a preservation and re-embrace of national identity², which came powerfully to the service when in 1988 tens of thousands demonstrated in the streets of Budapest against Ceaucescu’s plan to destroy thousand-year old Hungarian villages in Erdély (Transylvania in present-day Romania) as a means of his politics of forced assimilation. I have also seen how difficult this re-embrace of national identity was after the fall of Communism, and how many puzzling questions, frustrations and fears were unearthed as a result. Is Hungarian national identity a legal term, referring to the people who live in Hungary? Or is it a cultural term, referring to all Hungarian-speaking people inside and outside the borders? Is it maybe a racial term, defining blood-ancestry? Is national identity a social construct? Or is it part of who we essentially are? Is it an inclusive or an exclusive term? Are Gypsies and Jews who live in Hungary and speak Hungarian “real” Hungarians? Are those Hungarian immigrants in the United States and Australia who do not speak Hungarian anymore rightfully called “Hungarians”?³

¹ Hungarian Reformed theologian Laszlo Varga describes Communist internationalism from a Hungarian perspective in his essay “Communism the Tool of Forced Assimilation” in Borgh-Keulen-Brinkman, eds. *Faith and Ethnicity*, vol. 2, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Meinema, Zoetermeer, 11.

² In my part of the world we speak about “national” identity rather than “ethnic” identity, probably reflecting the prevailing idea that ethnic identity needs political expression.

³ Many of these questions have been dealt with in depth in the meticulously compiled history of Hungarian nationalism and national identity of Gyurgyák János: *Ezzé lett magyar hazátok. A magyar nemzeteszmé és nacionalismus története*. (Budapest: Osiris, 2007).

But most of all, where should the church stand in this discussion? I write this paper at a time when after almost 90 years of separation the Hungarian Reformed Church reunited with the Hungarian Reformed churches of the old Hungarian territories. For the Hungarian minorities outside Hungary the Reformed church has served in the last 90 years as a preserver of national identity.⁴ According to Dutch Reformed theologian Van der Borght, “It seems that nowhere is the need for a link between faith and ethnicity so urgently felt as in the case of the Reformed Hungarians.”⁵ Religion and national identity went hand-in-hand in the regions where Hungarians became the minority group. In Erdély (Transylvania) the Orthodox have traditionally been Romanians, the Reformed (and Roman Catholics) Hungarians, and the Lutherans Szász (German). This is arguably in harmony with the *Reformation* tradition of creating national churches with national structures and national creeds,⁶ but is it in harmony with the *biblical* tradition?⁷ Or is the reunification of the Hungarian Reformed Churches maybe also a reaffirmation of a kind of historical exclusiveness that is ultimately against the true catholicity of the church? Paul emphasized that in Christ there is no Jew and Greek anymore, and encouraged the different ethnic groups to receive each other once Christ had received them. This should ideally happen in the context of the local church, too, as was the case with the Greek-speaking Jews in the largely Hebrew-speaking church of Jerusalem (Acts 6) or with the Jewish group within the largely Latin church of Rome (Rom 14-15). A close link however between national identity and the church often seems to work against this principle. Hungarian Reformed theologian János Pásztor gives an example of this from the recent history of the Hungarian Reformed church in Croatia. The unity of the originally bilingual church was seriously disrupted by Hungarian nationalist attitudes, bringing “much harm for both the cause of the Gospel as well as the Hungarian minority there”.⁸ Pásztor believes that this is not only a practical but essentially a theological issue: “It is a significant part of the mystery of Christ that

⁴ For a short summary of this problem see Ferenc Szűcs, “Reformed and Hungarian: Faith and Ethnicity in a Middle and Eastern European Context” in Borght-Keulen-Brinkman, 122-137.

⁵ Eddy Van der Borght, “Introduction: Western Perspectives on Faith and Ethnicity” in Borght-Keulen-Brinkman, 11.

⁶ “Most churches that grew out of the Reformation are organized along national lines. These national churches are a consequence of the understanding of the relationship between faith and ethnicity in a Protestant perspective.” (Ibid, 10)

⁷ According to Van der Borght “the arguments for the national church within the reformed tradition are not so strong as often thought” (Ibid).

⁸ János Pásztor, “The Witness and Experience of the Reformed Church in Hungary since the Collapse of the Part-State 1989-2001” in Borght-Keulen-Brinkman, 172.

all nations are together as parts of his body (Eph 3:6). All nations need the Saviour, and praise him together (Rev 7:9-10). This 'multinational' character is not just a result of the Gospel, but is part of it."⁹

Through involvement in many international evangelical organizations, meeting hundreds of believers from other cultures, praying and working together with believing Romanians, Slovaks, Gypsies, Jews and all kinds of nationalities, I experienced the glorious unity and love in Christ that transcends national and ethnic identities. As an evangelical pastor I have a dream of churches in Hungary that are full of Hungarians, but also with Gypsies and Jews, who pray and worship together, demonstrating the all-inclusive nature of the gospel. After reading and rereading the New Testament many times, I dream of churches where the question is not "Who are your parents?" (a question that in my experience is hardly intelligible in America, but which is very much relevant in Central Europe) but "Do you love and obey Jesus?" In some small ways I can say I already live in that dream. My small evangelical denomination has a Gypsy church in it, and my church in Veszprém is a community where by God's grace love has sometimes overcome ethnic boundaries. And yet, I am not completely satisfied with the results. I want to see more of that multi-ethnic glory, and I want to see the church to be the champion of that unity in Christ, instead of building impenetrable walls between different nationalities.

But is my dream in harmony with the Bible? Is it not instead a modernist utopia that disregards the organic tissues of mankind to its own peril? Is it not a form of "castrating culture" (to use the Welsh Dewi Hughes' expression¹⁰ in his fascinating treatise on ethnic identity and the Christian faith)? I understand that there are all sorts of practical problems with my dream. For one thing, in my multi-ethnic Christian encounters (except those with Hungarian-speaking Gypsies and Jews) I use a language that is not mine: English. In the international evangelical conferences, where I appraise the multicultural unity of brothers and sisters, I sing songs that come from an Anglo-Saxon Christian experience, drink coffee (instead of tea), eat hamburger and hotdog (the kind of food most cultures represented there would not traditionally have in their homes), write my name on my name tag in a reversed fashion (in Hungarian we write our family names first), and am very efficient with my time (while terribly missing the wonderful flexibility that allows for personal communication, something that is so important for cultures like Hungarian!). It is a trans-cultural experience in which unity is achieved by putting aside the identity-markers that define me, and by pretending an identity (which is usually Anglo-Saxon) that neither me nor others from

⁹ Pásztor, 171.

¹⁰ Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2001)

various nationalities naturally have. Is not then a national church a better demonstration of the truth that the gospel can be enculturated and incarnated into the lives of *all* the nations of the earth? Absorbing ethnic and national identity into a new international community experience can be an impoverishment compared to the beauty and depth of living in a specific culture and speaking a specific language. And this is exactly that which pulls many Hungarian Christians back from a multi-ethnic evangelical experience. The multi-ethnic evangelical world reminds some of us, Hungarians, of the internationalism of Communism, which was indeed a form of “castrating culture”. I know many of my kinsmen, principally in the Reformed church, are afraid that our stories will not be redeemed, but instead will simply be ignored and then forgotten, in the evangelical melting pot. They are concerned that we will lose our memories. Memories in Central Europe are our primary sources of identity, unlike the individualistic tendencies of America or other parts of the world where personal achievement is the primary source of identity. Many of my Christian brethren are afraid that if we lose our memories, preserved in our cultural markers, we will lose an essential part of our identity. These memories are not only in our history books, novels and films. They are also in our cuisine, and in the fact that our big meal is lunch, not supper, unlike in the Anglo-Saxon cultures and in the evangelical conferences where multiculturalism gains expression. Our memories are in the folk tales that as children we heard from our parents and grandparents. They are in the statues on the squares of our thousand year old towns. They are in the often dark but always beautiful stanzas of our poets, the respected mediums of our ethnic experience, who played artfully with the same language that we absorbed as little children, and which is not English or German. Our memories are in our folk music that inspired Brahms, Bartok and Kodály, in the old buildings, castles, ruins and battlefields, in the hills and the rivers, the Bakony, the Bükk, the Mecsek, the Duna, and the Tisza, the Lake Balaton, the Hortobágy “puszta”, and the legends of those places that we Hungarians all know about. It is in our lost wars and lost wars of independence that we ironically celebrate, 1703, 1848 and 1956, Rákóczi, Kossuth and Nagy, Mikes, Petőfi and Illyés. Some of our memories, a lot indeed, have to do with Christianity, even Reformed Christianity. Many of my Christian friends are afraid that in the search for the smallest common denominator to make the multi-ethnic brotherhood possible we actually reduce life and culture into a superficial – and too often Anglo-Saxon – social experience, and thus castrate ourselves, even our Christian selves, rejecting a rich heritage, a heritage which explains to us who we really are.

If we add to this that in order to belong to God Hungarians have to believe in the Messiah of the *Jewish* people, which is also a strong ethnic minority group in Hungary, a group that has sometimes been considered to be part of the Hungarian nation, at other times as a different – maybe even antagonistic – identity, and a group that has always had a double and not a single ethnic

consciousness, the complexity of the issue becomes even more obvious. Do Hungarians have to give up their national identity and embrace a Jewish identity in order to belong to God? If not, why not? If yes, how can it be? What would an American say if he heard that in order to belong to God he would have to believe in the Messiah of the Iraqi or Afghani? When I say that I am a Hungarian who believes in the Messiah of the Jews, I am uttering a sentence that for many Hungarians is not much different from saying that I believe that salvation comes from the Slovaks or the Romanians. It raises all kinds of provocative questions that relate to the Hungarian and the Hungarian Christian identity. As a Bible-believing Christian I know that talking about the Messiah of the Jews is not the same as talking about the (hypothetical) Messiahs of the Afghani or Slovaks. But I also know that the questions they raise are not necessarily different. At least not for a lot of my kinsmen who desperately try to preserve the beauties of their national identity.

In this paper my aim is to approach the question of ethnic identity from a historical-redemptive perspective. I am convinced that the proper foundation for discussing the relationship between ethnicity and Christian identity is salvation-history. Instead of trying to find God's place within the national story, we have to see how the nations can become part of God's story. My starting point therefore is not the fact that ethnic identities exist, but the fact that God has a redemptive plan for the nations. I will not venture to show how the encounter with Israel's Messiah is experienced from the perspective of the non-Jewish ethnic groups, like Hungarian, but the other way round, how the ethnic groups are reached and blessed through the Israel of God. My goal is not to explain how Israel's Messiah becomes part of the national story, but rather, to show how the national story becomes part of the much more important story of Israel's Messiah. At first glance the two approaches look the same, but in reality they are worlds apart. If we try to explain the relationship between ethnic identity and the participation in salvation-history from the point of view of the ethnic story, we will never get the right perspective. It is my conviction that *the only healthy way of looking at the complex issue of Christian ethnic identity is if we try to explain it from a salvation-historical perspective.*

Naturally, in this essay I cannot give a comprehensive and satisfactory answer to all the questions involved. It is my conviction, though, that the principles that we learn from a salvation-historical approach bring us closer to giving biblical answers to those questions. In order to arrive at my conclusions I will first discuss the role of the nations in salvation history. I will argue that the new covenant is a covenant with Israel, but since it is continuous with the Abrahamic covenant, the promise of a new covenant was always a promise for the nations, too. The new covenant Israel, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, is a multi-ethnic people living in "Diaspora" among the nations. Secondly, I will speak about national identity within the new covenant Israel. I

will emphasize that the new covenant Israel is continuous with the spiritual "Israel" and not with the ethnic Israel. The new identity for all believers from all ethnic groups is Christ. When we identify with Christ we identify with Abraham's seed who is both "Israel" and "Adam". Thirdly, I will name three principles that help us explain national identity in relation to Christ: inclusion, separation, and incarnation.

A. SALVATION-HISTORY AND THE NATIONS

1. *The New Covenant Is Promised to Israel*

When we come to the subject of Christian ethnic identity from a biblical-theological direction, we have to take into account that a long story precedes or goes alongside our personal and ethnic existence, a story which is usually referred to as "salvation history". The new covenant in which the nations find favor with God is not an entirely unexpected work of God. Nor is it a plan B after the unbelief of Israel. Nor is it a covenant made *directly* with the nations. When we pay attention to the biblical authors, we see that the new covenant had been promised to the people of Israel centuries before the coming of Christ. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, quotes Jeremiah who said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (8:8) He emphasizes that the essence of this new covenant is that God will write his laws into the hearts of his people. The problem with the old covenant, the covenant that God made with Israel after the Exodus (8:9), was that it was only an outward covenant and thus it could not guarantee the obedience of the people. The new covenant, however, will be a covenant in which God changes the hearts of his people to achieve their obedience. It is a covenant in which the outward demands of the law become inward motivations of the heart. Whereas the old covenant consisted of people who were outwardly commanded obedience, the new covenant will consist of people who are given new hearts that loves obedience (cf. Ezekiel 36).

When we read the Old Testament promise it is obvious though that God is still dealing with *Israel*. Jeremiah prophesies of a new covenant with the "house of Israel" and the "house of Judah". The promise is given to Israel, not to the nations. At least not to them *directly*. Even if the definition of "Israel" changes under the new covenant, and we shall see that it actually does, the continuity of the people of God is clearly affirmed. God has a plan for his chosen people, Israel, for God had made an eternal covenant with them and he will never deny himself. When speaking of the new covenant in which we take part as people of other ethnic groups we should therefore still affirm the continuity of Israel in the plan of JHWH. The new covenant is a covenant with Israel. By becoming part of it we

enter into a covenant that was promised to Israel, and thus we also become members of Israel.

2. The New Covenant Is Continuous With the Abrahamic Covenant

The new covenant is not however an *entirely* new covenant. It is “new” compared to the Mosaic covenant (the “old covenant” in Hebrews 8) which has become “obsolete” when Christ came. But it is not new in that it is the *fulfillment* of the Abrahamic covenant which, contrary to the Mosaic covenant, has never become obsolete.¹¹ In Galatians 3 Paul discusses how the covenant in which the nations are blessed comes about by the coming of the Seed that was promised to Abraham. Paul emphasizes that the Mosaic covenant could not annul the promise made to Abraham 430 years before Sinai. The new covenant is continuous with the Abrahamic covenant and is in reality its fulfillment. Every believer who belongs to the new covenant is a son of Abraham. The new covenant is new in that the Seed finally came and became curse for us who believe so that the blessing promised to Abraham (which includes the gift of the Spirit) will be ours, too. But it is not new in the sense that it is still the covenant with Abraham. Belonging to the new covenant is belonging to the Abrahamic covenant. Being united with Christ means being united with the Seed of Abraham. Being a son of God is being a son of Abraham. Belonging to the new covenant people of God is therefore belonging to Israel.

3. The Abrahamic Covenant Is a Promise to the Nations

Many biblical theologians correctly emphasize that the covenant with Abraham is the starting point of salvation history. Obviously, there had been men and women of God before Abraham, but there is a definite new beginning, a covenant of promise when God calls Abraham. Abraham is promised to become the father of all believers from all nations (Rom 4:16). Everyone who belongs to God after this covenant will belong also to Abraham. In his overview of Biblical salvation history Michael Williams warns us, however, that this fresh start in Genesis 12 must not be overemphasized, because it is also continuous with the “creation-wide sweep of God’s action and concern”.¹² God indeed began a new work in the world when he made a covenant with Abraham, and this new work was the beginning of Israel and the beginning of the promise that through his Seed blessing will come to the world. And yet, it is important to keep in mind that the

¹¹ For a detailed argument for the temporary nature of the Mosaic covenant see Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Academic, 1998).

¹² Michael A. Williams, *Far As the Curse Is Found* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 101.

Abrahamic covenant was always an answer to the problem of the fall of creation and the rebellion of the nations. The Abrahamic covenant is not only the beginning of the history of the Jewish nation, it is also the beginning of God's saving plan for the nations. It is not accidental that the call of Abraham is placed after the story of Babel where as a result of God's judgment all kinds of languages were born. In Genesis 11 we get the impression that God gave up on the nations and cursed them with a way of life that is characterized by disunity and separation. The birth of ethnicity is not simply an inevitable development of people multiplying within the frameworks of God's creation, it is also a punishment for peoples' rebellion against God. We can of course celebrate the richness of the thousands of languages spoken by the people of the earth, and appraise their significance in building human culture, including the beauty of poetry and the power of these languages to name and conquer reality in a thousand ways, but in Genesis 11 the birth of languages is also clearly shown as a curse on mankind. After Babel people go on their own ways, far from God, separated from each other, and try to succeed on a cursed earth. This is the background of the covenant with Abraham appearing on the pages of Genesis 12.

When God calls Abraham he gives him the promise that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). The text unmistakably says that the blessing that comes to the nations will come to them through Abraham. This is another way of saying that in the new covenant the nations will become members of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul refers to the same promise when he tells the Galatians: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." (Gal 3:14) When Jeremiah talks about God writing his laws on the hearts of Israel, we should take those words in the larger context of the Abrahamic promise that the nations will also be blessed through the Seed of Abraham. The promise included the nations from the very beginning, and thus the new covenant is but the realization of that promise by the coming of the Seed.

4. Israel in the New Covenant Is Multi-Ethnic

As a fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, the new covenant people of God is multi-ethnic. It is quite obvious when we read the Acts of the Apostles that the question whether non-Jewish people could be members of the new covenant people of God was answered with a firm yes. The majority of the forming churches became Gentile churches, and some, like the church at Antioch or the church at Rome, had a multi-ethnic membership. It was not an easy process, and David Sim is right when he points out that "the issue of ethnicity within the Christian church and the related question of the problem of the requirements of Gentile converts was not resolved either in Jerusalem or in Antioch; these important questions remained contentious throughout the lifetime of Paul and his

opponents.”¹³ The apostolic position was nevertheless clear, and the decision of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) that the nations can become part of the people of God (without circumcision and keeping the Mosaic law) was unquestionable.

But we should also note that the self-understanding of this multi-ethnic people of God was that they were actually the sons of Abraham, forming a new, multi-ethnic *Israel*. The apostles and the writers of the New Testament now applied for the multi-ethnic church the terms originally used for the Jewish people. Peter speaks of the new covenant people of God as a “chosen race”, a “holy nation”, and a “kingdom of priests” (1Pt 2:9). Paul calls Gentile believers the “sons of Abraham” (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:7), even “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). The aim of Peter and Paul is to emphasize the continuity with Israel, as if to say that Israel in the new covenant became a multi-ethnic community, just as it had been promised to Abraham at the beginning of salvation history.

5. *The Multi-Ethnic New Covenant Israel Lives in Diaspora*

An important aspect of the end of the Mosaic covenant is the end of the outward “custodianship” of the Torah and all its political implications for the people of God. By the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant the people of God ceased to be a political nation and is not limited to a certain geographical location anymore. Abraham’s seed is promised to inherit the whole world (Rom 4:13)! Instead of living at the land occupied by Joshua, Israel now lives among the nations. She does not form a political structure of its own, but becomes part of the existing political structures of the nations of the earth. With the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant something similar happens to the people of God than what happened to Israel when she was scattered among the nations under the Old Testament, except that this time the scattering is not a punishment but the beginning of a new work whose goal is to reach all nations and make them disciples of the Messiah.

When Israel in the Old Testament was scattered among the nations she lived in “Diaspora”. In the Diaspora Israel was a minority among the people groups among which she was scattered. She did not have a political state of her own and was both accommodating to the majority nation and tried to preserve her own distinct identity. “After the exile the people was scattered geographically, subject to various political authorities, and diverse in language. Religious tradition and observance assumed an even greater role in maintaining distinctive identity.”¹⁴ The apostles used the “Diaspora” existence of Israel to

¹³ David C. Sim: “Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel and Matthew” in Mark G. Brett: *Ethnicity and the Bible*. (Leiden-New York-Koln: E.J. Brill, 1996), 183.

¹⁴ John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 1.

describe the situation of the new covenant multi-ethnic Israel among the nations. Both James and Peter call Christians the “Diaspora”. James addresses his epistle “to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora” (Jas 1:1), clearly referring to Christians who are living among the nations as the Israel of God. Similarly, Peter addresses his first letter “to the exiles of the Diaspora in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1Pt 1:1), and exhorts them to conduct themselves with fear throughout the time of “their exile” (1Pt 1:17).¹⁵ The self-identity of Christians, therefore, must include a sense of both alienation from their kinsmen and a new belonging to the worldwide Diaspora, the center of which is not the Jerusalem below but the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:26).

We have seen so far that the new covenant was promised to Israel, it is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant was a covenant for the nations, too, the new covenant Israel is multi-ethnic, and that it lives in dispersion. Let us now examine how belonging to this multi-ethnic-Israel-in-Diaspora affects the ethnic identity of believers.

B. NEW COVENANT ISRAEL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

1. *The New Covenant Israel Is Continuous with the Spiritual Israel*

Although there is a clear continuity between the new covenant multi-ethnic people of God and the Old Testament Israel, the continuity is not with the Jewish people as such but with the “remnant” of the Jewish people, the Israel within Israel, the spiritual Israel. This truth has an immense significance for Christian ethnic identity in the new covenant. Throughout the history of Israel we see a dichotomy between the natural Israel and the spiritual Israel, the natural seed of Abraham and those who followed his faith, too. Israel’s history is the history of Israel and the history of Israel within Israel. It is the history of the natural seed and the history of the seed of promise. The prophets made a distinction between the circumcision of the body and the circumcision of the heart, the latter of which was the basis of belonging to the spiritual Israel. They sometimes called “real” believers the “remnant” within Israel. At one point the “remnant” was only seven thousand Israelites (1Kings 19:18), at times of revival (e.g. Nehemiah 8) it was significantly larger, but there always was a remnant and it was always a smaller circle than the entire Jewish people.

The new covenant Israel is the continuation of the remnant within Israel. All four gospels describe the ministry of John the Baptist who was appointed to

¹⁵ I find it puzzling that in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992) N.T. Wright does not discuss these verses at all, despite his strong emphasis on the “exile” theme and his thesis that the new covenant is the end of Israel’s exile (301).

prepare the people for the arrival of the Lord. The aim of John's ministry was to gather together the believing remnant for the Messiah, and commanding the rest to join this remnant through repentance. He announced that the national existence of Israel was coming to an end and only those would escape who repent and believe in the Messiah. When some people referred to Abraham as their father, John answered: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Lk 3:7-9). John the Baptist was saying that the natural sons of Abraham would be judged and cut out unless they become part of the remnant, because the remnant, the spiritual sons of Abraham, would be the people of the Messiah. Not birth but faith is the only criterion of belonging. So much so that – as the New Testament clearly demonstrates, and the so-called "new perspective" theologians rightly emphasize¹⁶ – by faith Gentiles can also belong to the Messiah without having to be born a Jew or having the identity markers of the Jewish people. The new covenant Israel is the remnant of Israel *plus* all those from other nations who believe in their Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul explains this theological truth in explicit terms in Romans. One of Paul's purposes with the letter is to explain the mystery of the unbelief of the Jewish nation. He tells his readers how sad he is on account of the perishing of his kinsmen (9:1). The unbelief of the Jews is the more puzzling given the fact that "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" (9:4-5) Does this mean that God's promise to Abraham to have an everlasting covenant with his sons has failed? No. "It is not as though God's word had failed. For *not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (Rom 9:6-8) Paul could not make his point clearer. There are two kinds of Israel: the natural Israel and the spiritual Israel, the natural children of Abraham and the children of promise. The new covenant is a covenant with the children of promise. The only way the natural children of Abraham can be members of the new covenant is if they become children of promise through faith in the Messiah. Paul was saying the

¹⁶ "Both Stendahl and Sanders highlighted the social dimensions of Paul's theology, specifically his commitment to integrate Jews and Gentiles in the church." (John M.G. Barclay: "'Neither Jew Nor Greek': Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul" in Brett: *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 201.)

same thing in chapter 2: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.” (Rom 2:28-29)

All that this means is that in the new covenant only faith counts, being an ethnic Jew does not. The basis of the nations` joining the covenant is faith in Israel`s Messiah. The nations cannot be natural sons, but they can become spiritual sons (sons according to the promise) of Abraham. Similarly, the natural seed, the Jewish people, have to believe in the Messiah in order to belong to Israel. It does not help them that they are the natural sons of Abraham. Unless they believe they are not really the sons of Abraham and will not inherit the promises. Israel in the new covenant is not an *ethnic* community, it is a *faith*-community, a continuation of the faithful remnant, the Israel within Israel. It is a covenant that is not Jewish in an ethnic sense. It is “Jewish” in a spiritual sense. The nations may enter the covenant without losing their ethnic identities, while also acknowledging that salvation comes from the Jews and so in a sense they have to become sons of Abraham in order to belong to the new covenant.

2. The New Identity for All Nations Is Christ

So far we have seen that Gentiles do not have to have a Jewish identity in order to belong to the new covenant. We have also seen however that they have to identify with the story of Old Testament believers, the story that began with Abraham. Gentile believers become sons of Abraham when they believe in Jesus, the Seed of Abraham. There are two story-lines for an individual Christian: the Israel-story and the ethnic story. For example, as a Hungarian in one sense I have Abraham as my father and in another sense I have Árpád¹⁷ as my father. I am shaped by the national story and I am shaped by salvation-history. I am who I am because I belong to the Hungarian nation, and I am who I am because I am a believer in Jesus and thus a son of Abraham. The question now before us is this: how do the two stories relate to each other? What is the relationship between the national story and the redemptive story in shaping Christian identity? What happens to us when we become followers of the Messiah? Is our national story transformed by the redemptive story? Or do they continue to shape us in a paradoxical-dialectical way? Do we maybe have to reject our national story and let salvation-history shape us? Are we to exchange fathers (Abraham instead of Árpád) as part of Christian conversion?

In his letters Paul sheds some light on this question. His way of dealing with Christian ethnic identity is in harmony with his general way of dealing with

¹⁷ Árpád was the head of the tribal federation when the Magyars (Hungarians) occupied the Carpathian Basin, circa 896. He is often called “our father Árpád” by Hungarians.

Christian identity: *Christ must be all in all!* In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (16-17) The NIV correctly puts *κατὰ σάρκα* as "worldly point of view" for it refers to our natural, earthly, perception of Christ and other people. When we become one with Christ our identities change and our perception of Christ and other Christians changes, too. There is a new identity formed in us, and the new identity is *Christ*. We receive a Christ-identity and all other Christians receive a Christ identity that with the help of the Spirit we perceive. We see Christ from the Spirit's point of view and we see each other from the Spirit's point of view, as new creatures in Christ. In Galatians Paul makes this even more explicit. In chapter 3 he talks about the change that the coming of the Messiah brings to our identities. Jews as well as Gentiles become the sons of God by believing in Christ Jesus. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (26-27). Clothing ourselves with Christ has an immense impact on our Christian identities. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (28) Christ-identity supersedes both Jewish and Greek (and Hungarian, Romanian, Gypsy, American, Afghani, etc.) national identity. The identity of all Jews and Gentiles who become followers of Jesus is a Christ-identity. The new identity for Gentiles is not Jewish identity but Christ-identity, not least because even Jews gain a new, Christ-identity. The unity of the church of Jesus Christ is built on this new identity which is Christ himself.

Does this mean that both Jews and Gentiles lose their national identities when they become followers of Jesus? Well, yes and no. The question cannot be answered by a simple affirmation or negation. We need to further examine the nature of Christ-identity in order to see its implications for ethnic Christian identity. We find the key to understand it in Christ's embodiment of both Israel and Mankind in his person.

3. *Christ as Israel*

In Galatians 3:28 Paul says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek anymore. National identity is subjected to the new self-understanding of the Christian. We should not take this teaching however as a denial of the long story of Israel. Salvation-history, as we have seen, must shape the new identity of both Jewish and Greek followers of Jesus. Paul therefore continues his thought in Galatians 3 by emphasizing the connection between the new Christ-identity and the Abrahamic covenant: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then *you are Abraham's seed*, and heirs according to the promise." (3:28-29) Christ-identity is

also Israel-identity because Christ is Abraham's promised Seed. By Israel-identity I do not mean a loyalty to present-day Israel or Jewish culture, nor do I understand Israel in an ethnic sense. By Israel-identity I mean an awareness of being part of the salvation history that began with Abraham.

Christopher Wright points out that Gentile believers "had come to belong *within* biblical Israel as God's people. Or more precisely, God's people *expanded* (through Christ and in the purpose of God) to include people of foreign nations who, so long as they are in Christ, are now to be counted as also in Abraham."¹⁸ Wright wants to know why this is the case, and his answer is extremely important for our discussion of ethnic identity. "Because Jesus is the *Christ* – the Messiah, who *embodied Old Testament Israel in his own person* [emphasis mine]. So all those in him are by that very fact included in the Israel of God in Christ."¹⁹ He adds: "And what Paul told the Christians of Galatia and Ephesus, of course, applies to Christian believers of any nation, including yours and mine – anywhere in the world."²⁰ In other words: we belong to the Israel of God and thus have an Israel-identity (in the above sense) because we have Christ as our identity. Since Christ is the embodiment of Israel, belonging to Christ means belonging to Israel. As Christians we cannot have a Christ-identity without also embracing Abraham. All ethnic awareness that rejects Abraham and the story of his believing seed automatically rejects Christ, too. Although Christ-identity is not Jewish in a cultural sense, it is Jewish in its roots. The truth is that "the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings" (Rom 15:27), not the other way round. Paul warns the Gentile believers: "You do not support the root, but the root supports you." (Rom 11:18) When Gentiles become members of God's family they are grafted in the tree of Israel (Rom 11,17-24), the natural branches of which were the Jews, even if the majority of them have been cut off because of unbelief. Tet-Lim N. Yee is right when he remarks that the state of the Gentiles is "still being defined in relation to Israel, no matter how 'unresolvable' this relation, *prima facie*, might turn out to be".²¹ I would add that if this relation to Israel hurts national pride, let national pride then be hurt! If the Syrian Naaman had to bathe in the river Jordan, we cannot find healing in the Danube, either.

¹⁸ Christopher Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2007), 83-84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

4. Christ as Mankind (or Adam)

There is however an important aspect of the Israel-identity that needs to be discussed, too. When Christ became Israel in his person, he also became Man (or Adam) in his person. Christ-identity is Israel-identity, yes, but it is also Man-identity, an identification with the second Adam. It is important that Christ's identity as Man (or Adam) is realized through his identity of Israel (or Abraham's Seed) because that is the way God planned to restore mankind into the state of blessing. But the blessing was there promised to all the nations from the very beginning of the covenant with Abraham, and so the nations have always been in the saving purposes of God. Israel in the Old Testament was a paradigm representing mankind under the Lordship of JHWH. Israel was meant to be a model-nation, a Mankind-being-restored, a miniature Adamic race being blessed on condition of obedience. Israel's exclusive existence as the people of God was not a rejection of the nations but on the contrary, a means to embrace the nations. Israel was meant to be an incorporation of Mankind at a certain land in order to be a paradigm for the glory, righteousness and love of JHWH.

The implication of this is that when Christ-became Israel he also became Mankind, and when Christ became Mankind that meant the end of the exclusiveness of Israel. Christ fulfilled the paradigm-role of Israel in his own person, without the temporary model-role of a particular nation. As Luke demonstrates in his highly significant genealogy of Jesus - in the same chapter where some of the Jewish candidates for John's baptism brag about their being the sons of Abraham - the Seed of Abraham is also the *son of Adam*! The genealogy of Jesus in Luke does not end with Abraham, as in Matthew's gospel, it goes way back to Adam, as if to say that the Messiah is not only Abraham's Seed (Israel), he is also Adam's Seed (Mankind).

In Ephesians 2 Paul explains how Christ-identity becomes both Israel-identity and Man-identity. "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men) - remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, *who has made the two one* and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was *to create in himself one new man out of the two*, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." (11-16) How could Christ destroy the dividing wall between ethnic Israel and the nations? *By becoming both in one person*, says Paul! Does this mean that he discarded the history of Israel as the people of God? No, he widened the

Israel into its original worldwide scope, according to the promise given to Abraham! “The promises of the blessing to the patriarchs are a reassertion of God’s original intentions for man.”²² With the coming of Christ God’s original purpose with Israel *and* the world began to be fulfilled. The need for a model nation ceased, the paradigm was turned into the whole, the representation became that which it stood for, and the door was opened for a direct work among the nations. I say “direct”, but I of course still affirm that it is a widening of *Israel* and it is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Only the Messiah could make the paradigm (Israel) and that which the paradigm stood for (Mankind including all nations) *one* in his body, and he did exactly that.

In the last part of this paper I will briefly examine how Christ-identity – as both Israel-identity and Adam-identity – is realized in the context of the ethnic experience. There are three principles that must guide our Christian national self-understanding, independently of whether we are Gentile or Jewish believers. These are the principles of *inclusion*, *separation* and *incarnation*. These principles have a dynamic relationship with each other; despite the tension between the three principles, we can experience them as three elements of the same act of faith. All three are aspects of our Christ-identity. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul makes it clear that the mission of reconciliation depends on being a new creation in Christ. There is a logical order among the three principles: inclusion precedes separation and separation precedes incarnation. We cannot practice separation before we experienced inclusion, and we cannot practice incarnation before we were separated. A logical order does not mean that these are stages of the Christian life or that any of them happens once and for all. They are instead aspects of everyday discipleship, repeated again and again, as part of faith in Christ, in relation to national identity.

C. CHRIST AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

1. *Christ and the Principle of Inclusion*

Since Christ has become Mankind in his person, and the Israel was widened to her originally promised scope of the entire created humanity, the nations can become part of God’s people without becoming Jewish. Christ-identity is Israel-identity but not ethnic Jewish identity. In order to be a son of Abraham I do not have to give up my culture, put on the identity markers of the Old Testament Jewish people, keep the food laws, or be circumcised. (As an extension of this principle: nor do I have to speak English, the “lingua franca” of most evangelicals in the world.) I can be a Hungarian and as a Hungarian belong to the God of Abraham. Christ is my identity, and since Christ became both Israel and

²² Wright, *Salvation*, 64.

Mankind, I am included in both – without changing my ethnic identity – when I receive Christ in faith. In Abraham`s Seed the nations are all blessed. From the state of being far from the commonwealth of Israel and being foreigners to the covenants of promise they have now been brought near and made members of God`s household, on the single condition that they believe in the Messiah of the Jews.

The principle of inclusion is gloriously emphasized by Paul in Romans 15. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.’ Again, it says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.’ And again, Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.’” (Rom 15:7-12) Because Christ became Israel for the nations, the nations can praise God in their own languages and from their own ethnic experience. In the opened heaven John saw a great multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” praising God and the Lamb for their salvation (Rev 7:9). With my fellow Hungarian believers I will praise God in Hungarian, as a Hungarian, and thank God for making me part of his beloved Israel. I will also praise him with my fellow Romanian, Slovak, Gypsy, American, Afghani and Arab believers, each of us in our own languages. Christ-identity is inclusive, because when Christ became Israel by the same act he also became Mankind.

2. Christ and the Principle of Separation

The second principle in the relationship between the new Christ-identity and ethnicity is the principle of separation. At the same time when we are embraced by Christ *in* our ethnic identity we are also separated *from* our natural identity. This is a fine point of Christian identity, easy to misunderstand and difficult to put into practice. Its importance is nevertheless absolutely crucial for a healthy Christian self-understanding. What do I mean by separation?

We have already seen that the multi-ethnic new covenant Israel lives in Diaspora. It is a minority within the various national groups of the world, just like the Jews in the Old Testament were exiles in dispersion among the nations. There is a spiritual demarcation line between the non-believing majority of an ethnic group and the believing minority that lives among them. The scope of this paper does not allow me to further elaborate the “minority” theme of the New Testament, so I just refer here to the New Testament emphasis on the disciples of Christ as a “little flock”, on the entrance into the kingdom of God through a “narrow gate” which “few find”, on the expectation of persecution, and the

warning not to be conformed to the world. Jesus tells his followers to even hate their fathers and mothers, which is obviously not a command for acts of hatred but a command to choose final loyalty. Jesus` disciples are “in the world”, but they are not “of the world”. “They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” (Jn 17:16) The church of Jesus Christ is *holy* (just as Israel in the Old Testament was a holy people among the nations) because the church has been set aside from the world. It means an ethical separation but it also means a separation for a purpose. The people who are set aside from their majority nation are set aside as people belonging to those nations (principle of inclusion) but as people who have a new loyalty now (principle of separation). The new loyalty is a loyalty to Christ and his multi-ethnic Israel, which might include a degree of loyalty to the nation and its cause (principle of incarnation), but only as an expression of the loyalty for Christ, and to the extent it is in conformity to the will of Christ.

A remarkable picture for both the principle of inclusion and the principle of separation is Paul`s image of the olive tree in Romans 11. The olive tree stands for Israel as the people of God of all ages, the natural branches of which are the Jews, and the wild branches from the wild olive tree are the Gentiles. Paul says that the Gentiles were cut off from their natural trees and grafted into the cultivated olive tree. “After all, if you were *cut out of an olive tree* that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!” (24) In this image we see the principle of inclusion. Believers from all nations become part of the people of God, they are grafted into the tree and become part of Israel. The Israel of God thus becomes a multi-ethnic people, a people that was not a people but became God`s people (Rom 9:24-26). But there is also a principle of separation in this image, which can easily be overlooked. Paul explicitly says that before the Gentiles believers are engrafted into the cultivated olive tree, they are *cut off from their wild olive tree*. Naturally, it does not mean the giving up of many aspects of ethnic identity (language, culture, ancestors, memories of the past), but it entails some kind of a separation that warrants the picture. When Christ includes us, Gentile believers, in his Israel, he bring a sword that separates us from our kinsmen. I would argue that even Jews have to experience that! The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells his fellow-Jewish believers that they had to separate from the religious-political system of their Jewish nation and give full allegiance to Christ: “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” (Heb 13:12-14)

3. Christ and the Principle of Incarnation

It is the principle of separation that makes the principle of incarnation possible. Since the gospel is about the inclusion of the nations into the Israel of God, the gospel requires missionaries who bring the message about Christ to the nations (Rom 10:14), and since missionaries are *sent* to the nations, they naturally come *from outside*. Missionaries are by definition foreigners, this is why they must be *sent*. The pattern of all missions is the sending of Jesus Christ into the world. In his high priestly prayer Jesus says: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." (Jn 17:18) His incarnation is an example in that when he came into the world to be one of us he also retained his separate identity and remained holy (he was in the world but not of it). We should follow in his footsteps and identify with the people that Jesus sends us to, and in the meantime retain our identity as the multi-ethnic new covenant Israel living in Diaspora.

Normally, Jesus sends us back to our own people. This means that the spiritual separation from our nation is an almost invisible separation (except its ethical and religious dimensions), but a necessary condition for truly loving and serving our countrymen for the sake of Christ. By the step of incarnation we take on ourselves their pains and bring healing to them under the Lordship and guidance of Christ. The apostle Paul gave us a glorious example of this kind of service when he was willing to become cursed for his kinsmen, the Israelites. In his life we can see the principle of separation and the principle of incarnation working together. Since he had been separated from his Jewish people he could say: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law." (1Co 9:20) This agenda is a perfect summary of the principle of separation and the principle of incarnation, and the relationship between the two. Had Paul not been separated from his Jewish people, he would not have been able to say that he would *become* like a Jew, since by nature he was already one. Separation is essential for incarnation. We also see that the purpose of separation is not to defend a new exclusivism, like that of Old Testament Israel and the Diaspora communities, but service through incarnation. The Christian Diaspora in this respect is very different from the Old Testament Jewish Diaspora.

There are cases when Christ sends people to a nation that is different from their own. In these cases the incarnation is identification with the destiny of another nation, which identification is made possible through the principle of separation from one's own nation. A national identity without spiritual separation makes cross-cultural missions impossible. In the second most popular Hungarian patriotic song, a song that we sing at every national event, there is a stanza which says: "To your homeland without fail / Be faithful, O Hungarian! / It is your cradle and will your grave be / Which nurses, and will bury you. / In the great world outside of here / There is no place for you / May fortune's hand

bless or beat you / Here you must live and die!" If a Hungarian Christian takes this song seriously, cross-cultural missions become impossible for him. But when Christ becomes our identity, and he sends us to another nation to preach them the good news of inclusion, and we had been separated for his purposes, we can say with the Jewish Paul: "To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (1Co 9:21-22)

CONCLUSION

A salvation-historical understanding of Christian identity in an ethnic context must have at least three implications for the self-understanding of the church of Jesus Christ. If we agree that the church is the new covenant Israel as a multi-ethnic Diaspora, the church must always view herself as 1) the continuation of the Israel of the covenants, 2) a multi-ethnic community, and 3) a minority among the national groups from which her members are called.

Any ecclesiology that disregards the Israel-dimension of the church is a defective, possibly even heretical ecclesiology. We can see examples for this deviation in Marcion's theology in the second century, the Nazi theology of German Protestants in the 1930's, and some extreme views of Hungarian Reformed pastors who deny the Jewish blood of Jesus.²³ The church can never be separated from the Abrahamic covenant, and this fact must have a humbling effect on our national identity. The church is not Jewish in an ethnic sense, but it is Jewish in a spiritual sense, an heir of the promises given to Abraham and his seed.

The church must also see herself as a multi-ethnic community. No one nation in the new covenant, not even the Jews, can claim that they have a special place in God's plan. The debate around the warrant for national churches is an important debate. Whatever stance we take in this debate, our position must reflect the inclusive, universal, multicultural dimension of God's new covenant people. A denial or disregard of national identity can easily become the denial of the principle of inclusion, one of the glories of the new covenant. A strong ethnic character on the other hand can damage the multi-ethnic nature of the church. A balance has to be found in which ethnic diversity does not mean either ethnic exclusivism or a castrating of culture.

And finally, the exilic theme of the new covenant Diaspora must make us aware that the church is a holy people. We are disciples of Jesus who are set aside

²³ In certain intellectual circles in Hungary that have strong nationalistic and anti-Semitic sentiments, there is a heretical view that Jesus was a Parthian prince and had no Jewish blood in him.

even from our national loyalties. This prevents us from unquestioningly serving national purposes that are not in harmony with the will of Christ. It is my conviction that when the church understands herself as a Diaspora in exile, she can avoid the mistakes that she too often committed in the last centuries. To use Karl Barth's expression, the Creator God must never be made the idol of a "tribal deity".