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The Mystery of Israel

A Reply to Dr. E. Flesseman-van Leer

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IN the last number of the *Journal* an article appeared under the title, "The Significance of the Mystery of Israel for the Church." The writer, Dr. E. Flesseman-van Leer, called for a Christian re-estimate of Jewry. Her challenge is so sharp that it cannot be allowed to go by default. It is one thing to demand that the past sins of the Church with respect to the Jews be repented of. It is quite another to demand a reparation that means revising Christian doctrines from their very foundations. Dr. Flesseman is aware that her views are not consistent with what the Church has taught through the ages. She says in regard to the Old Testament: "It has never been taken with sufficient seriousness by the Church from sub-Apostolic times" (p. 11). She is aware that what she is proposing amounts to a theological revolution: "For there is no theological doctrine which is not in some way affected by our understanding of Israel and the Old Testament. A decided reorientation in this respect is certainly due" (p. 12).

The exegetical foundations of Dr. Flesseman's position must first be laid bare. They are astonishing in their tenuousness.

1. Who are *now* elect Israel? Although believing that the Church is elect (p. 6), Dr. Flesseman's main purpose is to re-assert the continuing election of the Jews as such. ". . . Paul is absolutely certain that against all the appearances of his time, God did not, even in the moment of radical unbelief, cast away the people whom he had chosen from the beginning as His own (Rom. 11:2). Even in disobedience, they remain an elect people, 'for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance' (11:29)" (p. 8). But in simple fact, this is not what Paul says. He meets the suggestion that Israel's election had failed by denying it, "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. *For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel*" (9:6). It is not the case that "even in disobedience they remain an elect people," for the elect Jews are only those who have accepted Christ. The election of Israel has been fulfilled in the remnant who have become Christians (9:27). To be a Jew now means something different from what it meant before: "He is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, *in the spirit, and not in the letter*" (2:28f.). But Dr. Flesseman will have us believe that it is still a matter of the letter (p. 8). Taking up the question a second time, Paul gives the same answer (11:1-10). Israel, *true Israel*—pace Dr. Flesseman—has come to Christ. "What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; *but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded*" (11:7). This is Paul's main

point. It is an explicit statement that elect Israel is Israel within the Church, and it follows that the rest are not elect, as Paul does not hesitate also to say. Dr. Flesseman gravely mis-states the "problem with which Paul wrestled" when she describes it in the question, "How was it possible *after the Resurrection* for the Jews to reject Jesus as the Christ?" (p. 8). Paul plainly states that true Israel—represented in himself, the other Apostles, and hosts of others, who together are the remnant—*accepted* Christ after the Resurrection. It is mainly by omission of this vital element of Paul's teaching that Dr. Flesseman's position arises and that she is able to contemplate the possibility of an election of Israel that has not been radically affected by the Cross and the Resurrection. Yet it is very clear that for Paul and his associates the change is decisive, as he does not fail to show.

2. Paul teaches that the recusant Jews have been rejected. This statement may sound very harsh to a person nurtured on the notion of the "double decree," which tends to bedevil exegesis at this point. I Corinthians 9:27 is a good example of the impossibility of fitting Paul's thought into that system. Paul, an "elect" man, there speaks of his danger of "becoming reprobate." In Calvin's system, a man cannot change from the class of the "elect" to the class of the "reprobate." The one he belongs to is fixed long before he is born. Paul does not think in this way. For him, election is not a *character indelibilis*, as Dr. Flesseman would have it (p. 9). He asserts that God has never been bound by his election in such a way that every son of Abraham must be saved (9:6-18). By reason of his freedom God can indeed call men who are not sons of Abraham at all, except in the "spiritual" way of being men of faith (9:18, 24f.). Paul is in no way trammelled with the idea, now maintained by Dr. Flesseman, that the Gentiles have to be *added* to the Jews—and Jews "of the letter" at that!—nor would he have spoken derogatorily of them as being "permitted to join in" (p. 8). What happens is that Jews and Gentiles become a new man that the Jews themselves have never been before (Eph. 2:15). But if Jews remain Jews in the old sense they do not remain elect: "They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God" (Rom. 9:8). Paul hopes that they will not be for ever unbelieving, but what he sees before his eyes and taking place by the crisis of the apostolic preaching is the fulfilment of the Lord's saying: "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt. 21:43. Cf. 8:11f.). For this reason he solemnly shook his raiment in judgment against the Jews and said: "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles" (Acts 18:6. Cf. 13:46, 28:28). The elect cornerstone had become for them the stone of judgment (I Pet. 2:6ff., I Cor. 1:23).

The teaching in Romans is entirely of this order. Paul has no difficulty in speaking of them as having been cast off. "The election hath obtained it; but the rest were blinded" (11:7). Shortly after, he speaks of the "casting away" of the latter (v. 15, *apobolē*). God "spared not" the natural

branches (v. 21, ouk epheisato). God shows "severity" towards them (v. 22, apotomian). They are "enemies" for your sakes (v. 28, echthroi). It is very clear that the Jews as such have no election in themselves. If they are to be saved, they will have to be "grafted in again" (v. 23). Meantime they are "broken off" (v. 17). Not that the Gentiles may boast. It is not they who bear the root, but the root that bears them (v. 18). But now Paul is speaking of the *root*, so that no one will make the error of imagining that the broken-off branches bear the Gentiles. That "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (i.e. are irrevocable) guarantees nothing but God's faithfulness. It is a statement about him rather than about the Jews. He being what he is, their rejection does not necessarily represent their final state. They can be restored if they become Christians. Two things are evident. Firstly, the Jews outside the faithful remnant still have an undefined connection with grace through the fathers, the root (11:28). One must say *undefined* to emphasise the fact that there is nothing here like the Calvinistic doctrine of election. Secondly, they could remain permanently in unbelief. As Paul meditates upon the mysteries of Providence and the gracious things that have happened in connection with their very fall, his Christian speculations open up such a strong door of hope that he ends in a faith that all Israel will be saved. But this is a hope, not a dogma of election, and it can not be the basis of dogmatic, prophetic, or historico-philosophic inferences. The foundations upon which Dr. Flesseman would have us re-think our whole theology in a Jewish way are not to be found in Paul (pp. 10f.). He was the great resister of Judaizing in his day. Could he be regarded as favouring theological Judaizing?

3. So far we have considered Paul's answer to the first part of the question, What is the status of the Jews? It is that *vis-à-vis* the *elect* Church they are the *rejected* people. The second part of the question will be, How do the Jews stand in relation to unbelieving Gentiles? His answer is, "There is no difference" (Rom. 3:22, 10:12). Once more it is clear that to Paul rejection means no more—and no less—than it already means for sinful mankind in general. His whole aim in the opening chapters is to put Jew and Gentile on the same level as sinners. Similarly, when he later speaks of the hope of all Israel being saved, the possibility is conditional upon the salvation of all mankind (11:25, 31f.). Any thought of "election" for the Jews would carry universalism as a necessary corollary.

There appears to be a problem in Paul because he seems to affirm some kind of priority for the Jews in general and yet at the same time argues vigorously that there is no difference. The resolution of the apparent contradiction comes with seeing that the priority in grace is now matched with a priority in condemnation. Dr. Flesseman accepts the former but tries to obliterate the latter. A clear passage on this point is Rom. 2:9-11. While granting a priority to the Jews, he refers to it first as a priority in condemnation, and, while acknowledging a priority in reward, it is in order that on balance he may be able to say: "For there is no respect of persons with

God." His purpose is to deflate the Jewish boast (vv. 17, 25ff.). Circumcision makes no difference, because "true" circumcision is not a Jewish, fleshly matter, but a spiritual one (vv. 25ff.). Raising the question again, he comes to the same conclusion. The Jews have an advantage, "because that unto them were committed the oracles of God" (3:1f.). What, then, has their unbelief done? It has not made the faith of God of no effect (v. 3); it has exalted God's just judgment (vv. 5, 7); and thus their advantage has been taken away: "What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin" (v. 9; cf. 23). Paul's regular method is to reduce unbelieving Israel to the same position as unbelieving Gentiles: *Gentile religion* is an example of what the *Jews* did with their revelation (Rom. 1:23-5; cf. Ps. 106:19f.); the Jews with the Law are in the same position as the Gentiles without it (chs. 2, 3, esp. 2: 12, 15, 26ff.); if the Galatians adopt the Jewish Law, they will be relapsing into Gentile heathenism (Gal. 4:9). It is surely clear that Paul is squarely facing two facts: (a) In the historical economy of revelation, the Jews (i.e. the *fathers*) have or rather had an advantage. He had no desire to alter this fact: rather indeed he presses it upon the Gentiles (Rom. 11:18). (b) But he has a strenuous desire to insist that there is now no difference (Rom. 3:22, 10:12f.; Gal. 3:28f.; Col. 3:10f.). If the unelect Jews are to have salvation, they must accept it upon precisely the same terms as those upon which it comes to the Gentiles. "If ye be *Christ's*, then are ye *Abraham's seed*, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29. Cf. v. 7). The Jews' Jewishness means nothing. "There is neither Jew nor Greek" (3:28). In the degree to which the Gentiles try to be added to the Jews they will be departing from Christ (5:1ff.).

In view of Paul's very clear teaching it is impossible to accede to Dr. Flesseman's request: "Perhaps it would be wise to refrain from calling the Church by the names, 'the true Israel' or 'the spiritual Israel,' which are not biblical in any case" (p. 13). The phrases may not occur, but their connotation is cardinal to New Testament teaching, and not least to Paul's. The rich pregnancy of the term, *the Israel of God*, derives entirely from its *new* meaning (Gal. 6:16. Cf. Rom. 2:29; II Cor. 3:6). In the people of God, Jew and Gentile, both transformed, are equal. "Through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18). The access is direct for both. Christ has "abolished the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace"³ (v. 15).

What we have been discussing is part of the universal theme of the New Testament that the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ and his Church.¹ But Dr. Flesseman does not accept this decisive principle. "Even today it is generally assumed that the Old Testament is inferior in significance to the New. It is regarded as merely provisional and preparatory

1. An excellent summary statement of this principle, with references, will be found in C. H. Dodd, *The Bible Today*, p. 70.

revelation of which the New Testament is the fulfilment." She suggests that if we had the courage of Marcion and the gnostics, we would reject the Old Testament altogether, but on the grounds now that the ideas of the Old Testament are all more clear and recognizable in the New. "As if it were a question of ideas in Scripture!" (p. 11). But, of course, the reason why the Church has never rejected the Old Testament, while always maintaining in principle that the New Testament is superior to it, is that Christ has a special relation to God's revealing action in Israel. He came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, and we must know what he came to fulfil. But the New Testament is about the fulfilment, and is therefore necessarily superior, as the man is superior to the child. And what we have here is not only a matter of ideas made clearer. It is a matter of divine *action* in Israel, consummated in Christ, and now looking to the Perfect Day. It is curious that Dr. Flesseman has not noticed that she reduces christology to a matter of ideas. "Is not Jesus Christ and His cross the full and luminous disclosure of precisely that election of man of which Israel is sign and witness?" (p. 11). The logic of this is that the Jews—unbelieving Jews!—give us the same as Christ gives us, but he gives it more clearly. Here is the heart of the issue. We can not exalt the election of the Jews without diminishing the election of Christ.

The Christian must assert with all strenuousness that God has now no purpose or standing for the Jews save the purpose and standing that he has for all men, viz. that of bringing them to Christ; that this purpose and standing can be found only *through faith*; and that therefore there is no room for thinking of God's dealing with modern Jewry *as a whole* (p. 10). The Christian, if he is to retain his name, must loyally follow Christ and the New Testament in rejecting all "literalism" with respect to the Jews, and that means rejecting the whole sorry company of Zionists, Dispensationalists, British Israelites, *et hoc genus omne*. He must also reject the not-much-more refined literalism that weaves a speculative Christian philosophy of history upon the notion of a continuing election of the Jews. Least of all must he allow such imaginings to endanger *assured* truth.