

SALVATION IS OF THE JEWS

“Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews” (John iv. 22).

FREDERICK THE GREAT of Germany once asked his private doctor this question: “*Zimmermann, can you give me a single proof of the existence of God?*” And Dr. Zimmermann replied: “*Your Majesty, the Jews!*”¹

That is astonishing. By all the laws of geography and history and ethnography that tiny nation ought to have been swallowed up in the ocean of humanity and to have utterly disappeared along with the Amalekites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Hivites, and all the other little peoples of those ancient days. But the stubborn persistence of the Jews in history in spite of all is incontestable witness to the Truth of the living God as we have it in the Bible.

That is the point of our text. The Jews were a constant thorn in the flesh to the Samaritans, and yet Jesus says quite bluntly that the knowledge of God and the Jews are bound up together, and apart from the Jews all knowledge of God is pure imagination. “Ye worship ye know not what. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.”

There can be no doubt that the Jew is God’s great mystery in the world—not mystery in the sense of an absolutely closed secret, but a mystery that keeps on disclosing the wonderful secrets of God’s providence in the world. The stubborn persistence of the Jews is an act of God, for God deliberately sets the Jew before us even to-day in order to teach us something that we cannot learn in any other way.

I. THE JEWS ARE GOD’S INSTRUMENT OF REVELATION

The Jew has been specially singled out and fashioned by God in mind and soul and even in language to know God, and to be the supreme instrument through which God reveals Himself to us all.

Look at it like this. If you are to make a thing, you must have tools with which to make it and give it shape. If you are

¹ Cf. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, pp. 72 ff.

to understand a thing, you must have tools with which to grasp it and shape the knowledge of it in your mind. Those tools of your mind are ideas, and thoughts and categories, and truths. But what tools have you got for knowing God? What are your mental instruments for shaping the knowledge of God in your souls? Even suppose you were to look upon God, how could you recognise Him and interpret Him? Would you not pass Him by as a stranger? Or would He not be quite invisible and incomprehensible? How is it possible for a mere human being to know the infinite and eternal God who far surpasses all our feeble human capacities?

What has God done about that? The answer to that question is to be found in the Old Testament, in the long story of the Jews. What God did was this: He selected one race from all the races of men, one of the very smallest, and, as Moses said, the most beggarly and contemptible of all races, in order to make that race into the very instrument of God's purpose to reveal Himself to all men, and to save mankind.

And so the Jews were chosen to be fashioned by God. But this is the constant marvel of the whole story: all through history, as the Old Testament tells us, the Jews were the most stubborn and stiff-necked people you could imagine. They disobeyed God at every great moment in God's purpose. They knew well they were chosen by God for the special purpose of salvation, yet all through their history they fought against Him. They stoned and abused His messengers. They killed the prophets. They contradicted God to His face, and resisted Him, proving themselves utterly unworthy of His love, and broke themselves again and again upon the Word of God so that they were smitten down in suffering and agony and judgment. And yet God's purpose of love remained and He refused to be rebuffed or thwarted. In fact, says Jesus, had any other nation been chosen, the people of Nineveh, for instance, or even those terrible people from Sodom and Gomorrah, they would have repented in dust and ashes long ago—but the Jews, it seems, were chosen in spite of all and because of their very nature as so unworthy.

And what did God do in the face of all that? He took this stubborn and rebellious people, took them with all their recalcitrance and resistance to His love, and subjected them to ordeal by history and judgment. He used their very stubbornness and the judgment they brought upon themselves in order to train

them. By elaborate religious ritual and carefully framed laws, by rivers of blood from millions of animal sacrifices, by the broken hearts of Psalmists and the profoundest agony of the Prophets, by the tragic story of Israelite politics, and the shattering of their power again and again, God taught the Jews through hundreds and hundreds of years until the truth was imprinted upon their conscience and there was burned into their soul the meaning of holiness and righteousness, of sin and uncleanness, of love and mercy and grace, of faithfulness and forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, atonement, and salvation; the meaning of creation, of the Kingdom of God, of judgment, death, and at last resurrection; the thought of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and yet the Prophet, Priest and King. And then at long last in the fullness of time when God had prepared in the heart and soul and religion of Israel a womb for the birth of Jesus, a cradle for the babe of Bethlehem, the Saviour of the world was born, the very Son of God—born right in the midst of Israel and all its suffering contradiction of God, and yet right in the midst of the Old Testament faith. And there were actually some who when they saw Him knew that He was the Son of God come in the flesh—Anna, and Simeon, and John the Baptist, and one after another the Twelve Disciples and many others who acknowledged that He was the Christ, the Son of God. But this is also clear, that many of the Jews, even of the rulers and priests, knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet wilfully blinded themselves because He was not the kind of Messiah they wanted. And so to the very last they resisted the purpose of God's wonderful love, and actually crucified the Christ. But throughout all that the faithfulness and love of God never wavered, and even the crucifixion of Jesus, which gathered up into itself all the tragic story of the Jews, was used as the mightiest instrument of all and the supreme revelation of God's eternal love. Through Israel and through Calvary Jesus was launched upon the world as the Saviour of all. "Salvation is of the Jews!"

That is the first thing we learn from our text. The knowledge of God and the Jews are bound up together, so that when God came into this world He came as a Jew. And to this very day Jesus remains a Jew while still the eternal Son of God. It is still through the Jewish story, through the Jewish soul shaped by the hand of God, through the Jewish Scriptures of

the Old Testament, through the Jewish Scriptures of the New Testament Church, that the Gospel comes to us, and that Jesus Christ is set before us face to face as Lord and Saviour. Apart from the Biblical revelation we would not have the tools to grasp the knowledge of God; apart from the long history of the Jews we would not be able to recognise Jesus as the Son of God; apart from the suffering and agony of Israel we could not understand the Cross of Calvary as God's instrument to atone for sin and to enact once and for all His Word of love and pardon and grace. Apart from the context of Israel we could not even begin to understand the bewildering miracle of Jesus. The supreme instrument of God in the salvation of the world is Israel, and out of the womb of Israel, *Jesus*—the Jew from Nazareth.

II. THE JEWS ARE GOD'S WITNESS TO-DAY

Now that Jesus Christ has come, and the Gospel has been proclaimed, and the Christian faith launched into the world, *why should the Jews continue to exist?* Why is it that against all the laws of geography, history, and ethnography, when Jerusalem was so utterly destroyed in A.D. 70 and the Jews scattered over the face of the earth, that the Jews are still distinct and stand out everywhere as members of a race that cannot be absorbed and cannot disappear into the sea of the nations? Because God has still a purpose with the Jews. Because in His infinite mercy God still uses the Jew to bear witness to Him, incontestable witness. *What is the witness of the Jew?*

(a) Undoubtedly he bears witness to *the judgment and mercy of God*. Here is a people specially chosen by God, and loved, carefully nurtured and prepared, wonderfully trained and taught, and at length given the priceless privilege of bearing forth the very Son of God. But here is a people who resist God, who try the patience of God, and at last even crucify the Son of God after heaping abuse and ignominy upon Him. Does God cast off His ancient people? Does God say: "I will have done with the Jews, and cast them off for ever?" Not a bit of it! To be sure Israel is judged, scattered abroad and condemned like Cain to wander over the face of the earth. But God will not let go of the Jews. It is the miracle of all historical miracles that the Jews still exist as Jews, bearing incontestable witness to the mercy of a God who keeps His

Word. The covenant made ages and ages back in history with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not forgotten. Whatever the Jew does, even if He strikes God in the face, God will keep His Word of mercy and love. What a witness the Jew bears to you and to me to-day—a message of amazing grace, of an incredible love that will not let us go!

(b) But more than that. The Jew has a witness to bear about *how we are to know God, and how to understand Jesus Christ*. The Jew may not be a willing witness, but he is a witness of God in spite of himself. Take the Gospel of Jesus Christ, take Christianity and transplant it from Jewish soil, pull it up from its roots in the historical purpose of God, and what happens to it? It loses all its fibre. It becomes corrupted and impotent, and darkness settles in upon the earth.

Think of *Roman Catholicism*, for example. Roman Catholicism stands for the phenomenon of a Christianity torn up from its Jewish soil and planted in an alien setting, until a Latin conception of God takes the place of the Biblical one; and the Roman Church sits astride upon the earth as the pompous patron of the Man of Calvary. No wonder there was a tremendous recoil from this Latin version of Christianity as the patron rather than the servant of Jesus Christ. And that is the story of Luther, and Calvin, and John Knox, and the whole of the Reformation—the rediscovery of the God who keeps His gracious Word with sinners, and freely forgives all who come to Him, the living God of the Bible.

Or think for a moment of *Nazi Germany*. There you have the stupendous attempt of a people to detach themselves from the Jew, to tear up the bonds forged at the Reformation, bonds of attachment to the Biblical God and the Biblical Messiah. And what do you get? A return to Baal and Moloch, a return to the gods of nature and war. Throw off the yoke of a Biblical Christianity and cut yourself adrift from the witness of the Jew, and there can only be a return to the ruthless gods of nature and the darkness of paganism.

Once again, take *Soviet Russia*. What do we have there but an attempt to take the great social message of the Prophets, to detach it from the weakness and impotence of Israel, to separate the social good of mankind from the Cross of Jesus Christ, and to work it out on a purely scientific basis? And all the world knows that such a road leads only to a wicked and

ruthless tyranny in which the social good of all is prostituted to the utter enslavement of men in body and soul.

But now take *the Christian Church in Britain*. For the last hundred years there has been a progressive attempt to detach the Gospel from the Old Testament, to transplant Christianity into the soil of nature—and what is the result? It is the dissolution of Christianity into philosophy, the evaporation of faith into a vague idealism, and into humanism. And we too have learned the art of patronising Jesus Christ, offering to Him but a moderate rational homage, and indulging in a pale watered-down Gospel to suit our own convenience—the British version of Christianity in which God is tamed and domesticated into a nice plastic ideal

Well may people cry again to-day: Where is the God of Elijah? Where is the God who intervenes in history, the Mighty to save—the God who can heal the hurt of His people and set their life on a wholly new basis? Where is the living God who comes in Jesus Christ and encounters us face to face, who can speak a Word to the wounded conscience and pluck us out of the very jaws of death? That is the God of the Bible—and thank God we are rediscovering the Bible again to-day. And one of the most potent influences in this direction is Martin Buber, a Jew of the Jews. Out of the very heart of Israel comes a voice calling us back from our abstract and impersonal philosophy to the Biblical way of knowledge, to a personal God who encounters us face to face in His Word. It is one of the great signs of the times that now that the Old Testament is being understood once more the Gospel of the New Testament is being allowed to exert again its marvellous power over us.

(c) But there is still something further that the Jew has to say to us to-day—and this is the most significant of all. The Jew bears witness to the *contempt and antagonism of the human heart to God*.

Think for a moment of that haunting piece of ritual from the Old Testament worship on the great Day of Atonement. Once a year the whole nation assembled before God, and two goats were taken for sacrifice. One was slaughtered upon the altar and its blood sprinkled on the ground and on the mercy-seat of God. The other was designed as a living sacrifice, and after the sins of the people were confessed and laid, as it were, on the head of the goat by the hands of the High Priest, that

goat was taken away from all contact with man, away out into the wilderness and released as an unclean thing. How much Israel learned from that extraordinary rite! Both sacrifices, the sacrifice of blood and the living sacrifice, pointed beyond themselves! By means of them the early Church understood something of the meaning of Calvary where Jesus gathered up all the meaning of Israel and fulfilled the purpose of God's love. Jesus died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and rose again, *but it still remains a fact that He is the despised and rejected of men.*

Look back upon the history of the world since Calvary and you can see that twofold meaning of the Cross unfolding itself among men. *The Christian Church* goes out into history as the suffering servant filling up that which is behind, as St. Paul said, of the sufferings of Christ. And that is where the Christ is to be found, He who forgives sins, who heals sinners, and who raises the dead—in the heart of the Christian Church and her Gospel message. But what of the Jew? What role does he play? *The Jew is become the scape-goat of the whole world.* You will find him in all the ghettos of Europe segregated as an unclean thing from the rest of mankind—the despised and rejected of men, the butt of their taunts, the scape-goat for all their ills. Nowhere has that come more clearly to light than in Hitler's Germany where the direst troubles were laid upon the heads of the poor Jews. And who shall declare their generation, for they were cut off out of the land of the living?

All that is used in God's wonderful purpose. Let us not forget that Jesus was a Jew, and that the Jew is still God's servant and witness, for he is still bound up with the divine Providence in history. No doubt the Jew stands now behind the shadow of the Cross, and it is in that very shadow that he is given continued existence in our modern world. The Jews are there to remind us that the Jew of Calvary is still the despised and rejected of men. They bear witness to a deep resentment in the human heart to the ways of God. As long as the Jew exists among us God will use the witness of the Jew to stab our hearts awake to the meaning of the Cross. He who despises the Jew despises Jesus. He who bears in his heart contempt for Israel is only making the Jew a scape-goat for his contempt of God.

And so the meaning of the Cross is unfolded to the world

by two lines of witness. On the resurrection side of the Cross there is the Christian Church which speaks of new life, a new humanity, and a new heaven and a new earth. On the shadow side of the Cross there is the Jewish Synagogue bearing mute and unwilling witness to the antagonism of man to God. And it takes both together to enable us to grasp fully the Gospel of the Old and New Testaments, the wonderful ways of God.

III. THE JEWS ARE GOD'S FINGER-POST POINTING TO THE FUTURE

The Jews are not only the one incontestable piece of evidence for the existence of God, they give us the only clue to history and the salvation of the world. When Jesus says in our text "Salvation is of the Jews", that has a decidedly future reference.

God's whole purpose in history is bound up with the Jew, and if the Jew still persists to-day, then it is by watching the Jew that we can discover any sign of what God will do in the chaotic story of our times.

The *Christian Church* is our only clue to the knowledge of the Saviour, for it alone bears the Gospel of grace and atonement and salvation and eternal life. The words of Jesus still remain true: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, *there am I in the midst of them.*" That is the place to meet with the living Lord, however small and feeble the company may be—in the Christian Church.

The *Jews* supply us with our only clue to history. Have you never wondered whether we are not all heading for another great war, more terrible than ever before, the complete devastation of civilisation and all mankind? What is going to happen? Will God not do anything? *Watch the Jews!*

Think for a moment again of poor wretched Germany. Never in history was there such an out and out attack upon the Jews, such a determination carried out with scientific ruthlessness to destroy Israel. But Germany had to fail. The Nazi régime had to crash, because the attack upon the Jew was as an attack upon the purpose of God. All the might of Germany, spiritually speaking, shattered itself upon the rock of God's purpose in history, upon the weakness and helplessness of the Jews, for the weakness of God is stronger than men.

What a parable for us! He who attacks the Jew has to deal with God Almighty. He who harbours in his heart any spirit of anti-Semitism harbours in his heart the spirit of anti-Christ, for it all entails resentment against the Jew called Jesus. The Jew stands upon the eternal purpose of God, and his survival in the crash of the Nazi régime is incontestable witness to the fact that God's purpose of salvation still lays hold of our world—even when it runs amok—and will not let go until the great purpose of redemption is fulfilled.

But what has the Jew to tell us to-day about the future? Look at the signs of the times—and there are two of them, each of tremendous significance: (1) the extermination of more than six million Jews in the last fifteen years; (2) the incredible fact that the Jews are back again in Palestine with their own state, for the first time in ages and ages of history. Never since A.D. 34, when Jesus was crucified, and since A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed, has God given two such signs in the world. Once again the Jew stands out in history as God's finger pointing to the future. What does he say to us? Surely this: that God is about to act in history, about to do a tremendous thing! **The Jew** does not, and cannot, tell us *what* God will do. We can never anticipate God. When He acts, He always takes us by surprise in a breathtaking event. But the Jew does tell us that God will act, and act in history, act among the nations. When you see the signs of the times, said Jesus, pointing to the Jews, then get ready. Trim your lamps. Gird up your loins. Watch and pray, for your redemption draws nigh. That is God's message to us in this day of grace, sent to us by the Jew: *Salvation is at the door!*

In one of the last books of the Bible we have a strange prophecy that is actually being fulfilled to-day. Listen to the words of Zechariah: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: In those days shall it come to pass that ten men shall take hold, out of all the languages of the nations, shall even take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying: We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." That is being fulfilled literally in parts of the world to-day, for the Jew stands out before men as the miracle of God in history, as the sign of God's salvation.

Where is the skirt of the Jew to be found but in the Bible—in the Old and New Testaments? We may well ask: where is the God of Elijah to-day? Let him who asks that question

first take hold of the mantle of the prophets, and then let him call upon the living God, the God of history, the God who has revealed Himself in the long story of Israel, the God who has come Himself in Jesus Christ. Let us return again to the Biblical message with all its historic realism and belief in a God who intervenes in the lives of men, and is ready to save the world. He who despises and resists the Biblical message will become shipwreck upon the rock of God's inviolable Word. He who despises the Jew will only destroy himself. But he who returns to the Jew called Jesus, and finds in Him the Incarnate Love of God, and very God of very God, even he will be saved.

What about you and me? Do we not sometimes catch ourselves participating in the anti-Semitic spirit, saying things and thinking things about the Jew? Then let the Jew, even with the unworthy characteristics so manifest in Palestine to-day, stab us awake to remember the Jew of Calvary—for that is the story of God and the human heart, your heart and my heart too. *Let the offence of the Jew point to the offence of the Cross.* Not only does God use the Jew as incontestable evidence of His activity in history, but God uses the offence of the Jew to lay His finger upon the very point where we are offended *at Him* and where the great decision must be made. If you find the Jew irritating you, that is an unmistakable sign that God is pressing you to the point of ultimate decision and unreserved surrender to His love. But if in that mortal hour you are at last broken down at the Cross and overwhelmed with shame at the enmity and treachery of your own heart, and cannot believe that God should love you still, then remember this: if God still keeps covenant with the Jew, even though he has done unbelievable despite to His love, *God will not break His Word to you.* It is sealed forever in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: "*Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out*"!

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