

An Israelite in whom
there is no Guile:
An Interpretative Note
on John 1:45-51
By L. Paul Trudinger

Professor Trudinger has contributed a number of helpful exegetical notes to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, and we are glad to publish this fresh study of a difficult passage.

The oddness of Nathanael's reply to Jesus' greeting provides us with a starting point in our consideration of this passage, and perhaps also with a pertinent clue to its interpretation. When Jesus, seeing Nathanael approaching, says, 'Look, here's an Israelite with nothing false about him!', Nathanael answers, 'How do you know me?' What are we to make of this rejoinder? Surely it cannot be merely a somewhat self-conceited 'Yes, I am, aren't I!' Jesus' further response is, on the surface, just as perplexing: 'When you were sitting under the fig tree I saw you!' What is it that Jesus 'knows' about Nathanael that startles him when Jesus first greets him in the way he does?

It is easy to miss in the English translation (and, for that matter, in the Greek of John) the probable word-play originally involved in Jesus' greeting. Its thrust is lost until we recall that the name Jacob, in the traditional story of Jacob and Esau, had become virtually a synonym for 'deceit'. In Genesis 27:36, Esau laments: 'Has he not rightly been called Jacob, because he has cheated me these two times?' This very same deceitful Jacob, however, is a key figure in God's plan for humankind's salvation and later in the story is re-named 'Israel' by God. Jesus' greeting could thus be expressed, 'Look, Israel without a trace of Jacob left in him!' It is *this* that startles Nathanael who, I suggest, was a devout and sincere Jew (historically as an individual, if you will, but perhaps functioning in John as a representative figure), who spent much time in the privacy of his own thoughts and reflections (the surface meaning, perhaps, of 'under the fig tree') meditating upon his race, its patriarchs, and the promises God had made to them about the coming salvation. I suggest further that the character of Jacob was somewhat of an embarrassment and a perplexity to many a devout Jew. How was it possible that God should work his will through such morally dubious persons? Why should such a deceiver as Jacob be the recipient of such blessings and of such a revelation as he had at Bethel, with the attendant promises made to him on that occasion (Gen. 28:12-16).

Nathanael and other devout Jews like him (as, for example, Simeon in Luke 2:25ff.) who were waiting for the 'consolation of Israel', must often have pondered over the wonder of God's ways in human history.

How could Israel's salvation be revealed while so much of the old 'Jacob' was still evident in the nation's life? One of John's aims seems to be to convey the sense that Jesus had a sensitivity, a psychic insight that made him fully aware of what was going on in Nathanael's innermost thoughts and longings concerning Israel's salvation. 'How do you know me?', Nathanael says with surprise! Jesus replies, 'When you were under the fig tree I saw you.' Again, John is using a multi-faceted, many-splendoured metaphor. At its most obvious level, 'under one's fig tree' meant being at home,¹ with one's own thoughts. On a deeper level of meaning, however, 'under the fig tree' may mean 'when the fulfilment of Israel's history is revealed', that is, when Messiah comes. For not only is the fig tree a symbol for Israel, but as the Synoptic references to it indicate,² it is spoken of with reference to Israel's fruitfulness in the New Age. The prophet Micah also so describes Israel in the day of salvation, when every man beneath his vine and fig tree shall live in peace.³ A further meaning of the phrase, quite possibly known to John, and if so most applicable to Jesus' encounter with Nathanael, is set forth in the later rabbinical literature, where 'under the fig tree' is the recommended place for the devout Jew to study the Torah.⁴ We should keep all of this in mind, since John shows a special penchant for words and phrases with multi-faceted, polyvalent meanings. But to return to our central theme.

Nathanael, we suggest, is contemplating the fulfilment of Israel's history and thinking in particular about the patriarch Jacob who was privileged to be brought to the very gate of heaven.⁵ We have suggested further that Nathanael is reflecting upon the fact that when Messiah does come he will lead Israel into the kingdom of heaven, but that Israel would need to be cleansed of every trace of deceit (Jacob) before Messiah could appear. Israel would 'see God' (another word-play on the name 'Israel' likely to be known to John)⁶, when she is 'pure in heart', without guile.⁷ Nathanael could only think of Messiah in glorious, grand terms. That is why he was so scornful when Philip announced that he had found the Messiah and that he was none other than Jesus of Nazareth! What? How could God do this to Israel? How could some in-

¹ As, for example, in 1 Kings 4:25.

² See Luke 13:6-9; Matthew 21:14ff.

³ Micah 4:4.

⁴ Thus Rabbi Aqiba in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:15.

⁵ Genesis 28:17.

⁶ Erroneously construing 'Israel' as 'the man who sees God'. Thus Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum*, 81.

⁷ Cf. Matthew 5:8.

significant, out-of-the-way village in Galilee be the locale of God's glorious fulfilment of Israel's history? 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'

As the dialogue progresses, however, Nathanael becomes convinced of Jesus' Messiahship and confesses him to be 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel'. The ground for this conviction appears to lie in the fact of Jesus' insight into Nathanael's deepest thoughts: 'Because I said, "I saw you under the fig tree" you believe, do you?' (John 1:50). Indeed, 'knowing the thoughts of men' was considered to be one of the expected accomplishments of the ideal King.⁸ Jesus, however, will not let Nathanael go off with such an understanding of the grounds of his (Jesus') Messiahship. Here John brings his point home with subtlety but with great force as Jesus, in the final words of the encounter, takes up the Jacob theme again. Jesus' Messiahship will be demonstrated by his death on the Cross; this in John is Jesus' 'hour' of 'glory'. The Jacob story will be played out in Messiah's culminating work. The heavens will be opened and the angels will once again ascend and descend, as in the ancient Jacob saga, but this time upon the Messiah. The ladder (and let us recall that the ladder was a Roman instrument of torture), the link between heaven and earth is now the Cross. The old folk carol expresses it most beautifully:

Alleluia to Jesus who died on the tree,
And has raised up a ladder of mercy for me.⁹

John repeatedly uses such phrases as Jesus' being 'lifted up', his 'hour', his 'being glorified', when speaking of Jesus' death. It was 'when he had overcome the sharpness of death' that he 'opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers', as the *Te Deum* firmly asserts. It was when he died that the veil of the temple was rent and the way opened for all into God's presence.¹⁰ One of the later rabbinical midrashim on the story of Jacob's dream (Gen. 28:12-13), that of Rabbi Yannai found in the *Genesis Rabbah* 68:18 and 69:3, which may embody a tradition known to John, speaks of the angels descending onto Jacob to awaken the true Israel within him. By his death on the Cross Jesus cleanses Israel of its guile, for here indeed is 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world',¹¹ and by thus 'overcoming the sharpness of death' Jesus is raised to newness of life and humanity is awakened to life eternal.

⁸ As in Wisdom 7:20.

⁹ 'Jacob's Ladder', No. 170 in *University Carol Book* (Brighton: H. Freeman and Co., 1961).

¹⁰ Luke 23:45.

¹¹ John 1:29.

That Messiah should bring humankind into the New Age through his death, sent to the Cross on a charge of blasphemy, would doubtless be even more bewildering to the devout Jew, Nathanael, than the fact of God's covenantal blessings being channelled through cheating Jacob, or the fact of Messiah coming out of Nazareth. John portrays Jesus as seeing into this uneasiness of mind and startling Nathanael by confronting him with the scandal of the Cross. Belief in Jesus as Messiah requires of us that we identify with the Cross, a theme or motif which John, I suggest, emphasizes subtly throughout his Gospel.¹²

¹² See, for example, John 20:27-28.