

The Church according to the Prophetic Tradition†

A. MARIASELVAM*

Historically the prophetic movement coincides with the emergence of Israel as a nation. Prophetism however outlived Israel's nationhood. But the idea of a community dear to God and worthy of his protection is anterior to both: cf. Gen. 18:16-33. Even before it became a nation, Israel, already as a run-away gang of slaves, was dear to Yahweh and was his peculiar possession: cf. Exod. 19:5-6. The prophetic tradition takes up these trends and develops the notion of a community relating itself positively to Yahweh, which will be later called in the New Testament the Church.

Nationhood and Prophetism

In the prophetic tradition, the two aspects of a healthy tension are seen with regard to the Nation of Israel, namely, reproach when it goes astray, but encouragement with promise when it is faithful to Yahweh. Appeal for conversion and promise of forgiveness are characteristic of the corrective sayings of the prophets to the straying nation. The prophets, as the conscience of Israel, condemned in the name of God Israel's infidelities (Am. 2:6-8; 3:2-11; 4:1-3), appealed for conversion (Am. 5:4-7; 14-15), and promised forgiveness (Am. 7:1-6). Such threats and promises were pronounced by almost all the pre-exilic prophets both in the North and in the South (Am. 4:11; 5:14-15; Hos. 4:1-3; 9:1ff.; Isa. 1:4ff.; 5:3-29; Mic. 2:12-13; 4:1-7). The promises were concerned with forgiveness (Am. 7:1-6; Hos. 2:14-15, 21-23; 5:15-6:3; esp. 14:1-7), with the New Covenant (Hos. 2:18 ff.; Jer. 31:31-34; 32:38-40; Ezek. 11:19; 18: 30-32), with the New Spirit and with the ingathering of all the scattered (Ezek. 36:24-28; 37:11-14 etc.).

Positive Aspects of the Prophetic Tradition on the Church

A. Terminology

Qahal is the Hebrew word which is translated almost consistently (about a hundred times) by the Greek term *ekklesia* in the LXX.

† Though the title might seem anachronistic and a title like "The Community of Israel according to the Prophetic Tradition" might be better, the present title was chosen simply because of the thematic discussion for which the paper was originally prepared.

* Fr Mariaselvam lectures in Old Testament at Sacred Heart Seminary, Poonamallee, Madras.

“The basic meaning of both words is a meeting or gathering . . . It is the people and the purpose which give significance to the *qahal*.”¹ The designation *qahal* does not occur in the prophetic writings as a technical term for the assembly of Yahweh. In Joel, the term designates the assembly convoked for the penitential liturgy (1:14; 2:15-16). Twice the term occurs in reference to cultic abuses (Isa. 1:13; Am. 5:21). Otherwise almost all the instances are connected with the threats of the prophets (Mic. 2:5), or with the promise of restoration (Mic. 2:12-13; Isa. 11:10-16; 56:8, Jer. 30:18-22; 31:7-9; Ezek. 11:17-20; Zeph. 2:1-3; 3:8-10).

B. Images and Figures

Vatican Two recognizes that the inner nature of the Church has been “made known to us through various images. Drawn from pastoral life, agriculture, building and even from family and married life, these images served a preparatory role in the writings of the prophets.”² Paul S. Minear has collected³ some 96 analogies or images which refer in one way or other to the Church. He classifies them into minor (32 of them) and major (the rest of them) images. Among the major ones, the author traces about twenty images “that gravitate around the conception of the Church as the people of God.”⁴ Among those twenty more important images, the following ones are taken up for consideration because they are mutually connected, and explain and enrich each other’s significance.

(1) Israel

Israel is the proper designation of the people of God. The name Israel contains in itself the analogy of king and subject. For it is “one of the names built out of a clause. The theophoric element *’el* is the subject, and the verbal predicate is the imperfect of a verb *’arah*, which probably means ‘to rule,’ i.e., ‘God rules.’”⁵ Originally Israel was the name of the union of the twelve tribes and implied at once membership of a nation and of a religion. It became then “the sacral name for those chosen by Yahweh and united in his worship.”⁶

Although in the divided monarchy, Israel meant the northern kingdom, after the fall of Samaria in 722, “the name Israel is transferred to the remaining southern Kingdom and is again a term used

¹ P. S. Minear, “Church, Idea of,” *IDB*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, Vol. I, p. 608.

² *Lumen Gentium*, No. 6.

³ P. S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975^a, pp. 268f.

⁴ *Idem.*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁵ G. von Rad, “Israel,” in *TDNT*, (trans. G. W. Bromiley), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1966, Vol. III, p. 356.

⁶ Hans Küng, *The Church*, (trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden), Sheed and Ward, New York, 1967, p. 114.

to describe the whole nation: a term which is now no longer primarily of political significance, but a religious description which the chosen people of God applied to itself, although now as before only those who were members by race formed part of this empirical nation."⁷ This usage seems to have been started by the prophets Isaiah and Micah (Isa. 5:7; 8:18; Mic. 2:12; 3:1, 8-9; 4:14; 5:1). So also the name Jacob for the people of God as such (Mic. 2:7; 3:1, 8-9; 5:6; Nah. 2:3; Isa. 2:5-6; 29:22).⁸

In the post-exilic prophets, however, "Israel increasingly becomes the object of a hope that God will perform an eschatological act of salvation (cf. Isa. 49:3; 56:8; 66:20; Joel 2:27; 4:2, 16; Obad. 20; Zech. 12:1), sometimes in the form of a reconstitution of the twelve tribes (cf. Ezek. 47:13-48:29; Isa. 49:5f.)."⁹

(2) *People of God*

Closely connected with the designation Israel is the phrase "people of God." The Hebrew word *'am* has become almost a technical term in the prophetic writings. The LXX translates it fairly regularly by *laos* and denotes people "in the sense of nation and national community. . ."¹⁰ "The concept of the people of God is at the heart of Judaism. Fundamentally the whole faith of Judaism can be summed up in the single phrase: Yahweh is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of Yahweh (Exod. 6:6f.; 19:5f.; Lev. 26:9, 11-12)."¹¹ This theme of Israel as the people of God appears in various forms and in different contexts but always as one of the central ideas in the writings of the prophets.¹² The idea that Israel is the people of God becomes a theme of promise and consolation when Israel returns to God (Jer. 31:31-34).¹³

When nationhood was annihilated by the catastrophe of 587 B.C., this theme received an eschatological perspective in the prophetic message. A new intervention from Yahweh—similar to the one which made Israel first a people at Exodus—is expected with eagerness and hope. Such a hope is in direct proportion to the misery of the shattered nation (Ezek. 11:19-20: cf. 14:11; 36:28; Jer. 7:23; 24:7; 30:22; 32:37-40). "Yahweh *will* once again be Israel's God, Israel *will* once again be Yahweh's people" (cf. Hos. 1:10; Isa. 61:6; Joel 2:28-32; Jer. 4:4; 9:24f.).¹⁴ "The metaphor of a 'flock' is often tied up

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸ Cf. von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 357f.; cf. also note 12.

⁹ Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 358 and notes 17 and 18; cf. H. Küng, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

¹⁰ H. Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

in the Old Testament with the concept of a 'people.'¹⁵ See Isa. 40:11; Jer. 13:17; 24:1-4; 31:10; Ezek. 34; Mic. 7:14; Zech. 10:2f.

(3) *Covenanted People*

Another theme that is consequent upon the idea of the people of God is that of "Covenanted-People." The phrase "people of God" indicates mutual belonging and relationship. The aspect of mutual belonging is well expressed by the image "the Bride or Betrothed of Yahweh" (cf. Hos. 1-3; Jer. 2:1-3, 20-25, 32; 3:12f.; 9:1; 31: 1-6; Ezek. 16; 23:4; Isa. 49:18; 50:1; 54:5f.; 61:10; 62:4f.). The aspects of election and relationship, expressed in terms of begetting and bringing up, are seen in the "Father-Son" image (Hos. 11:1; Isa. 1:2; 30:1; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 14; Mal. 1:16).¹⁶ For these aspects of mutual belonging and relationship, the covenant of God is the basis. "God and his people belong together, linked by that covenant which God in his free and powerful mercy has made with this small, insignificant, weak and sinful people: a covenant that is more than a contract, that means a way of life of a community."¹⁷ Like the other themes, the theme of covenant-people is also used in threats and punishments (cf. Hos. 1:9). Again the prophets promise a new covenant—a universal covenant of redemption in the promised Messiah (Isa. 42:6; cf. 2:2f.; 19:19-25; 49:6f.; 52:13-53:12; Hos. 2:16-23; esp. Jer. 31:31-34; 32:37-44; 33:10-26).¹⁸

The most important text on this theme of new-covenant-people is the prophecy of Jeremiah, 31:31-34, whose content has been deepened through successive re-readings. This Jeremiah passage has remained a permanent indicator of the partial fulfilment of the promise in post-exilic Judaism and of the expectation for the real fulfilment in the economy founded by Jesus.¹⁹

(4) *Vineyard of Yahweh*

The people of Israel is compared also to a vineyard or a vine (Hos. 10:1; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-3; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 15:2-6; 19:10). God's active deeds of election and special providence, His expectation of fruit and Israel's lack of response are very well brought out under

¹⁵ Viktor Warnach, "Church" in *Bauer Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer, Sheed and Ward, London-Sydney, 1970, Vol. I, p. 103.

¹⁶ All these images or analogies and metaphors can be divided into two groups according to the point of view which prevails in each: namely, those referring to the Church as redeemed community or as mystery: Viktor Warnach, *op. cit.* p. 106.

¹⁷ H. Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Golm O'Grady, MSG, *The Church in Catholic Theology, Dialogue with Karl Barth*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970, p. 94.

¹⁹ J. Coppens, "The Church, the New Covenant of God with His People," in *The Birth of the Church, A Biblical Study*, ed. J. Giblet, (trans. Charles Underhill Quinn), Society of St. Paul, New York, 1968, p. 24.

this image in Isaiah 5:1-7. Disappointment, threats and punishment follow Israel's lack of response.

(5) *Remnant*

Of all the images perhaps the most important and significant one is that of the Remnant of Yahweh. *She'ar* and *she'erith* are technical terms in the prophets. "These two words are used to denote a remnant which escapes death when a company or group of men is scattered or massacred (Deut. 7:20; Josh. 23:4, 7, 12; 2 Kings 10:11, 17; 25:11; Lev. 26:36-39; Ezek. 36:36; etc.)."²⁰ After studying solely the evidence of the terms used to refer to it, Roland de Vaux concludes that "the Remnant is that part of the Chosen People which is spared after God's chastisement. The very fact that there is a Remnant implies mercy and a promise, and is a justification for yet other hopes."²¹

The faithful Remnant in all its stages stands as a witness to the mercy of Yahweh. Salvation is not accorded indiscriminately, nor collectively even for a remnant. Only those who live according to the Law will be saved, and the few righteous people making up the Remnant will save only themselves (cf. Ezek. 14:12-20).²²

The conversion to Yahweh of those who are saved from the corporate doom "sets them apart from other men and consecrates them to God; to put it briefly, in the language of the Old Testament, it sets them in a state of holiness (see Isa. 4:3) . . . the election and the consecration formerly resting on Abraham and his children are renewed but restricted henceforth to the Remnant. It is the new Israel."²³ Isaiah appears to envisage a saved or even saving Remnant: cf. 10:20-23.²⁴ The Remnant will consequently become the heir to the promises originally made to the whole nation (Isa. 28:5; 4:2; Mic. 5:6-7; 4:7; Isa. 37:31).²⁵

²⁰ Roland de Vaux, OP, "The 'Remnant of Israel' According to the Prophets," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, (trans. Damian McHugh), London, 1972, p. 16. Originally in *RB* 42, 1933, pp. 526-39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. Isaiah's son "*She'ar-jashub*" was, so to say, a living symbol (Isa. 7:3) that "a Remnant will return to Yahweh": cf. *ibid.*, p. 19. There are three stages in the development of the theme of the Remnant: (1) Before the Exile, the Remnant refers to the Israelites—the tiny number to be left behind in Palestine by their conquerors; namely those spared by Shalmanesar and Sargon in Ephraim and by Sennacherib in Judah: thus Amos, Micah, Isaiah. (2) During the Exile, the prophets Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Ezekiel designate by this term those exiles who would return from Babylonia and form the New Israel. (3) After the return, the Remnant is identified with the community of repatriates under Ezra. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 19, 29.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 20, 25.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁴ S. Sandmel, "Israel, Conceptions of," *IDB*, Supplementary Volume Abingdon, Nashville, 1976, p. 462.

²⁵ Cf. R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

For the prophets of the Exile, the Remnant meant primarily those exiles who would return to the Promised Land. Jeremiah promised through his letter that Yahweh would lead the captives back home (cf. 29:8-9; also Isa. 11:11-16). "This promised return meant that God had forgiven the Remnant of his people, that he had blotted out their sin (Jer. 50:20) and given them a heart to know him (Jer. 24:7)."²⁶

"Ezekiel's particular mission was to induce in the Remnant a heart inclined to God"²⁷ (cf. 11:14-20). For him, the Remnant is a seed of new life, the new Israel rising from the dried-up bones (Ezek. 37:12), with new spirit (11:9), a new heart (36:26) and with it God will make a new covenant (11:20; 14:11; 16:60-62; 20:37; 24:25; 37:26; cf. Jer. 31:31-34). In the restoration, everything will be new: "a new allocation of the territory of the Promised Land (Ezek. ch. 48), a new temple (Ezek. 40-42) and even a new name for the new city which would thereafter be called 'Yahweh-is-there' (Ezek. 48:35)."²⁸

The essential traits of the notion of the Remnant may be summarized as follows: the Remnant is always a sign of God's mercy; it is a standing invitation to fear God and also to hope for divine favour. The idea of the Remnant is, from the beginning to the end, a bridge, linking the threat of punishment with the promise of restoration. According to Isaiah, the Remnant is spared because it repented, and it will inherit the promises because it is holy.²⁹

At the level of the contemporary events, the Remnant signifies those who escape from the present danger (cf. esp. Am. 9:9; Isa. 37:30-31; Jer. 24:5; Ezek. 11:14; Zech. 3:2). At the second level of the restored Israel, the Remnant is identified with the new Israel which forms "a holy community, living in the love and fear of Yahweh and receiving his blessings (cf. Isa. 4:2; 28:5; Mic. 5:6-7; Isa. 35:10; chh. 60-66.)" In the last level, "the Remnant will be formed not only of the new Israel, but of the spiritual Israel, which will comprise not only the scattered people of God (Isa. 28:5; Ezek. 37:20ff.; cf. Isa. 11:11; 31:6; 43:5-7; 49:5), but all the converted among the nations (Isa. 24:14-16; 45:14-15; 49:6; 58:3, 8ff.)"³⁰

Process of Purification by Superseding

In the writings of the prophets can be discerned throughout a tension between nationalistic and universalistic views with regard to God's relation to the community. That tension is very well articulated in the theme of election. For example, Amos declares that

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

Israel is like the Ethiopians, and the Philistines, and the Syrians (cf. 9:7) to God, and still he declares in the same breath, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (3:2a).⁸¹ It is also interesting to note in the prophetic literature that God equates Israel in case of infidelity with the Gentiles (Am. 9:7), but the Gentile nations will become acceptable to Yahweh (cf. Isa. 19:19-22, esp. 24-25; 2:2-4 [=Mic. 4:1-3]; 25:6-8; 66:18-21). One trend of thought envisaged universalism but "conditioned by the fact that the nations must come to Israel, they must become members of the Jewish nation and religion (Isa. 55:5; 60:3-4; Zech. 8:20-23)."⁸² In this case, the Servant of Yahweh will play a very important and central role (cf. Isa. 49:6; 52:13-53:12). Here we see that the particularistic tension is solved in favour of universalism, although nationalism is still there.

The Babylonian conquest and the national catastrophe followed by the Exile undermined completely the nationalistic view of the theme of election. The hopeful expectation for the eschatological community helped in a way supersede narrow nationalism: "The hope is now expressed that the heathen will receive grace and salvation (Zech. 2:10f.; Isa. 19:21-25; 25:6f.; 42:6; 55:4f.; 66:18-24)."⁸³ Even after the return from the Exile, the religious exclusivism has not completely disappeared, as can be seen from the reforms of Ezra-Nehemiah, e.g., Ezra 4:3ff.; Neh. 13:23-30.⁸⁴

The notion of "God's people" seems to enlarge proportionately with the acknowledgement of God's universal dominion: see the Oracles against the Nations (e.g. Jer. chh. 46-51), whose message is God's universal reign. If God is recognized as the God of all nations, which particular nation can claim to be exclusively "the people of God"? The Samaritan schism and rival claim reflect the emergence of the soul-searching question, as to which people is truly God's chosen.⁸⁵

The need to supersede a nationalistic view of God's election was very keenly felt. If real universalism or catholicity means "the unity in multiplicity, the fullness of human life under God's obedience,"⁸⁶ then even geographical boundaries should be superseded. In fact, the precarious geographical position of Israel between the two power blocks, Egypt and Assyria, was interpreted by the prophets as a sign that she should rely on God alone. Thus the exclusive tie with and reliance on the living God alone came to be considered as the essen-

⁸¹ S. Sandmel, *art. cit.*, p. 462.

⁸² Colm O'Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁸³ H. Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁸⁴ S. Sandmel, *art. cit.*, p. 462.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, cf. p. 462.

⁸⁶ Josef Neuner, "The Idea of Catholicity-Concept and History," in *Church, Readings in Theology*, compiled at The Canisianum, Innsbruck, P. J. Kennedy and Sons, New York, 1964³, p. 72.

tial mark of God's people³⁷ and this is what is called the spirit of the 'anawim. This seems to call for the need to supersede even specific credal formulas. For the very meaning of revelation is that "God manifested himself as universal Lord and King, and that man was called out of his self-centred world to belong to God under his holy and free decrees. Hence, what primarily matters in revelation is not the conceptual idea of God, but whether God is to be subject to man (either as an individual or a self-interested tribe), or man to God, ready to take his place under God's universal kingship."³⁸

Characteristics of the Church

From the prophetic writings we may glean the following as the characteristics of the community relating itself positively to Yahweh, namely the Church: the spirit of the 'anawim: Isa. 14:30a, 32; 41:17; 49:13; 51:21; 54:11; 66:2; Zeph. 3:12; the spirit of 'emeth, i.e. faithfulness or faith: Hos. 2:19-20; Isa. 10:20; 42:3; Jer. 4:1-2; Zech. 8:16, 19; a spirit-filled community: Isa. 59:21; Ezek. 11:17-20 *et passim*; missionary orientation: Isa. 66:18-21; community of knowledge and love: Jer. 31:31-34; community of joyful worship: Isa. 35; 41:18-20; 52:7; 61:5f.; Jer. 30:18-22; 31:12-14; community of holiness: Isa. 4:3; Zech. 14:5; Isa. 62:12.

We also notice in the writings of the prophets a constant process of interiorization of these characteristics but always with an opening for exterior social virtues (cf. Am. 5:24; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8; Isa. 56:1; 58:6ff.; 61: 8-9; 64:4-5; 66:2; Jer. 31:34).

Conclusion

What should be the attitude of the Church which takes the place of Israel? The prophetic tradition indicates the following points:

- (i) The divine election is "the result exclusively of God's own initiative and is his completely gratuitous gift (Isa. 41:8-9)."³⁹
- (ii) Israel and the Church are "chosen as representatives of the entire human family, to serve as a channel of divine revelation and of salvation for all mankind."⁴⁰
- (iii) Certainly God's providence and his saving designs extend to all men. The actual choice of Israel was made for the benefit of all nations to whom Israel was the pattern for all God's dealings with men and thus served as the *locus manifestationis seu epiphaniae* (cf. Isa. 2:1-4; Jer. 3:17).
- (iv) The affirmation of the good will of God to this particular nation is not *ipso facto* the denial or negation of it to other nations.

³⁷ J. Neuner, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁹ Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Church and Mankind*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.