

# Israel's Relations with the Nations

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Given the unique and exclusive character of Old Testament religion, one might doubt even the possibility of any dialogue with the neighbouring nations. Yahwism is based on the doctrine of election and does not seem open to universal salvation.

Israel's fundamental experience is that of God's special intervention in history. YHWH took the persecuted children of Abraham out of Egypt and brought them to himself. He protected them during the wanderings in the desert and gave them the promised land. To preserve them from contamination with the Canaanites he ordered them to exterminate the vanquished enemies. When they became unfaithful and repeatedly committed "adultery" with foreign gods, he temporarily repudiated them, sending them into exile. Chastised and purified, a remnant returned, adhering closely to the traditions of their fathers. Ezra and Nehemiah annulled many inter-racial marriages and the Maccabees preferred to die as martyrs rather than eat the food of the gentiles. Even Christ would assert, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, if we read between the lines of the Old Testament, we can discover that the chosen people did not live in a complete ghetto and often underwent the influence of neighbouring cultures.

## Primeval History

In spite of the strongly monotheistic character<sup>2</sup> of the primeval history, many mythological elements of the first eleven chapters of Genesis are borrowed and adapted from Babylonian sources: for example, the six days of creation, the shaping of the human body from fine dust, the tree of life, the fashioning of the woman from the

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<sup>1</sup> The Evangelist has kept Jesus' comparison of the Canaanites with dogs. It can be explained away as a means of underscoring the great faith of the woman, but the saying was recorded because most of Jesus' compatriots considered the uncircumcised as dogs and were not aware of the abusive character of the logion.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars prefer the expression "dynamic or implicit monotheism" to henotheism or monolatry; the existence of other gods is rather ignored than denied.

rib of man, the flood. The borrowing is most obvious for the "rib": the Sumerian word TI has two meanings, rib and life-giver. In Hebrew no such pun was possible and the name *Hawwah* (Eve), life-giver, is introduced in a later context (Gen. 3:20).<sup>3</sup>

### The Patriarchs

The original text, "I shall make your name a blessing.....in you all the nations shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:2f.) did not imply universal salvation *through* the patriarch. The nations will ask a blessing as bountiful as the proverbial blessing of Abraham.<sup>4</sup> But the reflexive was later interpreted as a passive and the New Testament authors were convinced that "salvation comes from the Jews" (e.g. John 4:22).

### The Various Codes

The Sinaitic covenant has often been compared with the Hittite treaties between an overlord and his vassals.<sup>5</sup> The various codes incorporated into the Pentateuch are based on the same principles of justice and equity as found in the code of Hammurabi and other contemporary legislation. Not only casuistic laws are very similar but even the so-called apodeictic laws have their parallels in ancient West Asian texts.<sup>6</sup>

### The Psalms

Some Psalms, especially the hymns and individual supplications, have a universal value and can be prayed by Jews, Christians and others alike.

The praise of the sky, Ps. 19:1-7, is probably an adaptation of a Canaanite hymn to the Sun-god, racing through the sky and giving light, warmth and life. The last verse, "No creature is deprived of its warmth," is often wrongly interpreted: it refers to life-giving heat and not to scorching or burning.<sup>7</sup> The second part of this Psalm was added so as to compare the idea of divine order expressed in creation with that of the moral order expressed in the God-given Law, which was equally precious for the chosen

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my paper on "Original Sin," *JYT*, 1969, Vol. 18, Nos. 2-3, pp. 126-29.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 12:18; 26:4; Deut. 29 and Jer. 4:2 have the hitpa'el but Gen. 12:3; 18:18 and 28:14 have the niph'al, with reflexive meaning.

<sup>5</sup> The studies of George Mendenhall and Klaus Baltzer are classic. Cf. also Denis J. McCarthy's *Treaty and Covenant*, *Analecta Biblica* 21, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> A. Alt, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1965. For a different view cf. Bruce Vawter: "Israel's Encounter with the Nations," a paper read at the Nagpur Conference on Evangelisation published in *Service and Salvation*, TPI, Bangalore, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Dahood's translation in the Anchor Bible is altogether different, "never turning aside from its pavilion," i.e., following the stipulated course.

people. A similar concept can be found in the Rta-Varuna tradition of the vedic literature.

Other adaptations of non-Jewish hymns are perhaps Psalms 39 and 104. Psalm 39 presupposes an original Phoenician ode to the storm-god and the itinerary of the tempest has been kept: the Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon and Damascus are too far north to be Palestinian. The biblical Psalmist has borrowed most of the elements of the Canaanite theophany in order to praise YHWH, Israel's God of creation and salvation. The literary affinity of Psalm 104 with the Egyptian hymn to Aton, the solar deity (ca. 1350 BC), is widely acknowledged although some indirect influence through Phoenician religions is not ruled out. Leviathan, here described as YHWH's toy but whose head has been crushed by him (Ps. 74:14), is the primeval dragon of the Ugaritic literature Lotan.<sup>8</sup> A remarkable difference is that in Akhenaton's poem divine providence ceases to be effective at sunset when evil power starts reigning again. YHWH's supremacy over evil is uninterrupted and unchallenged.

At times the literary affinity with non-biblical hymns is due to an identical human situation and does not necessarily prove any direct or indirect dependence of one author on the other.<sup>9</sup>

### Sapiential Literature

Some sections of the Sapiential books, especially Proverbs, bear such a close resemblance to the literature of neighbouring nations that we must presume some partial borrowing. In fact, the Bible itself refers to the wisdom of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia and Phoenicia.<sup>10</sup>

The style of the Jerusalem court was, from the time of Solomon onwards, an imitation of other royal courts, especially that of Pharaoh. Along with foreign princesses, many foreign officials must have come to Jerusalem and each brought his or her foreign customs and traditions.

Some expressions and metaphors found in Proverbs are so peculiar that their occurrence in non-biblical sources cannot be attributed to mere coincidence: e.g., "wise words are healing for the flesh" (Prov. 4:22 and *Ahiqar* vii); a wife is "one's own cistern"

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ugaritic Texts*, 125: 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> A comparison of Ps. 139 with Atharvaveda IV 16 confirms this statement. Cf. *Indian Eccles. Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 83, 105. The same would probably emerge from a comparative study of the Tamil classic *Tirukkural* with the biblical Proverbs.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Egypt in Gen. 41: 8; 1 Kings 5: 10; Isa. 19: 11. Mesopotamia in Isa. 47: 10 and 13; Jer. 50: 35; 51: 57. Arabia in 1 Kings 5:10; Prov. 30: 1; 31:1. Edom in Jer. 49: 7; Bar. 3: 22; Job 2: 11; Obad. 8. Phoenicia in Ezek. 14: 14; 18: 5. Aram in Job 1:21; 2:10; 11:19.

(Prov. 5:15, 18 and Dialogue between Master and Slave vii. 57-59); dishonouring one's parents "puts one in utter darkness" (Prov. 20:20 and Ahiqar viii. 15); "a soft tongue can break a dragon's rib" (Prov. 25:15 and Ahiqar vii. 105); "a fool's provocation is heavier than salt" (Prov. 27:3 and Ahiqar viii. 111), the "foreign woman," i.e., married to another man, entices "the simple," i.e., the inexperienced fool (Prov. 7:19 and 9:16 and Ahiqar iii. 13) etc. The three legendary wise men of the Old Testament, Noah, Job and Daniel, are non-Jews and the three friends of biblical Job hail from Idumea.

It is now generally accepted that the instruction of Amenemopet, dated between the 10th and 6th centuries BC, might have been used as a source of Prov. 22:17-23:11. Not all 30 sayings are taken directly from the 30 chapters of the Egyptian parallel,<sup>11</sup> but many of them are obvious imitations. To quote only a few examples:

(a) Amen.I.iii. 10ff.: "Give ear, hear what is said, apply your heart to understand...At the time when there is a whirlwind of words, they shall be a mooring place for your tongue" and Prov. 22:17-18.

(b) Amen.II.iv.5: "Guard thyself against robbing the oppressed and against overbearing the disabled" and Prov. 22:22.

(c) Amen.VII.ix.10: "Cast not thy heart in pursuit of riches...if riches is brought to thee by robbery, it will not spend the night with thee, at day-break it will not be with thee in the house. Its place may be seen, but not itself. It has made itself wings like a goose and has flown to the sky" and Prov. 23:4-5.

Since much of the typically sapiential literature deals with everyday life—friendship, life, love, sickness and suffering<sup>12</sup>—and not so much with cult, covenant, election and salvation, it is understandable that we find many affinities between the Bible and the wisdom literature of neighbouring nations. Nevertheless it also testifies that Israel was not completely isolated within its own cultural ghetto, but shared the same aspirations and experienced the same anxieties as the non-Jews.

### Sanctuaries and Sacrifices

With regard to cult and creed, the situation is different. YHWH has chosen Israel as his *segullah*, his special possession and a people set apart. They have been separated from the nations to be holy to the Lord. According to the Code of Holiness they

<sup>11</sup> A. Erman is still the best authority on the subject: *Eine ägyptische Quelle der Sprüche Salomons*, Sitzungsberichte der preussische Academie der Wissenschaft, 1924. He proposes to read "thirty" instead of "the day before yesterday" in Prov. 22: 23.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the German doublets: *Freund und Feind, Leben und Leib, Liebe und Leid*.

cannot offer unclean animals or birds, i.e., those used as sacrificial victims in other religions (Lev. 20:24b-26; also ch. 11). The other nations have been given the sun, the moon and the stars to worship, but Israel should not "serve other gods or bow before them"<sup>13</sup> (Deut. 4:19 and 28f.). In order to preserve themselves from contamination by other cults, such as the sacred prostitution of Ba'al Peor (Num. 25), the conquered cities had to be utterly "dedicated" (*herem*), i.e., destroyed and their inhabitants exterminated.<sup>14</sup>

The way to worship YHWH, the only way for which he has regard, is the one revealed by him to his servant Moses and described at length in the P sections of the Pentateuch.<sup>15</sup> According to Gen. 4:4, Abel already knew the Semitic ritual of sacrificing the first-born of the flock, while Cain's offering of the fruit of the land, a Kenite and Canaanite custom, could not be pleasing to God.

Moreover, YHWH is to be worshipped within the promised land, at the place he chose "for his name to dwell there." One cannot sing the praises of Zion near the waters of Babylon; "How shall we sing YHWH's songs in a foreign land? Let my right hand wither if I forget you, Jerusalem!" (Ps. 137:4-5). Yehezkel Kaufmann has proposed the following thesis: "The exclusive sanctity of the land of Israel is as fundamental a part of the priestly laws as the election of the people."<sup>16</sup> Although YHWH is the creator of the universe, he is not compelled to bestow his favours equally on all the nations or all the places of worship. He elected a nation and a locality of his own choice. In fact, such exclusive election is also found in other religions: without affecting the universality of his dominion, Marduk is both the sun-god of the whole cosmos and the particular god of Babylon. Jupiter, the Father in the sky, envelops the whole inhabited world, but is the national god of the Romans.

Similarly, Palestine as a whole and Jerusalem in particular was the special locale of YHWH. To leave one's country was to abandon its gods and when Abraham left Haran he gave up the worship of Sin, the moon-god (Josh. 24:2). Orpah went back to her people and her Moabite gods, while Ruth came to Bethlehem and worshipped YHWH.<sup>17</sup> According to 2 Kings 17:24-28, the foreign

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J.N.M. Wijngaards' article in *IYT*, 1969, Vol. 18, Nos. 2-3, pp. 180-90.

<sup>14</sup> The Bible testifies to the *herem* of Jericho (Jos. 6: 21), Ai (Jos. 8: 26), Makkedah (Jos. 10: 28ff.) and Amalék (1 Sam. 15). This was not an exclusively Israelite custom but it prevailed also among other people of that time.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Exod. 25-31; Lev. 1-10; 16-17; 21-25; Num. 1-10; 15-19; 28-30.

<sup>16</sup> Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, Chicago University Press, 1960, p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ruth 1: 15f. Other Non-Israelites who joined the chosen people on their way to the promised land also embraced Yahwism: Exod. 12: 48f.; Lev. 16: 29; 18: 26.

deportees into Samaria were expected to serve the God of that country. They failed to do so and were plagued by lions. The king of Assyria sent a Yahwist priest to Bethel to give them the needed instruction. The tribes who settled in Transjordan had a special cultic problem. In order to prove that they were part of the chosen people they built an altar for YHWH on the West bank of the Jordan. The other tribes first objected but Phinehas agreed with this arrangement (Josh. 22:10-34).

After his conversion, the Syrian Naaman could not settle in Palestine, but solved the problem by taking two mules' load of Palestinian soil to Damascus: on this he would build an altar in honour of YHWH (2 Kings 5:17).<sup>18</sup> A similar territorial exclusiveness is found in Deuteronomistic circles: if the Israelites are not faithful to the covenant they will be exiled from the promised land and thus obliged to worship gods of wood and stones (Deut. 4:28; 28:64 and Jer. 16:13). The later custom of shaking off the dust from one's feet before re-entering the holy land seems to imply that even the dust from a profane country would contaminate YHWH's territory. The Synoptic Gospels apply this concept to a house whose inhabitants reject Christ's messengers, i.e., the apostles consider such people as outsiders excluded from the kingdom (Mk. 6:11 and parallels).

In spite of this doctrinal and theoretical exclusivism, historical facts seem to prove that in practice there existed a much greater openness. During the wandering in the desert, it was not the Levite Aaron but Jethro, Moses' Midianite father-in-law, who offered burnt sacrifices to YHWH (Exod. 18:12): i.e., at the very origin of Yahwism Israel adopted a foreign ritual! The rites of cereal offerings mentioned in Lev. 1-7 are agricultural in origin and must have been borrowed from the Canaanite peasantry. Even the sacred precincts of Zion seem to have been at first a shrine of Nehustan, the Jebusite snake-god who bestowed wisdom and fertility. Its priest, Zadok, joined the chosen people and was kept as the chief dignitary of the new Yahwistic sanctuary. Two narratives of former events were used, or invented, to camouflage this religious syncretism:

1. The story of David's census and the punishment of the plague which followed states that the avenging angel was stopped at the threshing floor of Araunah, thus indicating that the place was very propitious (2 Sam. 24:16-17).
2. The presence of the snake-symbol in the temple, the Seraphim of Isa. 6:6, was justified by the legend of the desert episode: Moses had made a bronze snake to cure the people bitten by fiery serpents (Num. 21:4-10). But even

<sup>18</sup> The following verses, 2 Kings 5: 17ff., are interesting from the point of view of cooperation in sacred rituals; Naaman had to bend the knee along with his master at the sanctuary of the god Rimmon. Elisha gave him a tacit approval, "Go in peace."

at the time of Hezekiah, people still offered incense to it and the zealous reformer had it broken in pieces (2 Kings 18:4). In the wisdom of Solomon, it was once more mentioned as a token of deliverance (Wis. 16:6). Finally, the Gospel of John used it as a type of the crucified Christ (Jn. 3:18; 8:28; 15:4).

A similar theme of the tree of life as a symbol of immortality is only mentioned in passing in the story of the garden (Gen. 2:9 and 3:22). Yet Proverbs (3:18; 13:12; 15:4 etc.) more or less identifies it with divine Wisdom. The Bible did not elaborate on it as a symbol of the cross, but the Church Fathers and the liturgy make ample use of its typology.<sup>19</sup>

Not only the site, but also the design and decoration of the Jerusalem temple were of non-Yahwistic origin: Solomon is said to have entrusted these to Hiram, the prince of Tyre. Although there were no images of Syro-Canaanite deities or of YHWH himself, the decoration of the sanctuary was inspired by mythological symbolism of plants and animals. Strictly speaking, one could even call into question the orthodoxy of the representation of animals such as the Cherubim who protected the covering of the ark in the Holy of Holies, in the same way as their Babylonian counterparts protected the entrance of Marduk's temple.

### The Nations shall see my Salvation

We must therefore admit that the Israelites have borrowed some mythical elements from foreign cultures and adapted them to their cosmogony. They took over some sapiential sayings of neighbouring nations. They even adopted some foreign rituals and some decorative motifs in YHWH's temple. But it seems more difficult to prove that they ever felt the salvation of other nations as a problem. The idea of mission as a "centrifugal" movement, going out to preach the message of salvation to other nations, is absent from the Old Testament, except perhaps in the Book of Jonah to which we shall return. But even as a centripetal force,<sup>20</sup> i.e., to win over non-Jews and bring them to Zion, missionary zeal is found very sporadically in Israel's history.

In exilic times YHWH was acknowledged as the only creator and master of the universe. Even Proto-Isaiah already considered him as the Lord of history who could hire a razor from beyond the River or use the King of Assyria as the rod of his anger

<sup>19</sup> The tree of knowledge is more central in the story of the garden but is nowhere else mentioned in the Bible. It was probably too closely connected with the female deity Asherah and her sacred post: the branches are an embrace and the fruit suckling breasts.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. de Groot: *The Bible on the Salvation of the Nations*, St Norbert, Abbey Press, 1966, p. 3.

to chastise the rebellious sons of Israel (Isa. 7:20 and 10:20). Similarly Deutero-Isaiah stated that YHWH had anointed Cyrus as his shepherd and servant to defeat the enemies of his chosen people (Isa. 45:1). But he was rarely conceived as the universal Saviour to be worshipped by all the Gentiles.

YHWH is at times depicted as a light to the nations to whom he has manifested his glory. But this *kabod* is perhaps the salvation of the remnant, the vindication of the faithful ones in the eyes of the whole world: e.g., "My deliverance draws near, my salvation has gone forth and my arms will judge (*shapat*) the peoples" (Isa. 51:5). Those exiled to far off lands will be rescued and the prophet will be able to enlighten the nations about the justice of his God, "that my salvation may reach till the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). His servant is to be a light to the nations so that those who were blind may see (Isa. 42:6-7). This interpretation of "light" as salvation of the faithful exiled is certainly the most appropriate one for Ps. 98:2-3, "The Lord has made known his victory, he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the earth has seen the victory of our God!"

At times this divine judgement is given an eschatological dimension and YHWH appears as just and exalted above all other gods, therefore to be praised by all the nations of the earth (Pss. 67 and 97). This salvific intervention, this "glory among the nations," as well as the fact that YHWH created the heavens, should convince the gentiles that he is the universal judge and king. They should give up gods of wood and stone and bring offerings to his court (Ps. 96:1-10).

The Zion song, found both in Isa. 2:1-4 and Mic. 4:1-3, bears some similitude to these judgement Psalms. Zion is the mountain of YHWH where all nations will come to learn the Law and where he reigns as the king of peace, after the swords have been changed into ploughshares.<sup>21</sup> Its origin is disputed and the arguments put forward in favour of a post-exilic date are not accepted by all. Some connect it with the Day of the Lord, while others refer to a much earlier Syro-Canaanite tradition of Ba'al Zaphon, in the hill of the North. This tradition would have been adopted by the Jebusites and finally taken over by Israel. In any case this same eschatological theme of the light of God's justice recurs in Trito-Isaiah and in Psalm 87. The kings of the earth will come to the brightness of YHWH, a brightness which will replace the brilliance and glory of the sun. Survivals from the exile will be sent to the coastlands. From everywhere people will come to Jerusalem and be enrolled on the list of the elected (Ps. 87:4-6). They will bring oblations and some of them will

<sup>21</sup> A similar description of universal peace and harmony is found in Isa. 11: 6-9 and also in 65: 25, but unrelated to the salvation of the nations.



even be appointed as priests and Levites along with the Israelites (Isa. 66:18-23).

These few texts definitely describe a universal religion centred around Zion. They are of an eschatological and apocalyptic nature, of obscure origin and do not seem well integrated into the tenets of Yahwism. Other texts are more nationalistic and stress the defeat and subjection of the gentiles rather than their conversion and salvation. The non-Jewish nations will come to Jerusalem after "licking the dust," bringing silver and gold as tax and they will become slaves (Ps. 72:8-11). They will arrive, bound in chains, and bow down to their victors, bringing the wealth of the nations loaded on a multitude of camels. Forced to praise YHWH, they will become slave-labourers at the rebuilding of the city walls. "Israel, you shall suck the milk of the nations, suck the breasts of kings" (Isa. 60:5-16). Instead of the universal King of peace, YHWH will appear as the Vindicator, the mighty one who saves Israel by trampling people in his wrath, pouring out their life-blood with a fury that reminds us of Kali (Isa. 63:1-6).

### Idolatry

For many Israelites, the *go'im* remained the uncircumcised worshippers of dead idols. They could adore the sun, the moon or the stars as their god-given portion (Deut. 4:14). But idols were dead and empty objects, the work of human hands. A goldsmith or woodcutter shaped them. He used part of a tree to cook his food, another part to warm himself, and the rest he shaped into his god (Isa. 44:9-20), a lifeless wooden block that has to be propped up, has eyes that are blind and other non-functioning senses. When the enemy came it could afford no help, but had to be lifted on the shoulder and carried along as an extra burden, while fleeing from the foe (Pss. 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Isa. 45:20 and 46:1-7).

A whole section of the Wisdom of Solomon (chaps. 13-15) deals with the folly of idol worship. Though the Egyptians were not fully to be blamed when searching for something to adore, they could not be excused for setting their hope on inanimate idols, mere statues which a skilled workman had carved and covered with a coat of red paint to hide the blemishes or fixed with a peg lest they tumble. They are not only useless and without profit (*beliy-ya'al*), "but the beginning, the cause and the end of every evil" (Wis. 14:27). Both the idols and their makers are to be accursed (Wis. 14:8).

### Conversion of Non-Jews is Possible

Though the general attitude is rather one of despising non-Israelites, some rare and exceptional cases of concern for justice and for the salvation of all are recorded in the Old Testament.

There is the unique prayer of intercession by Abraham in favour of however few righteous men who could be found in

Sodom (Gen. 18:19). There is the chance given to the Egyptians to take YHWH at his word when he announced the coming plague of hail. They could take the necessary precaution for themselves and their cattle (Exod. 9:19-20). Similarly the Amorites had to complete their iniquity before they were exterminated and their land conquered (Gen. 15:16). Although the punishment of non-believers is harsher than that of Israel they are nevertheless judged and punished gradually and given a chance to repent (Wis. 12:10, 22).<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah speaks of a divine compassion which can bring each evil neighbour to his inheritance, i.e., to his god-given place of worship. If they diligently learn the way of his people they shall be "built up" (Jer. 12:14-16).

Similar conversions are acceptable according to Isa. 56:3-8. Foreigners who keep the sabbath and observe the covenant of YHWH are welcome to offer sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. One of the psalmists spontaneously affirms that all nations will come and bow down before the Lord and praise him as their creator (Ps. 86:9-10). The prophet Zechariah speaks even of a movement of mass conversion to Yahwism: "Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem... ten men from the nation of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of one Jew saying, 'Let us go with you for we have heard that God is with you,'" (Zech. 8:22-23).

Such passages are rather few and far-between to prove a continuous openness of Israel to proselytes. They serve nonetheless as a corrective to the doctrine of absolute exclusivism. In fact, some aliens have now and then been admitted into the community of the chosen people: already at the time of the Exodus a "mixed multitude" of non-Israelites joined the group of the runaway slaves (Exod. 12:38). Rahab and her family became members of God's people after the conquest of Jericho (Josh. 6:22-25). The Gibeonites had recourse to a ruse but were finally tolerated among the Hebrews (Josh. 9:27). Ruth married Boaz of Bethlehem...

The most relevant group is that of the *gerim*. The Bible distinguishes between two classes of foreigners. There is the *nokri* or *neker*, stranger, i.e., the unknown and racially unrelated. He is to be excluded from the Paschal meal (Exod. 12:43), does not benefit from the release of the jubilee year (Deut. 15:3) and should not be given any authority over a Jew (Deut. 17:15).<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, we have the *ger*, sojourner or resident alien, who is often numbered among the marginal people requiring

<sup>22</sup> According to Wis. 12: 10b-11, this chance is not likely to be made use of: "God knew their ways would never change...they were an accursed race from the beginning."

<sup>23</sup> *Neker* is also used in the case of "strange" gods and "foreign" wives such as those of Solomon. At times its meaning is close to that of *zar*, strange, unauthorised or even hostile.

special help and concern like the needy, the widows, the orphans and even the Levite. The Israelites should love this sojourner as they love themselves (Lev. 19:34), remembering that they themselves were once sojourners in a foreign land.<sup>24</sup>

God protects the *ger* with special care (Deut. 10:18). He is granted a juridical position equal to the sons of Abraham (Deut. 1:16; Lev. 18:26; 20:2; Exod. 12:49). Once he has become a full member of the covenant community by circumcision, he takes part in the Passover (Num. 9:14) and can offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord (Num. 15:14-15, 26; 19:10). Ezekiel even predicts that in the restored Jerusalem the sojourners will be given a share of the promised land along with the Israelites by birth (Ezek. 47:22-23).

After the exile there is a double tendency. On the one hand, stricter demands are made on proselytes—the LXX term for *gerim*—to observe the whole Mosaic law, but on the other hand the scribes and Pharisees of the diaspora leave no stone unturned to get new converts, “they traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte” (Matt. 23:15).<sup>25</sup>

### Salvation Unrelated to the Zion Community

At least three texts are remarkable in the sense that they imply salvation outside and unrelated to the Israelite community.

(a) Malachi 1:3 states that YHWH hates Esau and has left his inheritance to the jackals, being angry with him for ever. But then he turns to Israel and denounces the malpractices in the liturgy of the temple: these offerings of crippled and diseased animals are a profanation of God's name. On the other hand, the incense and prayers offered in the sanctuaries of well-intentioned non-Jews reach YHWH and are more acceptable to him than those of his own people (Mal. 1:10-14).

(b) According to Ps. 47:8-9, the election of Israel is not unique. The nations belong to God's family as equal to the sons of Abraham: “The princes of the nations are assembled with the people of Abraham's God. The rulers of the earth belong to God who reigns over all.”

(c) Isaiah prophesies an eschatological election of Egypt and Asshur, the traditional enemies of Israel (Isa. 19:18-25). Heliopolis—the city of the Sun—will become the city of YHWH and have an altar as a sign and witness to the Lord of Hosts. The Egyptians will offer sacrifices, make vows to YHWH and fulfil them. There will be a highway

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Exod. 22:20-21; Lev. 19: 33; Deut. 14: 29; 16: 11; 24: 17; 26:12; Jer. 7: 6; 22: 3; Zech. 7:10 etc.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the article “Stranger” in Leon-Dufour's *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, TPI, Bangalore, 1973, p. 711.

from Egypt to Asshur and both nations will join in true and acceptable worship. Egypt, Asshur and Israel will all three be YHWH's chosen communities: "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (v. 25). The most striking aspect of this equality is that God himself will directly make his name known and elect the two other nations without any mediation of Israel. The latter will no longer be unique as the Lord's people.

### The Book of Jonah

The Book of Jonah has often been considered as the story of a Jewish missionary sent to the Ninevites, the arch-enemies of the Israelites. It would be the only example of a centrifugal mission. If it was written at the time of Nehemiah, it could be a reaction against the exclusive chauvinism of the Judaizers.<sup>26</sup> The prophet is unwilling to go and preach to those pagans, but God forces him to cooperate with his plan of salvation. He clearly teaches him a lesson through the miraculous tree that grows in one day and withers overnight: Jonah should not be angry that God has the salvation of all men at heart.

The rebellious attitude of the prophet has been contrasted with that of Paul who brought the Good News of salvation in Christ first to the Jews, but then—when they refused to accept it—to the gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6). A comparative study of the Book of Jonah and Rom. 9-11 might yield interesting results.

Yehezkel Kaufmann strongly objected against such an interpretation. One may not agree with his dating of the Book (during the reign of Jeroboam II, i.e., 784-744 BC), but after a closer examination one has to admit that the central theme of Jonah is God's mercy and patience with sinners.<sup>27</sup> "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? . . . and not rather that he turns from his ways and live?" (Ezek. 18:23). The Ninevites listened to this foreign prophet of a foreign God and mended their ways.<sup>28</sup> Jonah is outraged, not because he is a narrow-minded zealot, but because he is a champion of God's justice according to which the guilty city cannot be spared. The purpose of the author is not to exhort Israel to missionary activities among the gentiles, as de Groot would have it,<sup>29</sup> but to foster in them the same attitude as that of Abraham interceding for Sodom (Gen. 18).

<sup>26</sup> The Book of Ruth is certainly intended as a protest against Ezra's strict policy of dissolving inter-racial marriages.

<sup>27</sup> *The Religion of Israel*, pp. 283-84. The style and vocabulary is more Aramaic than Hebrew and the idea of retribution and conversion of non-Jews presupposes Jer. 18: 7-8 and Deutero-Isaiah. It could not have been written in the first half of the 8th century BC.

<sup>28</sup> The theme of the repentant Ninevites is also found in the Gospels.

<sup>29</sup> A. de Groot, *The Bible on Salvation of the Nations*, p. 41.

Jonah can be considered as a *midrash haggadah*, an edifying story written in order to bring out the message of Exod. 34:6-7 and Jer. 18:7-8: "The Lord, a Lord merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..." (Exod. 34:6f.). In fact, the first part is quoted in Jon. 4:2 as the reason why the prophet first tried to escape his mission. In Jer. 18:7-8 we read: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if this nation... turns from its evil ways, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it!" This is partly quoted in Jon. 3:10.

Nevertheless, the Book of Jonah has its bearing on the problem of universal salvation. Caught in the storm, the sailors pray each to his god. The captain is scandalised by the prophet of YHWH who carelessly carries on sleeping and requests him to call on his God and ask him to save their lives (1:6). There is some irony in the fact that pagan sailors are more religious than the Jewish man of God who has to be told to pray by a pagan. Jonah acknowledges his guilt in shirking his mission and shows his magnanimity in offering to die in order to save the sailors: a Jew sacrifices himself for *go'im* ! These non-Jews now pray to YHWH the creator of heaven and earth, offer him sacrifices and make vows. Their lives are spared.

After the legendary episode in the belly of the big fish, Jonah goes to Nineveh. Once again the foreigners are depicted in a sympathetic way. They turn from their evil ways, do penance and thus prove more religious than the prophet of YHWH. Finally, after the legend of the miraculous plant, God makes fun of Jonah saying as it were, "What is wrong with you? When I have pity on this large city of repentant sinners and refrain from destroying it, you are furious. But when I destroy that one-day little plant, you pity it and are still more upset. Please, make up your mind: Do you want destruction or salvation?"

In his humorous way, the author has shown that God is merciful and a compassionate Father of all, both Jews and gentiles. In his justice he does not overlook wrongdoings but above all has the salvation of all at heart.

## Conclusion

After this summary survey of some facts and texts concerning Israel's attitude towards the gentiles, the general impression of exclusive election and cultural ghetto calls for some qualifications.

YHWH has chosen the children of Abraham as his own people with Palestine as their promised land, but not a few outsiders managed to be accepted into this community, especially the *gerim*. Moses gave his people a cult and a code of their own, not to be contaminated by foreign practices, but right from the beginning

and throughout their history they assimilated local ritual customs and liturgical hymns, incorporated foreign elements in their legislation and were influenced by the sapiential literature of the surrounding nations. This non-Jewish material runs as a continuous thread through the fabric of their existence. Theoretically this was condemned and at times repudiated by civil and religious authorities, but in practice it was never fully checked.

A remarkable feature of Jesus' genealogy in Matt. 1:1-17 is that the official line of descendants is drawn clearly from father to son during forty-two generations, but in between there are four women who apparently belonged to other races. Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, was probably an Adullamite like his own wife Bath-Shua (Gen. 38:2 and 20). She had to risk her life to remain married to a member of the chosen people. Rahab, the Canaanite inn-keeper, connived with the Hebrew spies against Jericho's authorities and extracted the promise to be accepted into the community of Israel. Ruth, the Moabite, left her country and her gods to give an offspring to Naomi of Bethlehem. Bath-Sheba, Solomon's mother, who is only referred to as "the wife of Uriah," was a Hittite woman forced to yield to the advances of King David.

One could consider these cases in particular, and Israel's relations with the gentiles in general, as not very legal, not very orthodox, or simply as the reality of life and the blood-stream of human nature. But from the point of view of faith, it was part of God's plan of salvation and a gradual growth towards the much broader religious outlook which Paul formulated in his first letter to Timothy: "God our Saviour desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).