

A new Israel?

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A reaction to the article by [Matthew A. Tsakanikas](#), “The Bible is clear: Jesus made the Catholic Church the new Israel” on [LifeSiteNews](#), February 17, 2025, originally published on February 9, <https://catholic460.substack.com/p/biblical-catechesis-the-church-is>.

Unless mentioned otherwise, all quotations from Scripture are from the New International Version, 1983.

This article is also available in French on www.croiretcomprendre.be.

Introduction

After an initial article around the same subject, to which I replied in my “When the Church talks about Israel”,¹ Tsakanikas has written a second article which concentrates on three New Testament texts, Galatians 6:15,16; Romans 11 and Revelation 20. In it, he takes on the views of Pre-Millennial Dispensationalists [PMD], a group which is rather more known in America than in Europe. Naturally, much of his critique concerns also the more classical premillennialists. As one who has distanced himself from some of the conclusions of Dispensationalism, I will try to answer his arguments.

These questions are of course of great importance to all those who seek to ground their doctrinal opinions on the Bible and particularly so to those who love the people of Israel. In his previous article, the author displayed his antagonism towards any Zionist understanding of biblical prophecy, but without any

¹ Available on my website, <https://www.aepeb.be/liege/Croire/connaitre/israel2.htm>

real reference to the Old Testament. Although the recent political side of the issue is (happily) absent from this article, the implications are clear: If the Catholic Church is indeed the new Israel, and if the three passages quoted in support of it bear this out, Israel is a “has-been nation”. As a people it will have been absorbed by the Church, diluted into the Church and disappeared from the Church. To come to such a conclusion while leaving all biblical prophecy outside the discussion will come as a surprise to most evangelical and/or protestant readers. What they perceive as the fulfillment of Scripture, putting prophecy back centerstage in world history, the Catholic Church perceives as a menace to its very understanding of its role in the world. It is a foundational issue, not to be shrugged off in indifference.

Although Old Testament prophecy should be central in any debate on this question, that is not to say that the New Testament allows the vision Tsakanikas defends in this article. It does not. In this article, I will seek to prove this. But in the final section I will resume the argument from the wider angle of the history of Israel, taking into account the Old Testament right up to the present situation and beyond.

Before entering into the exegetical question concentrating on the three Bible passages mentioned, let me give a short overview of what Tsakanikas maintains. I will do this through a number of direct quotes:

“St. Paul’s teachings in Galatians and Romans reveal the Church as the ‘New Israel.’ The Book of Revelation must be read through this lens – not as a prophecy of an earthly Jewish kingdom, but teaching us about Christ’s liturgical and canonical reign from heaven.”

“Since Christ’s Ascension and until His Second Coming, Christ’s reign is extended by His Church. Christ empowered His Church to make Himself present in mystery and so unite heaven and earth through orthodox worship, belief, and works (cf. Romans 12:1-2) and so spread the kingdom: “whatever you bind on earth is bound in

heaven and whatever you lose on earth is loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18; 18:18).”

“Under the appearance of bread and wine, Christ comes as the “lamb who was slain” (Revelation 5:6; 1Corinthians 11:26) and gathers the baptized (Revelation 14:1) as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16) in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:10), present now in sign and power (Hebrews 6:5) but in full glory at the end of time.”

“Christ and His Church’s reign on earth until the Second Coming and final judgment is like Christ’s first coming: in poverty, meekness, sorrow, and bearing the weight of sinful humanity. It is an extension of Christ’s salvific office and applies Christ’s atonement and one-time sacrifice in the liturgy. There, Christ returns veiled in sacrament, can die no more, but continues to sanctify us.”

“Not only do PMDs take the “thousand year” reign literally instead of canonically, symbolically, and liturgically, such dispensationalists make a false distinction between Israel and the Church.”

“The mistake of the Pre-Millennial Dispensationalist [PMD] is to believe that God’s promises still belong to Israel according-to-the-flesh instead of the doctrine explained in Saint Paul that Christ brings the Israel according-to-the-flesh into the true promised land and Zion only by their becoming a new creation in Christ because “Christ is the *telos* of the law” (Romans 10:4).”

“The true Jerusalem is life in the Holy Spirit, a kingdom of priests (cf. 1Peter 2:5,9). The true Jerusalem is no longer an earthly city, the once “great city” of Revelation 18 which was destroyed (and named in Revelation 11:8 as Jerusalem where the “Lord was crucified”).”

“Israel according-to-the-flesh [race and circumcision] was not replaced by the Church of God. Rather, it was always the Church of God that was awaiting the Messiah to reach God’s true promises. In not following the Spirit it falls from the promises while those who follow the Spirit through faith in Christ enter God’s Israel.”

Most of the questions provoked by these quotes will be reacted to further on. But allow me the two following remarks:

- The comment on Revelation 18 is needlessly insulting, and totally unsubstantiated. The insinuation that present day Israel and Jerusalem are the city of Revelation 18 *and thus the whore of chapter 17* is all the more shocking because its identification with Babylon/Rome is vastly more evident. The whore of chapter 17, which is the city of chapter 18, drunk with the blood of the saints does very badly compare to the Israel according to the flesh of these last 2000 years. But its comparison to the Rome of the Caesars and the popes is very troubling indeed...²
- Tsakanikas has a good number of references to ‘liturgy’ (16). The following quote is typical: “Since Revelation is more about the *liturgical* reign of Christ already from heaven, and PMDs reject the value of *liturgy* uniting heaven and earth in mystery (cf. Matthew 18:18; Hebrews 12:22), they cannot see the New Jerusalem in the Church’s *liturgies* or understand Christ’s institutions of the mysteries.” (Italics are mine) May I suggest that he sees liturgy as having an importance Scripture does not give it and thus sees it in many places and with a meaning the New Testament does not bear out?

“The Israel of God” in Galatians 6:14-16

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God. (NIV)

² Tsakanikas has protested since that he never said that present-day Jerusalem was Babylon. “I was saying it was the Great City destroyed in 70 AD and so that is not the same city as the present Jerusalem 2025. The point being we no longer need earthly Jerusalem because in the Christian Eucharistic Liturgy the true Jerusalem comes down from heaven in Revelation 21.”

Galatians 6:16 is not a loose text that appears more or less out of nowhere! Before we try to interpret its last words, we must put it in the context of this short letter to the churches of Galatia which Paul wrote more than likely before the council of Acts 15, where the matter of circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law for non-Jewish Christians was decided upon.

The Galatian churches – we should think of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, fruit of Paul's first missionary journey – were amongst the first churches established in a mixed Jewish and pagan setting. Tempers had seriously heated up between the Jews and the new Christians, and we learn that teachers had come over from Jerusalem, 2:12,13, adding to the problems. A separation occurred and even Barnabas and the apostle Peter got tangled up in it. The idea was to drive a wedge in between the churches and Paul, 4:17. The apostle reacts with some heavily loaded phrases:

- “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (5:2-4)
- Or: “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.” (5:7,8)
- And: “Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.” (6:12,13)

He even goes as far as comparing the city of Jerusalem, where stood the holy temple, to a slave and her children, 4:25. Israel, the temple, the Law, all things he respected and loved, as Acts 21 witnesses. But Paul was very conscious of the enormous difference the coming of Jesus had created, 4:4-7. The times had been fulfilled. The Messianic Age had arrived and with it,

Israel's vocation had been led to a new understanding. The Jews that rejected that, either in rejecting Jesus or in pressing the non-Jews into the corset of the Law, had become the enemies of the Gospel, as he would argue some years later in Romans 11. They tried to undermine the freedom in Christ in order to keep believers firmly within the bounds of Judaism, 4:29, bounds that had imprisoned *him* without hope and from which Jesus had delivered him. What sort of Israel was it that opposed itself in this way to the long-awaited Messiah? And *that* would be the true Israel? "But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son..." (4.30)

Does he mean that from now on, the word Israel means something different? That from now on, the majority of the gentile Christians were the new Israel? That from that point forward, the Christians from pagan origin were the new Jews? Or does he mean that the real Israel, the Israel of God, were those Jews who had followed the Messiah into the new reality that had come to pass, "that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6)? Even if these Jews were only a fraction of the nation, a remnant, as the prophets had foretold.

That leads the apostle to the statement of 6:14-16: "But God forbid that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." (New King James Version)

The answer to the questions provoked by this text does not lie in Galatians alone, but in the much fuller treatment Paul gives it in Romans 9 to 11. But before we come to that, we must turn to the actual translation of Galatians 6:16 and its meaning.

Tsakanikas suggests that the reading of the RSV gives the right understanding of the text. He writes:

“The opening of this essay read Galatians 6:16 that those who had become a “new creation” in Christ (Gal 6:15) were “the Israel of God” (6:16). These included the Jews [“circumcision”] and Greeks [“uncircumcision”] of 6:15 who now live by faith. The RSV translation made it obvious and the tradition of the Church as shown in Lumen Gentium §9.3 added authority to the translation that the new “rule” and those who follow it are “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

However, the more stubborn PMDs will argue against the understanding of the RSV translation. They try to distinguish God’s Israel from the Church when Paul really wants the reader to distinguish Israel according-to-the-flesh from what has become the Israel of God in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.

This is the original Greek of Gal 6:16:

καὶ ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν εἰρήνη ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ ἔλεος καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ Θεοῦ. [Emphasis added]

This is the RSV translation:

Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.”

This should be compared to the more literal rendering of the NKJV: “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, *and* upon the Israel of God.”

Why should we understand the “*and*” (italicized above) differently? Tsakanikas:

“Without sufficient knowledge of Greek grammar, some readers will argue that the translation into English should read “and upon the Israel of God.” After all, in the Greek there is clearly a *kai* (“and”) to which no word corresponds in the RSV translation. The problem with demanding that *kai* be translated by “and” is that *kai* can have senses in Greek that “and” cannot have in English.

The word *kai* in Greek, like the word “namely” or the phrase “that is” in English, is often used to introduce a re-wording for the sake of clarity or amplification, but “and” is seldom used that way in English. In Galatians 6:16 the *kai* signifies that the phrase that follows, “upon the Israel of God,” rewords an earlier phrase, “upon those keeping

the rule.” Its use here conveys that “the Israel of God” are one and the same people as those who keep the rule. The new rule, implicitly faith in Christ which causes “new creation,” is what now constitutes “the Israel of God.”³

Standard *Greek Grammar* texts explain these cases: “*kai* often = *namely, for example, and so* where an antecedent statement is explained either by another word or by an example”; this is done “often to set forth a climax and not an alternative.”

In other words, and contrary to PMDs, St. Paul is not establishing “the Israel of God” in 6:16 as an alternative to those who have become a “new creation” in Galatians 6:15. Rather, by including *kai* in the final clause of Galatians 6:16 he is *emphatically* stating that the circumcised and uncircumcised who have become a new creation because they accepted his new “rule [of faith]” are “namely” the “Israel of God.”

First a word on the implied clarity of such a Greek reading. Obviously, it had not struck Tsakanikas as such. He needed a colleague to point it out to him and says so himself! So much for this being so clear! This is all the more important that a point of importance is at stake. The reading that takes the “and” as expletive, namely, could allow the understanding that the Church is the new Israel, the Israel of God.

Checking out a good number of translations, I find only two that do somewhat like the RSV. The translation in today’s English: “As for those who follow this rule in their lives, may peace and mercy be with them – with them and with all God’s people!” which weakens considerably the meaning of the word Israel, and J. B. Philips who changes the order of the verse: “To all who live by this principle, to the true Israel of God, may there be peace and mercy!” As for the revision of the RSV, the NRSV, it reverts back to the classical translation: “..., and upon the

³ Here he adds this note: I am indebted to Greek scholar Kevin Tracy, PhD, University of Pennsylvania, a professor at Christendom College for guiding this explanation on usages of Greek “*kai*.”

Israel of God.” The NIV follows the RSV, with the literal translation in a note. Apparently, the vast majority of the translations have not caught on to the “clarity” Tsakanikas has discovered!

He concludes this section of his article: “Anyone who would interpret the meaning as though the Israel of God is distinct from the *new creation in Christ* is simply reading the Greek wrongly. They are ignoring the clear and entire context of Galatians and all of Paul’s writings prior to Romans 11, **namely/and** that God’s people, God’s Israel are now justified by faith in Christ and not works of law [i.e. fleshly circumcision]. Otherwise, the Jews wouldn’t have bothered persecuting Paul for this very teaching that the Israel of God now includes the gentiles.”

We must conclude that the usual translation is not an example of reading the Greek wrongly, and that it is not ignoring the context of the whole letter. It does not go either against all Paul had written prior to Romans 11, as he has not written about Israel before Romans except here in Galatians! And no, this understanding was not the cause of Jewish persecution of Paul. The cause lay in the very fact that he believed God was sending him to the Gentiles.

Why did Paul add these last words of 6:16? What could he have meant? Let me quote from my commentary on Revelation, page 111⁴:

“The Israel of God in Galatians 6:16 is not necessarily a reference to the Church. Perhaps it should be seen as an indirect reference to the Pharisees in a letter that is precisely concerned with the teachings of Jews who undoubtedly presented themselves as the true Jews, the true people of God. Jeremias writes this:

⁴ [*Apocalypse, la mémoire du futur*](#), 2013. The quote of Jeremias comes from: J. JEREMIAS, *Jérusalem au temps de Jésus*, Paris : Cerf, 1968, p. 355.

“...Religiously and socially, the Pharisees constituted the party of the people; they represented the crowd in opposition to the aristocracy from both a religious and social point of view. Their respected piety—they claimed to be the true Israel—and their social organization aimed at eliminating class differences made them the party of the people and gradually ensured their victory.”

Does Paul want to emphasize that the true Israel are not these pretentious Jews, but those among the Jews who recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah?”

He had said some very severe things against the Jews who had tried to influence the Galatian Christians. Here, in these few words, he encourages those Christians that had not fallen for their teaching. Peace be on all those that live by the principle of the cross, and peace be on the true Israel.

There is an additional reason to read 6:16 this way. When Paul speaks about the unity of the Church, he seems to think more in terms of a new man, Christ and His body. Paul says as much in Galatians 3:16: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.” And in 1Corinthians 12:12,13 he writes:

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

Or in Ephesians 2:14:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility”.

The New King James version translates:

“that He might make in Himself one new man out of the two, so making peace”.

But he *never* expresses this in terms of a new, or true, Israel. By faith, gentile Christians are descendants of Abraham, but they have not become Jews! Paul would have thought the idea

ludicrous, simply because “Israel” always had overtones of the physical Israel. He limited his definition of who is a Jew, like in Romans 2:28,29:

“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.”

But without circumcision, there was no Jew even though the real Jew is much more than a circumcised person. He is that, but without the faith of Abraham that is to no avail. Jesus recognized that when He met Nathanael: “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”, John 1:47. In other words, the Israel of God are believers of the circumcision, that is of the Jewish nation “who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.” (Philippians 3:3)

Allow me a comparison. Israel has but rarely been the “Israel of God”, a nation that walks in the faith of Abraham. Again and again, it has exchanged its faith for a religion of trust in the flesh. But for the Church, has it not been just the same? Instead of being “the Church of Jesus”, it has developed into something else, something we may still call the Christian Church, Christianity or, worse, “Churchianity”, but a religious structure that no longer is recognizable as the Church of Jesus.⁵ In other words, the Israel of God is to the Jewish religion what the Church of Jesus is to the Christian religion. Today, Paul would perhaps reword Romans 2:28,29:

“A person is not a Christian who is one only outwardly, nor is baptism merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Christian who is one inwardly; and baptism is baptism of the heart, by the Spirit, not by tradition. Such a person’s praise is not from people, but from God.”

⁵ The terminology comes from my [*L’Église de Jésus*](#) which I wrote after a teaching series on Matthew 14-18.

But now, on to Romans 11.

What Paul believed about Israel: Romans 11

First of all, *why* did he write Romans 9-11? In the first eight chapters, he had written on how sin has affected everybody, both Jew and Gentile. How none was righteous. How Abraham and David had been saved through faith, and how God accepted the Gentiles in the same way, just through faith. But as far as Israel is concerned, has everything now changed? Has God finished with the old Israel? Should we believe that, from the beginning, His aim had been to create the Church as another, better and new Israel? Paul will not allow such a mistreatment of Scripture and History. If that were true, God would no longer be true! And so, having brought to its conclusion his exposition of the Gospel, see Romans 1:16,17, he turns to what to him must have been an essential question, a headache as much as a heartache: Now that the victory of Christ was complete, 8:31-39, what about the people of Israel? Not: what about a new and spiritual Israel, but what about this sinful and guilty Israel which is the only Israel there has ever been?

He makes it clear from the start of these three chapters what he is on about. Let me quote them.

“I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel...” (9:1-4)

“Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” (10:1)

“I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” (11:1)

My people, my race, the tribe of Benjamin, yes, he is clearly talking about the Israel according to the flesh. The question

behind these chapters is: What of this people that had rejected the Messiah? Where does it all lead?

He starts out like this, 9:6-9:

“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

What does he mean? It is not sufficient to be of the physical descent of Abraham. Both Ismael and Esau were. You must be a child of the promise and thus, of faith. Not that physical descent counts for nothing! One of the underlying realities that links these chapters is the fact that *physical* descent has created a people and a nation different from all other peoples and nations. That physical reality is there right through these chapters and beyond. It is still there even today as the last word has not been spoken yet. It will be spoken when the Messiah will come from Zion and change the history of Israel. It will be spoken when the last descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will have found repentance and faith. And that, of course, is Paul’s burden.

The coming of the Messiah has changed Israel’s history. It could not have been otherwise. The purpose of his coming was that through him the nations would be called, as many prophets had foretold. Listen to Isaiah, 49:5-7:

“And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” This is what the LORD says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel— to him who was despised and

abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Restore the tribes of Jacob, *bring back* those of Israel that God has kept and *be a light* for the Gentiles. To do that, Christ would have to die, be raised from the dead, be glorified and send His Spirit, so that His Word would change lives from Jerusalem to the far reaches of the World. This triple calling has been at the center of God's action in these past ages, and none of these three objectives has been finalized as yet. A numerous people from the Gentiles have come to Christ. At the same time, Israel, and even more so *faithful* Israel, has dwindled to a remnant, Romans 9:24-29. The tragedy of the greater part of Israel is that it contented itself with the Law. That was as evident in Paul's eyes as it is today, 9:30-33.

In chapter 10, he shows that God is not at fault in this situation. First, Jesus has brought the Law to its end, 10.4. He is the end and the purpose of the Law. Before, between God and Israel there was the Law. But the Law had been fulfilled in the Messiah. The old road was closed. It had never brought anybody to salvation and now it was blocked because it had fulfilled its purpose: lead Israel to its Messiah. He had opened a new road through His death. Public faith in Jesus would take you all the way to the open arms of the Father. And that new road is traveled by Jew and Gentile alike. All this did not happen in secret. Far to the contrary, messengers have been sent all over the place. All the means possible have been used. But Israel has not wanted to listen. As the prophet Isaiah has said:

"All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations..." (Isaiah 65:2 = Romans 10:21)

Now, is Paul saying in effect that this stubborn people is not or is no longer Israel? Far from it. All day God has held out his hands to this obstinate people. They could have been buried for good among the Gentiles. They could have disappeared like so many people and nations of old. They could have become like

any other people. But that did not happen, did it? They came back! And they certainly are not like other nations, however much they try. Look at the news. Listen in on the United Nations. Obviously, even the God-hating crowds know that Israel is not like any other nation. They are hated like no other nation. They came from the deathcamps and the gas chambers, from pogroms and persecutions without end, and here they are. Are they the “unreal” Israel? Hitler did not think so! *He* at least knew who were Jews! And none of the arrogant so-called new Israel, the self-styled Israel of God of the theologians, was there to offer to take their place (“Herr Hitler, you are wrong! *We* are the real Israel!”). They see themselves as the real Israel, but they are no Jews, thank you very much! In fact, in a polite way they hate the Jews as much as anyone. They would choose Barabbas any time.

Is Paul saying that in his “not all Israel belongs to Israel”, he is talking about “the Galatian 6:16 Israel of God”, as Tsakanikas argues? Yes and no. It depends on what we mean. Yes, this is the people of God that finds its source in the promise given. Ismael and Esau were not in that group. They were descendants of Abraham but they were not amongst the children of the promise. Not because they were eternally rejected and damned as individuals – that has nothing to do with this question – but because they were not Isaac, the son of the impossible promise. But that does not mean that Paul is talking here of some sort of dematerialized, “dejudaized” Israel! He is talking of the literal Israel, both according to the flesh and to the promise. Gentile Christians cannot become Israel even though they have become through faith the descendance of Abraham. Only Israel can become the Israel of God.

All this becomes clearer in chapter 11. I will start with a synthesis of the whole chapter.

The Israel of God in Romans 11:1-10.

God has not rejected his people, the people of Israel. How can we be sure of that? Because part of Israel *has* entered into the

promise. Paul names himself as an example of that. He says something like this: “I am both a real Israelite and a disciple of Israel’s Messiah, and I am not alone. History tells us of other evidences of the Israel of God who had faithfully walked with God like Abraham in Genesis 17:1.” His example comes from the life of Elijah the prophet. It shows there has always been *an election within the election*. Israel is God’s elect people. That is not and must not be under discussion, even though to be elect, in this context, does not mean to be saved! But contenting oneself with being part of the elect people has never been spiritually sufficient. Paul says here in the beginning of Romans 11 that there is in fact an inside circle, the election of grace. It is not linked to the Law, or to circumcision, but to grace and thus, to faith. When Israel wants to obtain acceptance of God through obedience to the Law, it becomes incapable of living through grace. It remains stuck in the outer circle.

What is this “*eklogia*”, this election of grace? It is not an irresistible selection *to* grace but an election that works *through* grace. Only those who search for it there where it can be found can enter. Paul says in 11:7: ‘The election has obtained it.’ The election of grace is the election that has obtained grace. It is a picture of the *remnant*, the spiritual heart of the nation. The *remnant* is that small group at the heart of the election of Israel that has obtained mercy because it has searched to be declared righteous through faith.

What Paul does *not* say in verse 7: “Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the election has obtained it, and the rest were hardened”, meaning: the elect from the Gentiles have obtained it. No, the election that has obtained it is the election *within* the election of Israel. Paul talks about Jews in both cases, those that have obtained and those that have been hardened. In other words, the Israel of God is the election of grace, the small group of Jews (by comparison to the rest of the nation) that walks by faith. And he does not say either that the others are “not-Israel”. They remain the chosen people and their role in history hasn’t come to an end as yet. But they can and should be so much more!

The olive tree illustration in Romans 11:11-24.

Israel has stumbled. The Messiah came and they rejected Him and had Him crucified. But how could that be? And as it is beyond discussion, did God have a purpose with that terrible fall? Yes indeed! It opened the door to the Gentiles, so that the Good News of Jesus was brought to them. And God's purpose in that was to provoke sinful Israel to jealousy and to repentance. Their fall had meant immense spiritual riches to the Gentiles: these became the followers of the Messiah, God's special people. Paul would later find out how deep Israel's fall had been. When back in Jerusalem he was invited to defend himself, he related how Jesus had appeared to him, and they listened peacefully. Then, he came to what God had given him as his particular calling: "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." (Acts 22:21). At that very moment, the crowd erupted in violent anger: "The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (22.22) Yes, Israel has stumbled indeed!

But then he adds a statement of great import. He says that if their loss has meant riches for the Gentiles, how much more their inclusion, literally, their "*pleroma*", their fullness. Their loss, which had been catastrophic, will be followed by a new fulness of mercy and salvation. He doesn't talk about a sort of spiritual Israel and even less about the Church, but about the fallen and rejected Israel, about the hated Jews of these past 2000 years. So there is hope. At the time Paul writes this letter, well after the crucifixion, he tells there is hope. Their fall is not the final story. A new chapter will still be written, and the apostle wants to do all he can to make that come true. He will try, on his small scale, to make that fulness come about at least for some of those fallen Israelites. His motivation is clear: if their rejection has meant the reconciliation of the world, what will not happen when they come back and are reintegrated into God's plan? It will be like a resurrection from the dead!

There is reason to be confident. Israel is like the first offering of a new dough in the Temple. That means that all the dough is

holy. Or like the root of a tree. If that is sound, all the tree and its branches will be the same. The rest of the dough has not been discarded and nobody prefers to have only a root! He wants a tree!

That brings the apostle to his illustration of the olive tree.

There are two such trees, a cultivated one and a wild one. Paul does not really make identifications as such, but it is rather clear that with the cultivated tree he means the believing descendance of Abraham. The patriarchs are the root of the tree that became known as Israel and that corresponds to the “election of grace” of 11:7. The purpose of the tree was, and is, to be a blessing to the world, Genesis 12:1-3. To participate in this blessing, one has to be connected to the cultivated tree, which, if you are a Gentile, means that you must be grafted onto that cultivated tree. Paul writes:

“If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among⁶ the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” (11:17,18)

Once connected to the root, its sap starts flowing through you in order to produce fruit. Is there reason to get proud and feel superior to the natural branches? None whatsoever. “... they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith, because the decisive issue is living faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.” (11:20,21) After 70 A.D., the Jewish part of the Church gradually diminished and one could come to think that the Church had displaced Israel, and that process happened rather quickly. The organized, visible Church became like a tree to itself! As for Israel, faith often became something different,

⁶ Some translations have preferred : in their place (like RSV). The dictionary (BAGD) does not mention such a meaning of ἐν, and translates like NIV under the word ἐγκεντρίζω (enkentrizo, to graft) in Romans 11.17.

an outward conformity rather than an inward life. Paul encourages us to study the past of the tree. Many branches had been cut off and had become a pile of dry wood, just good enough to serve as firewood. He says: “Tremble!” It could happen again! What God did to the original branches, He will do also to the engrafted branches. They too can be cut away. What happened to the broken off natural branches? Did they disappear? Not really. They are still there, all around us. Have these Jews become non-believers? Not necessarily! You will find most of them in the Synagogue. And so it is with the grafted branches, members of the Church. Many of them are found in religious structures of all shades and names. Do not tell them they are broken off! And yet, that is exactly what has happened...

All this makes Paul conclude:

“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.” (11:22)

It would seem that today we have put all our cards on His kindness and have altogether forgotten about His sternness. But the same causes will produce the same effects. How many grafted branches have already been cut off since the beginning of the Church? And why do we see so much enmity towards Israel from those who consider that they have taken the place of the Jews in God’s love? Is God really through with Israel? No, they can be grafted again if they repent, just as proud members of the Christian Church can be cut off. We, gentile Christians, have been grafted *against our nature* onto Abraham’s root through living faith. Paul comes back to that in Ephesians 2:11-14:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by

the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility”.

Is it then so surprising that God would graft again those that through lack of faith had been excluded? And should love to Israel not be one of the values of those, churches as well as Christians, that have found mercy in Jesus? Should we not open our eyes to what God wants us to see: He has a future for trodden down, rejected and despised Israel. For they can be grafted back onto the spiritual root of the Israel of God. Our walk with the Messiah should have the quality of provoking them to jealousy. We have not replaced them, but we are amongst them. They are brothers we should love. Most of them are separated from us, but they are brothers still. Yet, what has happened? Two thousand years of Christianity have produced the opposite effect. Not because *they* have been blind and deaf, but because the Church has not only been proud, but it has become the main persecutor of the Jews, it has hated them. *Our* Fathers. *Our* ancestors. *Our* churches! Our guilt cries to heaven! But God is not like us. His judgment of Israel is not His last word. His love and faithfulness are proverbial. He will once again turn to Israel.

The salvation of all Israel, 11:25-27.

This is the key text in the discussion about the future of Israel:

“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.””

Who is Paul talking about when he mentions “all Israel”? That is the real question. On its answer depends our view of the future both of the Church and of Israel.

Could “all Israel” include unbelieving Jews? No. Salvation is and must be through faith. But as soon as we say that, we must confess our ignorance of the future. How will many Jews react to the coming of Christ as mentioned in Zachariah 12 or here in Romans 11:26? In other words, the spiritual situation of today’s Israel is not a final situation.

“All Israel” is Paul’s conclusion about the destiny of his beloved people. His concern here is not: “What will happen to the Church?” Or: “What is the destiny of humanity?” He is still talking about the Israel that is, partially, hardened by God.

In general, those who favor the interpretation that “all Israel” equals the Church as “the Israel of God” of Galatians 6:16, do not believe there is a future for historical Israel. They can discuss endlessly about ecumenical relations with Judaism but in the end, they, the Church, and they alone are “all Israel”. I am not just being negative. The anti-Zionism of a number of theologians and Churches is just too frightening.

The far better view is to see “all Israel” as believing Israel, the remnant of the prophets. In other words, “all Israel” equals the election that has obtained grace of verse 7. “All Israel” must be the same as “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6. It consists of Israelites both according to the flesh and to the Spirit. How many will they be, those that will be touched by the Spirit according to Zachariah 12:10?

Does that contradict what Paul says in Ephesians about the wall being taken down? But here in Romans 9-11 Paul is not talking about the Church. His concern is the Jewish people. What will happen to them? What does it mean that God has not rejected them?

In the Church, there is neither Jew nor Greek. Galatians 3:26-29 teaches:

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you

belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Does he mean that these particularities disappear? Of course not! But these things no longer should divide the Church of Christ. The new unity in Christ is not of the mashed potato variety! The three distinctions Paul mentions remain. A Jew doesn't become a Gentile, or vice-versa, a slave doesn't become a freeman just through conversion (remember Onesimus in the letter to Philemon) and a man doesn't become a woman or the other way round. All that is not under discussion in Romans 11. But what of God's choice of Israel? *That* is the Romans 9-11 question.

Let me summarize what I am saying in the following seven points:

First, Paul mentions Israel twice in verse 26. The first mention is clearly historical Israel. They have been hardened all through the history of the Church. It is little likely that the second mention talks about a completely different group. Obviously, both groups are not identical, but both are Israel. "All" Israel is still Israel. There is no square inch of exegetical ground to turn "all Israel" into gentile Christians.

Second, "all Israel" is a typical idiom of the Old Testament. This is its only use in the New Testament, but it is used 146 times in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the historical books. It does not necessarily mean every single Jew. Often it speaks about the leaders as the intermediaries of the whole of the people. All through Joshua 10, 'all Israel' means in fact the army of Israel. In 1Kings 11:42, 'all Israel' is the entire nation, but in 12:1, it obviously is a small part of the nation. But in all cases it means historical Israel or those individuals that stand for the whole nation. Paul means that all of repenting and believing Israel will be saved in that day when the Messiah will come from Zion, as the prophet had foretold. We surely must understand this in the light of Zachariah's prophecy about the movement of repentance

that will sweep the country – and the world? – when Israel will see it's Messiah, Zachariah 12:10.

Third, Paul's preoccupation in these three chapters has been with historical, physical Israel. Would it not be most surprising that here, in the culminating text of his treatise, he would all of a sudden mean the Church, essentially from the Gentiles? That just doesn't make sense.

Fourth, in the final verses of Romans 11, he speaks again of historical Israel. That is no surprise. Who are the enemies of verse 28? Would they be "all Israel" as meaning the Church? Of course not!

Fifth. When he mentions all Israel, he probably talks about the Israel of God in Galatians 6:16. It is rather likely he does. But that Israel is of necessity part of the historical Israel. He talks about Jews, members of the elect nation who have also entered into the inner election of grace. But he does *not* talk about gentile Christians.

Sixth. Why does he say that "*in this way*, all Israel will be saved"? One could read: "In this way, that is, through the entry of the fullness of the Gentiles, the full mystical body of Christ which is 'all Israel' will be saved." But that runs counter to two things in the text: it gives a different meaning to the two mentions of Israel within the same, short phrase, which is doubtful. But, second, it does no justice to the "until". The hardening of Israel will give way to "something" *once* the number of Gentile believers has reached its limit. What is that "something"? Is it going to give way to Israel's salvation? That would be a logical conclusion, ... and Paul says exactly that! And if it is not Israel's *salvation*, what else could it be? The hardening has led to the rejection of Israel's Messiah and to its opposition to the Church. It has led to Israel's judgment, from the destruction of Jerusalem to the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It has led to the awful persecutions of the Jews at the instigation of the gentile Church during the better part of two millennia. It has led to a valley of dry bones. But what if that hardening should come to an end? Paul has already referred to it: "For if their

rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (11:15) Life from the dead. Unexpected, un hoped for, unmerited, and to the main part of the gentile “Church”, undesired. Yet, mercy and grace, flowing like a mighty river and salvation unfathomable.

Seventh. When will this happen? When “the deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” Godlessness. That stark reality applies to how many of the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? It is the present shocking reality in the eyes of God. But that *will* come to an end when the tide turns. And turn, it will. In other words, this tragic situation will not end with endless loss. There will be a finding before the end.

The fullness of the Gentiles. What does Paul mean? The word he uses is *plèrooma*. It is found twelve times in the writings of Paul.⁷ BAGD proposes to read “that which is brought to fullness or completion” in Romans 11:25. In 11:12, they hesitate between that same meaning and “fulfilling, fulfilment” as in 13:10. The idea of the salvation of the full number of the Gentiles in 11:25 seems the right understanding. The fullness of the Gentiles would not really change that understanding. There will come a time when *God* judges that this time has effectively come.

There is another question that needs asking. What is the meaning of ‘saved’ in this verse? Is it a spiritual salvation as in chapters 1-8? Or is it a salvation from its enemies, in the foreground of which one would find the Antichrist in that final point of history? Or could it be both? If “all Israel” equals the Church, the question is hardly worth asking, but if it is the true Israel, it could easily be either of the two answers. What I mean is that seeing it differently, and, undoubtedly, in a better way, the question opens up. In the light of Christ’s visible appearing,

⁷ Romans 11:12,25; 13:10; 15:29; 1Corinthians 10:26; Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10; 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; Colossians 1:19; 2:9.

coming from Zion, that is Jerusalem, the salvation is quite likely both temporal and eternal.

What this all leads to is that there most evidently is a future for Israel beyond the Gospel period. God is not finished with Israel. There is a place and a time for many prophecies to come true. That is not a thought to be scoffed at. Yes, Jesus is the end of the *Law*, Romans 10:4. But that is in no way contradicted by 11:25,26. Not because we resort to an exegetical distortion, as some might be inclined to say, but because Paul nowhere creates a spiritual Israel, “the Church”, that would somehow draw to itself all that has been promised to Israel. I do not diminish in any way the glory attached to the Church that is Christ’s body. I do not raise in any way a new wall of separation inside that Church. But we cannot theologize away God’s promises and faithfulness to the descendancy of the Patriarchs.

The conclusion, 11.28-36

Paul concludes these three chapters with a final word and a doxology.

Israel in its great majority has turned its back on its Messiah. Since Paul wrote those words, time has only seen an increase of that majority. During his ministry, Paul had felt the Jewish opposition in his flesh. Because of the gospel, they, his own people, had turned into enemies. But enemies of whom? Paul does not say. He specifies: Because of you, which means, because of the Church. That God would call the Gentiles to Himself was utterly hateful to them, as if He had rejected Israel, not seeing that *they* had done the rejecting. But whose enemies? *God’s*? Some translations and quite a number of commentaries add those dreadful words: enemies *of God*. But these two words are missing in *all* manuscripts. It is hard to believe that the apostle would write that. Had God become their enemy? Had they become his enemies? What is true is that they had become *our* enemies. That was a reality Paul had felt in his flesh. Not enemies of the Church, but very much the enemies of those Jews who had become the perpetrators of that treasonous behavior

to maintain that the God of Israel had sent them to bring salvation to the Gentiles, bringing them to faith without becoming Jewish proselytes. And yet, Paul says, though they take themselves to be our enemies, we love them because of the patriarchs. They cannot sin themselves out of that inheritance and we must love them whatever their antagonism. Why?

Because God's gifts and call are irrevocable. Israel was not a passing love-affair of God. *Perpetual* is the word that appears again and again in the text of the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, as it talks about God's love for and his covenant with Israel. God does not love the Church *instead* of Israel. He has not taken a new spouse! He who forgave cruel Nineveh, would He turn his back on his own?

Then he addresses his readers, turning an earlier line of reasoning into a conclusion. You were disobedient to God. You were in desperate need for mercy. How did you receive it? Through their disobedience. That opened the door wide to you, Gentiles. But that open door is also open to them. It has not been closed to them. Even more so, the mercy you have received is the guarantee that they too will find mercy. "For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

It is a concluding remark like the one with which he ends his first main point in this letter: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." (3.19) Every man accountable. Every man disobedient. But every man the object of God's mercy. In Paul's day, the surprise was that the Gentile was a candidate of grace. Today, the surprise is that the Jewish people, "all Israel", is also a candidate of grace.

The magician's hat.

You may have seen it before. A magician comes on stage with a pointed hat with a wide rim. He pronounces a formula, takes his

hat off and pulls out a rabbit. Theology is sometimes like that! Strange and unexpected things are produced and odd conclusions are reached. What was put into the hat manifestly does not compare with what was pulled out.

Israel is put into the hat and, surprise, surprise, the Church is pulled out! This is how some theology strikes me when we study the future of Israel. As with the magician's hat, you may be taken in without having seen it come. But once you start analyzing the process, you realize the trick that has been played on you while you were not looking carefully.

I am not saying Tsakanikas has put on a magician's hat! What I am saying is that it happens all too often in theology! The Bible goes in and strange things come out. Let us see what comes out of the hat and after that, let's analyze.

First, Tsakanikas creates a strong link between Galatians 6:15,16 and the end of Romans 11. He writes: "When Paul speaks about a "hardening has come upon part of Israel" (Rom 11:25a) he is referring to Israel according-to-the-flesh. When he continues in the last half of the verse "until the full number of the gentiles come in" (Rom 11:25b), he is speaking about the new rule from Gal 6:15-16. When he finishes the thought and says, "and so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26), the meaning of Israel has shifted "from the flesh" to "God's Israel" according to the Spirit in Gal 6:16 and promises of Galatians 4:31. It is the same maneuver Paul made in Romans 9:6-8."

Second, as Galatians was written before Romans, Romans depends on Galatians and must be read as such. As Galatians 6:16 presents the Church (which in his understanding is always the Church of Rome), the mystical body of Christ, which includes both Jew and Gentile, one should identify "all Israel" of Romans 11:26 as the Israel of God of Galatians 6. This means that we should make "distinctions about Israel in terms of "according-to-the-flesh" and according-to-the-rule-of-Gal 6:15-16 which brings the gentiles into the reconstituted "Israel of God," the Church." "When Paul speaks of "all Israel" being saved it is a reference to the full mystical body reaching completion

and not a fleshly or earthly Israel.” In other words, “Romans 11:26 does not prophecy a massive conversion of all remaining Jews on earth to Jesus Christ at Jesus’ return in glory from heaven. While that would be wonderful and nice, and with God we Christians also “will that all men be saved,” it is just not within the framework of Paul’s thought in the canon of the New Testament. When Paul speaks of “all Israel” being saved it is a reference to the full mystical body reaching completion and not a fleshly or earthly Israel.”

And third, as in Romans 9:6-8, Paul’s definition of Israel moves from the Israel according to the flesh to the Israel of God. Paul says that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel ... this means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants”, referring to Galatians 4:25-31. In Romans 9:6-8, “Paul’s meaning of the word Israel shifted within two words of each other. In the first instance it is a reference to Israel according-to-the-flesh, but two words later it is in reference to the “Israel of God” from Gal 6:16.”

“The mercy of which Paul was marveling in Rom 11:28-36 is that God has been trying to give the Jews *more time* to accept the Messiah by simply allowing a “time of the Gentiles” (cf. Luke 2:24 – he probably means 2:34) before the Second Coming. By bringing conversion to the gentiles in accord with God’s mystery in Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:9-10), Paul is trying to make the Jews jealous and reconsider their obstinacy towards Jesus. The mercy to the gentiles is God’s additional mercy to the Jews “that by the mercy shown to you [gentiles and Romans] they [the Jews] also may receive mercy” (Romans 11:31).”

The magician’s hat has produced its surprise: Israel has all but disappeared and a massively gentile Church has run off with the prize. Have we been tricked? Let’s analyze these three points:

First. The changeover is attributed to Galatians 6:15,16. There, Paul is supposed to have changed the definition, calling

the Church ‘the Israel of God’. We have seen that this conclusion is anything but sure. It hinges on a meaning of the word ‘kai’ (‘and’) that virtually no translation has accepted, and that the order of the words in verse 16 hardly encourages. In other words, it lacks all justification. Something so important cannot be based on such flimsy evidence. However, I do agree with the conclusion that “all Israel” refers to “the Israel of God”! *But* the Church is *not* this Israel of God. In fact, the Church is *never* called “Israel” in the New Testament. Galatians 6.16 would be the only – unproved – exception.

Second. There is no interpretative rule that the older text determines the meaning of the following texts. The rule is that the clearer and more developed text determines the meaning elsewhere. Undoubtedly, Romans 9-11 is both clearer and more developed text. So we are not forced by Galatians 6 as we interpret Romans 9-11. We must also refuse to limit ourselves to 11.25,26, but, instead, take in the whole context of these three chapters. Tsakanikas writes: “When Paul speaks of “all Israel” being saved it is a reference to the full mystical body reaching completion and not a fleshly or earthly Israel”. But “the full mystical body reaching completion” is nowhere mentioned! His ‘completion’ obviously refers to the fullness of the Gentiles coming in. But this fullness of the Gentiles is *not* the same as “all Israel”.

And third, Romans 9:6-8 does not imply such a conclusion. The argument in Romans 9 brings Paul to mention the remnant, and that leads him up to the conclusions of Romans 11. The real Israel, the remnant, is the election within the election. In its salvation at the end, all Israel will be saved. When? At the end. Yes, we could say that God gives Israel and the Gentiles more time:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2Peter 3:9)

“The mercy to the gentiles is God’s additional mercy to the Jews ‘that by the mercy shown to you [gentiles and Romans]

they [the Jews] also may receive mercy' (Romans 11:31)." Should we not ask ourselves why this process of provoking the Jews to jealousy seems to have ended with the fall of Jerusalem? Are we not called to be imitators of the apostle? How can it be that the provoking to jealousy has been changed into the unrelenting hatred the Church has poured out on the Jews? Could it be that this hatred betrays the origin of much of what bears the name 'church'?

Before we move on to the book of Revelation, allow me a short outline on the future of both Israel and the Church. It will also serve as a good introduction to the next section. I have not provided any Scripture references, but I can argue every one of these seven points from Scripture.

First. God has called and chosen Israel and given it a perpetual covenant, which is the covenant with Abraham, distinct from the covenant of Sinai.

Second. The purpose of Israel and of its election was to be God's very own people from which would be born the Messiah.

Third. God had always been clear that through Israel, the blessing was to reach the whole world.

Fourth. The great tragedy of Israel's rejection of the Messiah created a new situation. Israel (except for the remnant of faith) came under judgment, and was "lost" among the nations. At the same time, the gospel of Jesus was preached to the world and a new people came into being: the Church Jesus is building. This Church is his body in which Jewish and gentile Christians are to be at one, without hostility, rising to become a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Fifth. While this new body is gathered until its completion, Israel was hardened and unable to realize its predicament of being under wrath. But at the same time, the Church became unfaithful to its Lord. Here too, a remnant stayed true while the majority strayed. While the spouse of Christ prepared for the coming of her Lord, a strange church grew up and became a

prostitute. So while the wall of separation in between Jewish and gentile Christians had been destroyed, a new wall was raised in between the faithful pilgrim Church and the harlot, and much blood was shed as she tried to crush the true Church. That wall is *not* in between churches and organizations, but between the disciples of Jesus and the followers of a false gospel. All this seems like a sad replay of what happened in Israel during the days of the prophets. And with time it seems to touch all churches and communions. Sadly, the sleeping church is very much more common than the waking church.

Sixth. Finally, the tide turns. Israel has come back to the frontpages of the news. This return may seem political and in part it is, but to many it is at last a return to Jerusalem and the hope of a messianic future. The Church sees and watches. In most places, none had expected Israel's return and hardly anyone was ready to find a theological place for it. Here was a people that had inherited the prophecies but that was extremely reticent as far as the Church was concerned. Here was a people the Church had written off, which caused her no real problem during most of the past centuries. But now that position was coming under increasing criticism. If this was God's doing, did it mean the end-times are upon us? How was this resurrected people to relate to the faithful disciples of Jesus?

Seventh. Scripture draws two lines to the future around the coming of the Messiah. The Old Testament, that is the Hebrew Bible, draws a prophetic line to the restoration of the Kingdom centered around a rebuilt Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple, work of the Messiah. The New Testament draws just as clear a prophetic line to the ingathering of the true Church and the coming down to earth of the new Jerusalem. The coming messianic Kingdom will be the accomplishment of what has been promised. But how will these two lines come together? That has not been fully revealed. But both lines will come together in that glorious messianic future. Then, in a finale foreseen both by the prophets of old and by the Revelation, the earth reaches at last its end. God creates a new earth and a new heaven where He will live with his people, which is the whole

descendancy of Abraham, both Jews and Gentiles in a unity the same of which on such a scale has never yet been seen.

The New Jerusalem: Revelation 20 and 21

The Bible gives us two tales which are at the center of the unfolding of History. There is the tale of Israel which starts with Abraham and leads us right up to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The story culminates in the coming of the Messiah, in His mysterious death and in His glorious reign. It tells about a land, a city and a temple and how everything was lost and how a new dawn would come through the mercy of the God of Israel. And then there is the just as amazing tale of the Church of Jesus which starts with the coming of the Messiah, His death and resurrection, His sitting at the right hand of God and His sending of the mighty Spirit to take His Gospel to the ends of the world and to the end of time and which culminates in the new Jerusalem descending from Heaven.

But are they two tales? Or are the two but one great tale? In a very real way, there is of course only one tale as there is only one God, one Messiah, one Israel and one Church. The two tales start out and end up in that great tale that runs from eternity to eternity.

But that is not the question here. There are some who reject there are two tales. The two are one, they suggest, because the thread of Israel as a separate story is broken off. By whom? By Israel as it became unfaithful to the covenant, and by God as He continued Israel's story in a new way through the Church that was born on the morning of the feast of Pentecost following the death, the resurrection and the ascension of the Christ. The Church, they say, is the actualized Israel, while the original, the real?, Israel is lost if not to man, at least to God. The fact its coming back in the headlines of the news is purely accidental and carries no meaning as far as the Scriptures are concerned.

In Revelation, the Bible reaches the culmination of this new Israel which was God's idea from the start.

Tsakanikas comes to Galatians 6 and Romans 11 by way of his interpretation of Revelation. His article begins this way: "The one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ does not accept Millennialism which teaches that before the final judgment, Christ will establish a thousand-year [millennium] reign on earth and reign from the earthly city of Jerusalem. It is a misappropriation of Revelation 20:4-6. Christ's kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36)." So, in his understanding, there is no earthly future for Israel. This earth is a write-off. It will be destroyed at or shortly after Christ's second coming:

"Jesus' reign already began with His Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. His Second Coming and the Final Judgment will be visible and glorious before everyone and bring the temporal order of humanity to a close (cf. CCC §676). Nothing earthly, nothing temporal, will remain afterwards and so there cannot be an earthly reign of Christ from an earthly Jerusalem at the Second Coming."

Is Millennialism "a misappropriation" of Revelation 20? Is the conclusion sure that all earthly fulfillments of the prophets of both Old and New Testaments are to be excluded? That question is closely linked to the way we read, or do not read, the Bible. This is particularly the case of the Old Testament which presents again and again an earthly messianic future for the people and the land of Israel. Can we really maintain that all these prophecies and promises relate only to the Christian Church? I will come back to that in the last section of this article. But is this the most reasonable way of understanding the book of Revelation?

In order to make such a reading possible, one must adopt a very symbolical reading of Revelation. Those who do this want us to see the Church in many places. The 144,000 in chapters 7 and 14 are the Church. The two witnesses of chapter 11 are also the Church. The temple in the beginning of the same chapter is the Church too. So is the holy city in 11:2. So is the woman of

12:1, and so is her offspring in 12:17. In 12:6, this ‘celestial’ woman, supposed to be the Church, escapes into the desert: should we understand an earthly desert? What else? But if the earthly Church is in view, which desert would be able to serve as a hiding place for a Church scattered over the whole earth? But of course, the desert is symbolical too. A symbolical Church is hidden in a symbolical desert... One of the major problems of such a way of interpreting Revelation is the way in which it relegates Scripture to a second role. The commentator becomes the master of the book! And as far as surprising symbolical interpretations go, only the sky is the limit. Anything goes.

Now of course, there is symbolism in the book. It says so itself. The candlesticks of chapter 1 or the dragon of chapter 12 are symbolical and the symbols used are systematically explained. Then, of course, there are many pictures in the book. The sword coming out of the mouth of Christ in chapters 1 and 19 is a picture, and one not very difficult to understand. But there is also another phenomenon that makes the book seem so strange and phantastic. In chapters 8,9 and 16, is John writing in symbols? In pictures? Or, by any chance, is he trying to express in his vocabulary and comprehension of the late first century things that belong to our 21st century? By way of example, how would he ever be able to describe a helicopter?

The same questions come when we try to understand how the parts of the book are related to each other. We can all see the various series of sevens: 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets and 7 vials to name the best known. How do they relate to the structure of the book? There are basically two ways of looking at it. Either Revelation is comprised of cyclical judgments, with each series repeating and/or expanding the previous one and *each one* leading to the end. There is no ongoing story. Or there is some overall chronological structure, regularly interrupted by parenthetical sections which answer particular questions.

How would this apply to chapters 20 and 21? Are they just another cycle ending with the final judgment? Or are they part of the chronological development described in the seven visions of the final denouement in 19:11-21:8? This is not the place to

enter into all these questions (I have done so in my commentary on Revelation, *Apocalypse : la mémoire du futur*) But the case for a chronological development is a rather strong one, while the case for seeing these two chapters as a new unit is rather weak. Not only that, but what one often puts into such a view takes such a freedom with the text that one must wonder if the text is not just a hook on which to hang anything the commentator feels should hang there.

Let me quote one example of this in Tsakanikas' article. He writes:

"It is why those who died in Christ as martyrs and those brought to life in the first resurrection [baptism and communion (John 6:58)] are both already partaking in eternal life and 'priests of God and of Christ ... who reign with him a thousand years...'"

What he says is that baptism and communion are what is meant with the first resurrection in Revelation 20:4,5:

"I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection."

This raises the point Henry Alford famously made on these two verses:

"If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned, where certain *psychai ezesan* [souls came to life] at the first, and the rest of the *nekroi ezesan* [dead came to life] only at the end of a specified period after the first, — if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave; — then there is an end of all

significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.”⁸

The text specifies that these souls had been beheaded. Is that now the same thing as baptism? There are some who would maintain that somebody who gets baptized has lost his head, but not with an ax, no? This is what I mean when I say that with this sort of interpretations only the sky is the limit...

Tsakanikas seems to have a profound dislike of literal ways of reading the Bible, and Revelation in particular. What is his problem? Any interpretation that would give the Jewish people a future outside the Church can only be suspect, whatever a given Scripture passage may affirm. Doctrine, independent of revealed truth determines what a text is supposed to mean. Any Scripture that seems to lead to a doctrinally wrong conclusion *must* be interpreted differently. Millennialism is an example:

“The “thousand years” of Revelation 20 is the age of the Church, the new Israel of God in the Messiah [...]. Christ’s priests, those already sincerely partaking in the Lamb when heaven and earth are joined in the liturgy which Christ established (1Corinthians 11:23-32), will have nothing to fear at the final judgment and general resurrection of all who have died. ...”

This has been the Church’s teaching as from the fourth to fifth century. Very early on, after the time of the apostles – who were all Jews – antisemitism started spreading within the Church. Already by the time of the Nicean Council of 325, this led for instance to the decision that Easter should never be celebrated on the day of the Jewish Passover. The emperor Constantine, convener of the Council, said:

“We ought not therefore to have any thing in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way. And consequently, in unanimously adopting this mold, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews. How

⁸ *The Greek Testament* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), iv, p.732.

can they be in the right, they who, after the death of the Savior, have no longer been led by reason but by wild violence as their delusion may urge them? It would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people as the Jews. It is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord."

Millennialism was seen as a Jewish fable. But what if the six mentions of a thousand year reign in Revelation 20 seemed to give credence to that very fable? A change in interpretation was called for. Probably inspired by the allegoric interpretation of Scripture, notably presented by Origen in the third century, a new way of explaining Revelation became the custom. The thousand year reign became an illustration of the reign of the Church which had so gloriously come to the fore with the conversion of the emperor and the empire. This new teaching has dominated the Church ever since. All other interpretations were outlawed, and the Bible became a virtually closed book.

Another three quotes from Tsakanikas:

"The true Jerusalem and Zion is spiritual and heavenly. It transcends anything earthly: "the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Galatians 4:26); and so, through the liturgies which Christ established, Christians "have come to Mount Zion ... the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:22)."

"Zion joins to earth only within the foundation of the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:14), the Israel of God. Through apostolic succession and mystery, God gives admittance to the Lamb at the new Jerusalem's center (Revelation 21:22-23) by the authority Jesus gave "to bind and loose." This is a clear reference to the divine liturgy and making present the body and blood of Christ as Jesus commissioned at the Last Supper and which John explains in chapter 6 of his Gospel. Under the appearance of bread and wine, Christ comes as the "lamb who was slain" (Revelation 5:6; 1Corinthians 11:26) and gathers the baptized (Revelation 14:1) as "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16) in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:10), present now in sign and power (Hebrews 6:5) but in full glory at the end of time."

"Entrance into the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21:10 is entrance into God's true temple through the "new veil" of bread and wine

(Hebrews 10:19; 1 Corinthians 5:8b) at the Sacrifice of the Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7b, 11:26; Revelation 21:22). To enter God's temple (which is the Lamb shown in 1 Corinthians 5:7b, 11:26) is to be a priest through Christ's priesthood (cf. 1 Peter 2:5,9 by being baptized) who receives Holy Communion. It is why those who died in Christ as martyrs and those brought to life in the first resurrection [baptism and communion (John 6:58)] are both already partaking in eternal life and "priests of God and of Christ ... who reign with him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6c). [Here I do not yet make distinctions between the sharing in Christ's priesthood by Baptism and the distinct ministerial share in apostolic succession.]"

Allow me to shortly comment on these remarks.

Tsakanikas wants to convince us to use a liturgical key to unlock Revelation. Believers enter the new Jerusalem through the liturgy of the [Catholic] Church. He writes elsewhere: "There are at least three mistakes involved in missing this: 1) not reading the Book of Revelation in accord with the Letter to the Hebrews [liturgically]"... It obviously is very true that we must read Revelation in accord with the rest of Scripture. For not doing so, many wander off into fanciful fantasies. But why single out Hebrews? And how then introduce into Hebrews the liturgies of the Catholic Church? Or confuse the once for all sacrifice of the Son of God with the so-called sacrifice of the Mass, and baptism with the first resurrection? In that case, doesn't Doctrine reign over a silenced Bible, in spite of so many references?

How do we enter into the New Jerusalem? Through apostolic succession and mystery, by the authority Jesus gave to bind and loose, authority which the Church has locked up securely in the Catholic priesthood? But Scripture is completely silent on apostolic succession, making it a non-authorized fiction of the Church which in spite of having been repeated for centuries cannot ever become an acceptable tradition.

The question is of course: does all this furnish a better reading of Revelation? Who says that Hebrews, explained in a Catholic way, provides a key to Revelation? Have we come to the

new Jerusalem through the liturgy of the Church, and must we understand, amongst others, the liturgy of confession as the Catholic Church has established it? Is such a conclusion helpful to give us a *biblical* understanding of Revelation, or does it muddle the pool? Does it increase our confidence that the rejection by this Church of any Millennialism is a sound doctrinal conclusion? And if not, does the book of Revelation encourage us to think that there is indeed a future for Israel?

Never, says Tsakanikas:

“For these reasons, the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ does not accept the pre-Millennialist theology of dispensationalists. Pre-Millennial Dispensationalists [PMD] deny that the Church is already the beginning of the “thousand year” [millennial] reign of Christ spoken of in Revelation 20:4-6. Not only do PMDs take the “thousand year” reign literally instead of canonically, symbolically, and liturgically, such dispensationalists make a false distinction between Israel and the Church...”

This is not only without any proof in Revelation or, for that matter, anywhere else in Scripture, it runs counter to the experience of these last two thousand years. No, the Church is not the promised reign of justice and peace, even at its beginning. Why is Church History so pitifully full of injustice and war, not the least caused and maintained by the Church of Rome, although Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Anglicanism have no reason to throw the first stone? And, so as to wipe out any distinction between Israel and the Church, hasn't the Church done its utmost to encourage the extermination of Israel? Its utmost. The word is sadly well chosen.

We must move on. What future is there in the Bible for Israel and how could this future relate to the Church of Jesus? My last chapter will provide some remarks both from the Old and New Testaments. The reason of this last section should be obvious. It is not enough to criticize the teaching of the Church. We must show there is a Biblical alternative.

Israel in history

One can hardly miss the many mentions about the future of Israel in the Hebrew prophets. So as not to repeat what I wrote in my previous article, let me quote some of these mentions from four of the less known prophets in order to “catch the music”:

“In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will put them on trial for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel, because they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land.”

“Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, “I am strong!” Come quickly, all you nations from every side, and assemble there. Bring down your warriors, LORD! Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side.”

“Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations.” (Joel 3:1-2,9-12,20)

“...I will bring my people Israel back from exile.” They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,” says the LORD your God.” (Amos 9:14-15)

“The day for building your walls will come, the day for extending your boundaries. In that day people will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, even from Egypt to the Euphrates and from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain. The earth will become desolate because of its inhabitants, as the result of their deeds.”

“Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago. “As in the days

when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders." Nations will see and be ashamed, deprived of all their power. They will put their hands over their mouths and their ears will become deaf. They will lick dust like a snake, like creatures that crawl on the ground. They will come trembling out of their dens; they will turn in fear to the LORD our God and will be afraid of you."

"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago." (Micah 7:11-20)

"On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD. They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid."

"At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD." (Zephaniah 3:11-13, 19-20)

Please note: none of these prophecies have been fulfilled as yet. It is on texts like these that the expectations of many Jewish and Christian people are grounded. Should they be understood spiritually? But what would that mean? Should they be applied to the Church? So the Church will be led for judgment to the Valley of Jehoshaphat? She will feed her flocks in Bashan as of old? She will plant vineyards in Samaria? Has present-day Israel merited such a messianic future? Of course not, no more than the Church of today. Oh, there will be spiritual blessings no doubt. And the Church will see these things and be joyful. And

present-day Israel must repent and will repent. But yes, this future will happen. Why? Because God is faithful to His word, to Israel as to us who have become disciples of His Messiah.

But how *can* the future for Israel and the future of the Church possibly relate to each other?

While working on my commentary on Revelation, that same question came up, as it should. Doesn't the New Testament declare impossible any literal future for Israel? Isn't Revelation silent on the future of Israel? But should we then tell Israel that God has reneged on His promises? That He has decided to apply them to those foreign nations that had gathered in some superficial way under the banner of a religion that bore the name of His Son but whose heart was ice-cold toward Him, and towards Israel? Is there another way? A way to a common future that would respect both Old and New Testament?

There is a surprising parallelism between the book of Ezekiel and Revelation. Both begin with the revelation of God in His Son, overwhelming both prophets. Both give a glimpse of the glory, as it leaves Jerusalem and the Temple for Ezekiel, or as it fills the heavens and returns to earth at the end of time for John. Both pronounce judgment on the nations and both see a proud city as the manifestation of the rebellion against Heaven, Tyre in Ezekiel, Babylon in Revelation. Both see that rebellion epitomized in an evil creature, Satan or the dragon, and each is expelled from Heaven. But where the parallelism gets most interesting is at the end of both books. First, there is the Messianic Kingdom in Ezekiel 37:15-28 and in Revelation 20:1-6. I will quote a few paragraphs from my commentary on Revelation:

"The prophet describes the reunification of the two parts of the people, Judah and Joseph, and the reign of David, fulfillment of the prophets' expectations. Then, in exactly the same place where John describes it, Ezekiel speaks of a brutal invasion that strikes the people of Israel. It is the revolt of Gog and Magog. Ezekiel specifies that this invasion, in a distant time, 38:8,16, affects a people who dwell safely

in an open country, 38:11,12. This people has returned to this land, “gathered from among the nations.” There is no question here of a long period of insecurity, war and encirclement, but of the brutal attack on a people that enjoys a peace that recalls what the prophets say elsewhere of the messianic reign. We cannot fail to observe that this can in no way be taken for the current situation. This prolonged time of peace in the land of Israel has not yet taken place and will not take place this side of the Millennium. We are on the verge of the revelation of the Beast, and not of a time of peace for the Jewish people. The charge of Gog and Magog is therefore still future and must take place after the thousand-year reign, exactly at the time John sees it taking place.

Seeing these chapters as a “spiritual” event concerning the Church is completely inadequate. At no point does the Church of Jesus Christ resemble this people at peace, living in open cities. We are at war, and it doesn't seem to be getting better! The roaring lion prowls around us. Persecution is rampant. The end times are upon us. A symbolic reading is simply not one of the interpretive options for the biblical text of Ezekiel 38 and 39. That this heavily influences the interpretation of Revelation 20 will be obvious.

In the parallelism, this text on the New Jerusalem stands side by side with Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of the temple, the city, and the land in chapters 40 to 48 of his book. The temptation is to *superimpose* these two texts and to interpret Ezekiel in terms of Revelation, excessively spiritualizing the details of the text. One of the main reasons behind this tendency to take this text in a symbolic sense (but without providing a truly satisfactory explanation) is the biblical impossibility of a return to the ceremonial sacrifices of the Law for those redeemed by Christ. The first covenant in the sense of a path towards forgiveness has been replaced by the new covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ.”

Does that put an end to all explanation of Ezekiel 40-47 as describing a literal temple at the center of the nation of Israel during the messianic reign? This is what one usually hears. But we should maybe give more attention to the text. The Jews of these chapters have not died and risen but they have survived the upheavals during the reign of the Beast and have been brought to the land of their fathers. They have seen their

Messiah come into His glorious rule and they have wept bitterly. They have become believers, but in an unusual situation. They aren't converted Christians saved by faith, for the simple reason that faith has given way to sight and the days of grace have come to an end.

"This therefore creates an unprecedented situation. On the one hand, we have the people of the new covenant, Jews and non-Jews, who form the new Jerusalem. On the other hand, we have believing Jews who no longer live under the old covenant—broken, as Ezekiel knows very well—but who also do not live under the new covenant. They live under the Law, but without being able to fully return to this Law as the path to God through the sacrifices announcing the great sacrifice of the Messiah. They live in the land of Israel, and a new temple is erected in the center, with such precise detail that it cannot be spiritualized.

[...]

Will the sacrifices offered in this millennial temple be effective in the atonement of sin? No more than under the old covenant. They will be a visible, repeated, and powerful image of Christ's unique sacrifice and a reminder to the world that sin is not a bad memory from times gone by. Even in the ideal situation of the messianic reign, men can only be saved by faith in this unique sacrifice. The temple will be an ultimate earthly representation of the heavenly tabernacle. The glory of God will fill it, 44.4. The people of Israel at that time will finally experience a life of worship such as they should have lived before. Indeed, God reminds the people through Ezekiel of their sins, 44.6, because of which they experienced the exile which will only definitively and truly end when God comes again to dwell among his people. As long as the Shekinah is not reestablished, the people keep wandering. Now, upon returning from the Diaspora, the generation that experienced the terrors of the end, cf. Revelation 12.14, will serve God according to the letter and to the spirit of the Law. "The nations will come up to the mountain of the Lord, and their sacrifices will be offered as burnt offerings on My altar, and they will be pleasing to Me, and I will make the house of My splendor to shine." (Isaiah 60:7)

[...]

However, in the New Jerusalem, the situation is radically different: there is no temple because the Lord God Almighty is its temple (Revelation 21:22). The city and the temple are integrated to the point of being inseparable. But the restored city of Jerusalem in Ezekiel is separated from the temple. These two texts clearly describe two distinct realities, even if they are, we believe, contemporary. Note that in this temple, there is no longer a separate courtyard for non-Jews. The dividing wall mentioned in Ephesians 2:14 has disappeared. In fact, many essential elements of the first temple are missing: the Ark of the Covenant and therefore, logically, the veil, the altar of incense, the lampstand, the table of showbread, the bronze laver. Upon closer inspection, both the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place appear to be empty except for the wooden altar mentioned in Ezekiel 41:22, of modest size, made of plain wood not overlaid with gold. This altar is the table before the face of the Lord. Clearly, this temple has a different role. It is not a step backward, but a step forward toward a new spiritual situation.

The texts of Ezekiel 40-48 and Revelation 21:9-22:5 are thus parallels. The prophet describes the destiny of the people of Israel at the return of the Messiah, while the visionary of Patmos sees the glory of the people of the new covenant. The New Jerusalem is not an updated image of the prophet's vision, but a parallel reality, a description of what God has reserved for those who follow him and who belong to his Son."

Because these situations are parallels, we must not *superimpose* but *juxtapose* them. In Gog and Magog, the two situations touch each other. Then, after the last judgment and after the destruction of this present earth, a new earth is created and time gives way to eternity.

Where will the new Jerusalem be during the messianic reign? The description in Revelation 21:9ss is a mix of heavenly and earthly details. It is a visible city and "The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it." (21:26) Which nations? After the old earth has disappeared, 21:1, will there still be 'nations'? Should we conclude that the new Jerusalem will be present during the millennial reign?

Impossible? Or the only conclusion that does justice to all the details? Note that Gog and Magog seem to have a double target: “they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city”. (20:9, RSV)

The beloved city must be Jerusalem, but what is ‘the camp of the saints’? Could it perchance be the new Jerusalem, doubtlessly invisible to those to whom this had not been given?

Before we decry such interpretations, shouldn’t we ask ourselves what we put in its place? What kind of fulfillment do we see for *all* the texts involved? Far too often, we jump to symbolical and spiritual conclusions that flourish particularly well there where the textual details are brushed aside with easy disdain and left in limbo. What should be clear to any attentive reader of both Old and New Testament: God will stick to His word in the detailed promises He has given both to Israel and to the Church.

Conclusion

Israel is Israel, not because all Israelites are accepted by God whatever their spiritual situation might be, but because that is the way the Bible speaks about Israel. There is a distinction between Israel “according to the flesh” and “the Israel of God”. But this distinction does not concern the question of the flesh as such, but the added question of faith. Only those who walk in the faith of Abraham are spiritual children of Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile. But only believing *Jews* are the Israel of God. They are the election of grace, the election inside the election, the remnant. They are not a closed group. Not only are there many Jews who over the centuries have put their faith in the Messiah, Jesus, and who continue to do so, but right at the end of this present world, as Jesus comes back to Jerusalem, He will send out a spirit of grace and supplication on Israel according to the flesh, and as the Messiah comes from Zion, “all Israel” will be saved.

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:33-36)