

‘In Spirit and Truth’ (John 4:24)

Practical-theological considerations on Israel in Christian spirituality

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1. Introduction

In an article in a Christian newspaper in the Netherlands, Roger F. G. van Oordt, who is the managing director of *Christians for Israel* in the Netherlands, explained that the Name of Christ is in the centre of the activities of his organisation. Simultaneously, though, the director of *Christians for Israel* speaks about ‘the works that God does in our day’. His explanation then takes a different turn. He writes about Jewish feasts, about the feeling of shame because of Christian arrogance towards Israel and about the ways in which Christians support Jewish people. He mentions a few miracles which are supposed to illustrate God’s work in our days: how Israel survived the 1948 and 1967 wars, new archaeological discoveries in the old City of Jerusalem, and the migration of Jews from Belarus to Israel. At the end of the article he writes:

All newspapers together would be too small to contain all the miracles that God in his great mercy demonstrates to Israel. We should hear about this miracle of divine faithfulness every Sunday. What an encouraging comfort.¹

Van Oordt’s words illustrate how in some Christian circles the focus has gradually moved from what God has done in Christ and what he does among those who believe in the Messiah of Israel and the world to what is happening in the Middle East. Van Oordt’s argument demonstrates a kind of Christian spirituality that radically focusses upon Israel, the people and the land. At about the same time that Van Oordt’s article was published, I received the annual invitation of a Christian Zionist newsletter, called ‘Israel Today’. This international group of Christians collects news items regarding the land of Israel, the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. Their reports are framed by a Christian eschatology and by the coming of God’s Kingdom. The choice of prayer intentions as communicated in the newsletter is at least remarkable. Readers of the newsletter are urged to pray for the IDF, the Israel Defence Forces, so that more believers may consider a military career. Prayer intentions concerning the *aliyah*, the immigration of Jewish people to the State of Israel, explicitly invite readers to pray that God will use terrorist attacks in Western Europe (such as in France and in the United Kingdom) to ‘demonstrate to the Jewish people that the land of Israel is a safe place to live in, and that God may use the result of elections in the United Kingdom to urge British Jews to ‘decide to move to Israel’. From the perspective of ecumenical relationships, such as those with Palestinian Christians, such prayer invitations should to be assessed critically. For the purposes of my essay, however, I confine myself to addressing the tension between Christology and ‘Israelism’ in Christian spirituality. Specific for Christian spirituality is its focus upon Christ and upon the salvation that God works through Him.

Some Christians propose a maximal integration of Jewish religious customs in Christian practices, resulting in new congregations, which read the Hebrew Bible with the help of Jewish commentaries, celebrate Jewish religious festivals, keep the Sabbath, and strictly follow the Torah rules. Because in Christian spirituality the believer becomes focussed upon Christ, these

¹ Roger F.G. van Oordt, ‘In elke uitgave van Christenen voor Israël staat de Heere Jezus centraal’ [‘In every publication of Christians for Israel the Lord Jesus Christ takes the centre’], *Reformatisch Dagblad*, June 7th, 2017 [<https://www.rd.nl/opinie/in-elke-uitgave-van-christenen-voor-isra%C3%ABl-staat-heere-jezus-centraal-1.1406655>, consulted September 8th, 2017]

developments require further reflection. Besides, it may be asked whether this expression of philosemitism is a kind of supersessionism in disguise, the annexation of Jewishness in a Christian framework. Yet a Christian theologian cannot decide on how the annexation of Jewish religious practices in the Christian religion is experienced within the wider interreligious dialogue, including the Jewish believers.

Christian theology, though, aims to focus on the subject of the uniqueness and the essence of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In this essay I approach this question from the perspective of Christian spirituality. 'Salvation is from the Jews', Jesus tells the Samaritan woman in John 4. This statement has had at least a threefold impact upon Christian spirituality. First, Christianity received the worship of the God of Israel through Jesus of Nazareth. Christians worship no other God than the God of Israel. Salvation emerges from God's dealings with Israel. Second, Christians and Jews share the Old Testament, in the Christian-Jewish dialogue generally known as the Hebrew Bible. That Christians use the term 'Old Testament' demonstrates that the same text is read in a different hermeneutical framework. In the background is the distinction between the old and the new covenant, a distinction made by the writer of the book of Hebrews (Hebr. 8). Nonetheless, Christianity shares the Hebrew Bible with the Jewish religion.

In the remainder of this essay spirituality is used as an interaction of practices. Spirituality also refers to an attitude. This relates to the third aspect. The unique history of Israel as a nation among which God has revealed Himself evokes a different religious emotion than that which is felt toward other nations, despite the fact that theologians do not have a unanimous answer to the question of whether the difference between Israel and the nations is still religiously relevant after Pentecost.² The spiritual attitude of gratitude embodies this religious emotion. Israel passed on God's revelation to the world. This gift can only be received with gratitude. This characteristically Christian spiritual attitude emerges from Jesus's saying that salvation is from the Jews.

2. 'Where do we have to worship?'

The encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan women in John 4 counts as a prophetic moment in the gospel. After the woman acknowledged that Jesus was a prophet sent by God, she asked a question about true worship: "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Her inquiry 'where do we have to worship' refers to an age-old conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Perhaps every religious conflict goes back to only one question, certainly the conflict between Jews and Samaritans does: 'Who are the people of God and what are the claims, promises and duties involved?' Is Jesus able to tell her whether she is allowed to worship God in her own place, Mount Gerizim, or does she have to accept that she has to go to the Temple in Jerusalem, to worship in the Jewish way? Jesus' answer in John 4:21-24 is remarkable:

'Believe me', He says, 'a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.'

What is implied in Jesus' answer to the question regarding the true worship of the one and only God? Five elements attract the attention. First, Jesus focusses upon Himself ('believe me'). In

² For instance Kendall Soulen defends the view that the distinction between Israel and the other peoples is still theologically relevant. R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

John's Gospel this is to be taken as a self-expression of Jesus as the apocalyptic prophet. John the Evangelist identifies Jesus with the highest authority, the most faithful witness of God. The inquiry after the true worship of God leads to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, according to the Gospel of John. Next, Jesus speaks about a rupture in time ('a time is coming and has now come'). The Gospel of John already anticipated this in the conversation between Jesus and Mary his mother (John 2). Jesus tells Mary: 'My hour has not yet come.' Mother Mary rightly feels that another time is coming. How future and present – coming and now – associate depends upon the coming of the Son of God, until it will be revealed – also for the Son – when the time is there, and Jesus knew that the time had come (John 13:1).³

Thirdly, Jesus marks the difference between Jew and non-Jew ('we worship what we do know'), because God has revealed salvation among Israel. Israel is not an arbitrary reality, but is intrinsically connected with knowing the one true God. Israel's God is the one and only God. The perspective of salvation history makes clear how Jesus emerges from the people with which God entered into a relationship to reveal his redemptive purposes.⁴

Fourthly, the coming of Jesus creates a change in the worship of God: true knowledge and worship of God concentrates on Jesus the Son. Jesus' addressing God as Father is a particular element in John's Gospel as it emphasizes the unity of Jesus and the God of Israel. The early Christians explained this unity with help of the Christological dogma of the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures.

Finally, worship is embedded in concrete, material reality, it takes place at a certain time and at a certain place – according to generally accepted Kantian categories – but foremost worship is a spiritual attitude. The 'geography' of spirituality is the geography of the human spirit as Jesus talks about 'worship in spirit and truth'. In summary, in the conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus does what he usually does in His teaching and in His conversations: He directly addresses the core of the Torah and speaks with Israel from the heart of God's covenant. Ceremonies, holy places, such as the Temple, and religious practices are needed indeed to mediate God's truth and to sustain faithful worship. Worship, however, primarily is an attitude of the human spirit. External forms are helpful, in certain ways they condition the content of worship. Yet in the end, true worship is determined by the spiritual attitude of the human heart. It is focussed on God, as God is spiritual Himself; it is love for His truth, as Jesus is the ultimate revelation of truth. Christian spirituality has an inner and an outer dimension, the mystical and the public aspects.⁵ Spiritual realities have an external, empirical shape.

Although much more can be said exegetically about John 4,⁶ for the purposes of this essay the following three summarized insights are most relevant:

- a. The Person and work of Jesus Christ provides the norm for true worship. He is God's Truth in Person, He is the Son who addresses God freely as Father, and He reveals himself as the ultimate religious authority ('believe in me').
- b. The worship of Israel's God closely relates to the way of Israel ('we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews'). God's history with Israel is anchored in true worship. Perhaps the Dutch theologian Simon Schoon exaggerates this point when he writes that Jesus' identity today is none other

³ The nature of eschatology in the gospel of John needs to be addressed as different issue.

⁴ This provides a first answer to the charge of anti-judaism in the gospel of John. About the exegetical complexity that surrounds this topic, see Judith Lieu, 'Anti-Judaism, the Jews, and the Worlds of the Fourth Gospel', in: Richard Bauckham and Carl Moser (editors), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008, p. 168-182.

⁵ Philip Sheldrake, 'Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic', in: *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (April 23, 2003): p.19-37.

⁶ See Benny Thettayil, *In Spirit and Truth: An Exegetical Study of John 4:19-26 and a Theological Investigation of the Replacement Theme in the Fourth Gospel*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2007.

than the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, but he rightly sides with the German theologian Marquardt when he reminds us of Jesus's Jewish roots as expressed in John 4:22.⁷

c. Jesus relativizes the form of worship, its place and its ceremonial conditions, and He localises the worship of God in the spiritual attitude of believers. Yet this does not imply the individualisation of spirituality that we encounter in many forms of contemporary spirituality. It points to a minimal criterion for Christian spirituality: practices of faith need to be shaped in such a way that they focus upon God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

The essays in this volume address an excessive emphasis on Israel in Christian theology and practice. My own understanding of 'excessive' may be derived from the above, namely when the focus upon Israel creates a theological tension which puts the spiritual orientation upon Christ under pressure. I therefore understand Israelism, the topic of interest in this volume, as the inner-Christian phenomenon in which the interest in Israel becomes leading for Christian spirituality, such as mentioned in the examples at the start of this essay. In this article I state that such an overarching attention to Israel in Christian thinking and practice deprives Christian spirituality of its christocentric focus. The sending of Jesus Christ is a rupture in time and it fundamentally changed the way in which God encounters humans. This essay does not so much address the relationship between church and synagogue, but it questions the attention given to Israel in Christian spirituality. Contemporary Christianity shows an increasing interest in Jewish religious feasts and ceremonies, for example by integrating Passover meals in Christian worship, and in pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

This article contributes to the theological reflection about these phenomena, presenting three different Christian spiritual practices as illustrations for the tension between a focus on Christ or a focus on Israel in Christian spirituality: the celebration of Holy Communion, the local congregation as a sacred place, and the eschatological expectation of Christians. These three practices provide cases to reflect upon the ceremonial, geographic and eschatological aspects of Christian spirituality. Worshipping God is shaped in ceremonies,⁸ it takes place in concrete locations where people meet, and it concerns the moving forward of time towards the final advent of God's Kingdom. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman deals with these three dimensions of worship. From that point onwards the form, space and time of worship in John 4 are determined by Jesus Christ.

3. Holy Communion, the basic form of Christian spirituality

In this contribution I present the sacrament of Holy Communion – or the celebration of the Lord's Table or the Eucharist, as it is called in various Christian traditions – as an exemplary form for worshipping the God of Israel. In eucharistic theology, the nature of the presence of Christ is at stake. Theology always involves a particular concrete form. In those traditions in which the real presence is intrinsically linked with the elements of bread and wine, this may lead to a practice that includes a respectful observance of the sacred host, a more formal role of the clergy in distributing the elements, while the congregants receive bread and wine kneeling. In the more Zwingly-oriented theologies of communion, the sharing of bread and wine is understood in a more communal way. This shapes the ritual accordingly: more informal, with less emphasis on clergy or consecrated instruments, possible in the setting of a usual private living room. Apart from the various theological convictions concerning the presence of Christ in the sacrament, a theological dispute that divided Reformation Europe sharply, it is nonetheless a common Christian view that Christian spirituality is shaped by the sacrament: Christians focus upon the Living Lord, based upon God's salvific actions in the past, and in

⁷ Simon Schoon, *De weg van Jezus. Een christologische heroriëntatie vanuit de joods-christelijke ontmoeting*, Kampen 1991, p. 150.

⁸ In ritual studies the term 'ritual' is more common.

doing so a social reality – the congregation – emerges and is sustained, until the day Christ reappears.

The various Christian traditions differ widely when it comes to the practice and theology of Holy Communion: high- and low church liturgy, episcopal or congregationalist organisation, transubstantiation or spiritualisation, open or closed communion, pietist or liberation theology spirituality. These many differences, however, can be summarized under three common elements: (a) bread and wine make us remember the suffering and death of Jesus Christ; (b) they are shared among the believers; and (c) they create an awareness in the present that we participate in salvation brought about by Christ. Holy Communion is the ultimate ceremony in which Christian spirituality takes shape. Perhaps even more than prayer, which phenomenologically is more common among religions worldwide. Perhaps the fact that the Eucharist is so central to Christian spiritual practice causes ecumenical pain when borders are set around the table of the Lord. Excommunication in many Christian traditions ultimately means exclusion from the community of the Lord's Table. In the eucharistic practice, the very core of Christian faith is at stake: the communion with God, the unity of the believers and the Kingdom of God both in the present and in future. Increasingly, though, Christians are starting to incorporate Jewish festivals into their religious practice. One example is the integration of Passover meals in the period of Easter. In most cases, however, those Christians do not join a Messianic-Jewish community, but they adopt a Jewish religious practice, which they desire to integrate in their own, Christian, liturgical repertoire.

The historical connection between Passover and Eucharist of Holy Communion is very complex. Part of this complexity is the parting of church and synagogue during the first centuries of early Christianity. The theological complexity in the relationship of Passover and Holy Communion, though, has three components. First, a ritual component: which actions, symbols and practices account for the difference between Jewish Passover and the Christian Eucharist? Look for example at the differences in liturgical texts, the words of Christ 'this is my body', and the different ingredients of the meals. Secondly, an historical component: the genesis of the Eucharist as a Christian rite evidently connects the Jewish Passover – the remembrance meal of salvation according to Exodus 12 – and Jesus' meal with His disciples in the night before He would be crucified. Despite the discussion among exegetes whether the Last Supper was the actual celebration of the Passover, it is clear that Jesus provided a new understanding of the meal.⁹ Thirdly, a religious-referential component: Passover refers to the Exodus, the release of the Jewish people out of Egypt, whereas Holy Communion refers to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The content of Passover – God's salvific actions in the liberation of his people from the power of Egypt – differs from the content of the Eucharist (God's redemptive actions in the cross and resurrection of Christ). Yet the act of remembrance and the presence of salvation have a common denominator: the God of Israel acts in history in a salvific way and we have to be reminded of salvation again and again to experience that we are part of it.

Yet Passover and Eucharist remain distinct liturgical practices. If anything creates a difference, the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ does. Christology functions as liturgical 'identity marker'. Pesach emphasizes the unity of the Jewish people and the election of Israel, while the Eucharist emphasizes the sacrifice of Christ as Lamb of God for the world and the unity of the body of Christ. Without further elaboration of this complexity, it is relevant to ask what is meant by adding the celebration of Passover. What does it mean for the Christian practice of celebrating the Eucharist or Holy Communion?

⁹ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, New edition edition, London : Philadelphia: SCM Press, 2011. See also: Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research*, Walter de Gruyter, 2006.

In the light of these considerations, a few questions emerge. First, could the practice among some Christian groups of integrating Passover celebrations in the week before Easter entail a kind of positively intended supersessionist thinking? A Jewish holy time is reframed within a Christian system of beliefs. The search for renewed positive connections with Israel simultaneously entails a change of meaning of the Jewish ritual of Passover.

Secondly, could this change of meaning, on the other hand, abrogate the change of meaning that took place when Jesus instituted the repetition of the Last Supper ('as often as you do this in remembrance of me') and that the early Christians received as 'handed over by the Lord himself' (1 Cor. 11)?

Thirdly, what does the integration of Passover in the Christian community imply for the spiritual attention of those who celebrate Holy Communion? In brief, the two signs of bread and wine point to the suffering and death of Christ. The additions of other elements, borrowed from the Passover tradition, at least diffuse the christocentric meaning of Holy Communion.

Finally, we have to distinguish between rituals that belong to Jewish believers because of their Jewishness and Christian rituals that enact the narrative of Christ. Christians should leave the combination of Passover and Holy Communion to Jewish believers in Christ, enabling them to express their Jewishness and their Christian faith, without taking over Jewish rituals in a non-Jewish environment.

The sharing of bread and wine – thus sharing in the reconciling work of Christ – functions as an 'identity marker' of the Christian community and symbolizes a spiritual concentration upon Jesus Christ. Despite the complexity of the connection between Passover and Easter, there is hardly any discussion about the question whether Jesus changed the meaning of Passover during the last Supper with His disciples: He started to connect the story of Passover with His own story of suffering and death, turned His disciples into witnesses of this event and commanded through the Apostles that the body of believers, being the body of Christ, would continue to 'do this until He would come again'. What happens with this central Christian religious practice when the references to Christ are changed into references to identity-shaping moments in the history of the Jewish people? In the encounter between Church and Synagogue the Christian Church should desist from appropriating a Jewish practice for its own Christian purposes. Likewise, in reference to the Christian tradition, it may lead to a weakening of the references that shape a christocentric understanding of the Holy Communion. The nations of this earth are united with each other and with Israel because of Christ, not because of the Exodus story. Only Messianic Jews – the name may be somewhat unfortunate, however, because Messianic expectations are intertwined with the Jewish religion – can meaningfully integrate Passover and Eucharist: the remembrance of God's redemptive actions in the Exodus story, in which the identity of the Jewish people is expressed, can be combined by them with the signs of bread and wine, the remembrance of God's redemptive actions in Christ, in which the identity of the people of Christ is expressed. It would imply a particular spiritualisation of Israel to apply the liberation from Egypt to the Christian community without any reservations.

4. Where do we worship God? The geography of Christian spirituality

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman revives the old conflict about the proper place of worship. Do we have to worship God at Mount Zion in Jerusalem or are we allowed to worship at Mount Gerizim? Jesus, however, does not answer the question directly, and not in terms of space: 'a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.' (John 4:23-24) The woman's question concerns a location: some places are more holy than other places.

Geography gives us orientation in the world. Spirituality has a geography too: where do we worship God and where is the Holy One to be found? Fundamental to Jewish faith is that God is without location. He is the Invisible One. Transgressing the commandment that forbids the making of idols is a serious act because it denies the very nature of God. The Holy One is not to be captured in images nor in words. In Israel the act of prophecy is iconoclastic. Except for a symbolic shrine, the ark of the covenant, the most Holy place in Israel's Temple is empty. This makes Jesus' answer a thoroughly Jewish answer: God is God. It may be a phenomenologically unique feature of Israel's faith that God is nowhere to be found.

In his explanation of visuality in Christian spirituality, Alister McGrath addresses the question of whether it is possible to 'see' God. Before writing about holy places, he deals with the Incarnation: Jesus as the 'the authorized visual image of God'.¹⁰ In Christ 'grace and truth' (John 1:17) have become human. In His conversation with Peter, Jesus deals with the question of the location of God in a surprisingly different manner. He does not give coordinates on a map, but in determining His spiritual geography He points to the community of His disciples: 'for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Mt. 18:20). Only after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the full impact of these words was revealed. The peace of Christ (John 20:21-22) and the continuing presence of the living Lord (Matthew 28:20) point to a spiritual presence, in which Jesus' answer to the Samaritan woman's question that God is Spirit and is worshipped in spirit and truth, find their fulfilment. The question of where God is to be worshipped does not require an answer that includes geographical grid references. The plain answer is this: God can be worshipped anywhere, because Israel's God is everywhere, due to the presence of Christ's Spirit.

The reality of God's omnipresence according to the New Testament puts Christian desires to search for God's presence through pilgrimages and religious travels in a debatable perspective. Though Jerusalem has become a Holy City for Jews, Muslims and Christians, Christian spirituality contains a critical note that warns against the localization of salvation. This has two consequences. First, journeys to the Holy Land will always create a tension regarding the confession that Christ is present among the faithful gathered in His name wherever they are in the world. Secondly, the Middle East is not the privileged place where Christians have to look for God's actions in the world. Everyday life and the congregation are. In the remainder of this section, the first point deserves elaboration: Christian spirituality is a spirituality of journeying in so far it concerns the mission of God. But it is at the same time a spirituality that criticizes religious tourism. The next section addresses the spiritual attitude of Christians in enduring the foggy appearances of history, in restraining the longing for speculations, and in striving for peace and justice here and now.

Sociologists have pointed out the similarities between medieval pilgrimages and religious tourism to the Holy Land.¹¹ Shapiro says:

'Christian Zionist travel to Israel is journeying to the apple of God's eye. Regardless of how 'secular' or 'political' we might think it to be, participants' reliance on religious language to justify and authorize their actions places their travel squarely in the realm of pilgrimage.'¹²

Though pilgrimage is a recurring topic in contemporary literature on spirituality, the Christian attitude towards pilgrimage is two-sided; both sides are represented by the Apostles Paul and Peter, embodied in their letters and lives.

¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell 2003, Chapter 6.

¹¹ William H. Swatos, *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, edited by William H. Swatos Jr and Luigi Tomasi, Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002. N. Collins-Kreiner and N. Kliot, 'Pilgrimage Tourism in the Holy Land: The Behavioural Characteristics of Christian Pilgrims', in: *GeoJournal* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2000), p.55-67.

¹² Faydra L. Shapiro, 'To the Apple of God's Eye: Christian Zionist Travel to Israel', in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (October 1, 2008), p.307-20.

The Apostle Paul was a traveller. He journeyed from town to town, was continually on the move, he moved back to Jerusalem to encourage the Christian church and was restless in his peregrinations. As a pilgrim he was never at home, because he had become part of God's movement. In his travelling, Paul devoted himself to the growth – quantitatively and qualitatively – of the Christian community, to the movement of the Gospel from Israel to the nations of the world. His travelling touches other examples of people who started travelling because they had heard God's call: Abraham, Moses and Jonah, Miriam, Ruth and Mary. Eventually, the travelling person can only be understood theologically, because God called him or her to it. God himself moves and creates movement: the Father sends the Son, and both the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit. Paul embodies this *Missio Dei* in his missionary travels. He is the pilgrim who shares in the mission of God, or the pilgrim used by God to continue his mission, just as in the sixth century, when Augustine went to Great Britain (Canterbury) and in the seventh century, when Willibrord moved to the Low Countries.

The Apostle Peter addresses the readers of his letters as 'God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces' (1 Pet. 1:1). Christian 'exile' is another aspect of pilgrimage; being on the move because your true home is elsewhere. Yet this does not entail the renouncing of earthly life, but an attitude of 'being in transition'. The exile, as it is called by Peter, does not lead to a Stoic way of everyday life, imperturbably. The Apostle calls for actively serving Christ, even if that implies suffering in the current situation (1 Pet. 2). It is not a call to walk away, but to stay instead. Paradoxically, this aspect of pilgrimage looks more like *stabilitas loci*, staying at the place that you have been called to.

Both aspects, the journey as part of the *Missio Dei* and the shaping of Christian life in the awareness that this world is only temporary, are joined together in the Christian community, the local congregation. This centrifugal movement of God's presence and the dislocation of salvation emerges in the communion of His disciples. It moves to the dispersed communities of Christians all over the world. Is this a new phenomenon which is unique for Christianity? God reveals His glory in communities all over the world and one does not need to travel to find a sacred place. Jesus did not answer the Samaritan woman's question concerning the correct mountain for the proper worship of God. Instead, He spoke about worshipping God in spirit and truth. The Spirit of God and the truth of the Gospel are found in the congregation, where people worship God according to the Spirit and where they shape their lives according to the Gospel. Craig Bartholomew says:

'The primary place in which we encounter Christ is in the local congregation, as we gather around him to hear his address and to eat and drink of his life. The Christ we encounter is the one who stands with His face turned toward His world; having borne in His body the wounds of the world, He sends us out from his table to work alongside the Spirit (*Missio Dei*) in bringing hope and healing to His world.'¹³

For that reason the widespread practice of religious tourism among Protestant, mainly Evangelical, Christians can be questioned. They seek encouragement in their faith by visiting the Holy Land while they neglect ecumenical relationships, such as local congregations among Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians. Christians do not meet Christ in Jerusalem, but in the local congregation, the place where God's promise is preached, Holy Communion is celebrated, and God's Kingdom of justice is put into practice.

¹³ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for To-day*, Baker Academic, 2011, p. 320. See also: Fred Hughes and Craig Bartholomew (eds.), *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, first edition, Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2004.

5. 'A time is coming and has now come.' Christian spirituality as historical spirituality in the here and now

Christian faith actively engages with time. First, God's dealing with world is embedded in historical events. The God of Israel is not a God of myths but a God of history. Secondly, the future is fundamentally open. Christian faith lives from the promise of a new heaven and earth and a new appearing of Christ. In other words, Christianity entails eschatology, a doctrine of the 'last things'. History is full of moments when God reveals Himself, and the final moment – if temporal categories are adequate – is still open. Salvation history is not yet closed. With Abraham, we expect a city with foundations (Hebr. 11:10) and with the Apostle John we look forward to Jerusalem coming down from heaven in a way that fits a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:2). This new reality is qualified by a new presence of God. He, then, will be 'the 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28). Eschatology is a doctrinal term, Christian spirituality concerns an attitude of expectation and the virtue of hope.

The idea of salvation history, though, is a rather complex idea. Do events in history bear the mark of divine revelation or is additional 'interpretation' of history needed before one may assume a divine revelatory act? In other words, is salvation a feature of reality or is it an interpretation afterwards? Another aspect concerns the miraculous. Does salvation history consist of a series of miraculous events? And do miracles speak for themselves? It may be helpful at this point to compare the events of Jesus' crucifixion and His resurrection. Apart from the special signs that accompany Jesus' crucifixion, such as the tearing apart of the curtain in the Temple, the open graves, the earthquake and the solar eclipse – as reported by the Gospels – the crucifixion of Christ in itself is not a miraculous event. It would be considered a miscarriage of justice instead. Through the witnesses, such as the Evangelists and the Apostles, the crucifixion receives its soteriological interpretation. The centurion overseeing the crucifixion expresses the belief that Jesus is the Son of God; John the evangelist informs us about the time of Jesus's death: the time that in the Temple lambs are slaughtered to be sacrificed; the Apostle Paul connects the death of Christ with the curse because of sin. Through these testimonies, Gospel writings and early Christian letters, the salvific significance of the cross becomes clear.

On the other hand, the resurrection of Christ is a miraculous event indeed. Yet the resurrection of Christ as a salvific event cannot be derived evidently from the facts of the empty grave and the appearances of the Living One. The New Testament letters, however, reflect upon these facts as salvific. The apostles write about the expectations that are raised by the resurrection of Christ, and they address its salvific significance, such as in the renewal of believers in the light of baptism and through the working of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the crucifixion and resurrection, the question emerges of whether the whole of human history, including all its events, should be seen as salvation history. A theological rationale for this, could be that God is providentially involved in world history. Yet with an approach like this, the specific aspect disappears in favour of the general aspect. If all world events are part of salvation history, the whole Christian idea that salvation is connected to historical events becomes obsolete.

When we select only those events that are experienced as 'miraculous', however, we do not arrive at a clear understanding of salvation history either. From most of Christ's miracles it can be concluded that they are part of salvation history. The feeding of the 5000 or the healing of the blind, being signs of the Kingdom, as miraculous events are to be considered significant for all believers at all times, as they determine the course of history in the direction of God's coming Kingdom. The feeding of the crowd and the healing of the blind do not have the same significance as cross and resurrection. In summary, the concept of 'salvation history' is not a simple theological concept that can be used intuitively.

It is clear, however, that faith in Israel's God, as professed by Jews and non-Jews, is anchored in human history. God's salvation in which humans may share is a proclaimed salvation. We have to put our trust in the proclamation of the good news concerning certain events in history in which God works out His salvation for humankind. It is proclaimed, but grounded in historical events: Abraham's call, the liberation from Egypt, the reign of David, the birth of Christ. In twentieth-century theology lots of ink has been spilled about the question of whether divine revelation is located in events or also includes the interpretation of these events. These considerations are important for the way believers understand and interpret historical events. How do we read the times? How do we interpret contemporary events? If believers think they have to identify God's hand in the events of world history, this is usually done from the motivation to identify God's salvific actions. Eschatological expectations somehow motivate believers to identify events as part of a larger salvific movement: God is acting towards his future and events X and Y are supposed to indicate this.

Like followers of the Jewish faith, Christians expect an open future that is filled. The filled future of Christians and Jews is the future of the Messiah. Christians express this expectation in the Apostolic confession as it speaks about the Crucified and Resurrected One in the future tense: *inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos*. Throughout the ages this 'filled expectation' has been made concrete in all kinds of fulfilments. The openness of the coming of the Messiah is constantly threatened by predictions around certain dates or particular events that were supposed to manifest the signs of Christ's appearance and of the new world of God's Kingdom. These eschatological predictions have been projected as 'prophetic'. In a more nuanced version, these prophecies included the multi-interpretability of events. Indeed, the 'what' and 'how' of the last things cannot be derived from certain dates of events. Characteristic for the prophetic-eschatological approach in Christianity is its tendency to structure history in certain periods.

In the Reformed tradition this became particularly known as 'federal theology' or covenantal theology, with the Dutch 17th-century theologian Johannes Cocceius as its most famous representative. The structure of the end of times, with phases and dispensations, could become very detailed (for instance in Dispensationalism). All kinds of chiliastic imaginations – or should we call them 'fantasies' – complement this 'end-of-times' thinking, especially the role of Israel is significant in these theologies. Israel is awarded a passive role (when the attention is mostly directed towards the conversion of Jews to Jesus the Messiah) or a more active role (when the interest focusses upon the actions of the current Jewish state). In the first approach, something should happen to Jews (namely conversion) before the end time is there. Jewish people are turned into passive instruments to serve in a Christian view of world history. The second approach, however, reads world events and puts the actions of the Jewish state and the surrounding nations into a framework of continuing salvation history. The centre of the world is the Middle East and Jerusalem is supposed to be the place where God's action is taking place. The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 is an important democratic and sovereign event and has been interpreted – with more or less caution¹⁴ – as a divine action in world history. But, going a step further, should 1948 also be interpreted as part of salvation history? Should it be incorporated in Christian theology as an event that draws nearer the coming Kingdom of God and the appearance of Christ? Especially the latter option is both theologically speculative and morally reckless. It is speculative because the idea of salvation history is being used naively, without normative and confessional 'backing'. It is reckless, because it encourages the idea that humans are called to contribute actively to the coming of Christ. Above all, this approach is very problematic as it subjugates the history of the Jewish people to a Christian and functional theological framework: Israel has a role to play in a Christian

¹⁴ See Mackay, Ewald. *Gedenksteden in de Jordaan: een bundel opstellen over geschiedenis, traditie en cultuur*. Heerenveen: Groen, 2000, 37-49.

eschatological narrative. Morally problematic, also, because it leads to theologically motivated favouritism on the stage of world events and world politics. In the end, the tension within Christian theological ethics becomes almost unbearable: two understandings of the ‘prophetic’ are fundamentally at odds. On the one hand, an eschatological interpretation of world history, including the role that Israel has to play in this scheme. On the other hand the coherence between Biblical prophecy and ethics: prophetic action concerns a call for justice between concrete peoples and nations.

What are the consequences of this for Christian spirituality? First, to a Christian spirituality belongs the attitude to endure the fog of history. We can only interpret events in the light of God’s way with the world from the wise perspective that the Apostle Paul presents when he writes that we ‘we see in a mirror dimly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Secondly, it is part of Christian spirituality to postpone judgment and not to jump to conclusions in viewing world events in their possible consequences for the coming of God’s Kingdom, in whatever ‘phase’ it may happen. Christians should not engage in speculations and should be reticent; they should not overestimate themselves by attempting to look into God’s reign in the world or even by trying to contribute to God’s reign. Christians live in the here and now; they have to remain close to everyday life, and not to engage in seductive musings and speculative interpretations of world events to serve their eschatological frameworks. Thirdly, in the here and now, Christians strive to serve justice and peace, they are attentive to everyday life and learn to love both friends and foes. It seems some Christians first love the Jew and then the Greek; but perhaps they rather apply the apostolic advice to first love the brother and sister in faith and then every other human being alike. Finally, it is part of the riddle of history, that while postponing judgment and doing justice, Christians engage in disputes. The practice of disagreement is a Christian spiritual practice.¹⁵ In any case, in the end of times it will be revealed that some Christians have been on the morally wrong side of things, others will have defended a right case though sometimes through doubtful means, while others fought for a right cause and encountered misunderstanding, even became disowned. World history is full of periods in which Christians, with hindsight, took wrong positions on slavery or women, they fought religious wars, they supported Apartheid. In other words, Christians have defended all kinds of moral positions for shorter or longer periods in world history. It belongs to a Christian spirituality to accept this as a sad fact of brokenness.

This leads to a final consideration. Christian spirituality is a spirituality that entails debate and disagreement due to the Christian idea of conversion: we have to be renewed in our minds, an act of the Spirit but embedded in the community of saints in which we meet and gather to be illumined by the Spirit and to discern truth in the knowledge and wisdom of fellow believers. Hence having fiery debates is a Christian practice. When Christians disagree sincerely they should expect a lot from spiritual discernment. The exchange of opinions and perspectives, without excommunicating one another as members of the one body of Christ, calls for a mature spiritual attitude. The Apostles themselves demonstrated this attitude. Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James. They were not on the same page all the time. They disagreed fiercely, they opposed each other vehemently, but they all stood up for the right cause of the Kingdom of God and the worldwide body of Christ. When we apply this insight to the topic of this chapter, the conclusion must be that Christian spirituality in the light of eschatology does not entail the ‘correct’ chiliastic position, nor exclusive activism for or against the Palestinian case, nor a contribution to the Aliyah, the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the land of Israel. Above all it is about a spiritual attitude that keeps itself in tune with different interests and loyalties, to discern truth and justice in the here and now and to be steadfast in the hope for a new constellation of heaven and earth, and to keep alive the expectation of Christ’s

¹⁵ See also Myers, Benjamin. 2012. *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*. London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 51-58.

reappearance. In the dim light of history and the many moral conflicts, versatile loyalty cannot be embodied by one person or one group only. We need the worldwide Church as a whole to embody such an attitude. We have to embrace debate and confusion, not as ultimate reality, but as a spiritual attitude in a broken world. Perhaps the Samaritan woman was left with a similar confusion when Jesus said to her ‘a time is coming and has now come’ (John 4:23).

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