

“SALVATION IS OF THE JEWS”: THOMAS F. TORRANCE’S DOCTRINE OF ISRAEL

Stan Maclean

Keimyung University, Republic of Korea

INTRODUCTION

There have been several studies of Karl Barth’s doctrine of Israel,¹ but hardly any research has been done on what Thomas F. Torrance, Barth’s greatest ambassador, had to say about Israel.² This paper is an attempt to close this gap. It is based on a number of scattered references to the subject in Torrance’s major works, along with a small collection of essays and lectures on Israel and the Jews. This article demonstrates that Torrance’s doctrine reflects the tectonic shift in the twentieth century in the Christian stance towards the Jews. This shift was precipitated by the enormity of the Holocaust. “The Christian Church can never be the same after the Holocaust,” Torrance wrote.³

This new approach involved a vigorous repudiation of all forms anti-Semitism, a clarion call to recover the Jewishness of Jesus, and a resolute affirmation of the ongoing validity of God’s covenant with Israel.⁴ Barth was at the forefront of this change. In stark contrast to his liberal predecessors, who had detached Jesus from his Jewish roots, Barth insisted that whoever has Jesus Christ through faith “must have” the Jews “along with Jesus Christ as his ancestors and kinsmen.”⁵ Doubtless, Barth’s thoughts on the Jews had an impact on Torrance, who also underlined the Jewish origins of Christianity and the irrevocable nature of God’s promises to Israel. Following Barth, he also spoke about one covenant of grace with its twofold expression as Israel and the Christian Church.

On the other hand, the essay demonstrates that Torrance’s doctrine of Israel goes farther than that of his master in Basel. Barth was no lover of the Jews, but Torrance clearly was. Christians not only must have the Jews, they *need* the Jews, Torrance exclaimed. They need the Jews to understand Jesus better, and

¹ In English we have George Hunsinger, ed. *Karl Barth, the Jews, and Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); Mark Lindsay, *Barth, Israel, and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel* (London: Routledge, 2007); Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s “Doctrine of Israel”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

² The most we have so far is a chapter on Israel in Kevin Chiarot’s book *The Unassumed is the Unhealed: The Humanity of Christ in the Christology of T. F. Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013); a chapter that deals only with ancient Israel and its preparatory role in the incarnation.

³ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and the Destiny of Israel,” in *The Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), 86.

⁴ See, for example, World Council of Churches, “Concerns of the Churches—The Christian Approach to the Jews,” Amsterdam Assembly, 1948 <<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1948-amsterdam/concerns-of-the-churches-the-christian-approach-to-the-jews>>; also Roman Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate* http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html#.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 289.

they need them to complete the church's divine mission in the world. Both Barth and Torrance saw the Jews acting as a continuing witness to God. Still, while the former understood this witness mainly in the form of God's judgement, the latter understood this witness equally in the form of God's salvation. The Jews are not only "the flesh Christ judged, rejected, and condemned."⁶ They are the flesh that God is raising up. Torrance also distinguishes himself from Barth by allowing the history of diaspora Jews to inform his doctrine. Zionism and the Holocaust interpreted Christologically, are therefore central to his theology of Israel.

JESUS, JEW OF ISRAEL

Jews and Christians are divided over Jesus of Nazareth. Yet this man is also the ground of the unity between them. To know how Torrance understands Jesus is to know Torrance's theology, including his theology of Israel. The core of his theology is an elevated Christology, one defined by the hypostatic union of God and man in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is not half God and half human; rather he is fully God and fully human, and it is just as necessary to accentuate his humanity as his divinity. What people urgently needed, in Torrance's view, was a deeper participation in the real humanity of Jesus Christ, which modern theologies had tragically obscured.⁷ Torrance bemoans the fact that Christians over the centuries have stripped Jesus of his Jewishness, leaving us with a "Gentilized" Christ. This Gentile image may be a by-product of the necessary contextualization of the Gospel outside of Israel, but the downside of this process is that it enfeebles our appreciation of the incarnation, the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Yes, the Word of God became man, but this means the Word became a concrete individual man, not a man in general. While for some theologians this concreteness involves an emphasis on a free will and an individual ego in Jesus, for Torrance it involved an emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus. Jesus' Jewish ethnicity, cultural, and religious background are not just incidental aspects of the incarnation. We need to see Jesus "as he really is," and that means "as a Jew."⁸ We need to think of him as such not only at Christmas but all the time, since the resurrection and bodily ascension of Jesus mean that "to this very day" he "remains a Jew while still the eternal Son of God."⁹

To fully understand Jesus, then, we need to know about his historical and cultural background. The study of Israel's archaeology and history are not enough. Christians need to learn the language and idioms of the Jewish scriptures, for these writings mediate "permanent structures of thought" that are signalled by terms such as "the Word," "revelation," "mercy," "truth," and "forgiveness."¹⁰ Torrance, though, felt that Christians could not do this properly on their own. They need the aid of Jewish eyes, hearts, and minds, to help them to see the Jesus who is given to us in the Scriptures. This is part what it means for the Church

⁶ Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ*, 170.

⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Royal Priesthood* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), 43; "The Place of the Humanity of Christ in the Sacramental Life of the Church," *Church Service Society Annual: The Church of Scotland*, no. 26 (1956): 1–10.

⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 20.

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, "Salvation is of the Jews," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 22 (1950): 166.

¹⁰ Torrance, *Mediation*, 18.

“to go to school with Israel,” and to share in the mortification of the hearts and minds of its people that was a necessary preparation for their reception of God in the flesh.¹¹

Torrance’s Christology is governed by the “theological algebra” of the *anhypostasis/enhypostasis*,¹² which at first glance would seem to obviate the need to be concerned about Jesus’ Jewish background. This doctrine repudiates the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was adopted by God as the Christ. Jesus is very God and very man, yet his humanity has no independent existence (*anhypostasis*) apart from its union with the Son of God (*enyhypostasis*). Jesus’ humanity is also vicarious. It represents all sinful humanity, and this sinful humanity has been incorporated vicariously into the humanity of Jesus Christ, who in his substitutionary work atoned for the sins of all people. The universal significance of Jesus’ human nature clearly overshadows Jesus’ particularity, that he was a distinct human being—a male, first-century Jew.

Yet if he were not a concrete, distinctive individual, Jesus could not be our true brother and our true representative before God. Jesus’ humanity then is a situated humanity, grounded in a particular cultural, historical, and religious milieu. Indeed, Torrance argues that our knowledge of God hinges on our knowledge of Jesus the Jew of Nazareth. Unless the Word of God had become incarnate in Israel “after the flesh” of the Israelites, we would not be able to know the Son of God. Instead, Jesus would have remained “a bewildering enigma.”¹³

Jesus Christ is of course the one mediator between God and humanity. He mediates God’s revelation and redemption, and he mediates our response to God. Yet he is not a mediator apart from Israel, for without Israel the world would have no mediator. This truth is summed up in Jesus’ pronouncement that “salvation is from the Jews.”¹⁴ Yet Jesus brought to perfection the mediation of Israel. “The whole prehistory of that mediation was gathered up and brought to its consummation in Christ,” who came out of the “womb of Israel” as the “son of Mary.”¹⁵ This is apparent in Jesus’ genealogy: He is “the son of David, the son of Abraham.” It is apparent in the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament: “the prophet of the Most High,” the “great high priest,” and “king of the Jews.” They signify the mediatorial offices of prophet, priest, and king that had been forged over thousands of years in Israel. It is apparent finally in Jesus’ role as the “Suffering Servant” of Israel, which tie those offices together. Great suffering came upon Israel, as God worked incessantly to make a sinful, recalcitrant nation a suitable mediator of God’s salvation. This suffering was the means whereby God “began to narrow down his assumption of Israel into union with himself toward the point of the Incarnation where, in the midst of Israel, he was to assume man into oneness with himself in the ultimate act of reconciliation.”¹⁶

Torrance’s plea for Jewish help in comprehending Jesus was prompted in part by the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus, which, in his view, had failed to help us to see Jesus as a son of Israel

¹¹ Torrance, *Mediation*, 12.

¹² Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert Walker (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 233.

¹³ Torrance, *Mediation*, 19; Torrance, *Incarnation*, 44.

¹⁴ John 4:22.

¹⁵ Torrance, *Mediation*, 22.

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Israel of God: Israel and the Incarnation,” *Interpretation* 10 (1956): 309.

and the climax of God's mediation through Israel. "Christians desperately need their Jewish brethren, and Jewish eyes, if they are really to discern Jesus as he really is, a Jew."¹⁷ Torrance underlined how Jews in his century had revolutionized our understanding of the physical universe, and he believed that they could *a fortiori* help us to revolutionize our understanding of Jesus. It was Jewish scientists who spearheaded the transition from a "dualist to a unitary outlook upon the universe," an outlook that permits the "miracle" of the incarnation to take place.¹⁸ Torrance felt that the Jews had an intellectual advantage over the rest of humanity, one that stems from their ability to think without dualisms and without a need for images. This advantage is not natural, however, but is a fruit of the "the creative impact of the Word of God" on them over millennia.¹⁹

ISRAEL AND ITS DIVINE VOCATION

The thing that distinguishes the Jews, more than anything, from all other peoples is that they are the only ethnic group that has been singled out and called by God, for the purpose of bringing the world closer to God. "Israel was called out from other nations to be the unique historical partner of God's personal and intimate self-revelation, whereby knowledge and worship of the living God might be earthed in human existence."²⁰ This is what it means for Israel to be the "People of God." Israel is the only nation that was fashioned by God over millennia, so that God could reconcile the whole world through them, first by being a "light" to the Gentiles, and by giving birth to one who is the "light of the world."²¹ Jesus, a son of Israel, fully illuminates and embodies the God-given vocation of Israel. The heart of this vocation is suffering witness to God's goodness and righteousness.

Torrance is cognizant of the fact that Israel has often failed to live up to its calling, that it has behaved like other nations, that it has been guilty of pride and idolatry. It has loved things on earth, while it has forgotten the things of God. "This is Israel's problem today as in the past: how to be a people of God (*laos*) as well as a human nation (*ethnos*)."²²

Did Israel's divine mission end when Jesus the Messiah established his church on earth? The answer to this question is bound up with our understanding of God's present relationship with Israel. In the main, Christianity is defined by a theology of supersession.²³ In this theology, the church, the Body of Christ, replaces Israel as the elect people of God, as the "holy nation," which is charged with the mission to bring

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, "Israel: People of God—God, Destiny, and Suffering," lecture to the Anglo-Israel Friendship League and the Israel Ecumenical Working Group, Westminster Abbey, London, U.K., 6 Feb. 1978 (Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ): 14.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VI: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 15.

¹⁹ Torrance, "Israel: People of God," 5.

²⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, "Christian/Jewish Dialogue," in *The Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), 140.

²¹ John 8:12.

²² Torrance, "Israel: People of God," 3.

²³ For a valuable study on the subject, see Michael J. Vlach, *The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009).

the news of God's revelation and redemption to the world. There are a number of New Testament verses that can buttress supersessionism,²⁴ but Romans 11:11–36 forces one to question it. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."²⁵ While these words were rarely taken seriously by the church in past, they clearly guided Torrance's doctrine of Israel.

Torrance goes a step further than Paul does in Romans. While the apostle doesn't speak of a continuing mission for Israel parallel to the mission of the Church, Torrance does. For him, the "calling" of God implies a mission for Israel, although it is not ingredient in a different covenant. There is "only one covenant of grace" and "only one people of God," and Christians must regard the Jews as belonging "in the profoundest sense to the one Church of God."²⁶ This means that Israel's mission is inextricably bound up with the Gentile church and its divine mission. Yet while Christians and Jews belong to one church, their vocations differ.

The Jews have invariably been witnesses to God throughout their history, but in a different way from the church. While the Christian church lives on the "resurrection side" of the cross of Calvary, the Jewish synagogue lives on the "shadow side," behind the cross of Calvary.²⁷ In many old European cathedrals, you will find sculpted symbols of the church and synagogue juxtaposed: two queens, but one is blindfolded to stand for the Jewish synagogue. Yet Torrance believed that the synagogue still pointed to God, even if blindly.

It does so, first, because it is a *witness to the judgment of God upon human sin*. It is not hard to find unflattering statements about the Jews in the New Testament. "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart, you always resist the Holy Spirit,"²⁸ Stephen, the church's first martyr, accused the Jews before they stoned him for preaching Jesus as the Christ. Such statements are naturally a great source of embarrassment for churches in the post-Holocaust era that are trying to heal the enmity between Christian and Jews. Still, Torrance doesn't think we should simply gloss over negative portrayals of the Jews in the New Testament. These statements are not seeds of anti-Semitism; rather, they teach, in his view, a valuable theological lesson: that God was justifiably angry with the Jews for rejecting their Messiah and his only begotten Son. Indeed, the whole history of ancient Israel is the tragic story of the Jew's disobedience toward God. While the Jews feel the weight of humanity's hatred for God, they have been also at the forefront of humanity's resistance to God's will. They bear "unwilling witness to the antagonism of man to God."²⁹

The fact the Jews stoned the prophets of God and had the Son of God crucified is proof of the depth of their sinfulness, but ironically it is no less proof of *how close* God was to the people of Israel, how much he loved them. "The very intimacy of God's relation with Israel had the effect of intensifying the stubbornness of its self-will in a refusal of God."³⁰ "The more they were called, the more they went away,"

²⁴ Chief among them are Matthew 21:43, Gal. 6:16, Phil 3:3, 1 Thess. 2:14–16, and 1 Peter 2:9.

²⁵ Romans 11:29.

²⁶ Torrance, "The Divine Vocation," 86.

²⁷ Torrance, "Salvation," 171.

²⁸ Acts 7:51.

²⁹ Torrance, "Salvation," 171.

³⁰ Torrance, "Divine Vocation," 89. Also, Torrance, *Incarnation*, 48.

Hosea tells us.³¹ God had expected more from Israel than from any other nation because he had done more for this nation than any other one. God's anger burned hottest toward Israel because he held this nation alone to the highest spiritual standards. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities," are the words of the prophet Amos.³² Still, it cannot be forgotten that the Jew represents every man and every woman, that their sins are universal, and that the Jewish antagonism toward God is humanity's antagonism toward God. As Barth said, "in the Jew, the non-Jew has to recognize himself, his own apostasy, his own sin."³³ Besides, even when Israel resists God, it bears witness to God and his work of salvation, as Romans 9–11 reveals. Resistance, in Torrance's view, was in fact "an inescapable and essential ingredient in its vicarious mission."³⁴

Secondly, the synagogue points to *the mercy of God*. As great as God's anger is toward the Jews, his mercy towards them is greater. Despite Israel's rejection of its Messiah and the Word incarnate, God will never reject Israel. The fact that the Jews have survived as a people down to the present, despite being hated, persecuted, and massacred by Gentiles, is evidence of God's mercy toward his elect people. "The stubborn persistence of the Jews in history in spite of all is incontestable witness to the Truth of the living God as we have it in the Bible."³⁵

Third, the synagogue bears witness to the *world's resistance to the Christ*. Jewish history is the most tragic history. No people have suffered more than the Jews. For Torrance, the suffering of the Jews is no accident of history, for they participate unwittingly in the suffering of Christ. This is a consequence of the organic bond between Israel and Jesus. Like Jesus, Jews have been hated and attacked without reason throughout history. The Jew, like Jesus, is the "scapegoat of the world," the one who unjustly punished in lieu of justice.

Anti-Semitism has been called "Christianity's most disturbing legacy to the Western world."³⁶ Torrance did not quite see it that way. Rather, he interpreted anti-Semitism as a product of the spirit of the anti-Christ at work in Western societies. "The Jew bears witness to the contempt and antagonism of the human heart to God. He who despises the Jew despises Christ."³⁷ The Jews, of course, are not willing witnesses to Christ; instead, they are witnesses to Christ despite their lack of faith in him.

THE HOLOCAUST

Christians were not directly responsible for the Holocaust. Still, there was a conviction among many church leaders and theologians that "Christian" Europe had provided fertile soil for the near extermination of European Jewry in the 1940s. In the blunt words of the Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, "the Church has produced an abiding contempt among Christians for Jews and all things Jewish, a contempt that aided

³¹ Hosea 11:2.

³² Amos 3:2.

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 511.

³⁴ Torrance, "The Divine Vocation," 89.

³⁵ Torrance, "Salvation," 164.

³⁶ Ralph Klein, "Anti-Semitism as Christian Legacy," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 11 no. 5 (1984): 285.

³⁷ Torrance, "Salvation," 169.

Hitler's purposes."³⁸ For Rosemary Reuther, this problem is as old as Christianity, a product of its foundational theology. Reuther contends that anti-Judaism is the "left hand of Christology."³⁹ In short, the exaltation of Jesus is the denigration of Judaism.

Torrance didn't think that Christology paved the way for the Holocaust, but he did believe it was the key to making sense out of this horrific event. The Holocaust certainly testifies to the wickedness of human nature, and it also testifies, from the view of many Jews, to the absence of God in the world. Torrance was adamant that, contrary to all appearances, the Holocaust was a witness rather to God's presence and work in the world. He does not deny that the Holocaust was the climax of a long history of anti-Semitism in Europe, yet he was exceptional in seeing this genocide as an attack on Jesus Christ. Indeed, he interpreted the Holocaust as the terrible price of Israel's "vicarious mission to mankind."⁴⁰ It indicated the depth of the "penetration" of the Word of God into European culture but also the depth of sin in this culture. The Holocaust was a naked attack on the nation that bore the Word of God and gave this Word to the world, and it has to be understood, Torrance argues, in "relation to the blood of the covenant faithfulness of God, sealed in the innermost destiny of Israel"⁴¹

Torrance's interpretation of the Holocaust was reinforced, if not shaped, by his visit to *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. After seeing words from Ezekiel 16, "in thy blood live," inscribed on the Museum's memorial stone, he told his Israeli host that these words from that prophet provided a clue to the meaning of the Holocaust when read in light of the cross of Jesus Christ.⁴² He explained to him that this blood is that of the covenant "cut into" the "flesh" of Jews "from generation to generation" and the "blood of the covenant remembered of God who will not abandon" the Jews.⁴³

Auschwitz was no proof that God had finally abandoned the Jews, that they were among the reprobate. Paradoxically, God was *there* in the Holocaust. As Torrance said in one of his sermons, "fire rages in the world" yet "God is in the fire."⁴⁴ Yet God was present intensively in the Holocaust, because of the organic bond between the Jews and Jesus. Jesus Christ was there in solidarity with the suffering of his people. Torrance wanted Jews to know that unless they believe God suffers with them, "then there is no answer to the horror of *Yad Vashem*."⁴⁵ Only the cross of Christ can give Jews the assurance that God is with them in the pits of suffering and in death, for the cries of the victims in the death camps were an echo of Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross. The Holocaust testifies to God's solidarity with his people, but, more importantly, it testifies in a mute and horrible way to God's atonement for the sins of his people.

I know no other way to relate the mighty living God of Providence to the fearful cruelty, violence, and suffering of mankind than through the cross of Christ. For us this means that

³⁸ In Rosemary R. Reuther, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 7.

³⁹ Rosemary R. Reuther, "Anti-Semitism in Christian Theology," *Theology Today* 30 no. 4 (1974): 365.

⁴⁰ Torrance, "Christian/Jewish," 147.

⁴¹ Torrance, "Christian/Jewish," 147.

⁴² Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, ed. Jock Stein (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 178.

⁴³ Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 178.

⁴⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clark, 1960), 73

⁴⁵ Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 178.

God does not abandon us in irreversible guiltiness of our existence or in the unappeasable agony of our shame, but rather enters himself into its terrible depths, unites himself with us as our God even in the utmost extremity of death, in order to expiate our guilt and redeem us into life.⁴⁶

ZIONISM AND THE MODERN STATE OF ISRAEL

While the Holocaust constrained churches to retract their anti-Judaic statements, the establishment of a new state of Israel in 1948 forced churches to reconsider God's promises to ancient Israel. The story of the Wandering Jew is a legend. Still, it reinforced a Christian perception of the Jew as an outcast, another Cain, who for his role in the death of Christ is cast out of Israel by God, and who must remain a fugitive and refugee in the world until the end of time. The rebirth of Israel, however, meant that the Jew had a home again, and this forced Christians to re-think the biblical promises regarding the Jews and their land.

Although churches in the post-Holocaust era made strides to reverse their anti-Judaism, many were reluctant to back the new state of Israel. The *United Church of Observer*, an organ of the United Church of Canada, for example, called on Jews to "renounce their fanatical claims for an immediate state."⁴⁷ Although the appearance of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, which condemned all "displays of anti-Semitism," ushered in a new era in Catholic-Jewish relations, the Vatican would not formally recognize the state of Israel until 1993. By contrast, Torrance was unwavering in his support of the new state of Israel. He believed that the Jews had an *iure divino* (divine right) to the land of Palestine. "Our Jewish brethren are entirely right in claiming that the *amhar-aritz* (People of the Land) concept is integral to that mission of Israel and belongs inalienably to the concrete form of God's covenant with Israel"⁴⁸ Torrance understood modern Israel as a nation resurrected from the grave, a fruit of the "organic bond" that exists between Jesus and ancient Israel. So, while the Holocaust is a participation of the Jews in the death of Christ, the new Israel is their participation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Despite the secular origins of Zionism, Torrance had no doubt that the return of the Jews to the Promised Land and the rebirth of Israel had divine sanction. World history, he believed, revolved around Christ, but this also meant that history revolved by implication around the Jews. Torrance believed that the Jews give us our "only clue" to history. Israel, he argued, "constitutes the critical centre in the human race and in human history."⁴⁹ In contrast to existentialist theologians like Rudolph Bultmann, he took seriously the historical dimension of redemption. History is the time-space field where God reveals himself and where his redemption takes place. For this reason, the Jew is always God's "finger pointing to the future."⁵⁰ The corporate experiences of the Jews are signs that "God will act ... act in history ... act among the nations."⁵¹

⁴⁶ Torrance, "Israel: People of God," 9.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Lindsay, *Barth, Israel, and Jesus*, 61.

⁴⁸ Torrance, "Israel: People of God," 11.

⁴⁹ Torrance, "Divine Vocation," 86.

⁵⁰ Torrance, "Salvation," 172.

⁵¹ Torrance, "Salvation," 172.

Torrance's support for modern Israel was indicative of his deep sympathy for Jews, but it was also indicative of a core theological principle of his—that there is no dichotomy between God and creation, between God and space-time. The rebirth of the nation of Israel was confirmation of this principle. In the culture of the Jews, he wrote, “the physical and the spiritual; the temporal and eternal; and the moral and religious are held inseparably together.”⁵² Christians, therefore, must be on guard against over-spiritualizing God's redemption. As N. T. Wright noted, that part of the Lord's prayer, “Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven,” “remains one of the most powerful and revolutionary sentences we can ever say.”⁵³

The return of the Jews to the land of Israel testifies to the verity of the temporal, physical, and spatial dimension of God's redemption. In the Bible, the promise of land to the Israelites was as important as the promise of forgiveness of sins, and Torrance was convinced that there was a “deep interconnection” between the people of Israel and the Holy Land. The very identity of the people of Israel is closely bound up with this land. At the end of the Seder meal, for example, diaspora Jews have always shouted “Next year in Jerusalem.” For Torrance, then, to imagine Israel without land is to ask for “a diminishment in its existence and a distortion of its significance for mankind.”⁵⁴

The Holocaust and rebirth of Israel could serve as parables for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but for Torrance these are more than parables. He saw the return of the Jews to the Holy Land as the first fruits of the resurrection of the whole creation, which Jesus Christ has inaugurated. The resurrection of Jesus “entails the resurrection of the promised land and its people.”⁵⁵ George Knight contends that the biblical promises regarding the land have been literally fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus, after all, was nurtured by the land of promise and his body was “composed” of the “produce of the land,” so that he did in fact become the *place* of the God's redemptive purpose.⁵⁶ Yet, at the same time, Jesus cannot be unyoked from the people of Israel, because of that persistent union he has with them. So, while the promises regarding the land may be fulfilled in Jesus, they nonetheless extend to the people of Israel who are tied to this land.

Torrance's championing of modern Israel was not without qualifications. He lamented that Israel had often behaved like other nation-states, and so had failed to live up to its divine calling and mission. The problem is that Israel is both a *laos* (a people) of God and an *ethnos* (a nation), that it has a “laic destiny” alongside an “ethnic actuality.”⁵⁷ Zionism is an assertion of the latter, but Torrance exhorted Israel to resist the temptation “to allow its ethnic actuality to suppress its laic destiny.” Yet in view of Israel's treatment of its Arab Palestinian minority, which has culminated recently in the construction of a wall around this people, it appears that Israel is failing to resist this temptation. Gentiles Christians can be forgiven for being unable to discern the “laic” side of Israel or the lineaments of Israel the church. Still, Torrance was optimistic that Israel would fulfil its laic destiny, and wrote about God being “creatively at work in Israel ... giving

⁵² Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 10.

⁵³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 29.

⁵⁴ Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 11.

⁵⁵ Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 12.

⁵⁶ George Knight, “Israel—The Land and Resurrection,” in *The Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David Torrance, (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), 40.

⁵⁷ Torrance, “Divine Vocation,” 86.

substance and shape to the structure of the people of God.”⁵⁸ Modern Israel, he concludes, is like a “woman in the last stages of travail, as a new reality struggles to be born.”⁵⁹

Yet Torrance cautions us against expecting Israel to “only be church.”⁶⁰ God has called the Jews, unlike Gentiles, to be a godly nation, a light unto other nations. As the vision of new Jerusalem in Revelation (21:24) tells us, “[T]he nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” Israel, symbolized by Jerusalem here, is not a symbol of a spiritual community only. It is also destined to be a model for all nations, for it will be a nation that is illuminated by the “glory of God”⁶¹ and be one that fulfils its laic calling for God. As Torrance puts it, “[T]he ethnic as well as the laic nature of Israel is thus to be regarded in proleptic relation to the redemptive purpose of God for all peoples and nations in a new earth and a new heaven.”⁶²

A CHRISTIAN MISSION TO THE JEWS?

The new Christian appraisals of the Jews in the post-Holocaust era have put into question concomitantly the church’s mission to the Jews. Within mainline churches, missions to the Jews today, if there are any, are limited usually to civil inter-faith dialogues, for the purpose of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Torrance is sensitive toward the Jews—they must be approached with “sympathy and understanding”—but he did not want a mission that was this limited. The church’s core mission today to Jews, he felt, must be no different than it was in the first century. The Church “is obliged to witness to Christ and proclaim the Gospel to Israel now as it was in the New Testament times.”⁶³

At the centre of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, Jürgen Moltmann has acutely observed, there is the great messianic question that begs to be answered: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”⁶⁴ Torrance, of course, does not think Jews must continue to wait for another Christ, but he also does not think that Jews need to convert to Christianity. The church’s mission to the Jews shouldn’t be patterned after missions to other peoples. The church cannot bring the Gospel to Israel, Torrance argued, because the Gospel came out of Israel. The church has to acknowledge first that it is a “debtor to Israel,” that salvation is from the Jews—salvation that is by grace for Jews and Gentiles.⁶⁵ The Christian mission must involve a recognition, then, that Jews are “brother believers” who share with Christians the same faith in God, who, with Christians, are under “one covenant of Grace” and constitute “one people of God.”⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 144.

⁵⁹ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 144.

⁶⁰ Torrance, “*Israel: People of God*,” 3.

⁶¹ Revelation 21:23

⁶² Torrance, “*Israel: People of God*,” 3.

⁶³ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 140.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, “Israel’s No,” *Christian Century* 107 (Nov. 7, 1990): 1021.

⁶⁵ Torrance, “Divine Vocation,” 95.

⁶⁶ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 139, 143.

There is in fact, then one church with two parts: the root one of Israel, the “Jewish Church,” and a branch one of the Gentiles, the “Christian Church.”⁶⁷

Now this throws at us the strange paradox of a Church that openly confesses Jesus as the Christ and a Church that refuses to confess Jesus at all. Now we need to understand that for Torrance the essence of the church is not human faith but God’s election and that the true nature and composition of the church will be unveiled only with the final advent of Christ. Torrance believed with Paul that the Jews’ rejection of their Messiah was an ingredient in God’s plan of salvation for the Gentiles. Nonetheless, he also believes that the Christian church must bear part of the blame for the Jews persistent rejection. They cannot now recognize the “Gentilized” Christ that non-Jews have created, and we should not expect them therefore, Torrance felt, to become Christians in the normal sense. Indeed, he didn’t believe the Jews had to abandon their synagogue to find Christ, because they can, and will at some point, discover him within their own God-given covenant, which is still valid, in his view. Still, the Christian Church has a responsibility to help Jews discover him within the synagogue, within their own covenant. To accomplish this, the church’s mission to the Jews must have the following features.

First, the mission, Torrance insists, must be aimed at “all Israel,” not simply to individual Jews. In other words, the Christian witness to the Jews must take “*corporate form*.”⁶⁸ This approach is consonant with that of the ancient prophets of Israel. Today this approach is much more challenging since Jews now are deeply divided, especially in regards to the meaning and relevance of their spiritual heritage. Love for Israel though is one thing that unites all Jews, and the return of millions of them to the promised land makes a Christian witness to all Israel more feasible than ever. The great hope is that as a fruit of this witness, Israel “will participate in the restructuring of the covenant relations” that have occurred with the coming of Jesus, its Messiah.⁶⁹

Second, this mission will involve *cooperation* with Israel. The Christian Church must learn to “share, and be seen to share, in the mission of Israel.”⁷⁰ The church’s mission originated in Israel, which is “the great prophetic Word of God addressed to mankind,” and it cannot be completed without Israel.⁷¹ Torrance bemoans that Jewish rabbis have reduced the Word of God to a dead letter, have severed it from the Word revealed. Still, he believes that the Christian Church can rectify this problem by bringing to the Jews the word of the Gospel, so that Israel can recover “the creative source of their life in the living Word of God.”⁷² The secret to this cooperation is the “incorporating” of the Christian witness within the mission of Israel.⁷³ There is an echo here of Paul’s horticultural analogy in Romans 11, where the Gentile community, as the wild olive branch, is grafted into the trunk of the domestic olive tree, which is Israel.

⁶⁷ Torrance, “The Divine Vocation,” 87.

⁶⁸ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 145.

⁶⁹ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 148.

⁷⁰ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 146.

⁷¹ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 146.

⁷² Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 147.

⁷³ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 140.

Third, the mission will be one of *reconciliation*, for the Christian Church “cannot be perfect, cannot reach its fullness apart from Israel.”⁷⁴ Yet reconciliation needs to occur within Christianity as well. Torrance rightly believed that the fractures in the Christian church were fatally undermining the Christian witness to the Jews. These divisions make Jews sceptical of “the sincerity” of the Christian faith in the “atoning reconciliation” of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵ The Christian mission to the Jews must be corporate in both directions. It must be directed to all Israel, yet it also must involve the whole church in unity. While Christians must work to overcome the barriers separating them, they must simultaneously work at reconciliation with Israel, the “Jewish Church.” Indeed, full Christian unity will be impossible as long as Christians are separated from their Jewish brethren since in Torrance’s view, the schism between Christians and Jews is the oldest and deepest one and “the root cause of all other schisms in the one People of God.”⁷⁶ Reconciliation at this foundational level has the highest priority, for the Jews “hold the secret” to the unity of humankind, not only to the unity of the church.⁷⁷

Fourth, the Christian mission to the Jews must be a *priestly* one. The Christian Church must obey the call in First Peter to be a “holy priesthood,” which, for Torrance, entails an emphasis on sacrificial service to God in imitation of Christ. This divine command to be a holy priesthood is a key to reconciliation and cooperation between Christians and Jews, since this command was first made to Israel (Ex. 19:6). Obeying this command will though be the greatest challenge for both Christians and Jews, since the Church and Israel have historically neglected their priestly calling. The church has instead allowed cultures to dictate its agenda; while Israel has been preoccupied with preserving its ethnic identity. The priestly ministry, though, can help to bring the Church and Israel together. The church cannot fulfil this ministry unless it sees it as a participation in Christ’s fulfilment of Israel’s calling, and Israel will never see Jesus as the Christ unless it recovers its own priestly ministry with the help of the Christian Church. One of the most effective ways the church can help Israel is by standing with her in suffering and by bringing the light of the cross of Christ into the dark abyss of the Holocaust. “To the unappeasable agony of the question ‘Why,’ Christians can only point to the Cross of Christ, which speaks of God himself present in the depth of human violence and abandonment, giving the Cross its unconquerable power.”⁷⁸

Lastly, the Christian mission to Israel must be *eschatological*. For Torrance, eschatology is essentially about the advent of Christ in history and the full unveiling of his kingdom. No one knows, of course, when the final advent will occur, yet Torrance believed that there were signs that it was imminent. The Jews are a chief sign, and therefore the world needs to watch them. Torrance believed that this small community gave direction to world history, that they were God’s “finger-post pointing to the future.”⁷⁹ If we follow the Jews, it will be shown to us that “God will act in history” and “act among the nations.”⁸⁰ He clearly acted in the

⁷⁴ Torrance, “The Israel of God,” 317.

⁷⁵ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 146.

⁷⁶ Torrance, “Divine Vocation,” 87.

⁷⁷ Torrance, “Divine Vocation,” 86.

⁷⁸ Torrance, “Christian/Jewish,” 5.

⁷⁹ Torrance, “Salvation,” 171.

⁸⁰ Torrance, “Salvation,” 172.

twentieth century, in Torrance's view, when the Promised Land was restored to the Jews. This was not the first largescale return in the history of the Jews to their land, but Torrance saw this one falling within the "witness of Israel to the coming day of the Lord."⁸¹ Another witness to the advent will be reconciliation between Christians and Jews and their cooperation in witness and service to God. Progress in these areas buoyed Torrance's hopes. He saw Christians and Jews being "harnessed together" in the Israel of God as part of the mysterious plan of God "for witness, service and mission in the accelerating rush of world events toward the end-time, when Christ himself will come to take up his reign and make all things new."⁸²

CONCLUSION

Torrance's doctrine of Israel is a theologically constructive attempt to heal the enmity between Christians and Jews, who together constitute the Israel of God. The doctrine is reflective of the post-Holocaust era in Christianity, which saw the church make amends for its anti-Judaic heritage. It stands out for its attempt to bring about reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity without compromising the essence of the Gospel. Torrance advocates a form of "soft supersessionism,"⁸³ in which the covenant that God made through Jesus Christ does not abrogate the one made under Moses, but instead completes and extends it. Yet it cannot be fully completed and extended without Israel, and therefore not apart from the reconciliation and cooperation of the Jewish and Gentile Church of God; for there is really only one covenant, one of grace, just as there are only one people of God, although grievously divided. Yet instead of calling Jews into the Christian Church, Torrance called the Gentile Church (the wild olive tree) to be re-grafted back into Israel (the domestic olive tree).

Torrance's reflections on Israel bring us to the profound depths of his Christology, and to the point where he advances beyond Barth in his theology of Israel. The nexus of his doctrine is the "organic bond" that he posits between Jesus of Nazareth and Israel. This bond is revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God in Israel, and the potency of it stems from Torrance's conviction that the Son assumed and healed our sinful human nature.⁸⁴ It is thus an intimate bond. God was with the Jews even in a place completely alien to God—at Auschwitz. Through this bond, then, God's covenant promises to Israel remain valid, because through Jesus, God has gathered up all the sins of Israel, including its unconscionable rejection of its Messiah, and has atoned for them on the cross. Through this bond, moreover, the sons of Israel are participating now in the resurrection of Jesus' flesh as they lay hold once again of the land that was promised to their forefathers.

⁸¹ Torrance, "Christian/Jewish," 145.

⁸² Torrance, "Divine Vocation," 96.

⁸³ I am indebted to George Hunsinger for this term: "After Barth: A Christian Appreciation of Jews and Judaism," *Pro Ecclesia* XXIV no.3 (2015): 391–92.

⁸⁴ Torrance, *Mediation*, 40–42.