

# THE RELIGIONS OF THE NATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

by Paul Hacker

## 1. *Hermeneutic Preliminaries*

Historical criticism has disclosed that the traditional text of many biblical books is the result of a redaction or several successive redactions. The redactors combined and intertwined materials they took from different sources. But even these sources did not, at least in the case of the Old Testament, give direct and first-hand accounts of events. They were collections of materials, probably oral traditions, of very different origins and contents. The compilers, and later the redactors, added their own contributions at least in selecting and arranging the traditions.

These results of research, though uncertain in innumerable details, are safe in their broad outlines. Their discovery, however, seemed to involve a theological problem. Most of the non-Catholic researchers solved the problem in a somewhat rash and irresponsible manner. They simply brushed aside the traditional dogma of inspiration. This may have been a counter-movement to the previous exaggeration which had interpreted inspiration as fixing the individual words and as restricted to a superficial literality. But Catholic dogma had never supported this rigidity, and the doctrine of the spiritual sense had healthily counterbalanced the regard for the literal and historical senses. Catholicism's acceptance of historical criticism could have been quite smooth and fruitful if there had not been, at first, the need for warding off the subversive tendencies connected with liberal criticism. In our time, again, the assimilation of sound historical methods is impeded by a hectic anxiety to catch up with liberalism.

The Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* = DV) has explained that God, who is the primary author of Scripture, elected men in order to engage them in such a way that they were to use their own faculties in writing down what God wanted them to record (In sacris vero libris conficiendis Deus homines elegit, quos facultatibus ac viribus suis utentes adhibuit, ut Ipso in illis et per illos agente, ea omnia eaque sola, quae Ipse vellet, ut veri auctores scripto traderent. No. 11). These statements of the *magisterium* uphold the dogma of inspiration and yet in no way conflict with the safe findings and sound methods of biblical criticism. Nor do they encourage rationalistic or modernistic approaches.

Research shows the texts of Scripture to be embedded in a process of formation and transmission of traditions. Just as this process did not cease with the final redaction of the text, so it did not start all of a sudden with the recording of the first redaction. The inspired authors or hagiographers, referred to by decrees of the last three Councils, are of course those who actually recorded the text, that is to say, principally the redactors of the final text. It is this text that has become canonical.



Consequently, it is the final, canonical text that has to be used as the basis of theological reflection. In the framework of the present study, differences between the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist and the Priestly Code become irrelevant. Only in the case of the latest strata of the Old Testament does comparison with earlier stages seem to be of importance for discerning the intention of the canonical text.

Differences between inferred sources and differences between strata stemming from various periods can indeed sometimes render valuable aid in assessing the theological import of Scripture passages. However, we must not allow ourselves to play off one source against another and to see opposition where the redactors or hagiographers saw harmony. Revelation certainly includes varied aspects of the recorded text, here and there even statements which at the level of literal understanding are simply irreconcilable with each other. This is a consequence of divergencies between the sources used by the redactors. But there is no contradiction at the strictly theological level, nor is there any *dialectics*. Theological interpretation "must pay due regard to the content and *unity* of the *whole* of Scripture, taking heed of the whole Church's living tradition and of the analogy of faith" (*diligenter respiciendum est ad contentum et unitatem totius Scripturae, ratione habita vivae totius Ecclesiae Traditionis et analogiae fidei*. DV no. 12). The unity of Scripture is not, of course, one of literary genus, nor does it consist in a homogeneity of style or outlook or in the coherence of a system. Nor does it entail factual agreement when one and the same event is related in different parts of Scripture. The unity of Scripture is of a theological nature, that is to say, it is constituted by the Holy Spirit who has inspired all canonical books. Apparent contradictions and disagreements are invitations by the Holy Spirit to view significant events under different spiritual aspects — and a warning against confusing scriptural theology with secular historical information. The Fathers of the Church were quite alive to this invitation, and they can teach us an important lesson on this point, though in following the Spirit's guidance they used categories and methods different from the ones that are familiar to us today.

Critical research has revealed that the historical texts of Scripture are not simply reports on external events and facts nor are they absolutely unhistorical. There are many levels of historicity included in the texts. "The truth which God for the sake of our salvation willed to be committed to writing in Holy Scripture" (*veritas, quam Deus nostrae salutis causâ Litteris Sacris consignari voluit*, DV no. 11) in some cases gradually disclosed itself in century-long meditation on the divine economy underlying the events and facts. This process, itself part of the *history* conveyed by the texts, was guided by the Holy Spirit. The text presents facts in the meaningful form in which the Spirit revealed them to the inspired authors and, through them, to all potential readers in the future. Therefore, once we succeed in freeing ourselves from the secularistic, existentialistic, or rationalistic bias of which many exegetes today are possessed, we discover that it is precisely the results of sober and responsible historical criticism that can prepare the way for a fresh approach toward a spiritual and dogmatic interpretation of Scripture.

In the framework of the present study it is important to note that historical investigation has discovered in the texts adaptations of elements from religions preceding the religion of Yahweh and from religions contemporary to and



neighboring upon Israel. Such adaptation does not, however, imply a canonization of those religions. What matters is the fact that the foreign elements were thoroughly reoriented by their inclusion in the sacred text. The light of the Holy Spirit has transformed and transfigured them, thus setting free the truth included in them. The same phenomenon of a reorienting assimilation of foreign materials recurs in the New Testament and in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

## 2. The Old Testament

In the language of Holy Scripture the word *Nations* (*gojim*, ἔθνη, sometimes rendered by *pagans* or *gentiles*) signifies men who have a religion but do not live under the Covenant (*berith*, διαθήκη) established by God (in this sense, the word *Nations* is capitalized in this study). On the other hand, those under or within the Covenant are set apart and marked as God's own possession; hence they are *holy* (cf. Ex 19:5f; 1 Peter 2:9). The designation of those outside the Covenant as *the Nations* presupposes that those within are *chosen*, not as individuals but as a people. The Covenant is essentially established by God alone resolving and declaring that he will steadily preserve and protect and prosper the partner of the Covenant. Thus the notion of covenant includes the idea of *promise*. So Scripture can even speak of a covenant that God established with day and night (Jer 33:25), which means that he promised to preserve the order of nature. A covenant made with men includes stipulations concerning their behavior. Hence ratification of the Covenant is required of the chosen. This reciprocity constitutes the analogy to the secular use of the word *berith* in which it means *compact* or *agreement* (cf., e. g., Gen 31:44; Deut 7:2).

There is in the economy of salvation one case of a covenant that God made with an ethnic group. This is the Old Covenant established in the desert at Mount Sinai or Horeb. But Scripture records even earlier covenants. We may speak of a covenant based on the Creation. This was broken by man in his Fall, which resulted in a progressive degradation of mankind. Only after the Flood did God conclude a covenant described as *berith*. This covenant consists in God's promise to Noah and his descendants (Gen 8:21—9:17) that God will never "again destroy every living creature" (8:21) and will preserve the course of nature. Thus this covenant is not made with men only but animals and all created things are included. Homicide is prohibited, on the ground that "God made man in his own image" (9:6); moreover, blood may not be partaken of because it is life (9:4). There was no ratification from the side of the human partner. God gives his promise because (!) "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (8:21). The two last-mentioned features clearly show that the Noah Covenant is an *emergency regulation* (*Notordnung*; von RAD). It reckons with the fact that man is evil (cf. Gen 6:5; 8:21; Ps 14:3). In not enjoining any



worship of God and not exacting man's faithfulness, God implicitly presupposes that most of mankind will not remember the Covenant. *Because* mankind is evil, God's mercy protects them — against the drift to nothingness inherent in their trend to rebellion. Only from the viewpoint of the New Covenant does this mysterious *because* disclose its sense. For from this point of view the Noah Covenant reveals itself as an act of God's forbearance (ἀνοχή; cf. Rom 3:26). By preserving mankind in spite of their sins God establishes an ordinance which is to make it possible for the gospel in later times to reach all nations. The later covenants, on the contrary, namely the ones which God made with Abraham (Gen 12:2f. 7; 15:1. 5—11. 18—21; 17:1—21; 22:16—18) and with the Israelites at Sinai (Ex 19—23), are a direct *preparation* for the gospel.

The diversity of the peoples and languages, according to Gen 11:6—9, is the consequence of a curse of God. After the Flood men were building up technical civilization in man-centered secularity. This implied a defiance of God, who punished men's arrogance by confusing their languages and scattering them all over the earth.

Thus men's willfulness had forfeited the unity of mankind. A salvific covenant with the whole of mankind now seemed impossible. In this situation God called one single righteous man out from the plurality of nations and, making his covenant with him, laid the foundation of the future existence of the people that was to be his own possession. This righteous man was Abram, later named Abraham, to whom God promised: "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2).

Before the descendants of Abraham had grown into a people and before God had extended to this people the covenant he had made with Abraham, an opposition between the Covenant and the religions of the Nations could not possibly become conspicuous. Accordingly, in the history of the patriarchs and Joseph (Gen 12—50) the relationship to the religions of the Nations nowhere appears as distinctly thematic or problematic. Yet there can be no doubt that Scripture regards those religions as illegitimate, and there is no indication that the descendants of Abraham and Isaac practised a cult equal or similar to the cults of the Nations or acknowledged those cults as legitimate. When Jacob had left Laban, Laban noticed that his household idols had been stolen, and in fact Jacob's wife Rachel had taken them (Gen 31:19. 30—34); but the event is merely recounted, not judged. On entering Canaan and before constructing an altar to God who had appeared to him, Jacob instructed "his household and all those who were with him: Put away the foreign gods that are among you" (35:2). This event shows that the cult of the God whom Jacob worshiped was incompatible with other religions. On the other hand, in the dealings of Jacob with Laban and of Joseph with Pharaoh it appears that those outside the Covenant do acknowledge the God of Jacob (Gen 31:29. 48—54) and Joseph (41:38), though as one



among many gods. Thus those outside the Covenant interpret the religion of those within from the standpoint of polytheism; but the religion of the Covenant is exclusive. If the exclusivity remains unmentioned in some situations, as in the story of Joseph's marriage with the daughter of an Egyptian officiant<sup>1</sup> (41:45), it is none the less never abandoned.

To be sure, a scrutiny of the texts can infer an earlier stage of tradition where the patriarchs were worshipers of a god who had revealed himself to their Fathers. But if this is sure, it is surer still that in the final redaction of the text, which follows here the line of its immediate sources, the God of the Fathers is none other than the one true God. It is the redaction that has made the old legends a vehicle of the Revelation, and a comparison of the text that we have before us with the inferred previous stages can only contribute to elucidating the greatness of the revealed content.

The texts intend to say that the transcendent Being who from the twilight of confusion appears first to Abraham (12:1—3.7; 15:1—16; 17:1—8) and then to Jacob (28:13—15) is the one true God. This God is worshiped also by Melchizedek, the officiant and king of Salem, who solemnly blesses Abraham (14:18—20); for who can be the "God Most High, the maker of heaven and earth", in the intention of the final redaction, if not the one true God? The undeniable similarity of his title and position with the Canaanite religion is interesting; but the inference that the editor of the text wanted to hold him up as a representative of the Nations can claim no higher degree of truth than the classification of the religion of the New Testament as a variety of Hellenism on account of the occurrence of terms like *θεός, κύριος, σωτήρ, λόγος*, etc. In the religion of the final redactor the *Maker of heaven and earth* can only have been the one true God — whose religion was gradually revealed in the covenants that God made with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with the Israelites.

It was in Egypt that the descendants of Abraham grew into a people. The separation from the Nations began from the time when Moses asked Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go out and offer sacrifices to their God in the wilderness (Ex 5ff). After the exodus God, through the mediation of Moses, made a covenant with the whole people at Mount Sinai.

From now on it is the supreme duty of the people of God to keep unwavering loyalty to the one eternal God, the Creator of the world and the ruler of all events. God promises the people: "If you will . . . keep my Covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me . . . a holy nation" (Ex 19:5f). Accordingly, the first and the second commandments of the

<sup>1</sup> I use the word *officiant* to express the notion of Hebrew *kohen* or Latin *sacerdos*, because I wish to reserve the word *priest* to the domain where alone it properly belongs, namely to Christianity.



Law of the Covenant enjoin: "You shall not have other gods besides me" and, "You shall not bow down to images or serve them" (20:3.5). The people ratified the Covenant (19:8; 24:3.7). The ratification was repeated on some later occasions (Joshua 24:16—18.21.24; 2 Kings 23:3; Neh 9:38; 10:1—39).

The Covenant separates and distinguishes the holy people from all other Nations. For all those Nations worship other gods, identifying them with graven images or with things of nature. In the view of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament idolatry is the crucial feature by which the religions of the Nations differ from the statutes of God's Covenant. Only with respect to a time after the establishment of the Covenant of Sinai does it make sense to speak of *the Nations* (*gojim*, ἔθνη) in the biblical sense. For this usage connotes that the chosen people is set apart from all other peoples or nations. Since these are a plurality, the word *Nations*, signifying peoples outside of the Covenant, is in the Old Testament invariably used in the plural. The use of the words *pagan* or *gentile* to denote a single person presupposes conditions that arose only with the New Covenant, i. e. in Christianity. But whether it be used with reference to a time before or after the Incarnation, in either case the word *pagan* or *gentile* signifies a person outside the Covenant; whereas he who is in the Covenant is, by the same token, *holy*. Therefore the juxtaposition of the words *holy* and *pagan* in the phrase "the holy pagans of the Old Testament" is self-contradictory and confusing.

Never did the Israelites totally and perfectly keep the Covenant. Even before they reached the land of promise, cases of gross apostasy occurred: immediately after the proclamation of the Covenant (Ex 32), and again when the Israelites were staying in Shittim (Num 25). Israel's history up to the Exile is, with a few intervening cases of faithfulness, a series of breaches of the Covenant and of punishments that God inflicted accordingly. Essentially it is God alone who steadily keeps the Covenant (cf., e. g., Ex 2:24f; Neh 9:32). Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy again and again recall the prohibition of the worship of other gods and of the adaptation to religious habits of the Nations. Those gods are not God (Deut 32:21); if they are anything at all, they are demons (Deut 32:16f. 21. 39). The reason for the ban on image worship, according to Deut 4:15, is the experience, which the Israelites themselves made at Horeb, that God has no visible form.

The Israelites were not allowed to conclude any compact with the Nations dwelling in Canaan at the time of the invasion (Ex 23:32; 34:12). In particular, mixed marriages were prohibited (Ex 34:16). The Law enjoined the destruction of the idols, religious symbols and places of worship which the immigrating Israelites found in the promised land (Ex 34:13; Num 33:52). God promised to drive out the previous inhabitants of the land (Ex 23:27—31; 34:11; Lev 20:23) and the Israelites



themselves were to join in this action (Ex 23:31; Num 33:52). Some texts enjoin not expulsion but extermination of the Nations (Deut 7:2.16; Joshua 11:20). The book of Joshua relates examples of extermination.

The reason for the injunction of expulsion or destruction, according to the texts, is the temptation to apostasy and idolatry involved in the coexistence with the Nations: "They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you" (Ex 23:32f; similarly 34:12—16; Deut 7:4.16). Other texts say that the destruction or expulsion of the Nations is a punishment inflicted by God for the abominable religious practices of the Nations (Lev 18:25.27f; 20:23; Deut 9:5).

Since Israel had disobeyed the commandment to keep aloof from the inhabitants of the land and to destroy their places of worship (Judges 2:2), God resolved not to drive out the Nations but to punish the chosen people for their apostasy by allowing the Nations to oppress them (2:3.21). Not only peoples who were living in Canaan but also foreign tribes harassed the Israelites.

The historical writings of the Old Testament as well as the Prophets judge by one supreme standard all doings of the people of the Covenant and all events that befall this people. This standard is faithfulness to the Covenant, in particular to the First and Second Commandments. Most of the kings of Judah, and all the kings of Israel, were found disobedient. They favored the cult of foreign gods and idolatry. Finally God passed and executed his judgment, first on the northern kingdom: "They despised his statutes, and his Covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the Nations that were round about them, concerning whom Yahweh had commanded them that they should not do like them . . . Therefore Yahweh . . . removed them out of his sight" (2 Kings 17:15.18). Then on Judah: "I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies . . . because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt" (21:14f). Elijah fought against the cult of Baal in the northern kingdom and by a miracle compelled the people to acknowledge: "Yahweh, he is God" (1 Kings 18:39). God's judgment on the people's apostasy is a prominent theme of the admonitions of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. Neither is this subject absent from the prophecy of Amos (2:4; 3:14; 5:26; 7:9), Micah (1:7), Habakkuk (2:18f), and Zephaniah (1:4—6). "The Law and the Prophets" are unanimous in their zeal for the First and Second Commandments.

However, oracles of doom and disaster are directed not only against the people of the Covenant but also against neighboring Nations. Obadiah's and Nahum's messages concern foreign Nations only. Now



it is noteworthy that only a small number of the prophetic threats say that it was the idolatry of the Nations which provoked God to anger (e.g. Jer 50:38). Most of the relevant passages explain the sin of the Nations as consisting in their arrogance and cruel treatment of the people of God. But this cannot be interpreted as implying that Scripture tacitly regards the foreign cults, though forbidden for Israel, as *legitimate religions* for the Nations. Such relativism was as foreign to the prophets as was a missionary attitude.

The best theological commentary on the reserve of the Old Testament toward the religions of the Nations is found in Acts 14:16, where St. Paul says to the people of Lystra: "In past generations God allowed all the Nations to walk in their own ways." This implies that the ways of the Nations are not those of the people of the Covenant. The cults of the Nations do not concern the chosen people, in a twofold sense: first, inasmuch as those cults are banned in Israel; secondly, inasmuch as the people of God, if faithful to their Law, "do not inquire about the gods of the Nations" (Deut 12:30) and do not even mention their names (Ex 23:13; Josh 23:7). It has also to be noted that the commandment of destruction envisages only cults exercised in the Holy Land. When the Israelites were waging war with Nations living outside their country they never thought of eradicating false religions. There was no *jihad* in Israel. For the Nations lived under the Noah Covenant — to which St. Paul's speech at Lystra, as recorded in Acts 14:17, clearly alludes. No matter whether the authors or redactors of the writings of the Old Testament did or did not have in mind the Noah Covenant when they abstained from "inquiring about" the religions of the Nations as long as these did not intrude upon the chosen people, the fact is that the attitude of the texts is in perfect accord with that covenant. For the Noah Covenant actually did not enjoin any form of worship. It was to ensure the continued existence of the Nations until the time had come (Gal 4:4) for salvation to be offered to all peoples.

On the other hand, the reserve toward foreign religions did not preclude the prophets' insight and accusation that all inhabitants of the earth "have broken the everlasting covenant" (Is 24:5). This we may very well interpret as referring to the Noah Covenant. Later St. Paul was expressing the same idea when he said, "All have sinned" (Rom 3:23). The prophets foretold that all inhabitants of the earth will be judged and punished when "Yahweh of hosts will reign on mount Zion and in Jerusalem" (Is 24:21—23; cf. Jer 25:29ff; Joel 3:2ff). But this judgment will be mysteriously simultaneous with the salvation of all Nations (Is 2:2—4; Micah 4:1—3). Again, this salvation is not to happen automatically or irresistibly but it is tied to a condition. The Nations will be saved *if* they will ask Yahweh "that he may teach us his ways", as Isaiah and Micah say (*loc. cit.*), "*if* they will diligently



learn the ways of my people", as Yahweh says in Jeremiah's prophecy (12:14—17). The New Covenant was to bring more concrete information about how the Nations' "diligent learning of the ways of God's people" was to be effected.

In assessing the Old Testament statements concerning the covenants we must inquire above all into the nature of the *salvation* that is given in the covenant. Inasmuch as a covenant implies God's care for men, it is certainly coterminous with salvation. But there are different kinds of salvation — or, if salvation be understood as essentially one, namely as man's communion with God, it must be said that in God's dispensation salvation is manifested in different aspects and approximations. In the Old Testament salvation is, generally speaking, either an event of the past or a promise for the future. But in both cases the statements of the older texts, if taken in a strictly literal sense, refer to earthly life on this side of the grave. A rare exception is a text like Ps 49:15, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me". An analysis of this verse in the context of the whole psalm shows that redemption can be understood here only as a post-mortal event. Generally speaking, however, it must be stated that the explicit belief in resurrection and immortality emerges only in deuterocanonical writings. Death is an open problem for the earlier covenants. This implies that the full import of salvation is not yet realized. The total meaning of the salvation involved in God's covenant is not revealed before the Incarnation. There is a relativity in the earlier covenants. If considered from the point of view of the human individual, they are all incomplete. They point to something beyond themselves. Jesus Christ is the consummation of all previous covenants. Only his incarnation, passion and resurrection reveal the nature of that "everlasting salvation" which Deuteroisaiah (45:17) proclaimed (cf. Hebr. 5:9; 9:12).

The salvation contained in the Noah Covenant is the physical survival of mankind as a whole. This is a general and outward preparation for the new and eternal covenant, whereas the covenants made with Abraham, on Sinai, and with David were more specific preparations. There is an irreversible movement from the early covenants to the "eternal salvation" which Christ offers "to all who obey him" (Hebr. 5:9). It does not, therefore, make sense to isolate one of the earlier covenants — the Noah Covenant — and claim for it a salvific significance which it did not and could not have.

"The Law and the Prophets" are unanimous in the profession that Yahweh alone "is the true God" (Jer 10:10). He has created all things and is the ruler and judge not only of his chosen people but also of the Nations. Assyria is the rod of God's anger (Is 10:5; cf. 2 Kings 19:25 f). In Jeremiah's prophecy Yahweh names Nebuchadnezzar his servant because the Babylonian king executes God's judgment on Judah, even though he does not know that he is God's instrument. Cyrus, who allows



the Israelites to return from the Exile, is even Yahweh's *shepherd* (Is 44:28) and his *anointed* (45:1). Yahweh addresses him: "I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me" (45:4). Cyrus has "to fulfill Yahweh's purpose" (44:28). These are words of the same Deuteroisaiah who again and again condemns idolatry, including the idolatry of the Nations. The false religion of the foreign king and his people is in no way condoned by the fact that the true God prompts this king to execute His plans concerning His chosen people.

Where the Old Testament speaks of relations of Israel to foreign individuals it either represents these as somehow acknowledging Yahweh, or Yahweh's domination over all nations is manifested, or the difference of religion remains simply unmentioned. A few examples of all these three attitudes have already been adduced. We will consider a few more instructive cases.

There is no word on difference of religion in the account of Moses' relation to his father-in-law Jethro, the Midianite officiant (Ex 2:21). When Jethro later came to see his son-in-law at Sinai, he acknowledged Yahweh's superiority and even offered sacrifices to him (18:11f). The ingenious conjecture that the Midianites were worshipers of Yahweh even before the Israelites may or may not be true; in any case, the canonical text of Ex 18:11 makes Jethro say: "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods."

Balaam, when summoned by the Moabite king to curse Israel, was quite willing but Yahweh forbade him to do so and commanded him to bless Israel according to the inspiration he would receive (Num 22—24). The man whom God thus compelled to do his will was the same Balaam who, according to Num 31:16, was far from being a worshiper of Yahweh but enticed Israel to idolatry.

Naaman, a Syrian officer, was healed by Elisha of his leprosy, whereupon he professed that henceforth he would worship Yahweh (2 Kings 5:17). He added, however, that his position at the court obliged him sometimes to go into the temple of Rimmon, the god of Damascus, and to worship there, and he therefore supplicated Yahweh's pardon. Elisha did not enter upon the question implied in Naaman's excuse; he only said, "Go in peace" (5:19). The actual acknowledgment of the one true God by members of foreign nations was a problem whose solution was still inconceivable at that time. What the scholar in his jargon is inclined to describe here as a *problem* is exactly that "mystery" to which the hymnic meditation of the Apostle of the New Covenant refers in Rom 16:25f, Eph 3:4—9, and Col 1:25—27.

By way of rare exception could a foreigner associate himself with Israel. The most interesting case in point is that of the Moabite woman Ruth. She solemnly declared to her mother-in-law: "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Thus, in joining Israel she



at the same time acknowledged Yahweh and adopted the religion of Yahweh.

But it could also happen that a devout worshiper of Yahweh lived in a foreign country. An outstanding example of this is Job. He lived in Edom; but this does not imply that he was an Edomite. In Jer 40:11 we learn that Israelites could actually live in Edom. In the mind of the hagiographer Job was certainly not a *pagan* but a man within the Covenant. This becomes clear from the fact that Yahweh names Job his servant (1:8; 2:3; 42:7 f) and that Job serves the true God not unknowingly, as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus did, but consciously and with zeal. He remained faithful to the true God not only in a foreign country but even when Satan, with God's permission, put him to the test (2:6). Moreover, Yahweh even revealed himself to Job, although there was no place consecrated to the cult of Yahweh. All this enhances the significance of Job's figure and adds to the importance of the message of the book that tells his story. The view of the universal power of God is widened into a vision of the incomprehensible majesty of his justice, a vision that is darkness and anguish to the servant of God.

After the Exile Israel's relation to the religions of the Nations appears changed in more than one respect. Idolatry had apparently ceased to be an actual danger. The condemnations of idolatry in Deuteroisaiah, written probably during the Exile, partly look back on Israel's past (48:5), but most of them more or less clearly refer to the cults of the Nations (40:18—20; 41:7; 42:17; 44:9—20; 45:16.20; 46:6 f; 47:13). In the appendices to the book of Isaiah there are some passages that denounce present aberrations (57:3—13; 65:3.4.7; 66:17). On the whole it seems that when texts composed after the Exile speak of Israel's apostasy they are referring to the past, especially in penitential prayers (Neh 1:7; 9:18.26—30; Dan 9:5 f.11; Bar 1:21—2:12; 4:7.12 f). The prophecies about the end of idolatry and apostasy seem to have come true. In Judith 8:18 it is expressly said that there was no longer any idolatry as it used to be practised in the past. In the book of Baruch the worship of foreign gods appears as an actual threat only for Jews in the diaspora (Ch. 6).

The exclusiveness of Israel's religion was taught after the Exile no less strictly than it had been before. Mixed marriages were banned (Ezra 9:11 ff; 10:2 f; Neh 13:23 ff; Mal 2:11 ff).

On the other hand, the belief in the universality of Yahweh's domination, which had already been proclaimed by pre-exilic prophets, was intensified and expressed in a more concrete form.

In the beginning of the Exile Yahweh had proclaimed through Ezekiel that calamities as well as, in some cases, deliverance were to make the Nations "know that I am Yahweh" (25:7.11.17; 26:6; 28:24—26; 29:6.9.16; 30:19.26; 32:15; 35:15). The restitution of Israel will bring the Nations to the same insight (36:36; 37:28; 38:23; etc.), as the Israelites themselves also shall know Yahweh when they see his deeds (*passim*). But the



acknowledgment of the true God by the Nations is here conceived as compelled by dread and shame. Micah describes it in the words: "The Nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might . . . They shall turn in dread to Yahweh our God" (7:16 f). Only a few of the earlier prophecies, as for instance Is 2:2—4 (Micah 4:1—3), envisage a kind of inner conversion of the Nations.

From the time of Deuteroisaiah onward, however, the future salvation of the Nations, involving a conversion, is contemplated in an increasing number of prophecies and exhortations and poetical reinterpretations of past events. The Servant of Yahweh is to be "a *light* to the Nations", so that Yahweh's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6). Foreigners are expected "to *join* themselves to Yahweh" and "to *love* the name of Yahweh", and Yahweh promises: "These I will bring to my holy mountain . . . For my house shall be called a *house of prayer for all peoples*" (56:6 f). Yahweh urges: "*Turn to me and be saved*, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22; cf. Ps 66/67).

While in Deuteroisaiah's prophecy Cyrus does not yet know that he is God's instrument (Is 45:4), later reinterpretation makes him profess: "Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house" (2 Chr 36:23; Ezra 1:2). Nebuchadnezzar, who in Jeremiah's prophecy had been no more than an instrument of God, in the book of Daniel can profess: "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings" (2:47). He prohibits blasphemy of Yahweh (3:29) and praises the "Most High" in a hymn (4:34 f). Darius comes to recognize that "the God of Daniel . . . is the living God, enduring for ever" (6:26). In the Hebrew text of the book of Esther, King Ahasuerus merely allows the Jews "to gather and defend their lives" (8:11), whereupon "many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews" (8:17); the Greek interpolation makes the king acknowledge "that the Jews . . . are governed by most righteous laws and are the sons of the Most High . . . who has directed the kingdom both for us and for our fathers in the most excellent order" (16:15). In the book of Judith the Ammonite Achior "believed firmly in God, and was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel" (14:10). Jesus Sirach prays to God on behalf of the Nations: "Let them know thee, as we have known that there is no God but thee, O Lord" (36:5).

While all these texts clearly foreshadow an extension of the Covenant to all Nations, they do not include the slightest indication that the cults and beliefs of the Nations are legitimate religion. On the contrary, the exclusive universality of the Covenant and its salvation entails acknowledgment of Yahweh as the only true God and fulfillment of His will.

The book of Jonah, which was composed after the Exile, is of particular interest in this connection. Jonah is ordered by Yahweh to announce



punishment to the sinful inhabitants of Nineveh (1:2). But he is unwilling to do so. Old Testament stories do not know abstract reasoning; so the book of Jonah does not say explicitly why the prophet tried to escape fulfilling God's commandment. Yet the narrative makes it quite clear what the motive for Jonah's evasion was. He was a devout man; his prayer in the belly of the fish leaves no doubt about his piety. But his piety was of a very narrow kind. He was indignant at the idea that God wanted to show mercy to pagans. He thought that Yahweh was a national god, with his power restricted to the land where he was worshiped. Therefore he hoped to escape "from Yahweh's presence" by traveling to a remote country (1:3). But he had to experience that God found him even on the sea. Then, after Jonah had announced the imminent destruction of their city to the Ninevites, they actually did penance and God pardoned them (3:6—10). This again "displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry" (4:1). He would not have that God should have shown mercy to pagans (4:2f). God had to teach him another lesson, after the one implied in his being thrown into the sea and swallowed by the fish (1:15.17). God made a plant grow over the place where sullen Jonah was sitting outside of Nineveh. But then God made the plant wither, and Jonah once more became irritated (4:6—9). Thereupon God said to him: "You pity the plant . . . which you did not make grow . . . And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, (whose inhabitants) do not know their right hand from their left . . .?" (4:10f).

The doctrine implied in the story is clear. On the one hand there are the pagan mariners who "feared Yahweh exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows" (1:16) after God had saved them from the tempest; and there are the pagan Ninevites who "believed God" and did penance (3:5—9). On the other hand there is the pious but selfish Israelite who became angry as he saw that God's mercy did not respect the national limits to which he wanted to confine him. Jonah is of the same type as the Pharisees in the New Testament. The message of the book of Jonah is very close to the universalism of the gospel.

The story of Jonah makes it quite clear that the biblical idea of universality is not based on the commonness of religious feelings or the faculty of self-transcendence in all *men*, but on the all-comprehensive power, mercy and love of *God*. This is why true universalism is essentially tied up with an exclusivity. But this exclusivity again is not a quality of *man*. It is not narrowmindedness or self-preservation but the sovereign claim of truth and love that is incompatible with error and egoism, and this truth and love are identical with *God*. God rebukes the pious selfishness of his prophet; yet this prophet has to, and does, testify to the one true God. The religion to which the foreigners, the mariners and the Ninevites, are converted, is not a *self-evident mystery* revealed in a *transcendental anticipation* of their heart; rather, it is the response to an imperative call of the one true God. The mariners' prayers to the



gods of their religions proved ineffectual to calm the tempest (1:5). The fact of their prayer reveals indeed a transcendental urge of their heart. But this urge was misoriented. The gods to whom the mariners prayed were mere figments. But the phenomenon of the gale in combination with the prophet's explanation led them to know the truth. They came to know that "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land", had sent the gale to overtake his fugitive servant, who nevertheless professed himself his worshiper (1:9). So they prayed to this God and did his will by throwing Jonah into the sea (1:14 f). This disposed them to perceive, and respond to, the call: "They offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows" (1:16). Thus the behavior of the mariners as also that of the repentant Ninevites bears witness to the exclusive universality of the true God and to his religion, whose truth is in no way impaired by the inefficiency of its prophet.

The two books of the Maccabees, composed about 100 B. C., recount partly the same wars, of the Syrians with Israel, to which the book of Daniel refers in the form of prophecy. In these wars the enemies were attacking not only the people, as foreigners had often done in the past, but precisely their religion. Antiochus Epiphanes wanted to impose Hellenic religion on Israel (1 Macc 1:21—28.41 f. 44—51.54—61; Dan 11: 21—39). Nevertheless the second book of the Maccabees, like other deuterocanonical books, makes pagans arrive at a knowledge of the true God. Heliodorus offers a sacrifice to Yahweh (3:33—40). Antiochus Epiphanes in 1 Macc 6:12 f merely avows his injustice; in 2 Macc 9:13—17 he, at the point of dying, makes vows to Yahweh and promises to become a Jew himself.

The conversion stories in the late books of the canon of the Old Testament are surely fiction if seen from the point of view of external history. But they portray a spiritual event. They describe the growing insight or revelation that the knowledge of the one true God is accessible to all men. In this respect they intensify the visions of the prophets and are drawing a step nearer to the New Covenant.

The most thorough and thematic reflection on the problem of the religions is found in the book of Wisdom. Here ideas are developed of which about a century later St. Paul could make use to show that, once the time for salvation had come, not only Jews but all nations were called. — Wisdom teaches: "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (13:5). This implies that in principle all men can know the true God. Accordingly, Wisdom does not speak to Jews only but addresses the princes of all nations: "Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth, think of the Lord with uprightness, and seek him with sincerity of heart; for he is found by those who do not put him to the test, and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him" (1:1—2). He who allows himself to be guided by Wisdom will gain true knowledge of God and this will lead him on to



know what is right. Morality is represented here, following Greek philosophy, by the four cardinal virtues (8:7). Ignorance of God eventually produces moral corruption (14:21—31). — Since to know God is possible for everybody, the ignorance that worships false gods is a sin. To be sure, those who worship phenomena of nature incur a lesser guilt; “for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him” (13:6). Yet they stop at admiring created things while they ought to have proceeded to inquire about the author of all things. Therefore “not even they are to be excused” (13:8). “Miserable”, however, are those “who give the name *gods* to the works of men’s hands” (13:10), i.e. those who identify God with images.

The essence of the teaching of Wisdom is not alien even to the canonical writings of a “Hebrew” pattern of thought. In point of fact the whole canon of the Old Testament is an appeal to recognize God as him who created the world and has been directing Israel’s history. But in the earlier writings the method of demonstration is quite different from the reasoning of Wisdom. Hebrew thinking argues implicitly, by relating events; philosophy, as developed in Greece (and in India), reasons by connecting and dividing concepts. Events are individual; concepts are general. Both ways of thinking imply an appeal to the hearer. It is a gross misunderstanding, widespread in our time, that the abstraction of “general truths” leaves man unconcerned and that only the reference to individual situations can bring it home to man that his own self is involved. If the true knowledge of God was to shine forth from Israel and to spread over the world; if the prophecy of Is 2:2—4 and 45:22 and of Ps 66/67 was to be fulfilled, then it was necessary that the conceptual pattern of thought should be added to the pattern of relating events. For the environment of Israel, and to a large extent the chosen people themselves, were living in the atmosphere of Hellenic culture, whose highest spiritual accomplishment was conceptual thinking. The book of Wisdom exhibits an intertwinement of the two patterns of thought. As some Psalms and other texts in the older books of the Canon had done, the book of Wisdom also reviews prominent events of Israel’s past, but with the intention to show that all those happenings are evidence of the operation of eternal Wisdom, who herself “is a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty”, and “a reflection of eternal light” (7:25 f).

Neither of the two methods or patterns of thinking may be posited as absolute, neither the way of the Prophets nor that of Wisdom. Prophetic speech can proclaim that all Nations will know the true God; but it cannot demonstrate this knowledge by arguments understandable to men outside the sphere of Hebrew thinking. On the other hand, the book of Wisdom, while undertaking such a demonstration, seems to impart too much of eternal Wisdom’s light to the chosen people who were guided by her. As a consequence some important features of the message of the Old



Testament become less conspicuous. Men's sin and God's judgment are not presented in their stern outlines. God's punishments are explained as discipline and warning, reminding man of the Law (11:10; 16:6 f.11). This is surely a true interpretation, but an incomplete one.

However, the aspect of deficiency appears only if the book of Wisdom is separated from the context of the whole Canon. If it is read, as it ought to be, against the background of the Law and the Prophets, then the earlier writings of the Canon and Wisdom turn out to be complementary. The contemplation of Wisdom was as indispensable as the dynamism of the prophetic proclamation. Both styles of Scripture envisage, each from its own angle, the exemplary function allotted to Israel. The Prophet proclaims: "Out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem" (Is 2:3); Wisdom speaks of God's sons "through whom the imperishable light of the Law was to be given to the world" (18:4). Both the Prophets and Wisdom were preparations for the final solution that the problem of the religion of the Nations was to find in the New Covenant.

### 3. *The New Testament*

The New Covenant, based on the Gospel, is not restricted to an ethnic group as the human partner of God. Though the Abraham Covenant is its abiding basis (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:16 f), the partner is now potentially the whole of mankind. Those who through faith and Baptism are incorporated in Christ, have been called into the New Covenant, no matter to what nation they belong. The uniting grace of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:6.11) has spiritually abrogated the curse that had divided the peoples and languages (Gen 11:6—8). The spiritual bond establishes union at a much deeper level than membership in a racial or political unit can ever bring about. But this spiritual fellowship involves the individual's option. Therefore within the community the individual receives a far greater importance than he had in the Old Covenant. As a consequence of this transmutation, the word *pagan* or *gentile* has taken on a new sense in the history of Christianity. A pagan is now an individual who has a religion but belongs neither to the Old nor to the New Covenant.

However, the universality of the New Covenant was realized only gradually. The gospel, i. e. the message of the coming of God's kingdom, was at first proclaimed to the *House of Israel* exclusively (Matth 10:5 f; 15:24). Not before the majority of the Jews had rejected the gospel (Matth 22:8) and their leaders had crucified the Son of God, was the gospel brought to the Nations; only after his resurrection did Jesus give the commandment, "Make disciples of all Nations" (Matth 28:19). According to the account of Acts even Paul was in the habit of proclaiming the gospel first to Jews (13:5.14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1 f.10.17; 18:4.19; 19:8). Only when the Jews had opposed his preaching did he turn to the



gentiles (13:48; 18:6). The coming of the many "from east and west and from north and south" to "sit at table in the kingdom of God", is mysteriously connected with the rejection of Christ by "the sons of the kingdom" (Matth 8:11 f; Luke 13:28 f). Paul interprets this connection in the words: "Through their trespass salvation has come to the gentiles, so as to stir Israel to jealousy" (Rom 11:11). In using the expression "to stir to jealousy" the Apostle implicitly gives a positive interpretation to the words of Deut 32:21, "I will stir them to jealousy by those who are no people". He means to say that the Jews will be moved to emulate the gentiles when they see that these have become heirs to the promise made to the chosen people.

In the narrative of Acts 13:13—52, however, the jealousy (*ἔχλος*) of the Jews has a negative form. The Jews became jealous when they saw that even gentiles — "almost the whole city" (13:44) — came to listen to St. Paul's preaching. What scandalized the Jews was not only the content of the gospel, but perhaps still more the fact that the New Covenant extended the call to all Nations and thus abolished the national exclusivity of Israel.

In the Acts of the Apostles St. Luke describes the extension of the Covenant from the Jews to the Gentiles in four successive stages. The first stage is the conversion of Samaritans. These, though not Jews proper, agreed with the religion of the Jews to a very large extent; so their reception was not a great problem. The gospel was proclaimed to them, and the converts received Baptism and Confirmation (8:5.12.15—17). The Baptism of the minister of the Ethiopian queen (8:36—38) did not present difficulties either, probably on account of the close association of this man with the cult in Jerusalem (8:27). The third stage is the reception of the centurion Cornelius. Apparently he was not a formal proselyte, but he was "a devout man who feared God" (10:2). The fourth stage, finally, is the evangelization of Gentiles of a polytheistic and idolatrous religion and of Hellenic patterns of thought (17:16—34).

Success of the evangelization was harder to attain at the fourth stage than at any of the others; yet the Judaeo-Christians found the main difficulty in the passage from the second to the third stage, for from the ritual point of view a man like Cornelius remained a Gentile. This is why Luke has described the third stage of the propagation of the gospel in greater detail than the other stages. His elaborate treatment indicates aspects of abiding importance. — In his spiritual attitude Cornelius belonged to the same group as the Ethiopian minister. This group included persons whose religion in varying gradation accorded with the faith of Israel. The existence of such persons was presupposed or at least prepared by the narrations, in late writings of the Old Testament, of gentiles who attained the right knowledge of God and, above all, by the demonstration of the possibility and necessity of such knowledge in the book of Wisdom. Already under the Old Covenant Israel had begun to



realize its mission among the gentiles. — Cornelius was apparently less intimately linked to the Jewish community than the Ethiopian eunuch. In the story of the Ethiopian, Luke notes his worshiping in Jerusalem and his reading the Scriptures, but neither of these two features is mentioned in the description of Cornelius' piety. Peter, while speaking in the house of Cornelius, refrained from demonstrating the truth of the Gospel from Scripture as he and other apostles did when speaking to a Jewish or proselyte audience (Acts 2:14 ff; 3:12 ff; 7:2 ff; 8:32—35; 13:15 ff). He confined himself to a summary mention of *the Prophets* (10:43). Thus Peter presupposed that Cornelius and those who lived in his house had a respect for Scripture but he did not reckon with his audience's being familiar with it.

Cornelius' piety consisted in regular prayer and in the practice of other good works (10:2). His characterization as "godfearing" connotes that he had a proper knowledge of God. Yet there is nothing in the narrative to indicate that by his knowledge of God and by his piety he was already within the Covenant. Neither explicitly nor implicitly or anonymously was he already a Christian, though as a religious man (εὐσεβής 10:2), with a religion that was thoroughly explicit, he was incomparably less anonymous than those who are today sometimes called "anonymous Christians". If St. Luke by emphasizing the centurion's piety had intended to indicate that Cornelius was already a Christian, though not explicitly, he would have given the narrative quite a different course. — The centurion's "prayer has been heard" (10:31); his prayer and his alms "have ascended as a memorial before God" (10:4). It is not stated that his prayers included definite wishes whose fulfillment the angel came to announce. Probably the prayers consisted in fixed formulas. At any rate, it is impossible that Cornelius should have expressly prayed for his reception into the Church. The Baptism of a gentile was a thing so novel and unheard of that nobody could have thought of asking for or administering it. Otherwise it would not have been necessary that God himself should intervene to make it clear that He willed the Baptism of gentiles.

Cornelius had no distinct idea of what God intended to give him through Peter. This results from a comparison of the three versions in which the account of the centurion's vision occurs in the narrative. The first version, a direct narration by the author (10:3—5), gives no indication of the goal to which Cornelius is led. The angel merely demands an act of obedience, asking Cornelius to send for Peter. In the second version Cornelius, speaking to Peter, adds the following words to the account of his vision: "Now we are here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (10:33). Thus Cornelius expects Peter to give him a *message* from God; he is come to *hear* that message. But Cornelius does not seem to have had any idea of the possible content of the message. The third version, being Peter's report of the event to the Church of Jerusalem, is naturally tinged by



Peter's own experience. So the apostle makes the angel say to Cornelius: Peter "will declare to you a message by which you will be saved" (11:14). This reveals that Peter knew that he had to speak to Cornelius of the way to salvation — which he actually did (10:34—43).

In speaking to Cornelius and his household Peter presupposes that his audience have already heard of Jesus (10:36). He stresses that the gospel was first sent only to "the sons of Israel" (10:36.42). Another intervention of God was therefore required to remove the last doubts regarding the offer of salvation to all Nations. This intervention consists in the effusion of the Holy Spirit "on all who heard the word" (10:44), which causes them to "speak in tongues" (10:46) just as it had happened in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost (11:15; 2:1—4). To manifest his will, God here imparts the Spirit before Baptism, whereas in the normal case (8:16f) Baptism precedes the granting of the Spirit. — Before receiving the Holy Spirit and Baptism, Cornelius was neither in the Old nor in the New Covenant. He was not in the Old Covenant for the simple reason that he was a gentile, and as long as he had not yet received the Holy Spirit he was not in the New Covenant either. He was not yet accepted, but he was acceptable (*δεκτός* 10:35), i. e. pleasing to God, because he did what is right. God had *purified* (10:15) the pious gentile for a definite purpose. There is an inner dynamism in the right knowledge of God and in the doing of good works outside the Covenant. Being a response to an offer of grace, such piety disposes or even urges the person who practises it to seek reception into the Covenant, into the Church. The pious gentile does not foresee the goal to which God is leading him, but if he obediently follows the guidance of God he is sure to reach the end.

It would amount to missing or evading the point of the passage if we would inquire what might happen if a pious gentile does not come to know the gospel and the Church. The last phase of the economy of salvation, which is the establishment of the New Covenant through Christ, entails certain concrete consequences. This is how events come to pass like the one related in the story of Cornelius. Evidently the hagiographers were convinced that God does succeed in leading into the Church those whom he *foreknew* and whom he accordingly *calls* and "ordains to eternal life" (Rom 8:29 f; Acts 2:39; 13:48). This should duly engage our meditation before we venture speculations of our own.

Quite different from the case of Cornelius is the situation of gentiles who have not yet attained to a pure knowledge of God. They are still living under the Noah Covenant. In fulfillment of this covenant God has preserved life on earth, thus testifying to his existence. "He did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave from heaven rains and fruitful seasons" (Acts 14:16 f). God can be known from his operation in nature. In his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul expresses this idea in words reminiscent of chapters 13—15 of the book of Wisdom: "What can be known of God is plain to men, because God has shown



it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:19 f). To be sure, this knowledge is nowhere pure. Still, elements of true knowledge of God have remained, and it is to these remnants that the gospel appeals.

The biblical example of such preaching is St. Paul's speech on the Areopagus as recorded in Acts 17:22—31. The speech makes use of several concepts of pagan origin. In their original context none of them expresses pure knowledge of God. But each of them includes an element of truth. — According to the account of Acts 17, there was in Athens an altar with the inscription, "To the (or: an) unknown god". This inscription may have been the outcome of a typically polytheistic concern. There were so many gods. The worship of one among them might have been neglected through oversight. So it seemed safe to propitiate him by dedicating an altar to him. But whatever the motive for the construction of the altar may have been, in any case the altar bore evidence of an indistinct feeling that polytheism was insufficient or inefficient. It vaguely pointed to a reality beyond the illusions of polytheism and idolatry. There was a half-conscious, implicit dynamism in the inscription. St. Paul noticed this. He brought the meaning of the inscription from twilight to clarity and distinctness. He boldly declared: "What you worship without knowing it, this I proclaim to you" (17:23). Some manuscripts, not the oldest, read: "Him whom you worship . . . I proclaim to you." But it is easily intelligible how the neuter gender ( $\delta$ , what) could be changed into the masculine ( $\delta\upsilon$ , him whom); for before and after this sentence the text has the masculine gender ( $\alpha\gamma\nu\acute{o}\sigma\tau\omega$   $\theta\epsilon\tilde{\omega}$ ;  $\delta$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ ). On the other hand it is hard to understand how an original masculine could have been changed into the neuter gender. Therefore the reading, "*What* ( $\delta$ ) you worship . . ." is surely the original one. The solution of this question of textual criticism has a bearing on the interpretation of the passage. It is significant that Paul (in Luke's report) here uses the neuter gender. This implies that he did not simply identify God, whom he was professing, with the deity that the Athenians worshiped at that altar. The text does not say, "This unknown God I make known to you," but: "*What* you worship without knowing it, this I proclaim to you." This means: If you admit your obligation of worship, and if you admit that there may be an unknown Being that claims your worship, you are quite right in both cases. But the Unknown is not one of many gods to be worshiped at "shrines made by men" (24). Rather, he whom you do not know is the one true God who created the world and preserves it (24—26).

This God, Paul says, "does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything" (24 f). This implies that the way the Athenians worshiped their gods — and among them the *unknown god* — was not legitimate homage. Again, the fact that they dedicated an altar to a, or the, *unknown deity* reveals that



they were *seeking* a divinity, and Paul approved of this openness. God in fact wills that man seek him, starting from the natural conditions in which he placed each man (26 f). Yet there is no indication in the text that the particular way the Athenians sought the Unknown could promise success. On the contrary, Paul's critique of their cult suggests clearly enough that they were following a wrong course. In this respect there is a sharp contrast between the Athenians and Cornelius who did not know the goal but was on the right track. In the religion of the Athenians — which is representative of paganism in general — truth and grave aberration were jumbled together. It was not easy for them to discern the truth. Accordingly, the majority of them kept a hesitant and derisive attitude, and Paul's appeal did not find much positive response (17:34).

Still, St. Paul did not merely criticize the Athenians' religion. He made use of elements of truth which they already possessed. In speaking of man's quest for God, he alluded to ideas of Stoic philosophy. He said that men "should seek God, in the hope that they might *feel after* him" (27). The verb "to feel after" (*ψηλαφᾶν*) suggests corporeal touch. Stoic pantheism could imagine to touch God immediately in material things, and the immanentism of that philosophy actually included the conviction that God was "not far from each one of us." But while approving of the truth inherent in the movement of seeking, Paul did not sanction the pantheistic context that obscured and disfigured the truth. The drift of his sermon transmuted and reoriented the concepts he took from philosophy. — Paul went on to say that God "commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed" (30 f). Such decrees are certainly beyond the competence of a Stoic deity. Here is the point where St. Paul's sermon is passing from natural theology on to the gospel proper. And he begins with the same call with which, according to St. Matthew, St. John the Baptist as well as Jesus himself started the proclamation of the gospel, namely with the call to repent (*μετανοεῖτε*, Matth 3:2; 4:17). This call shows the true way of seeking God.

To support the theory of "anonymous Christians", the sermon on the Areopagus has been interpreted as intimating that the fact of worship was decisive, whereas the mode of worship and the Athenians' ignorance have been passed over in silence. But such an interpretation is quite incompatible with the text on hand as well as with the whole of Holy Scripture. Firstly, it is evident that what Paul approves of is not the worship in its own right but the quest of God manifested in it. Secondly, Paul expressly censures the mode of worship as practised by the Athenians. Thirdly, in the view of Scripture ignorance regarding God and regarding right worship is anything but a negligible trifle. According to Wisdom 13:8 as well as according to Rom 1:20 it is inexcusable. It is the



consequence of a willful aberration that has darkened man's understanding and "alienated him from the life of God" (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:18).

Paul's sermon includes two quotations, one from a philosopher ("In him we live and move and have our being") and one from a poet ("For we are indeed his offspring"). Like the inscription on the altar, these quotations are far from Christianity in their original context. The first conveys a pantheistic doctrine; the second, referring to Zeus, brings out the idea that the nature of man is essentially divine. Paul uses the first quotation to justify and encourage the quest for God. The Christian, too, can say that we are "in" God, though in a sense different from the pagan concept. We are in God because he created us and keeps us in being — in the words of the sermon on the Areopagus: God "made the world" and "gives to all men life and breath and everything" (24 f). And precisely from these facts our quest should start. As regards the second question, a Christian, to be sure, cannot describe himself as God's offspring in a univocal sense. But an analogical conception of man being God's child is familiar to both Testaments. Man is created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27), and since this image-character is restored in him through the grace of the New Covenant, New Testament texts speak not only of an "adoption" of men as sons of God (Gal 4:5) but even describe the regenerated as "born of God" (1 John 3:9) and "begotten by the word of truth" (James 1:18) and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Thus it may be said that the pagan poet's saying expresses a half-conscious and half-misled longing and presentiment. In the proclamation of the gospel the quotation receives a new orientation which sets free the truth contained in it. The idea that "we are indeed his offspring" was certainly misoriented in its pagan context; yet it brings out the high dignity that God has bestowed on man (*mirabiliter condidisti et mirabilius reformasti*). Therefore Paul's sermon can utilize this word to make his audience realize what a folly they commit in practising idolatry: "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is . . . a representation by the art and imagination of man" (29).

The sermon thus elucidates the aberrations of polytheism and idolatry by utilizing elements of truth included in the beliefs of the gentiles themselves. The movement of the evangelical proclamation, while taking in concepts of pagan origin, makes them correct each other and readjusts them all. This is the inchoate stage of a method that was going to be developed and profusely practised by Clement of Alexandria and, following him, by Eusebius and Theodoret.

The climax of the Areopagus sermon is reached with the *now* (τὰ νῦν) of v. 30: "Now God commands all men everywhere to repent." The same *now* also forms the conclusion of St. Paul's critical review of the conduct of Jews and gentiles in Romans 1—13: "Now (νῦν) the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη in the sense of the Hebrew *sedāqâh*) has been manifested" (Rom 3:21). This *now* is "the day of salvation"



(2 Cor 6:2) which Deuteroisaiah had announced (49:8) and which the Apostles' message proclaimed as having arrived. It marks the borderline between the old and the new aeon, the irruption of eternity into time. Every man who comes to know the gospel is placed on this borderline. Since the New Covenant involves individual option, the realization of the *now* summons each man to ratify or reject the Covenant. Those who accept the call of the "day of salvation" are received into the Covenant (Eph 2:13). They are reconciled with God by receiving his mercy (Rom 5:10; 11:30; 1 Peter 2:10). They come to know God (Gal 4:9). The *now* includes the claim on man to reorient his life — in the words of the Apostle: to *put away* the behavior of the past (Col 3:8) and to "yield his members to righteousness for sanctification" (Rom 6:19).

The *now* of the offer of grace is thus the turning-point both for the life of the individual and for the life of the Nations in general. It belongs to time and eternity alike. Neither of the two aspects should be lost sight of, neither time nor eternity. It is the vantage-point from which alone the economy of salvation can be surveyed in the proper perspective. Any theology, therefore, which claims to be Christian, has to take its stand at this point when trying to arrive at a reflected appraisal of the religions of the Nations.

Holy Scripture gives an example of this perspective when saying that God has condoned "the times of ignorance" (Acts 17:30), during which he "allowed the Nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16) under the emergency ordinance. He has condoned this ignorance not because it was insignificant if compared with the transcendental urge of man's spirit, but because *now* the time *is come* for repentance and salvation to be offered to *all* nations. If this offer is accepted, then and then only is the past annulled in its aberrations and reinstated in its remnants of truth and righteousness. The past is not redeemed by concepts but only in concrete reference to the "day of salvation" which is offered for the acceptance of faith in the message of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.

If the past is contemplated in itself, without reference to the "day of salvation", then the religions of the Nations remain as perverse in the view of the New Testament as they were in the view of the Old Testament. To be sure, in the first two chapters of his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul acknowledges the possibility of pagans pleasing God. Paul not only says that the gentiles can know God from nature; he even admits that "what the Law requires is written on their hearts", so that they can "do by nature what the Law requires" (Rom 2:15.14). Yet we must not overlook the context of these positive statements. They belong to a textual unit that reaches from 1:18 to 3:20 where they are set in a sharply negative framework. The passage starts with the sentence: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (1:18), and it



concludes with the sweeping verdict: "All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin"; "all have sinned" (3:9.23). The comparison of the conduct of the Jews with that of the gentiles leads to the result that neither of the two groups has an advantage over the other. Both groups have the possibility of pleasing God, the Jews being instructed by the Law, the gentiles being guided by nature. Yet both of them have failed to fulfill the will of God and both are in need of the expiation that was wrought by Christ and is received by faith (Rom 3:25).

The extension of the Covenant from Israel to the Nations involved a constant temptation to relapse into, or make compromises with, the idolatrous and polytheistic habits of the Hellenic environment. This necessitated exhortations to elucidate the new exclusivity, which no longer could be misunderstood as the nationalism of an ethnic group but had become manifest as the uncompromising claim of the truth. Exhortations of this kind are included in lists of vices, in references to individual situations, in retrospects on the past of the faithful, in outlooks on their pagan environment, in apocalyptic prophecy (Rom 1:18—32; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:9 f; 8:4; 10:9. 14. 19 f; 2 Cor 6:14—16; Gal 4:8; 5:19; Eph 4:17—19; Col 2:8; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:5; 1 Peter 4:4; 1 John 5:21; Apoc 2:14; 9:20; 21:8). Wherever the Epistles of the New Testament consider the religions of the Nations, their judgment of condemnation is no less unqualified than was the verdict pronounced in the Old Testament. The gods that the Nations worship are "by nature no gods" (Gal 4:8). The idols, which paganism identifies with the gods, have no reality in them (1 Cor 8:4). "What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God" (1 Cor 10:20; cf. Deut 32:17; Ps 105/106:37; Bar 4:7). Idolatry is one of the gravest sins in Christianity just as it was in the Old Covenant. The conscience of the Church in the first centuries was very sensitive on this point.

The gentiles "do not know God" (Gal 4:8; 1 Thess 4:5). But this ignorance contains a knowledge of God. They do not know God "although they knew God" (Rom 1:21). Even though they could and did know God from his works, "they did not honor him as God" (Rom 1:21). Thus their understanding was "darkened". They "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images" of perishable creatures (Rom 1:23; cf. Deut 4:15—19; Ps 105/106:20; Jer 2:11). They "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator... For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions" (Rom 1:25 f). The obscuration of their mind and the vanity of their thinking has produced moral corruption as a consequence of religious aberration, although the gentiles knew God's will from the dictates of their conscience (Rom 1:21—32; Eph 4:17 f; cf. Wisdom 14:22—29).

The universality of the New Covenant, foreshadowed in prophecies and wisdom speculations of the Old Testament, is grounded in the fact that eternal salvation is offered to all those who believe in Jesus Christ.



This involves two restrictions. First, salvation is not universal in the sense that "no man can prevent himself from being saved" (as Karl Rahner asserts<sup>2</sup>). Man has the grave liberty "to thrust from him" the word of God (Acts 13:46), "to refuse to love the truth and so be saved" (2 Thess 2:10). Secondly, the universality or catholicity of Christianity does not imply a general acknowledgment of all kinds of human religion. Nor is it based on the transcendental urge of human nature, since man's faculty of acknowledging and obeying God has been weakened by the Fall.

The Christians would however be misinterpreting the exclusivity of their religion if they secluded themselves to lead a sectarian life like the community of Qumran. And it would be a mistake to confine the attitude toward paganism to the condemnation of its depravity. He who wants to make the gospel accessible to gentiles has at all times to have recourse to the method which was initially practised in the sermon on the Areopagus and which is capable of manifold elaboration. This method is not a tactical device. It is based on two facts. First, the religions of the gentiles, corrupt though they may be, do contain elements of true knowledge of God, and the moral conscience of votaries of all religions does testify to the will of God. Secondly, the attitudes of pagans to the Divine, misdirected though they may be, are expressions of the urge to self-transcendence engrafted in man's spirit by his Creator who wills that man seek Him. These objective and subjective elements must be disentangled from error and selfishness. The truth that was "exchanged for a lie" has to be restored to its purity. The sermon on the Areopagus shows that such liberation is effected not in a contemplation of paganism in itself, not in static description, but in the movement of the proclamation of the gospel. This movement unveils the truth of the pagan thoughts in the proclamation which is utilizing them.

The same method has been practised in Paul's Epistles and in other writings of the New Testament, though in a less conspicuous way and discernible only by means of critical research. There are quite a number of concepts of Hellenistic origin which in the New Testament serve to expound the gospel, for example *σῶμα*, which is used by St. Paul to expound the mystery of the Church, *μυστήριον*, *συνέδῃσις*, *εὐσέβεια*, *σωφροσύνη*, *σωτήρ*. They are all reoriented by the proclamatory movement directed by the Holy Spirit. In a similar way, already in the Old Testament concepts of foreign origin had been assimilated into the religion of the one true God.

<sup>2</sup> „Kein Mensch kann verhindern, daß er erlöst ist.“ *Schriften zur Theologie* VII, 387. I have rendered *erlöst* with the word "saved". Some readers may think that the translation *redeemed* would be more appropriate. Either translation supposes an interpretation. The problem involved here can be treated only in a critical analysis of Rahner's theories. I hope to take this up in a later study.