

## „And will bring you into the wilderness of the nations...“

### The work of God in the Jewish repopulation of the land of Canaan

#### Introduction

The people of Israel were expelled from their land and their capital city Jerusalem in the year 70 of our time (CE), after the defeat of their rebellion against the Roman occupying power. In a Christian perspective, this expulsion was God's reaction to the long history of apostasy, idolatry, and self-justification of the chosen people, which culminated in the Jews<sup>1</sup> not recognizing Jesus/Yeshua as their King and Messiah, but rather handing him over to the cruel and ignominious death of the cross. Jesus himself announced the resulting terrible judgment to his contemporaries several times.<sup>2</sup> From the broader context of these passages it gets clear that the severe punishment imposed on Jerusalem, and Judea was due both to the fully unjustified execution of the Lord Jesus and to the long and sinful prehistory of the Jewry.<sup>3</sup>

The prophetic words of Jesus, with which he had announced the destruction of the Jewish temple and terrible tribulations for the Jewish people, became bitter reality quite soon after the crucifixion: God's wrath broke out in the so-called Jewish War from the year 66 CE. As a result, many Jewish people lost their lives to inconceivable atrocities committed by the Romans, while the survivors had to leave their country and its (largely destroyed) capital. The temple was destroyed completely and has not been rebuilt to this day.

Thus, the New Testament (NT) places the events at the cross of Golgotha in a close context with the expulsion of the Jews from the land of Canaan; from that land which God himself had promised and provided for them. This exile lasted for about 1800 years, and it is not yet completely revoked.

Since the end of the 19th century and increasingly in the 20th century, first some hundreds, then thousands and finally millions of Jewish people, sons and daughters of Jacob, have returned to the land of their forefathers. Jerusalem has awakened from its dusty slumber; the desert of Canaan is being revived; Israel is rising again from ancient ruins.

In view of the fact that the expulsion of the Jews after their lost war against Rome was undoubtedly closely connected with the rejection of the Lord Jesus, I can hardly deny that their return in modern times is also an event willed by God. Even more: I cannot doubt that the restoration of the Jewish nation on the soil of the land to which Moses and Joshua had once led them must be connected closely with the imminent revival of the Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> What is meant here is the rejection of the Lord Jesus by the bigger part of the Jewish people under the leadership of their religious and governmental-administrative leaders of that time. The numerous individual decisions for discipleship that happened both before the execution and after the resurrection of Jesus unfortunately do not change the fact that Jesus was, and still is, refused by the vast majority of the Jewry.

<sup>2</sup> C. Lk. 23,28; Mt. 23,38 & 24,1.2

<sup>3</sup> especially Mt. 23,1-37 and Lk. 23,1-27

For Jesus Himself had announced - almost immediately before His crucifixion - to the Jews (Mt 23:38.39):

*„See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'“*

Since the desolation of the house of Israel is obviously on the wane, the making visible and the return of the Messiah Yeshua *must* have come considerably closer. Because the scripture does not lie.

However, our human-Christian logic would probably expect a different sequence of events than they take place before our eyes. We would first wish for the repentance over the rejection of Jesus, then the Jewish revival towards their true and eternal Messiah, and then their return to the promised land, in which God would provide mercy and would bless the children of Jacob anew. Part of that renewed blessing would be the lifting of their exile.

The reality of our days, however, looks completely different. The return of the Jews to Israel has so far neither been accompanied by their thoroughgoing messianic revival, nor was it preceded by such a revival. At first glance, one can hardly have the impression that Israel has come even the smallest step closer to the knowledge and recognition of their Messiah through the advanced return to Canaan. Furthermore, the whole history of Jewish repopulation has by no means been as smooth and overwhelmingly victorious as one would expect - at superficial glance - from a perfect plan made by God. And today one could almost think that the whole thing has become bogged down in an insoluble conflict between the Jews and their neighboring peoples. As much as the development in *Eretz Israel* is impressive, in that within a few decades a modern democratic country with impressive growth rates has emerged from ruins in the desert, one cannot close one's eyes to the fact that today's Jewish state is far from offering a peaceful and stable home for its citizens. And it seems that the threat to the State of Israel is increasing every day, instead of decreasing.

These considerations lead to the question whether the reestablishment and unfolding of the state of Israel is *really* led by God; whether it is indeed *His* plan and purpose that is taking place before our eyes and in our days. And indeed, this question is being discussed extremely controversial in our time. This is true for the Jewish community itself; it is true also for the Christian churches and congregations, not to mention the rest of the world.

Therefore, I have examined the Bible to see if there are any spiritual principles or at least prophetic indications that shed light on the oddities in the realignment of the house of Israel.

### **Joseph's brothers: They were completely blind**

To answer this question, let us first look at the story of Joseph in the Old Testament (OT). It is found in Genesis, chapters 37 to 46. The account of that passage in brief is as follows: Joseph, one of the sons of the arch-father Jacob, was rejected by his brothers; mainly out of envy, they wanted to get rid of him and therefore sold him into slavery. However, through fortunate circumstances, he survived and eventually even received a very high, powerful and blessed position in the land of Egypt. Because of his power and wisdom, Joseph, who was rejected by his brothers, eventually became the savior of the house of Jacob. It is certainly not saying too much to recognize a Messiah type in the betrayed and exalted Joseph.

Among the sons of Jacob, therefore, a dramatic rupture had occurred. If there is to be any reconciliation of this evil deed, one might expect that the perpetrators would first have to repent of their deeds before the family could be reunited and renewed.

But see, God did lead things in a completely different way.

For strangely enough, we read nothing at all of repentance on the part of Joseph's brothers as they set out on the journey, at the end of which they will meet Joseph as their Savior. Not a single word! Rather, it is pure need and existential fear that compels them to make their perilous journey. (Gen. 42,1-3) And even more: They do not have the slightest idea that the brother they rejected will be their benefactor and savior. The motivation for their departure is that they are looking for a way out of a famine. Pure self-interest drives them. This is understandable in view of their situation, but it is important to see it clearly. Not repentance, not turning back, not spiritual renewal are the motives or conditions of their departure, but pure existential need. One could also say that they make their journey in a state of complete spiritual disorientation. They go to Egypt completely blind, and one wonders if they ever think of their sold brother at all. Neither a prophetic dream nor an angelic vision nor an enlightened person points them in the direction of their savior-brother Joseph, but pure need alone.<sup>4</sup> And this does not change at all during the eventful course of their journey. The actual point of their entire activities, or rather their deeper meaning - namely the reunification of the torn house of Jacob-Israel, the reconciliation of the "bad" brothers with Joseph and the new beginning of their common family history - remain hidden for a long time from those who have left. It is only the exalted Joseph who rather quickly overlooks things and yet does not make himself known for a long time.

Is this not a situation that corresponds quite closely to Jewish re-immigration? The return of the Jews to the old homeland was much more a reaction to the unbearable conditions in their Diaspora than the consequence of a spiritual awakening; not to mention a messianic conversion.<sup>5</sup> Even the fact that the new Jewish state was founded in *Eretz Israel* at all was anything but clear at the beginning of the Zionist movement. Theodor Herzl himself agitated and lobbied - at least for a time - for a Jewish homeland in other parts of the world; Cyprus, the Sinai Peninsula, or East Africa, for example, were considered. Influential rabbis of Herzl's time were also sceptical or even openly opposed the settlement of Jews in *Eretz Israel*. By and large, the Zionist awakening that led to the founding of the modern state of Israel was as spiritually benighted as the journey of the sons of Jacob at the beginning of their reconciliation with Joseph.

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<sup>4</sup> This seems to me particularly remarkable because very many of the decisive journeys or escapes in the Bible precisely did not begin in spiritual cluelessness, but were initiated by signs, miracles, dreams, or prophecies. The examples are so numerous that they cannot all be enumerated here; a few shall suffice. Consider, for example, the departure of Abram from Haran; Jacob's flight from Shechem to Beth-el; the later exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt; the journey of the magi to the stable of Bethlehem and their return, bypassing Jerusalem; the flight of Jesus' parents from Herod. Even David, whose flight from King Saul also began primarily out of fear of death, received spiritual strengthening from the priest Abimelech shortly after his departure; and the further course of his adventurous travels brought him so close to God that he regularly received instructions from God either directly or through other men (and women). The departure for and the further course of a significant journey without such spiritual instructions is obviously a remarkable exception.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Herzl's incendiary 1896 pamphlet "Der Judenstaat" (The Jewish State) made it clear from its very first pages that the driving force behind the departure of the Jews into a new era was predominantly their suffering. The heartbreakingly depressed situation of the Jews also resonates when, for example, the historian Barbara Tuchman quotes a Russian delegate to the Jewish National Congress to the effect that the Russian Jews of those times would even gone into hell in order to get out of Russia.

And now they have arrived, the Jews in the new old Canaan; by no means all of them yet, but certainly many of them. The first times of the immigrant Jews were very hard; so hard that one may well wonder why God did not make it a little easier for them. And life in the state of Israel has not become really easy and safe until today.<sup>6</sup>

But again, the Old Testament story of Joseph proves to be a foreshadowing of these events in modern times. For did not the Joseph brothers also suffer badly at first when they arrived in Egypt? Now they had reached the goal of their perilous journey, but this by no means meant the final breakthrough to their salvation. For when they fell down before Joseph, who had miraculously become vice-king, and begged him to sell them grain, he did not immediately offer them all the riches of his treasures. On the contrary, he stalled them by accusing them of evil motives (Gen. 42:12.14), and he also hid his true identity from them at first; he dealt harshly with his brothers like a complete foreign ruler (Gen. 42:7 & 30). He also subjected his brothers to certain trials and fears (Gen. 42:17); indeed, Joseph even staged a downright charade for this purpose (Gen. 42:25), which unnerved them even more (Gen. 42:28). As a further burden, he forced them to first make the arduous journey back home. Additionally, he frightened them by keeping one of them with him as a "pawn"; and this rather rudely, namely bound in prison (Gen. 42:19 & 24b).

Joseph's brothers had certainly imagined their rescue from their existence-threatening hardship in a different way! Even though the Bible does not record it - I can well imagine their anxious debates in the course of the protracted journey. Who, in their situation of facing diverse and mounting troubles, would not fall into doubt and begin to ask severe questions: "Is this really the way to our salvation? Or is it all just a meaningless mistake? Have we even walked into a trap of the devil?"

Only after they, now together with their youngest brother Benjamin, had arrived in Egypt again and had endured some more deliberate confusion from Joseph's side (Gen.44:1-13), their blindness was dismissed by Joseph revealing himself to them all as the son and brother who was believed to be dead. Only under the refined psychological pressure of Joseph a certain self-recognition of the evil-doers set in (Gen.44:16-34), only then did Joseph's messianic action take its course: For recognition was followed by reconciliation, and after that Joseph openly used his position of power for his brothers and turned all his goodness to them, whereby on the one hand the misery of the house of Jacob was actually lifted and on the other hand a completely new era could dawn for them.

The scheme followed by the children of Jacob in their approach to their savior-brother Joseph can thus be depicted as follows: (1) departure in spiritual cluelessness, driven by existential need → (2) arrival at the place of their salvation, but without immediate thorough solution of their problems and without recognizing their savior → (3) various confusing, dangerous and reiving situations need to be endured, before → (4) after massive pressure on the souls of the humiliated and greatly confused brothers, their Savior makes himself known to them and the actual reconciliation and reorganization of Jacob's family then takes its course.

As explained above, the course of the re-immigration of the Jewish nation to *Eretz Israel* so far corresponds strikingly well to this pattern. And also the overarching theme of the OT Joseph story,

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<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, no complete security of existence in any country in the world. But the manifold insults, threats, attacks, and fantasies of extermination to which the State of Israel has been repeatedly subjected since its reestablishment in 1948 strike me as extraordinary.

namely the salvation of the house of Israel by the rejected, hidden, yet highly exalted son and brother is a very apt parable for Jesus/Yeshua as the Messiah of the Jews.

Apart from this impressive report about the breaking and healing of the "original cell" of the house of Israel, there are other prophetic references in the OT which point in the same direction.

### **Ezekiel 20 and Hosea 2: The Return Leads into the Desert**

We may read in the prophet Ezekiel from the beginning of the 20th chapter a long report about the continued grave sins of the people of Israel, which finally lead to a national catastrophe of expulsion and exile. However, this serious report about aberration, decline and punishment takes a turn for the good starting from verse 34 of the same chapter. From there on it is announced that and how God wants to gather again his Israel scattered among the other nations, to bring it together and to bless it completely anew. Noteworthy for us here are verses 34 and 35:

*I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face.*

Here, too, we may understand that the gathering and restoration of Israel, at least at the beginning, will neither resemble a leisurely stroll nor a joyful journey to vacation. One may well imagine that the quoted "wrath" of God may rather affect the Gentile nations, under whose despotism and sadism the Jewry had to suffer during their exile. But immediately the last part of verse 35 makes it unmistakably clear: God's work of the restoration of Israel begins with his judicial action --- on Israel!

And this judgment shall take place "in the wilderness in the midst of the nations". Now this formulation is an extremely apt description for the present situation of the state of Israel! The Israel of today dwells among the nations of the world as in a desert: lonely, thirsty and under constant danger of life.

For despite all efforts of the State of Israel to maintain good international relations, its acceptance in today's world of states is low. There is probably no other nation or state in the world that is so permanently denounced, wronged and found guilty by international organizations such as the UN as this small country. The number of its international supporters is small, and they are as fickle and unpredictable as a diva. Even the backing of the U.S. is by no means certain, as can be seen from the changeable behavior of U.S. presidents in the succession from Mr. Obama via Mr. Trump to Mr. Biden.

It is important to note that the prophet Ezekiel does not at all described the beginning of Israel's reacceptance as a quick and smooth process, but rather as a judicial action of God, which very well includes hardships and fears; especially in that phase in which the miraculous bringing out of the Jews from the nations has already taken place.

A shorter parallel passage dealing with a similar restoration process is found in the prophet Hosea. There, starting in chapter 2, verse 2, we first read an account of how God turns away from his people, which is at least partly due to the "adultery" committed by their ancestors. After a sequence of re-

minders of both the adulterous behavior and God's punitive reaction, from verse Hos. 2:14 to the end of the chapter there is a hopeful preview of reconciliation and acceptance. The opening of verse Hos. 2:14 reads as follows:

*Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards...*

Herein we again encounter the desert motif: the actual restoration is again preceded by a phase in which things will obviously be difficult; and it is precisely there, in the midst of the hardships and afflictions of the "desert", that God will speak to his people in a clarifying manner; it is precisely there, in the face of barrenness and fears, that he will show his bride Israel the way to return to prosperity and opulence (here indicated by the motif of the vineyards).

Just as in the above-mentioned passages of the Joseph story and the 20th chapter of Ezekiel, the path to the blessed renewal of Israel does not lead directly from adversity to happiness but passes through a transitional phase that will obviously be marked by hardships and distresses.

## Summary

Thus, we may understand the problematic present of the state of Israel and the partly hopeful but partly still contested situation of the Jewish people all over the world as an intermediate phase on the way of their reacceptance by God. The blindness has not yet been removed from the Jews; Jesus/Yeshua the Messiah has not yet made himself known to them; they are still in a "desert period" in which their hopes for the future are overshadowed by tribulations, trials, and suffering. Even if these processes seem contradictory and confusing at first sight - they correspond to foreshadowings, which were already written down thousands of years ago by the spirit of God in words and incidents of the Old Testament. Through many pains and hostilities runs the process by which the Jewish people is brought back to God and in the course of which it is reinstated in its rights as the chosen people of God. And *at the end of it*, they will recognize and repent of their terrible delusion regarding their (and our) Messiah Yeshua. The confused hardships and difficulties of the foundation and development of the state of modern Israel are therefore in no way due to the "absence" or disinterest of God - quite in the contrary!

As we have shown above, the course of the resettlement of the land of Canaan is very much in accordance with spiritual principles and prophetic foreshadowing according to the Holy Scriptures, and therefore we may understand this resettlement as a part of the process that will lead to the renewed and restored acceptance of the Jewish people by God. We may therefore say that, under God's mighty and wise guidance, that day is approaching when what Paul wrote prophetically to us will come true: namely, that the reacceptance of the Jews will be "life from the dead" (Romans 11:15).

We Christians, as those who are already enlightened (by grace!), must never forget that the foundation of our faith and doctrine was laid by Jews - namely by the Jew Jesus and his exclusively Jewish Apostles of the early Christian era. Let us be sure that salvation not only comes from the Jews, but that it will also return to them. The partly confusing present circumstances of the Jewish people worldwide and in the state of Israel must not deceive us about this.

Let us therefore wish the Jews blessings and grace from God and let us beware of arrogance or even contempt towards them!

(Matthias Czerny, in July 2021 / Aw 5781)

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