

The Election of Israel Today: Supersessionism, Post-supersessionism, and Fulfillment

EMMANUEL PERRIER, O.P.

Dominican Studium

Toulouse, France

I

IT IS ALWAYS difficult to arrive in the middle of a discussion. One is exposed to the consequences of one's naiveté, and one especially risks obscuring the exchanges because one did not follow the first developments, or because of insufficient reflection upon the debated question. That said, it can also happen that a new eye is useful by the very reason of its ingenuousness. In proposing some reflections inspired by reading the response of Bruce Marshall to Francis Martin and Richard Schenk, I hope that at least certain of these reflections will pertain to the second category. In truth, it is not so much participation in a symposium organized by *Nova et Vetera* that raises on my part these preliminary precautions, as it is the subject itself of this symposium: "supersessionism" is an appellation that does not have an equivalent in my language, French. Not that reflection on the election of Israel after Christ has no place in French-speaking theology,¹ where some forms do draw near to supersessionism,² but it has generally not followed a path as resolute as that defined by Bruce Marshall: "Supersessionism involves, more precisely, the thought that the gifts God gave and the promises God made to the Jews now

¹ Cf. for example Denise Judant, *Judaïsme et christianisme. Dossier patristique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cèdre, 1969); Jean-Marie Lustiger, *La Promesse. "Mes yeux devant la fin de la nuit pour méditer sur ta promesse"* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2002).

² For example, C. Focant and A. Wenin, "L'Alliance ancienne et nouvelle," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 110 (1988): 850–66.

apply to us, the Church, *instead* of to the Jews.”³ This definition has the merit of clarity: the central notion of supersessionism is the substitution of the new People of God for the old. On this basis, harmonization with *Nostra Aetate* is made evidently difficult and one is naturally led to seek to resolve the issue by a position that goes beyond it, what Marshall calls post-supersessionist. However, if I have understood the givens of the discussion thanks to Marshall’s exposition, the supersessionist position continues to appear strange to me and, with it, the post-supersessionist position as well. I see at least three reasons.

Is Post-supersessionism the Sole Way Out of Supersessionism?

In the first place, supersessionism appears to me to be directly opposed to Romans 11:29: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” This is so because to substitute or replace implies that the new takes the place of the old and, on this basis, that the old loses its prerogatives. One could retort that supersessionism does not envision a replacement in strictly identical terms: it is indeed evident that the new Temple that is the Body of Christ is not of the same order as the old Temple of Jerusalem (cf. Jn 2:21: “He spoke of the temple of his body”). There is between the old and the new a relationship of fulfillment that avoids the idea of a pure and simple substitution. Indeed, between substitution and fulfillment, which are two different modes of relationships between realities, the second, it seems to me, should receive the priority in the measure to which it is much more consonant with the revealed given (cf. for example Mt 5:17: “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them”). Thus it seems preferable to me to ask if the fulfillment of the Old Covenant by the New is reducible to a substitution, rather than to ask how the substitution can integrate the idea of fulfillment. Marshall himself observes that this notion of fulfillment is indispensable to Christianity. And he adds: “But this ancient idea isn’t the solution to the problem of supersessionism. It is the problem” (4). If such is the case, it would be better to reverse the proposition: is supersessionism the solution to the problem of knowing in what consists the fulfillment by Christ of the election of Israel? This is why I am not convinced by the idea that one has to seek a post-supersessionist solution to supersessionism, as if supersessionism is the right way of posing the question of what becomes of the election of Israel. In sum, supersessionism is not presented as a problematic, but as a solution, and this is why its limits call not for a going-beyond but for a revision.

³ Bruce D. Marshall, “*Quasi in Figura: A Brief Reflection on Jewish Election, after Thomas Aquinas*,” *Nova et Vetera* 7:2 (2009), **XX–XXX**

A Post-supersessionism Without Messianism?

In the second place, Marshall seems to return at the end of his article to what he calls the “non-official position” of St. Thomas, consisting in “allowing the Jews to be Jews,” and leaving to the side the question of understanding what this means for the election of Israel after Christ (6). If I understand him, Marshall proposes as a post-supersessionist solution to no longer respond to the question that the supersessionist position raised. To employ a geometric image, supersessionism envisages the relationship between the people of Israel and the Christian people as two segments of a straight line, consecutive one after the other. Post-supersessionism would consist in no longer being occupied with this relationship and in acting as if the two peoples formed two parallel lines (called ultimately to be rejoined at the infinite point, that is to say the Last Judgment). It would be better, Marshall explains, to discuss with the Jews faith in the Trinity or the Resurrection of Christ, rather than to continue to squabble on the point of knowing which one, of our two peoples, is now the elected of God (6). If, on principle, one can only approve this irenic focus on the essential, always preferable to conflicts of heritage, I am not however certain that this settles the difficulty, because the first subject of discussion that we have with the Jews is not the Trinity or the Resurrection but the question of knowing whether Christ is, yes or no, the Messiah announced by the prophets of Israel and the subject of the promise made to Abraham (cf. Gal 3:16ff.). As much for Jews as for Christians, the messianic thematic is at the heart of the faith. And to be questioned on this messianic thematic, from the Christian point of view, is inevitably to put into relationship the Old with the New Covenant, as shown in various ways by the Gospels, then the first Christological discourses narrated by the Acts of the Apostles, and finally the Catholic epistles. The insistence of the New Testament to present to us the figure of the Christ from the angle of fulfillment should have for us the value of a warning: it is not possible to know Christ in truth outside the rootedness of his humanity in the history of Israel. I therefore do not see how our discussions with the Jews could be the discussions of two travelers keeping on one side and the other of a river. It seems to me in fact that Marshall, even when he wishes to avoid it, remains prisoner to the supersessionist manner of reflecting on the relationship between the Church and the promises made to Israel, and this manner consists in locking us in a strict alternative: either there is a relationship of substitution, or there is no relationship. That Marshall does not succeed in avoiding this aporia strengthens me in the idea that supersessionism is incapable of integrating the perspective of fulfillment, which consists neither in a pure and simple substitution, nor in a pure and simple juxtaposition. And if fulfillment does

not seem to Marshall the solution to the problem of supersessionism (3), this is quite simply because fulfillment cannot consist in a substitution, nor can substitution be a form of fulfillment.

The impasse into which supersessionism leads us is, however, not without interest: it shows us that the relationship between the Church and Israel cannot be thought on the mode of a relationship between foreign bodies. It is not possible, understood here after the coming of Christ, to ignore that Israel and the Church belong to the unique salvific plan of God, that the second is rooted in the first and fulfills its most fundamental traits. It is necessary, therefore, for us to seek an understanding of our question more fine than the dialectic of all or nothing, which characterizes supersessionism.

*Is the Dialectic Imposed by Supersessionism
Relevant to the Teaching of St. Thomas?*

In the third place, I have some concern that Marshall has continued to apply this dialectic when taking counsel from St. Thomas. I find evidence of it in the opposition that he discerns between an “official position” and a “non-official position” of Thomas, the one and the other encountered in some questions far apart in the *Summa theologiae* (cf. 5–6). The thesis is bold. It is based on the fact that in Thomas, concern for synthesis is never transformed into the spirit of system, and that he always prefers to respect all the aspects of a question rather than to reduce the revealed given by forcibly making it fit an artificial theological construction. This intellectual generosity of Aquinas is not for nothing in the capacity of his teaching to serve as a source of inspiration even today. It is not, however, possible to keep to this view: Thomas is by no means a mere collector of good theological ideas that he scribbled one after the other in the miscellany of doctrine. On the contrary, he most manifests his genius in his constant effort to maintain the organic unity of theological discourse despite the difficulties of harmonization of the revealed sources. This characteristic of Thomas’s work proceeds above all from a theological conviction: the object of faith is simple, all the discursivity of our discourse regarding this object—First Truth—comes from the limits of our intelligence.⁴ This is why the irreducible complexity of theology does not deny that there exists always a principle of order of this complexity, a principle that results from the unity of the object of faith and that a contemplative investigation alone allows one to bring out. Thus I regret that Marshall

⁴ Cf. for example, *Quaestiones de veritate*, q. 14, a. 8, ad 12: “quamvis fides sit de complexo quantum ad id quod in nobis est; tamen quantum ad id in quod per fidem ducimur sicut in obiectum, est de simplici veritate.”

does not try to harmonize what he calls the “official position” and the “non-official position” of Thomas (cf. 6) or, more exactly, that he has not attempted this harmonization *before* speaking of an “official position” and a “non-official position.” If it happens that Aquinas does not achieve a homogeneous doctrine on a given subject, it is always a good method to verify beforehand that one is truly faced with such a situation. Marshall has assembled in his study the principal places where Thomas evokes the election of Israel in the *Summa theologiae*, and he has indicated many aspects that hint at conciliation between these texts (such as the difference between *in figura* and *quasi in figura*), but without pursuing his reflection further. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that the hypothesis of opposition corresponded better to what he sought to show, namely that the post-supersessionist position that he proposes validates at the same time that it goes beyond the presuppositions of the supersessionist position.

II

One will have seen that the essential element of my reservations concerning the article of Bruce Marshall consists in the fact that he does not appear to have gone far enough in the critique of the presuppositions of supersessionism, and that, by way of consequence, he remains prisoner to the too sharp dialectic of supersessionism. Now, it is this dialectic of *all or nothing*, whatever may be the form, that appears to me to prevent access to the true stakes of the dialogue with Israel as the Second Vatican Council has fixed the terms. Regarding these terms, one could summarize them in the following manner: the more the Church deepens its links with the people of Abraham according to the flesh, the more it renews the knowledge of its universal mission in the sole source of the universality of salvation, who is the Christ. Inversely, the less theology respects the complexity of the relationship that Christianity has with Judaism, the less it integrates the perspective of the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, and the more it is tempted to seek elsewhere than in the Christ, Word made flesh, the principle of the universality of salvation. In other words, Christ is universal mediator of salvation *in his person*, that is to say, not only because he is God, but also and indissociably, in that which his humanity has of the more particular, more culturally situated, namely this culture—Jewish—that is the fruit of a sacred history, that is to say, of an election. I concede quite willingly to Marshall that the connection in Christ of the universal mediation with the particular election of Israel is difficult to make clear theologically (cf. 1). But is it not, however, an obligatory connection for those who take the Incarnation seriously?

Some years ago, Cardinal Ratzinger set himself a quite similar question at a conference that took place in Israel and was later published: “Can Christian faith, retaining its inner power and dignity, not only tolerate Judaism but accept it in its historic mission? Or can it not?”⁵ The Cardinal remarked in effect that if one separated Christianity from the Old Testament, then not only would the God of Israel become for us, Christians, a strange God, but in addition Christian identity itself would be affected: the center of our faith would no longer be Christ; it would be reduced to the universal message of Christ. The person of Christ, the fact of his historical rootedness, no longer could be the universal source of salvation but, quite to the contrary, it would become a curb to the universality of the *message* of salvation. This renewed form of Marcionism is not a fantasy. There is a way of opposing the historical Jesus to the Jesus of faith, or of making Christ the bearer of the liberty of faith, the radical contradictor of the observances of Judaism, which leads in theological practice to the denial of the unity of biblical Revelation.

The Gospels, in contrast, show us a quite different reality. On the one hand, Christ perfectly fulfills the Law by conforming to it completely as only the Just One can do, to the point of being able to fulfill the Law in the place of all sinners and of taking on himself the “curse of the Law” (Gal 3:13). His death on the Cross, which makes vain all the sacrifices commanded by the Law, does not make them vain by repudiating them or by scorning them, but on the contrary, through an intimate solidarity with the Law and with Israel: Christ celebrates the Pasch with his disciples, before dying at the moment when the pascal lamb is slain in the Temple. On the other hand, by reminding us that all the Law and the prophets depend on the twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbor, Christ opens membership to the children of Abraham to all those who enter into “the will of God in which moral commandment and profession of the oneness of God are indivisible.”⁶ “Jesus broadened the Law, wanted to open it up, not as a liberal reformer, not out of a lesser loyalty to the Law, but in strictest obedience to its fulfillment, out of his being one with the Father in whom alone Law and promise are one and in whom Israel could become blessing and salvation for the nations.”⁷

Put otherwise, it is not by abandoning the particular election of Israel that Christ universally bears salvation, but by broadening it to the dimensions of the world: “The history of Israel should become the history of

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

all, Abraham's sonship is to be extended to the 'many'.⁸ The election of Israel is not abolished but enlarged to all the worshippers in Spirit and in truth of the true God, revealed in Jesus Christ. This interior transformation of election was possible in the measure to which the faith of Israel, because it was faith in the one God, Creator of the world and of all human beings, already envisioned universality. "Since it is devoted to the one God of all men, it also bore within itself the promise to become the faith of all nations. But the Law, in which it was expressed, was particular, quite concretely directed to Israel and its history; it could not be universalized in this form."⁹ The particular election of Israel, therefore, does not have to be opposed to the universal mission of the Church, either by substitution, or by juxtaposition: it is found at the source of this universal mission, in Christ, and it follows that its consideration is indispensable for attaining to the true notion of Christian universality.

By re-centering on Christ the reflection concerning the relationships between Jews and Christians, the future Benedict XVI makes us attentive to the following fact: the particular relationship that Christians hold with the Jewish people, through which is recognized the singularity of the Jewish people among all the peoples, cannot consist in another relationship than the one that Christ holds with the people from which he comes according to the flesh. Certainly, this relationship takes different cultural forms over the epochs, and it is weighed down by the burdens of a tumultuous past, but the theological principles that we apply are and should remain fundamentally Christological: if we are, we also, "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29), this is uniquely considered as "sons of God, through faith" (Gal 3:26). How, then, to characterize the relationship between Christ and Israel? Christ is the one in whom all the promises of God have their amen (cf. 2 Cor 1:20), their realization. Having been subjected to the Law, announced by the prophets, he has by his life and by his death carried to their fulfillment the messianic, prophetic, and royal figures; he has offered in his body the perfect sacrifice and this body has become the new Temple. Otherwise put, Christ is the perfect terminus of the Old Testament Revelation. He is the terminus in the sense that all that preceded him was an announcement, a preparation, a pedagogy for his coming. And he is the perfect terminus in the sense that what preceded Christ was incapable of supplying what he alone supplied.

⁸ Ibid., 27. This is also the conviction of Cardinal Lustiger. Cf. Lustiger, *La Promesse*, 99 and 127: "baptism, from the fact that it incorporates into Christ, is equally an 'incorporation into Israel.'" This is why "the mystery of Israel is indissolubly the mystery of Christians."

⁹ Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant*, 38.

Thus whilst Israel is for us the witness of this divine pedagogy that introduces us to the understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and of the redemption in Christ Jesus, it remains only that: the witness of this pedagogy. Israel is for us the indispensable figure that leads us to the knowledge and love of Christ, but it is only the figure of a reality that goes beyond it by fulfilling it.

To say that Israel is the figure of the reality who is Christ means consequently two things, which should be clearly distinguished:

First, the figure is a pedagogy of the reality, it clarifies it, it disposes us to receive it, and this on two levels:

- On the one hand, Israel has among all the peoples been chosen in order to prepare the coming of the Word in the flesh. From this point of view, Israel has a unique and incommunicable role in the history of salvation: to be the figure of Christ.
- On the other hand, subjectively, the history of Israel as it was transmitted to us in the Revelation of the Old Testament possesses for every human being a propaedeutic value for knowing and encountering Christ in truth. From this point of view, Israel is a figure in as much as it is a *common past* to every human being who seeks to encounter Christ. In this way the present Israel, as it exists and has developed after Christ, is not the figure of the Messiah to come, but the *present witness of the past figure*: its existence and its permanence attest to the truth of the figure, they attest to the fact that the figure of which the Old Testament tells us is not a myth; but its development after Christ means that the present Israel does not perfectly overlap with the Israel of which the Old Testament tells us.¹⁰

Second, the figure is also distinguished from the reality from the point of view of efficacy: it is not capable of procuring for us what the reality procures for us. Christ is the unique savior of all human beings, by consequence including the Jews (cf. for example Acts 4:12).

- The institutions of the Old Testament and the Law were therefore—and are still—by themselves incapable of causing salvation (cf. for example Heb 7:19: “the law made nothing perfect”). From this point of view, the coming of Christ has changed nothing.

¹⁰ The fact that Israel is no longer the figure of the Word to come in our flesh, but only the present witness of the past figure, leaves intact the question of understanding whether Israel still possesses today the character of a figure. I will return to this question below.

- However, insofar as they prefigured Christ and his salvific work, they guided toward Christ and disposed the heart of the just to live according to his grace. The descendants of Abraham were thus opened to salvation by faith in the one who was to come (cf. Gal 3:6ff.). This is why, if the Jewish institutions and Law did not cause salvation by themselves, insofar as they were attached to Christ and to his work, they were that through which salvation was given to the Jews. From this point of view, the coming of Christ changed something: to remain faithful to Judaism despite Christ, is to prefer the figure to the reality, and to give to the figure the value that belongs only to the reality. It is necessary here to distinguish between the evolution of the Jewish tradition and the situation of each Jew:
 - After the coming of Christ, Judaism has continued to enrich its tradition, sometimes consciously against Christianity. Thus the Jewish institutions and Law, as they are comprised and transmitted today, no longer possess the same openness to Christ that they possessed before Christ.¹¹
 - From the subjective point of view, each Jew following in good faith his tradition is led toward Christ and receives Christ's grace in the measure to which this tradition conserves its right orientation toward Christ. He cannot remain in good faith if, arriving at explicit knowledge of Christ, he continues to prefer what he henceforth perceives as being only a figure of Christ.

The various theological principles that I have rapidly set forth would call for a number of complementary developments. But they suffice to outline an alternative position to supersessionism and post-supersessionism, a position whose importance and range go beyond the question of the relationship of the Church and Israel. The central idea of this position is found in the following affirmation: *if there is a unique Savior, there*

¹¹ Perhaps it is necessary to make this point more precise. There has undeniably been an evolution of the tradition of Israel after Christ and the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. For example, the rites have been adapted to the new situation of Israel, messianism has become more exclusively eschatological, and some interpretative traditions such as those set forth in the Talmud have been crystallized. Thus it is no longer as evident today for a Jew to recognize in Christ the fulfillment of the Law announced by the prophets. That said, the particularity of this enrichment is that it is joined to the Old Testament Revelation without being inserted into it, that it limits itself to the comprehension and the transmission of this Revelation. Put otherwise, the Jewish tradition after Christ remains always conscious of its secondary character in relation to Revelation.

can only be one single economy of salvation and one single Church of Christ. Far from being an obvious position, the correlation of the three onenesses rests on two convictions:

- On the one hand, each of the terms is Christocentric: Christ is the sole Savior by reason of the mystery of his person, where his humanity is the conjoined instrument of his divinity; the economy of salvation is one because it is the work that Christ accomplishes by the power of his Spirit, according to the benevolent plan of the Father; the Church is one because it is the mystical Body of Christ. Thus, there is only one Savior, one work, and one Body, as summed up by the mystery of the Pasch of Christ.
- On the other hand, the oneness of the economy and the oneness of the Church are a necessary consequence of the oneness of the Savior. This results from their Christocentric definition. This twofold derivation requires for theology the task of making explicit in what manner the grace of salvation is offered to all human beings, in space and time, and how all those who receive this grace and live it belong to the mystical Body of Christ.

The difficulties that the theology of religions encounters after the Second Vatican Council show that this task is hardly easy. One notes that faced with difficulties, the recurring temptation among theologians is to strain or question the connection between Christology, economy, and ecclesiology. One can justify this critical trend by concluding that these difficulties are the sign that Vatican II made a mistake: either by an excess of openness in not excluding completely from salvation those who are not sacramentally baptized, or by narrowness in not recognizing a plurality of paths of salvation, of revelations, and of religions uniting human beings in communities. These two contrary reactions offer the seduction of a facile solution. And it seems to me that the supersessionist and post-supersessionist positions, as Marshall presents them, engage us respectively in one or the other reactions. (Is this not the reason why Marshall, conscious that these positions remain unsatisfactory, is very prudent in his argumentation and his conclusions?)

But the current difficulties in uniting Christology, economy, and ecclesiology can lead us to another conclusion. After all, it might also be that Vatican II was more advanced than the theology, or, more precisely, the theology of religions had not yet attained the degree of profundity necessary for interpreting the Magisterium of Vatican II: if we do not succeed in holding the connection between the oneness of the Savior,

the oneness of the economy, and the oneness of the Church, perhaps this is due to the fact that we still possess an insufficiently Christocentric conception of each of these terms. Seen from this angle, the work of theology of religions is not anecdotal, or secondary, in relation to more fundamental dogmatic questions; on the contrary, it draws us back to the heart of Christian faith. And this is why, even if I do not accept the conclusions, the reflections of Bruce Marshall are so stimulating.

See full text on:
<http://nvjournal.net>