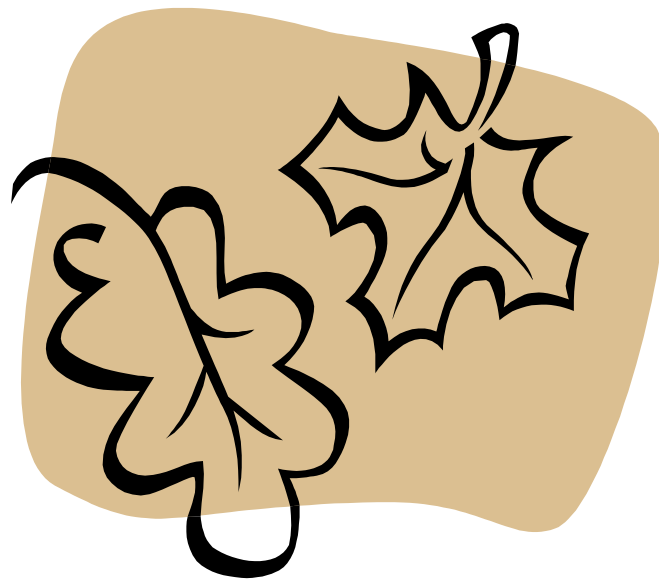


AUTUMN LEAVES

Volume 1



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Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the first volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, consisting of items that I wrote as a young man and which I am now re-issuing in my own “autumn” years. The first two items “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” and “Consider your Verdict” are already available as separate pamphlets.

As in the case of previous re-issues of my older writings, I have resisted the temptation to carry out a major edit. The article on the “Fate of Judas” is unaltered and appears exactly as published. (It is also available as a PDF in the public domain.)

However, in the case of the “Hope of Israel” I have redacted the wording quite considerably. The original was a transcript of a spoken address and did not lend itself to easy reading. I have tried to retain the conversational style but hopefully I have taken out at least some of the verbosity!

As always, I trust friends will enjoy these contributions from my younger self and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

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Beneath the Cross of Jesus

Scripture Passage: Genesis 28: 10 - 22

In the passage we see Jacob, one of the key characters in the whole book of Genesis. On closer examination, we see that he is in anything but a strong and happy position. Jacob had, in fact, done a very strong and dishonest thing: he had tricked his elderly father Isaac into thinking that he (Jacob) was his older twin brother Esau. As a result of this trickery, Isaac had given Jacob the unique and special blessing reserved for the first born.

The elderly and ailing Isaac was now near to his death and the angry Esau was planning to kill his brother as an act of revenge.

It seemed that Jacob could only do one thing and that was to take flight. His mother, Rebekah, sent him to her brother Laban, who lived at Haran. The hope was that if Jacob stayed with Laban for a while, Esau's temper might at least cool a little.

Esau was a physically strong man, a great outdoor type and hunter. Like Samson of a later date, his physical strength was not matched by strength of mind and character. In fact, Esau had already let himself down at an earlier stage by selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup (or *mess of potage* as it is called in the King James Bible). Jacob relied on the fact that Esau would soon forget about his trickery, even if he did not forgive the dishonesty.

Jacob, as a character was, we are told, a quiet man (Gen 25: 27) and had spent most of his time at home, just pottering about. Now he could do this no longer. He had to flee to Haran which was about three hundred miles away. It must have been a

long and lonely journey, oppressively hot during the day and bitterly cold at night, with no proper bed to lie on, just the hard ground. How lonely, tired and unhappy he must have felt at night when he laid down to sleep under the stars. And, of course, his guilty conscience and the fact that his present predicament was entirely his own fault would not have helped.

However, we must not forget one vital point. God was looking after Jacob - not, of course, that Jacob had done anything to deserve this, but then none of us ever does.

On one particular night, Jacob laid down to sleep, with his head resting on a stone - a stone that we Scots like to believe is the Stone of Destiny - and he dreamt a truly wonderful dream. He saw a ladder stretched up between heaven and earth and upon this a ladder on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. At the top of the ladder was the Lord God himself. In the dream, the Lord spoke to Jacob and said:

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad ... and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Once more, God was reminding humankind, through Jacob, of his own great faithfulness. Jacob had not only fallen short, he had cheated. Yet God now renewed the Covenant through Jacob, the same Covenant that he had sworn to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham.

This is the extraordinary thing about the grace of God; it continues from generation to generation among those whom God chooses. And it is strange how God does choose, often selecting

the most unlikely and sometimes, in our perception, the most unsuitable people.

Everyone would have expected God's choice to fall upon Esau. He was, after all, the elder of the two. He was also strong and virile, quite different from his dull, plain brother. Everyone, parents included, would have taken it for granted that God would renew the Covenant through Esau. God's choice, however, lay with the younger brother just as his choice, throughout history, so often seems to lie in strange and unlikely directions.

Many years later, God sent the prophet Samuel (I Samuel 16) to take one of the sons of Jesse to be king over Israel. Jesse duly produced seven sons in turn, all of them strapping fellows, any one of whom outwardly would have made a splendid figure for a king. Samuel looked them all over very carefully and he knew in his heart that not one of them was God's choice to be king.

He asked Jesse if he had another son and it transpired that he had. His name was David, still only a slightly built teenager who was given all the odd jobs to do around the house and on the land. No one in the family even thought that he might be in the running to be king.

Samuel had the boy brought in and immediately discerned that this was God's (surprising) choice and anointed him king over Israel. It seemed so odd, to choose a mere slip of a boy to replace the mighty Saul who physically had stood head and shoulders above every other man. Of course, Saul had been a popular choice and perhaps at least some of his popularity had been due to his appearance. We all do tend to judge by outward appearances. As a king, however, Saul had turned out to be a great disappointment.

Notice too that God had put his ladder down into the life of Jacob at a time when there was the greatest need. To put it mildly, Jacob's life was in a mess and would have to be sorted out well and truly if he was going to be any use to God or man. If his life was not sorted out, he would be on the run, literally or metaphorically, for the rest of his life.

It was at this time, at his time of greatest need, that God in his great mercy and perseverance showed Jacob that there is indeed a ladder between heaven and earth. Even the most mundane and earthly experience, like sleeping with a stone for a pillow, could be sweetened and transformed by the fact that God is faithful, that his Covenant still stands and that he is a God who moves and works among his people.

So it is today, just as much as it has ever been. God is gracious, God is faithful, he keeps his promises and renews his Covenant with us in a marvellous way that is quite beyond our understanding.

When Jacob awoke out of his dream he was afraid: indeed, he was very afraid. *How awesome is this place*, he said (Gen 28: 17). He knew that he had been given a vision by God. He realised again that God was gracious and faithful to him, liar, twister and deceiver that he was. So Jacob took the stone that he had used as a pillow and set it on end like a landmark and testimony that God had truly shown himself in that place. He called the place Beth-El, meaning house of God.

(There used to be a church of Glasgow that had a Scripture text painted on the wall. That was not unusual, especially in the nineteenth century. The text chosen was that quoted in the previous paragraph except that it was taken from the King James Bible. So, when the congregation sat in their pews on a

Sunday morning, they could see the words *How dreadful is this place* above the minister's head!)

But then something surprising and even disappointing happens in the story of Jacob. Having passed through a profound spiritual experience and being assured of God's faithfulness, Jacob seems to spoil the moment by trying to make his own bargain with God.

If God will be with me and will keep me in the way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God ... (vs. 20-21)

In the following verse, Jacob (to be fair to him) does offer to give God back a tenth of everything he gave to Jacob. In other words he was attempting to strike a deal with God. He was not the first and certainly not the last to try to do this. There is always a real temptation to add an "if" even in our dealings with God. Many people throughout history and today believe that they can enlist in God's army on their own terms.

But what is most interesting is God's response. He does not condemn nor does he condemn. He simply ignores these apparent conditions that Jacob seeks to impose. God has made his promise to Jacob. He brushes aside Jacob's attempts to keep control and simply allows him to proceed on his way, under-girded by the everlasting arms. So, in a real sense, God not only keeps his Covenant from his side, he also keeps it from our side as well.

To me, this is quite mind-blowing. God acts for man as our substitute. He did so supremely when, in and through Jesus Christ he bore our sins in his body on the tree. How much more convincing do we need of God's love and faithfulness?

Our course, God had in no way finished with Jacob at this stage. God had no intention of rejecting Jacob but the latter still had many lessons to learn. Some of these he would learn at the hands of his uncle Laban.

If Jacob was a deceiver, he was only a beginner and an amateur when compared with his uncle. Laban emerges as one of the truly dodgy characters of the Old Testament. He had made his money not by fair dealing and hard work (which the Bible commends) but by cheating, deceiving and taking advantage. Had he been alive today, I suspect that Laban would wear chunky jewellery, drive a flashy car, smoke cigars and live in an ostentatious house furnished in bad taste and filled with all the latest gadgets. Possibly he would have gold-capped teeth!

Oh yes, Jacob still had many lessons to learn. In fact, for many years, Jacob was in Laban's grasp. He was well and truly on the receiving end and getting a taste of his own medicine.

Fortunately, God sees possibilities in all of the people he has created and does not give up on any of them. He had invested too much in Jacob and his descendants to let him off the hook.

But let us just add one word of warning here. There could be a real temptation here to use God's grace as a kind of blank cheque to do exactly as we please. After all, God will do all the work for us? God indeed is gracious, but he is not mocked. By many standards it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Let us not yield to the temptation of taking his grace for granted or abusing it in any way. Just think how many times God has been gracious to you in the past. And if you are one of those who are still undecided, I urge and encourage you not to keep putting off your decision.

Maybe some readers are thinking that what has been said so far is very much rooted in the Old Testament and thus to the ancient world. However, we have one great and crucial advantage over Jacob. We stand on the other side of the Cross. For in the Cross of Jesus there is now a permanent ladder between God and man, between heaven and earth. This ladder goes beyond any dream. Jesus himself said:

...you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. (John 1: 51)

Christ's life, work, death and resurrection and the fullness of his sacrifice upon the Cross - these are all factors that link heaven and earth and God and man in a way that was often hinted at in the Old Testament through vision, type and symbol. On our side of the Cross, the vision has become an assured reality.

It is a great comfort and security to know that Jesus Christ is the ladder, even in times of darkest despair and sheer loneliness we can know that there is this permanent ladder between heaven and earth on which the angels of God (whom we often encounter without knowing it) continually ascend and descend.

Beneath the Cross of Jesus
I fain would take my stand
The shadow of a mighty rock
Within a weary land
A home within a wilderness
A rest upon the way
From the burning of the noontide heat
And the burden of the day

O safe and happy shelter
O refuge tried and sweet

A trysting place where heaven's love
And heaven's justice meet
As to the exiled patriarch
That wondrous dream was given
So seems my Saviour's Cross to me
A ladder up to heaven

Let us be clear in our own minds that the Cross of Jesus is no mere dream, it was - and it is - a reality in human history and experience. There is an old legend which states that the socket into which the Cross was fixed on Calvary marked the centre of the world. This is not true in a scientific sense yet this ancient perception illustrates a very important truth. In a very real sense the Cross is indeed the centre of world history. There is an old hymn that speaks on the Cross towering over the wrecks of time. The Cross certainly stands as a permanent judgment on sin but it also radiates the supreme love of God who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all.

When we stand beneath the Cross of Jesus we, like Jacob awakening from his dream can certainly say *How awesome is this place.*

I take, O Cross, thy shadow
For my abiding place
I ask no other sunshine than
The sunshine of his face
Content to let the world go by
To know no gain nor loss
My sinful self my only shame
My glory all, the Cross

Hymn composed by Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane

Consider your Verdict

Then what shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?
(Matthew 27: 22)

Compared with many other officials in the higher Roman establishment, Pontius Pilate was not the most important figure. He was a Provincial Governor which certainly meant that he had power of a kind but his power was very general and, no doubt, his chief difficulty in administering his Province of Judea lay in the fact that he was, as it were, between the devil and the deep blue sea.

He had the somewhat unenviable task of trying to placate the (often resentful) Jewish authorities who had very considerable influence over the common people. Indeed, for being able to stir up a mob at short notice, they were in a very much stronger position than he was.

And then Pilate had a virtually unworkable working relationship with Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee. The two men were sworn enemies, although, somewhat chillingly, they became friends after they had both washed their hands of Jesus (Luke 23: 12).

Then again, Pilate had to consider his own position in respect of the authorities in Rome and to make sure that he did everything according to the book. In other words, he had to cover his own back.

Yet, in spite of everything, Pilate (unknown to himself at the time) was destined to have his name perpetuated in the history books for all time coming. On the occasion when the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to him, he did not have much time to think or even to make up his mind. More than likely, he had heard something of this Jesus character. All of Jerusalem had

heard how he had ridden into the city a few days earlier, accepting the praise and acclamation of the crowds, who had spread the road with palm branches. Then, he had caused a minor riot in the Temple precincts by over-turning the tables of the money changers. And it was reported that he had even said that if the Temple was destroyed, he could rebuild it in three days. It is almost impossible to think that Pilate had not heard something of this mystery man from Galilee.

But then, Pilate was somewhat wrong footed. Jesus was arrested under cover of darkness and brought before Pilate without any prior warning. He found himself confronted not only by Jesus but, more threateningly, by a gang of influential people who were sure that he must be guilty.

Pilate, then, had to make up his mind. Was there any real threat to national security? Was this man who he claimed to be? Was it true what his enemies said against him? Had he been victimised and used as a scapegoat to cover something else? Or had this Jesus just been foolish and got in out of his depth? There were, after all, plenty of self appointed "messiah" figures and wonder-workers around Galilee at the time, most of them harmless cranks who could safely be ignored. And Passover time tended to bring many of these crazy people out into the open.

Then, again, if Pilate did take the side of the Jews, how would that affect - for better or for worse - the tricky and abrasive relationship between him and Herod? Jesus, after all, came from Galilee and came under Herod's jurisdiction.

Sooner or later we all find ourselves in a position that is not entirely dissimilar from that of Pilate. Jesus of Nazareth stands before us with all the startling claims that he makes: that he is the Saviour of the world, the Son of God, the way, the truth

and the life. We do not have unlimited time to make up our minds. Is Jesus the real thing or is he not?

I well remember in my very earliest days of working in full-time ministry, people would often tell me that they had "nothing against" the church or the Christian message but that they did not really have the time to devote to the matter. Maybe they would have more time when the work situation changed or when the children grew up or ...

My response is (and I want to express this sensitively and in a pastoral context) that we will never actually have more time than we do now. Time is something that we make, rather than something we have.

Almost certainly, Pilate had no idea just how great the responsibility was that lay on his shoulder on that day. He would have known that the fate of one man lay in his hands. That, for him, was nothing particularly unusual. He had the power of life and death. He also knew that his own position would not be strengthened in the eyes of the crowd if he brought in the "wrong" verdict. Yet he must also have been aware that Roman law was known for its fairness and impartiality. (Well, that at least was the theory.)

What we must all face and understand is that our own verdict on Jesus is not something that only affects ourselves. There is an increasing tendency to see faith as almost entirely a personal and private matter. To speak about it is perceived, in some circles as unacceptable as taking our clothes off in public. But if we do actually accept that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, the Messiah - that he is the one who is the way, the truth and the life, is this a matter that only affects us personally? I would suggest otherwise.

It is part of the Christian duty to bear witness to others. This is not just by saying or using certain words. I have seen examples of Christian people "witnessing" to others in an insensitive and inappropriate way, often by saying the right thing at the wrong time. It can, of course, be off-putting if we ram our beliefs down the throats of other people. Also, there is such a thing as casting pearls before swine. And, to be fair, we Scots tend not to wear our hearts on our sleeves and it does not come naturally to us to share our faith openly with others. Yet sometimes - and I say all this more to myself than to others - we can miss opportunities that come our way.

It is said that deeds speak louder than words. People will look at us. If they know that we are Christian, they will tend to judge not only the church but also the Gospel by the way in which we speak and act. What kind of image do we project? What kind of attitudes do we present? Do our neighbours, those with whom we work and people we meet actually *know* that we are Christians?

To put it another way, if you or I were on trial for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

Do other people see something of the light of Christ shining through us? (Again, I say this more to myself than to others.) If not, why not? Even the smallest Christian fellowship covers a surprisingly wide radius of occupations, backgrounds and interests. We may think that we have very little influence on others. Yet that can be a misperception.

Pilate found that no matter how hard he tried, he could not get rid of the problem of Jesus - which is what he would have wished to do. Pilate sent Jesus off to Herod, hoping that the latter would deal with him. Herod promptly sent him right back to Pilate.

Then Pilate thought of another way in which he might overcome the problem. There was a tradition that every year at Passover time, one prisoner would be pardoned and released. This year a man by the name of Jesus Barabbas was earmarked. If Pilate released Jesus the Christ instead of Jesus Barabbas this might neatly solve the problem. But the people were not having it.

Pilate even produced the meek and lonely figure of Jesus in the hope that they might take pity on him. Yet, this seemed to inflame the crowd even more. In fact, the more that Jesus became like a lamb to the slaughter, the more his enemies seemed to become as ravening wolves. In short, Pilate found that whatever ruse he tried, he simply could not get rid of the "problem" of Jesus.

All Pilate wanted was to find a solution that would be acceptable to Rome, to the crowd and to the Jewish authorities. He was not the first or was he the last person to realise how difficult it is to please everybody and cover one's own back at the same time.

Perhaps it was the cry that is recorded in John's Gospel (19: 12) as coming from the crowd that clinched the matter for Pilate: *If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend.*

We do not know what was in Pilate's heart. We can only surmise. Perhaps he was just a little sorry for Jesus. Maybe he even found Jesus interesting. Certainly this Jesus was no run-of-the-mill criminal. However, at the end of the day, for Pilate, Jesus was not worth even the possibility of getting into any real personal trouble. Pilate did not think Jesus was worth this any more than the crowd thought Jesus worth exchanging for Barabbas, a notorious brigand.

Pilate tried to get out of the whole issue by washing his hands in public. What a silly man! He could maybe wash his hands but he could not wash them of Jesus.

But let us bring this back to ourselves. It is all very well to speak of Pilate and what he did with Jesus. But what do *we* do with him? That is a far more searching question. We may find that we do not immediately cope with Jesus. It is certainly not that we wish Jesus any harm; in fact, the opposite applies. We too can find Jesus an interesting character. Maybe we read at least some of the New Testament and even some books about him. The difficulty comes when the presence of Jesus seems to cause trouble for us. In some quarters the very name of Jesus is like fire cast upon the earth.

Our commitment to him may get us into trouble at work when we take a stand on what we believe to be Christian ideals and principles. He may get us into difficulties with friends and even members of our own family who will not understand or possibly disapprove. But, whatever happens, we cannot wash our hands of Jesus.

There is a sense in which Jesus is always standing before us, asking for a verdict. The psalmist reminds us (Psalm 139: 7 - 9):

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

If I make my bed in Hell, you are there

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea ...

It does not matter where we go or where we try to escape to; God still graciously and consistently confronts us in the person of Jesus Christ. In a very real sense, in his great forbearance and

mercy, God allows us to stand in the place of Pilate. Jesus comes and stands before us. He asks us to consider our verdict.

What are we going to do with Jesus who is called Christ? Are we going to try to put off the decision by sending it to someone else? Or perhaps we will try to affect some kind of bargain or exchange, just as Pilate tried to swap Jesus for Barabbas. Or perhaps we will allow ourselves to be pushed or manipulated into a decision against him just because of what other people think, say or do.

The offer that Jesus makes to us is a truly tremendous one. He offers himself to us for who he is; the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. What then is *our* verdict? Is it *for* or *against*?

If it is *against*, we may think we have got rid of the problem, but in fact we have not. There is an amazing story in the Old Testament about a man called Jonah who tried to escape from God by travelling as far away as he could. Of course, he did not succeed in escaping. It's a great story. Read it for yourselves.

People who decide against Jesus may think that they have disposed of the problem and that they will now have peace and quiet. But it will be a sham and hollow peace for the figure of that stranger of Galilee will not give up on us.

We are all probably familiar with the 23rd Psalm, especially the words of the metrical version: *Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me*. The scholars can tell us that *follow*, in this context really means *pursue*. We may be tempted to give up on God and, indeed, there may be times in our life when our faith may well be tried and tested. But God will never give up on us. He will pursue us all the days of our life.

Whatever the ups and downs and whatever life may throw at us, there is nothing to compare with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It certainly does not mean that all our problems disappear. There is certainly no such promise in the Bible. But it does mean that we always have someone - and not just some thing - greater than ourselves on whose strength we can always draw.

Remember that he is not some distant figure in a stained glass window. He is here with us today, in his risen and ascended form and is made know to us through the Holy Spirit. His yolk is easy and his burden is light.

So, reader, what are *you* going to do with Jesus who is called Christ?

The Fate of Judas According to Acts 1: 18

(Reprinted from the Evangelical Quarterly Vol. XLIV No. 2 (April - June 1971 pages 97- 100)

Perhaps of all the so-called "contradictions" in the New Testament Scriptures the most frequently cited is the fate of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of the Lord. Curiously enough, however, this apparent contradiction does not always seem to be taken seriously. The New Testament mentions the fate of Judas only twice - in Matt. 27: 3-5 and Acts 1: 15-20. It is, of course, easier to find apparent contradictions where there are only two accounts. ¹

At the turn of this century any attempt to harmonize the two would have been quickly dismissed by a large number of scholars. A good example of this may be found in Bartlet's comments in the Century Bible: ² "The many attempts to harmonize the story of Judas's end, as given in Acts, with that in Matt. 27: 3-5 must be pronounced fruitless. The plain fact is that the two are different versions in which the story that the bad man came to a bad end became current". In fact, Bartlet goes even further and quotes with approval an article by Rendel Harris, ³ whose thesis is that both versions of Judas's death go back "to a conventional type of the bad man's ending, as given in the Jewish story of Ahikar." He further adds that he believes that "Acts is nearer to its original form, according to which its villain, Nadar, swelled up and burst." Is this, then, the end of the story? Perhaps many would say "yes". In Peake's Commentary, ⁴ for example, Professor G. W. H. Lampe simply says that the Acts account differs from that of Matthew - the presumption apparently being that the onus or proof would lie with any would-be harmonizer. The present writer would suggest:

(1) that the two accounts need not be seen as at variance and

(2) that the onus of proof should, in any event, lie with those who deny this.

One early extra-Biblical witness is a gruesome one of Papias ⁵ who suggests that Judas's body swelled up to an enormous size that he died on his own land and thus rendered it uninhabitable.

The actual account is so horrible and garbled that it is of little use for critical historical research but it might help to cast some light on the meaning of *prenes* in Acts 1: 18. The word is generally understood to mean "falling headlong" or "falling face-down-wards" or "becoming prone", but some scholars have suggested that it could mean "swelling up" and there is ample authority for such a proposition.⁶ There might, after all, be a more simple explanation of Acts 1: 18 than Jewish folk-lore! It may be that the solution lies in an intended double-meaning for the word. This is, of course, very question-begging and hypothetical but linguistically seems at least possible.

Augustine's harmonizing suggestion is well-known. He suggests ⁷ that Judas did attempt to hang himself (as in the Matthew account) but that he was actually killed when the rope broke and he fell headlong (as in the Acts account). This suggestion is ingenious, but does it fit the facts?

Matt. 28: 5 leads one to assume that Judas died as a result of hanging. Now this does not rule out Augustine's suggestion but perhaps it does bear slightly against it. Obviously this is a matter of opinion. On the other hand there is nothing inherently to suggest that Judas might not have hung himself, died and subsequently fallen headlong when the rope broke. The fate of Judas as recorded in Acts does not seem to rule out the fact that he could have been already dead when he fell. One could take this a stage further and suggest that Judas hanged himself and died, that his body hung for several days (during which time

it was decomposing) and then (perhaps due to the rope breaking) the swollen body fell headlong and burst open. One hesitates to go into morbid and unpleasant details, but it seems clear that the word *elakesen* denotes "a loud report" and / or "a rupture" after which "all his bowels gushed out".

It is tentatively suggested that, although Augustine's version is perfectly possible, Judas could well have been dead when he fell. The splitting open of a dead body in the manner described is pathologically more feasible if the body is in a state of decomposition.⁸ The meaning of *prenes* is still somewhat in doubt but this need not be too great an obstacle. If the idea of a double meaning in the word seems just too question-begging (as the present writer is inclined to think) the above theory need not be set aside; whether one takes the meaning to be "falling headlong" or "swelling up" the sense remains the same with only slight differences. If one accepts the former translation, Augustine's theory is still possible but, for the reasons outlined above, the present writer is of the opinion that he was dead when he fell. If the latter translation is accepted it could mean that the corpse burst open when it was still hanging. It should be noted however, that even if one does not accept a double meaning for *prenes*, the two possible meanings are not necessarily co-exclusive.

Another major difficulty is usually taken to be that of whether it was Judas who bought the field or the priests (as in Matt. 27: 7). The most usual explanation is that it could have been bought by the priests in Judas's name and this seems quite feasible. It does not seem necessary to take the view that Judas made his purchase of a field some time before the crucifixion, whereas the priests made their own separate purchase after that event. Whether or not the Acts account implies that Judas's death took place on the field is a matter of opinion. As regards his suicide, there is nothing in the Acts

account to suggest that he could not have killed himself. The Matthew account is clear that he did.

There is no doubt that there are difficulties in this question but none of these seems irreconcilable. One could agree with the great Princeton scholar, J. A. Alexander, when he points out⁹ that Matthew wrote "for a wide circle of readers, many of whom had no previous knowledge of the case; he therefore states the main fact, and according to his usual custom passes over the minute details. Peter, orally addressing those who knew the facts as fully as himself and less than six weeks after their occurrence ... assumes the main fact as already known, and naturally dwells upon those very circumstances which the Evangelist many years later . . . leaves out altogether". In magisterial tones Alexander concludes: ⁹ "... there is scarcely an American or English jury that would scruple to receive the two accounts as perfectly consistent, if the witnesses were credible. and any cause could be assigned for their relating two distinct parts of the same tradition."

1 For a minute examination of all the difficulties, see Kirsopp Lake in "The Beginnings of Christianity" (1933), I, v, pp. 22-30.

2 J. Vernon Barlet, *The Acts*, Century Bible (no date), p. 383.

3 *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. IV, pp. 49ff. See also R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the O.T.*, Vol. 2, pp. 715ff., for sources.

4 (1962) p. 887.

5 Papias: Fragment 3 quoted by Apollinarius of Laodicea. See *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. I. A. Kleist (1957), VI, p. 119.

6 See discussion and references, particularly to the N.T. versions, in F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1952), p. 77. See also Arndt-Gingrich, *sub vac.*

7 *C. Fel.* 1:4. Augustine's suggestion is adopted by I. A. Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1857, re. '1963), p. 27.

8 The present writer does not imply that this idea is in any way original but his thesis is that it has not received the serious consideration it merits.

9 *Supra cit.*, pp. 27, 28.

The Hope of Israel

The following is redaction of an extended sermon / address given, by invitation, in Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, Aberdeen on the evening of 13th February 1977. It was subsequently published, later in 1977, as the first half of a small book under the title of *The Hope of Israel*. The second half of the book was a complementary contribution by the late Rev William Still, then Minister of Gilcomston South Church. The copyright for my own contribution remains with me. The copyright for Mr Still's contribution rests with his literary executors and his part of the book is not reproduced. In my own contribution, because it was spoken and not written, the style is conversational. Although I do not think it is my best work, it has received more favourable comments over the years than any other. I was particularly appreciative of a warm commendation from the late Johanna-Ruth Dobschiner, writer of the book *Selected to Live* and, herself, a survivor of the Holocaust.

This evening, I thought I would look at the problem of Israel; not that I think it is altogether a problem. It is a subject which, as some of you know, is of great interest to me personally. Therefore, having looked at subject that I find particularly interesting, I have had to be very careful. I have been aware of putting on the brakes and making sure that I do not submit to the very real temptation of making Scripture fit into the mould of what I think it ought to say.

Of course, I suspect that we would all, deep down, quite like to rewrite the Bible, even if we wouldn't say so openly. There are passages that we wish were not there; and there are passages that are not there but we wish they were. Isn't it just as well that we cannot rewrite Scripture? In one sense, the Bible is closed book in that we are not at liberty to add to or subtract from it. In another sense, it is the most open of books in that it can never be said to be a book that we know, however long and however often we have read it.

Now, there is another important preliminary point that I wish to make. All Scripture is inspired by God. That does not mean - and never has meant - that all Scripture is equally important. I

could probably get by, for example, by forgetting that Luz had a brother called Buz.

Scriptural truth can, on occasions, be like a fine razor edge that is extremely sharp and there are times when it is a little broader and there are times when it can be quite wide and open to many possible interpretations. We have to avoid the temptation of making the wide truth of Scripture into a sharp truth and, of course, *vice versa*. There is a clear mystery (if that is not a contradiction in terms) in God's dealing with the Jewish people over the centuries. If the Word of God does not dot all the "i's" and cross all the "t's" on the subject, then it is not our place - my place - to do so as if to complete an unfinished work.

My last preliminary point is that I am not speaking tonight as a politician with some nationalist agenda. The whole future of the Jewish State and the fractious relationship with the Palestinian people is a complex and difficult issue to which I bring no quick fixes or easy solutions.

Now, interest in the whole subject of the future of Israel was revived nearly ten years ago as a result of the Six-Day War of 1967; more recent social, political and economic events in the Middle East have helped to keep the interest going. It is also a subject that has a certain connection with the city of Aberdeen. Those of you who were present at the original Bible Study that I led on the subject in 1974 may remember that I drew attention to the fact that Professor David Brown, who at one stage in the last century was Principal of the Free Church College here in Aberdeen (the building is now Christ's College) had a great interest in the future of the Jews.

Brown wrote a small book *The Restoration of the Jews* as long ago as 1861. In that book, he interpreted Scripture as pointing

towards a spiritual future for Israel which, in itself was not particularly controversial among scholars of the Reformed tradition. However, Brown went much further than, say, C H Hodge and other contemporaries by stating he was quite sure that there would be a physical resettlement of the Jews in the land of Israel. Now, that view was certainly controversial! At the time, Palestine formed a small part of the Ottoman Empire and any suggestion of a Jewish re-settlement seemed fantastic. And yet, less than a hundred years later, there would be a Jewish state and Hebrew, a dead language in the time Christ, would again be spoken in the streets of Jerusalem.

David Brown was (in my estimation) a very interesting character. A fine portrait of him hangs in the Presbytery Hall in Christ's College. He looks just a trifle more kindly than some of the other divines whose portraits hang round the wall. (I don't know why so many clerics of the nineteenth century are portrayed as both elderly and forbidding!)

Professor Brown was a devout scholar. He was one of the few men of his day - even in the Free Church of Scotland - who was aware that the rise of "higher" criticism of the Bible might not exactly be universal good news. Most of his contemporary scholars were either agnostic towards it, ignored it or allowed themselves to be swept along with every new fad that wafted its way to these shores from Germany. Brown, however, stood firm in his opposition. This was to become a contentious area of theology, even although it is now largely forgotten.

From a popular perspective, Brown was best known for his contribution to the famous nineteenth century commentary on the whole Bible: *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown*. (I always think it sounds more like a firm of chartered accountants than a commentary!) Although now largely superseded, it was a popular and respected commentary in its day.

Brown was also best known - and is still best known - for being one of the most able exponents of the post-millennial view of redemption history which believes that the millennium (thousand years) will come before the return of Christ.

I suspect that most Christians - of whatever tradition or persuasion - would agree that God does have a purpose for Israel. More problematic, of course, is to identify that purpose and, indeed, to identify who or what Israel is today. Who or what, in fact, is a Jew? Did you know that even the State of Israel does not have a satisfactory definition and cannot define a Jew? From an entirely darker context, Hitler had considerable difficulty in accurately identifying the people that he was so determined to exterminate.

If you look at Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter two at verse 29, it says *He is a Jew who is one inwardly and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God.* Now, in a sense, that is the nearest that Paul comes to an actual definition of a Jew. Yet I have the feeling that it is not pushing boundaries too far to suggest that Paul would not have liked that verse alone to be quoted out of context as a full definition. (Next to Jesus himself, Paul must have been quoted out of context more than anyone else in history!) If that definition was all that Paul had to say about Israel, the Jews and the state of the Jewish nation, we could all say "Fine!", close the Bible and leave it there.

But that is not all that he says. We keep that quotation in mind, of course, but only within the context in which it was written.

What is the purpose for the modern State of Israel having been established in the twentieth century? Do we see that as part of

the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy? I suggest we can take it, even from a very general view that in a real and also mystical sense, the little land called Palestine is the centre of world history. I find it hard to believe, especially with the advantage of living in the twentieth century, that the Bible only speaks of the future of Israel in a "spiritual" sense. Sometimes, of course, it does. But the real problem arises when people become unduly dogmatic about whether any particular text is speaking of a physical land or not. Again, we all have to be careful and ensure that we interpret Scripture by Scripture and not by what we think it ought to say.

Interestingly, in his book, David Brown devotes the first few chapters to objections to his interpretations. This is unusual; most authors would present their interpretation first and then deal with any objections thereafter.

Before we go any further, we need to refer to Galatians 3: 28. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* In the Kingdom of God, no one is better than anyone else by race, birth-right or by social station. Yet, at the same time, Paul is still telling us that there are distinctions. That is very different from saying that one is better than the other. There *is* still a distinction between slaves and free, men and women. But, under the New Testament dispensation none is better than the other. So the Jew will not have a higher or lower place in the Kingdom - but there still seems to be a distinction. This may sound like hair-splitting, but it is a crucially important point.

Then let us turn to Ephesians 2: 11, *Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands - remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and*

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. Here again, Paul seems to be making the same important point - there is a distinction but all are one in Christ Jesus.

Now, this is where the interesting aspect of Pauline logic really begins to make our heads spin. We think we know what he is going to say and then he says the opposite. What did we read in Romans 3: 1 - *What advantage has the Jew?* Now if we were to read right back through chapter two, there would be the temptation to say "None at all!" - but then you look at the remainder of the verse and it says ... *much in every way*. Well, there's a surprise. There is no distinction and yet there seems to be an advantage. This really needs some thinking through and, to be honest, it makes my head spin.

At verse 9, Paul says again *What then? Are we Jews any better off?* (Remember that Paul never considered himself as anything other a Jew.) We could say, yes, we have got the drift of the argument now. And we look at it again and it says *No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin.*

The whole matter is very finely balanced and there are so many different factors that have to be kept in mind. And you see how the power of Paul's logic is quite devastating! He takes his reader so far, then he asks a question and it is as though he says, Now, I knew you would fall into that trap so here is the correct answer. Then he asks another question and says, Now, you have done it again - and here is the right answer. He is saying that there is an advantage in being a Jew and yet all are one in Christ Jesus; in other words there is no superiority of

status in the Kingdom of God. These are not contradictory statements; they are expressions of two parts of the same truth.

Now, without going off on a tangent, there is another point to keep in mind, namely there is no specific mention of a "new" Israel in the New Testament. Certainly, in Galatians 6: 16, Paul himself uses the expression *the Israel of God* referring to the new Christian church. That is an expression that only occurs once in the whole New Testament. We do not (I hope!) found a complete doctrine on one word. I suspect that if Paul were writing in modern English he might put inverted commas round the word "Israel". In other words, it is a one-off exceptional use of the word.

Another pitfall we have to avoid is making too narrow a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament covenants. There is an almost natural tendency to do this. Of course there are very obvious differences between the Old and New Testaments; a child can see this. But although there are two Testaments, there are not two entirely different covenants.

As it says in the Westminster Confession There are not ... two covenants of grace differing in substance but one and the same under various dispensations.

Now, God's people never are - and never have been - his people purely by race or national descent. In the Old Testament we find examples of intermarrying out of the children of Israel, such as that of Ruth. God's people are his people through the covenant and not through racial factors. However there are also times in which the wires of national or racial descent do cross with the wires of the covenant. They are not one and the same thing but they do often cross.

Have a look at Romans 9: 6 - 8, *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants, but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants.*

So, that is important and we must take care not to over-react to that distinction. It is not saying the children of the flesh are rejected. We are back with our crossed wires again. It is possible for people to break loose from the covenant, even though they are descendants of Abraham. It is equally possible for others to be brought into the covenant, as we have already seen.

Having kept all these matters, as it were, in tension, let us now look at something more positive. The mystery of Israel, as we are told in fact in Romans chapter 11 is not the fact that they are going to be converted at some future time. The conversion of Israel is not a mystery; Paul sees it as something that will - that must - actually happen. The true mystery is the fact that a hardening of heart has come over Israel (verse 25). In other words, the mystery of Israel is not the fact that they are God's chosen people but that they have rejected God's gracious gift. That is the true mystery or, at least, part of it.

Let us just take this a bit further and look more closely at verses 25 and 26. I emphasised only a few minutes ago in another connection that it is not helpful to try to erect an entire doctrine upon one text. Yet the interpretation of this one text is going to make quite a difference. Let us look at this carefully: *I want you to understand this mystery, brethren, a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved.*

What does *all Israel* in this context. I suggest that it makes no sense to imagine that Israel has more than one meaning within these two verses. Common sense, quite apart from theology, would surely suggest that both words mean the same thing.

So, the next obvious step is decide what the word *Israel* does actually mean. There have been various suggestions, some of them very ancient. Saint Augustine suggests that it refers to the whole people of God. Although I hesitate to disagree with one of the great figures of the Christian church, I believe that that interpretation is impossible if the two words *Israel* do actually mean the same thing. I find it very hard to think that the first *Israel* quoted could possibly refer to the whole people of God.

Interestingly, John Calvin took the same view of Augustine and, again, I hesitate to disagree. But no one person, however learned and spiritual is infallible. Even Homer may nod.

Other commentators have suggested that it might refer only to the chosen members of Israel, the elect Jews, those who are converted. That interpretation certainly seems possible and would make sense - but, if it is correct, it seems a little unnecessary. If it is saying that those whom God has elected are saved, it seems to saying the patently obvious. I find it hard to believe that Paul would have wasted so many words in stating what was apparent. I suggest that there is a wider meaning and a more interesting meaning.

Professor John Murray of Westminster Theological Seminary has written a commentary on Romans ¹ that many preachers now rely on. It's not exactly, light reading and it is not intended to be. However, in many ways Murray reflects very similar

¹ New London Commentary series, first published 1967 by Marshall Morgan & Scott

interpretations to those of David Brown over a hundred years earlier. I want to quote directly from Murray:

The main thesis of verse twenty five is that the hardening of Israel is determined and that Israel is to be restored. This is but another way of affirming what has been called Israel's fullness in verse 12, the receiving in verse 15 and the grafting again in verse 24. To regard the climactic statement "all Israel shall be saved" as having reference to anything other than this precise datum would be exegetical violence. In a word, it is the salvation of the mass of Israel that the apostle affirms. There are, however, two reservations necessary to guard the proposition against unwarranted extension of its meaning: 1) It may not be interpreted as implying that in the time of fulfilment every Israelite will be converted; analogy is against any such insistence. The apostasy of Israel, their trespass, their loss, their casting away, their hardening were not universal; there was always a remnant, not all branches were broken off; their hardening was in part. Likewise restoration and salvation need not influence every Israelite. "All Israel" can refer to the mass, the people as a whole in accord with the pattern followed in the chapter throughout. 2) Paul is not reflecting on the question of saved Jews in the final accounting of God's judgment. We need to be reminded again of the historical perspective in this section. The apostle is thinking of a time in the future when the hardening of Israel will terminate; as the fullness, receiving, in-grafting have this time reference, so must the salvation of Israel have. Therefore the proposition reflects merely on what will be true at this point or period in history.

Again, we have to keep certain constraints in mind. If we are going to say, following Murray and others, that "all Israel" has such a wide meaning, we have to balance that against what we read in Romans 9: 6 - 8: *not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants*. To put this in another way - "all" need not mean every last single person without exception. There are places in scripture (and, indeed, in ordinary use) when such an interpretation would not make sense. So we adopt a bit of common sense as well as theology in using "all Israel" to mean the majority in Israel or Israel as a whole.

It is clear from a reading of Romans chapter 11, that though Israel is cast off, this is not permanent because certain presupposition and propositions apply. Let us now look more closely at certain verses in that chapter:

Verse 2: God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

Verse 11: It is clear that Israel's apparent fall is not something that is irrevocable. *So, I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now, if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean?*

Verse 15: The fall of Israel is by no means irrevocable. *For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? We will come back to life from the dead in a moment.*

Verse 16: It is clear that they are still a holy nation. *If the dough offered as first-fruits is holy, so is the whole lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.*

Verse 28: Perhaps this is the most important verse of all - it underlines the fact that the Jews are still numbered among God's elect and that the gifts of God are irrevocable. Personally, I think they are wonderful verses. *As regards the Gospel they are enemies of God, for your [i.e. the Gentiles] sake but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also*

may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

Think particularly of the word *irrevocable*. If God says that he promises something, that is the end of the story. God does not capriciously change his mind. I remember when I worked in a solicitor's office that it was not unknown for people to make promises to relatives about bequests and then to change their minds and make a new will. Now, that is perfectly legal but it is not the way that God works. He does not say that he will give - and then take away. Reformed theologians often underline the fact that God is sovereign - which could give the impression that God can do what he likes. But that is to look at it in a human context.

Yes, God is certainly, sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and all that - but there is one important constraint on the powers of God, namely that God cannot be other than he is - gracious, loving and just. God has made specific promises to the Jews under the Old Covenant. He cannot and will not go back on them.

So, let's get down to brass tacks. How will Israel be converted? The answer to that is very simple and very basic. They will be converted only in and through Jesus Christ. Now people come to Christ in different ways. There is no one size fits all. For some people it is a life-changing and dramatic event. For others it comes much more gradually. That in itself is not of great importance. What is important is that we all, young and old, male and female, Jew or Gentile come to God through Jesus Christ and the promised Holy Spirit.

But how do I know that Israel will be converted? Is it just wishful thinking? Well, there are specific promises in the Old Testament itself. It says in Zechariah 12: 10 *And I will pour*

out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him as one mourns for a first born. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; and all the families that are left, each by itself and their wives by themselves

Chapter 13:1 *On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*

It is always necessary to approach any prophetic passage with a degree of caution. Such passages can be a happy hunting ground for religious cranks and fanatics. That is not a reason or an excuse, however, for ignoring them. I suggest that the passages just read are describing a national mourning and national repentance. Now repentance is one of the factors that will often come before a time of revival or renewal. There is plenty of evidence for this in both the Old and the New Testaments.

When they look on him whom they have pierced is specifically taken up in John 19: 37; the piercing of Jesus on the Cross is taken as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah. But it goes further in that it does not only refer to piecing but to the fact that *they* will be looking at the Cross. When Israel really does look on the Cross of Jesus, when they really understand, when the veil is taken from their eyes and they realise that they, as God's chosen people, have rejected the messiah, the first thing

that will happen, almost inevitably, is that there will be sorrow and repentance. I say this cautiously, because it is not only the Jews who need to repent. The Christian Church has much to repent over in its treatment on the Jews over the centuries. (I will come back to that shortly.) There will be weeping on both sides over the years of separation and misunderstanding.

I would like to turn now to Luke's Gospel 13: 13 onwards, still on the theme of why I feel justified in suggesting that there will a national conversion of Israel. *At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him [Jesus] "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"*

These few words *Behold, your house is forsaken*, are among the most frightening words that Jesus speaks. Without intending to sound spiritually superior or arrogant, it is also easy to see how true these words are. Look at the Jewish synagogues throughout the world - they have all the trappings and the traditions. Some of them are beautiful buildings adorned with gold and stained glass. Yet there is such a heaviness and deadness even (perhaps especially) where the traditions of Judaism as most keenly followed. And those who cannot see that, of course, are the Jews themselves. There are none so blind as those who will not see. Yet that wilful blindness has itself a purpose. What we have just read needs to be balanced with what Jesus goes on to

say: *I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'* Now think about that. It is not all doom and gloom because if Jesus says *until* that surely implies that one day this very thing will happen. The Jews will one day be able to say *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*. Although their house is forsaken, it is not so for all of time. As David Brown says, in his somewhat quaint and archaic way:

But though they would not be gathered then, those blessed wings were yet again to be extended to Jerusalem even after the blood of the Son of God was in its skirts.

Again, let us look at 2 Corinthians 3: 14, *But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they [the Jews] read the old covenant, that same veil remains un-lifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed.*

I wonder if we can pursue this yet further. If we are agreed that Scripture is quite unequivocal on the fact the Jews will be converted as a mass, when is this going to happen?

Some people suggest that it could happen almost right now. Nationalism is strong, of course, but maybe not as strong as it once was. It has been tried. Socialism has been tried and hasn't really worked either. So, both of these possibilities have failed. Strangely, Israel seems to lack a true sense of purpose, beyond self preservation. There is plenty of determination but it is strangely unfocussed. Many people are surprised by the fact that Israel has no state religion and yet its people observe many religious ordinances. Surely there must be some pattern of God in the resettlement of Palestine.

Now there are those who say - and not without some justification - that the resettlement is purely a physical and political issue. It is, they say, quite different from the settlement of the land under the patriarchs and under Joshua when he crossed the Jordan. These were, they suggest, both spiritual and physical settlements and rather different from the present situation.

When David Brown wrote his book, the physical resettlement of the Jews was as remote as sending someone to the moon. It seemed out of the question and Brown was certainly swimming against the tide. What Brown suggested was that the re-settlement of the land did not have to be spiritual as such. He suggested that they could be resettled in the land, then they could be converted and, as a result, the resettlement would become spiritual as well as material. To me, that is an interesting and plausible interpretation.

In any event, the resettlement must surely be a sign of something. It cannot, surely, mean nothing that this seemingly impossible event has taken place and that Hebrew is being spoken again in the streets of Jerusalem. Even someone outside the household of faith looking at the matter objectively would agree that what has happened to Israel is almost incredible. And if we believe that God knows what he is doing - and I think we do - maybe now Israel is ripe for conversion. Maybe this will happen in the present century; maybe it will be next century. I don't know, of course, and neither do you.

Paul says that the gospel must be preached first to whole world (Romans 11: 25) but that does not necessarily have to mean that all of the world will be tidily Christian. We cannot be far off the time when the gospel actually has been preached to all nations. Remember, that is not the same as saying that all nations accept Jesus Christ. Clearly that has not happened.

But Paul is saying that when the gospel has been preached to all nations, then the time will be ripe for Israel to be converted. And when that happens, it will be, in that wonderful phrase of Paul's, *life from the dead*.

In the past, this phrase has often been seen as somehow referring to a resurrection. But does this interpretation really bear close scrutiny? Certainly, it has been challenged by modern scholars and none more so, in the Reformed tradition, by Professor John Murray in his *Commentary on Romans*², who says that *life from the dead* refers to

... an unprecedented quickening for the world in the expansion and success of the Gospel. The much greater blessing accruing from the fullness of Israel (v.12) would more naturally be regarded as the augmenting of that referred to in the preceding part of the verse. Verse fifteen resumes the theme of verse twelve but specifies what the much greater blessing is, in line with the figurative use of the terms "life and death" the expression "life from the dead" could appropriately be used to denote the vivification that would come to the whole world from the conversion of the mass of Israel and their reception into the favour and kingdom of God.

In other words it is not just a resurrection; furthermore it is not something that will only affect Israel but will also indicate a seismic sift for the Christian church itself. *What will that acceptance mean but life from the dead?*

One of the great sins of the Christian church is that have "gentilised" Christianity and torn it from its Jewish roots. We have brought in our own cultural baggage and assume too easily that it is far superior. Too easily we forget that Jesus, his family and his disciples were Jews. He himself was a Rabbi. Nearly all the New Testament writers were Jewish. In our culture, Jews at best have been seen as eccentric, with funny diets, reading a strange language that is written backwards and

² Supra cit.

observing festivals that mean little or nothing to us. At its worst, the Christian church has been at least complicit in cruelty and oppression. It has accused Jews of poisoning wells and killing children. In our own century, Hitler and others sought to exterminate the Jews altogether - in a part of Europe that is littered with crosses and holy-looking symbols. No wonder that, as Paul says, the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews.

But what do we, in later twentieth century Scotland, make of the Jews. What do we think about them? Probably we don't know what to think as we don't know many Jewish people.

Nowadays, many Jewish people are very liberal in outlook - liberal, that is, to almost everything except the Gospel. But, as we have seen, this seeming perverseness has its purpose. Judaism and Christianity are alike in that, as institutions, they both obey certain of the rules of God. In Judaism, their *house is forsaken*, in the sense that we have already seen. In Christianity, we too often seem to lack power in proclaiming the gospel. In both Judaism and Christianity there is a lot of apathy and nominal observance.

So what is going to change that? I don't want to appear to give a simplistic answer. I don't claim to have a magic bullet. But surely the conversion of Israel will have a mind-blowing effect on the church, when we experience the kind of dedication that God has given to the Jews, when we find it channelled in the right direction. What if we had a bit of the Entebbe spirit in the church?

It will wake us all up and the old fallen tree of Judaism will be re-grafted on to its ancient stump and will bear fruit in abundance. Humanly speaking, the tragedy of modern post-war Judaism is that there is so much ability and dedication and yet it seems to be channelled in the wrong direction. Throughout the

centuries, in spite of everything that has been thrown at them, the Jews have survived. Not only have they survived - but excelled. Go to any major business and profession today and there will always be one or two Jews at or near the top. It is almost impossible not to see - unless we want to be blind - that indeed they are God's chosen people. And, of course, as we have seen, the gifts of God are irrevocable.

If we are thinking humanly - and it is difficult not to! - God seems to have a bit of dilemma. The Old Testament has been superseded by the New and yet the Jewish people still operate under the Old. But God cannot go back on his word and so, superseded or not, the Old Covenant is still honoured.

Of course, in so many ways, the Christian church has had great difficulty in coming to terms with the Old Testament. It has been superseded but it has not been replaced. We observe the Ten Commandments. We remember that Jesus came to fulfil the law, not abolish it. But we are uncertain how much freedom we have. Much of the Old Testament study in our Universities is dry and boring and (dare I say it) largely irrelevant to the life of faith. It is almost as though we were just a little embarrassed by it. It is as though there is also a veil over the eyes of the Christian church as well.

We have already looked at Romans 11: 25 ... *when the full number of the Gentiles has come in*. At the risk of repetition, let us remember that *full number* need not mean every single last one. That would be straining common sense, far less theology. Because of our western way of thinking, we assume that if something is full, it is filled to the brim and static. I am told by people much cleverer than me, that this is due to the great philosopher William of Ockham having a container view of time and space.

Now the Jewish mind - and that included Paul - does not buy this static view. It sees *full number* as something dynamic or, to put it another way, full and overflowing. So *full number* is not speaking literally of numbers but refers to a fullness of blessing.

In all of this area, we have to be careful not to become carried away or to give simplistic answers to complex questions. We can only be certain that Israel is going to be converted - but when, we do not know. We can say, with justification surely, that the resettlement in the land must mean something - but what? I want to bear in mind the sensible words of Professor C H Hodge in his *Commentary on Romans* ³ when he says ... unfulfilled prophecy is not proleptic history. In other words, we cannot know exactly how any prophecy will be fulfilled. We will only know, after it has happened.

It was said, for example, at the time of the Six-Day War that this was a special moment in time. People remembered that it says in Luke's Gospel that *...Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled*. Did that mean - as some people suggested- that the time of the Gentiles is now fulfilled? I suggest that the answer is that we still do not know. We are too near to the event. History will eventually give us an answer, but not now. I personally believe that it was certainly an important and significant time, but how important and significant it was and where it leads us, in quite another matter.

What is it that stops Israel being converted right now? Why is there a delay? Of course, God is not in the hurry that we are and the exact times are within the mystery of Providence. In the days of the Old Testament, too often Israel's election was seen as a *carte blanche* for Israel to do as they liked. (Let us not be smug about this. I have met some Christians who,

³ Princeton, 1835

because they are "saved", believe that they can do and say almost anything they like!)

The people of Israel failed to see that they were elected for the sake of the world, not just for their own sake. They were God's chosen people in order to be a blessing - and in being a blessing they themselves would be blessed. Israel had been elected for the sake of the world but came to think that the world had been created for Israel.

It is God who hardens the heart, whether of Pharaoh, or of Israel, or of the Gentile nations. He does so in order that he can have mercy. So the hardness of heart that has come upon Israel is not something that is perverse on the part of God; it is to give us time. It is to give the Gentiles time to evangelise the world. It gives us a breathing space but a space that will not last for ever. And in that breathing space, we are not to forget the very obvious fact that Israel is still there and that we must have a special burden. After all, did Jesus not say to go first to the lost sheep of the house Israel? We do not know when God will turn their hearts. It could be tomorrow, next century or a thousand years hence.

Does it mean, then, that we should stop all of our missionary work and put everyone to Israel? To me, that would seem to be a touch of overkill. We were also told by Jesus to preach the gospel to all nations, not just one or some of them. But I would suggest that very often our mission priorities have not been as they should be. Paul reminds us forcibly that *Israel are enemies of God for your [the Christians] sake but as regards election they are beloved. Though through their sins they are called of God "Not-my-People" [Hosea 2: 3- 10] yet also they to become again "My People" through God's grace and will.*

The very hardness, blindness and perverseness that have fallen on Israel have been allowed by God so that the fullness of the Gentiles may be gathered in: and the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

In fairness, the difficulties between Jews and Gentiles are scarcely new. In the very early days of the church, there was sharp division as to whether the followers of Jesus were obliged to follow Jewish practices and traditions - see the Jerusalem Council of Acts chapter 15 and all that. But there was never a rapprochement between Jews and Gentiles. Tragically, the Jews became, in Christian eyes, not people to be sought out and brought into the fold but persecuted, excluded and even annihilated. In the "Merchant of Venice", Shylock is very much the bad guy and his punishment - his punishment, please note - is to become a Christian. In Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, the bad guy is Fagin, the Jew, who dies a very unpleasant death, not the one you see in the musical *Oliver*. Perhaps people would have thought that he deserved it, Jew that he was: and this in a Christian land?

It is a sad, indeed tragic, fact that Israel has not seen in Christianity that which attracts and draws her. She has seen the opposite. To this day, children in Jewish schools avoid using the "plus" sign because it makes a cross, a reminder of centuries of persecution at the hands of Christians. We can say that Jesus Christ is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley, the Altogether Lovely and the Fairest of Ten Thousand and yet somehow communicate something quite different.

And, of course, there is always the distinct possibility of falling into the very trap that we point at in Judaism, that of formalism and an unhealthy love of traditions. Have we made our culture so Gentile, that Jews find themselves even more alienated from us.

One mistake that we often make is that we assume that Jews must become Christians. You might ask - what else? This is where we need to be very sensitive. What we want is for Jews to become followers of Jesus Christ. We are not seeking to turn them into Gentiles. The title "Christian" may be far too loaded. Those Jews who have to come to Christ prefer to call themselves "Messianic Jews" and I suggest that this wish should always be respected.

Over its history, the Christian church has taken a few wrong turnings and then had to go back and retrace her steps. Some of the more senior of you here may just remember when radio first came to Aberdeen. My grandfather, a keen church organist in Peterhead was also a semi-professional singer and often gave short radio recitals from the old studio in Belmont Street, here in Aberdeen.

I know that there was great thrill in these early days when people sat with their crystal sets and earphones, oblivious to the whistling and crackling. It was the beginning of an exciting breakthrough. Then after the crystal sets, came the valve radios - sometimes as large as pieces of furniture. These were expensive, complicated and liable to break down.

Then, not so very long ago, engineers went back to crystal sets again and looked at them and, at the risk of being over simplistic, the transistor was born. The invention of the valve was, given the wisdom and benefit of hindsight, a wrong turning.

Maybe the time has come to see that the church has taken many wrong turnings in the matter of the Jews. Fortunately, we live under the Covenant of Grace and we also operate within the deep mystery of providence. It is certainly not too late, although the break down the walls that have been erected between Jew and Gentile will be far from easy.

But, of course, the One who breaks this barrier, this wall, down is Jesus Christ. As Paul says, *O, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.*

May God help us all to fathom the heights and depths of this great mystery.

