

Michał Wojciechowski

Church as Israel according to the Revelation of St. John

Collectanea Theologica 64/Fasciculus specialis, 33-40

1994

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

MICHAŁ WOJCIECHOWSKI, WARSAW

CHURCH AS ISRAEL ACCORDING TO THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN

The Book of Revelation presents in many visions a community of the saved, the People of God seen in an eschatological perspective. It is striking that many of these images attribute to the eschatological community we would like to call „Church” many features of Israel. In this article we shall discuss some texts which point clearly in this direction: Rev 7, 1-8; 11,1; 12; 21, 12-21a. Therefore we shall deal with the theological and eschatological image of the Church and Israel in the book and not look for information about the relations between Christian communities (called *ekklesia*) and the synagogue or about the forthcoming separation.

This information is limited to the letters to the seven local churches (Rev 2, 9; 3,9). It does not interfere to a great extent with the conclusions derived from the body of the book; it even confirms them. If some Jewish communities hostile to Christianity are called „those who say that they are Jews and are not” (2,9), the author implies the existence and necessity of both true Jews and the people of Israel; the enemies are seen as an exception and their conversion is still hoped for (3,9). Historically conditioned separation cannot overshadow the general theological vision of the one People of God.

Rev 7, 1-8

According to this text the saved are simply Israel divided into twelve tribes, which are enumerated one by one. 144.000 is a perfect, full number, but also limited and, because of the factor 12, appropriate to denote Israel. On the other hand, raising 12 to a power can suggest a multiplication of the twelve tribes, each of them being already a Twelve. The symbolic 144,000 would be first of all an enormous number (multiplier 1000) which can contain all the nations. The same 144,000 mean in Rev 14,1-5 all the „redeemed from the earth”. Nevertheless this multitude is subordinated to the structure of Israel.

The list of tribes seem Christian, for it begins with Judah, the tribe of Jesus (cf Rev 5,5; 3,7). The OT rarely mentions Judah first (Nb 2,7.10; 1 Chr 2,3; 8,12: the geographical order) In later judaism the first place is sometimes attributed to Levi before Judah (Test. Judah 21, 1-4; Test. Reuben 6, 7-12). The „messianic” order of tribes in Rev suggests

a soteriological intention in the dressing of the list. Manasses is mentioned separately and before Joseph, his father. As the city of Samaria belonged to this tribe, it could mean an allusion to the conversion of the Samaritans.

It seems, too, that the crowd from all the nations „which no man could number” standing before the Lamb (Rev 7, 9ff) is to be identified with the twelve tribes mentioned just before. The motive of countless crowds of the saved is often repeated in the book (especially 5, 9 and 14,6; cf. 10,11; 11,9; 13,7; 17,5); the author sees the salvation in a universalistic manner, continuing the prophecies of Trito-Isaiah (Isa 60,3; 66,20).

The relation between Rev 7, 1-8 and 7,9-17 was interpreted in many ways. The judeochristians or Jews in the first fragment were opposed to converted pagans in the second¹. Nevertheless, if we take either of these visions separately, we are under the impression that the image refers to all the saved. The author first hears the number of the sealed (7,4), next sees them as a „great multitude” (7,9). Both visions seem to contain images of one community. The first shows it during the period of trial (7, 1-4) and the second after the victory². If so, the image of twelve tribes would refer more closely to the reality of the the Church on the earth, giving to it the name and the structure of Israel. The traditional³, allegorical interpretation of Rev 7, 1-8 as an image of the Church (in our meaning of this word) diminishes the above circumstances and the Judeochristian context of the book; for its author Israel was a living reality. Moreover, the symbols in the Book of Revelation seem to blend with their meanings or even to absorb the symbolized things and facts.

The sealing of 144,000 is also ambiguous. According to the very similar text of Ezek 9,4,6 the sealed „upon the foreheads” are the just people from Jerusalem – the Remnant – saved from a plague. Rom 4,11 interprets the circumcisions as a „seal”, but 2 Cor 1,22 says: „(God) has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee”. Later we find a seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1,13; 4,30) and a seal of baptism (Hermas, Sim., 9, 16, 2-4; Clement of Aleksandria, Quis dives, 42). Next, the sealed are „the servants of our God” (Rev 7,3); this expression and similar ones designate in the Revelation the saved, the servants of the Lamb, members of the new eschatological community (Rev 1,1; 2,20; 6,11; 19, 2, 5; 22, 3,6) The sealed could as well be the Remnant of Israel and the totality of saved mankind.

¹ Long lists of older references: see Ch. Brüttsch. La clarté de l'Apocalypse, Geneve 1966, 141; the author of this commentary finds in Rev 7,1-8 the Judeochristians as „pars pro toto”. Later e.g. A. Feuillet, Les 144.000 Israelites marqués d'un sceau, NT 9/1967/3, 191-225: converted Israel; J. Massyngberde Ford, Revelation, AncB 38, New York 1975, 120-123 the Remnant (of Israel), with the idea of the Remnant also in Rev 7,9ff; A. Geysler, The Twelve Tribes in the Revelation: Judaean and Judeo-Christian Apocalypticism, NTS 28/1982/3, 388-399: Israel „according to the flesh” in the rebuild kingdom.

² Cf. e.g. P. Prigent, L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean, CNT 14, Lausanne 1981, 123f.

³ But still quite popular: cf. e.g. U.B. Müller, Die Offenbarung Johannes, OFKNT 19, Gütersloh-Würzburg 1984, 178f.

Conclusion: 144,000 from the Revelation have some features both of Israel and of the new community of the servants of the Lamb. The twelve tribes are multiplied to an enormous symbolic number. One reality is presented in two aspects: 1. from its starting point: it is identical with the historical Israel moving towards its eschatological perfection; 2. according to its purpose: it can be identified with the universal community of the saved from all over the world. Nothing suggests any discontinuity between both sides, between Israel and the Church.

Rev 11, 1

The temple of God, the altar and the worshippers are to be measured. It means their acceptance and preservation. The ideal temple of Ezekiel was also measured with a rod (Ezek 40-41; cf. Zech 2,5-8). In any case we are in the temple of Jerusalem. Further down (v.2) we read about the outside court, not measured and given over to the nations – for it was in fact the Court of Gentiles (the assumption that the outside court symbolizes the synagogue is quite false and apologetic)⁴. The nations will trample over the holy city – here appears an allusion to the Jewish War.

„The great city” (Rev 11,8) is the name of Babylon = Rome of emperors and persecutors (it is often used in Rev: 16,19; 17,18; 18,10ff; cf. 14,8; 17,5; 18,2). Sodom and Egypt symbolize its sins. The words „where their Lord was crucified” pose a difficulty, as they suggest not Rome but Jerusalem. The best explanation seems to be as follows: outside the (spiritual) temple of the saved all the world is now submitted to „Babylon” which has spread even onto the holy city – but later all the world will be submitted to God after the descending of the enormous celestial Jerusalem (Rev 21,16); the world is both the sanctuary and the realm of Satan⁵. On the other hand some hesitation on the author’s part or a gloss can also be admitted.

The fact of the preservation of the temple proves however that the author put less stress on the historical allusions and more on the temple as a new image of the community of the saved. The temple of Jerusalem, the altar and the worshipper designate the People of God saved despite the persecution. The community of the saved shows the features of Israel praying in the temple as if there were no difference between them. The temple with the Ark of Covenant returns once more in a vision at the end of the chapter, which proves that this symbol has a key meaning; the story begins and ends with the temple (an inclusion). On the other hand the remaining part of chapter 11 refers to the period when the Christian community already existed, to the persecution and to the final judgement. Once more there is no border-line between the Old Testament symbols and the contemporary situation of the community.

⁴ Against e.g. A. Feuillet, *Essai d’interprétation du Chapitre XI de l’Apocalypse*, in: *Etudes johanniques*, Paris 1962, 246-271.

⁵ Cf. Prigent, *op.cit.*, 168

Rev 12,1ff

„A woman clothed with the sun” was identified by the traditional Catholic exegesis as Mary, the mother of the Messiah; it is supported especially by Rev 12,5. The Woman also has some features of Israel. Her ordeal is reminiscent of the fate of the persecuted Church. As the Holy Virgin can symbolize both Israel and the Church, there is no contradiction between the individual and the collective interpretation⁶. We shall deal only with the latter.

The OT often portrays the chosen people as a woman. In particular, Israel appears in Isa 60ff as a glorious bride at the end of times (Isa 60,1.4.19n; 61,10; 62,3ff: with references to the sun, the moon and the jewels; cf. 4 Esd 9,38-10,54 where a woman symbolizes Zion, ruined and restored). Next, Jesus was born from the people of Israel which could be viewed as his mother (cf. v.5); we cannot substitute the Church here!

Twelve stars suggest twelve tribes; this meaning of the twelve has already been introduced in chapter 7. In Gen 37,9 we read about Joseph's dream in which he was honoured by the sun, the moon and eleven stars: his father, mother and brothers. The celestial bodies from Rev 12,1 symbolize therefore the patriarchs of Israel, the glory of the nation.

However, already in v. 6 we learn about the 1260 days long stay of the woman in the wilderness, which corresponds to 42 months from Rev 11,2, the period of persecution equal to the period of prophesying from Rev 11,3. According to vv. 14ff the flight of the woman and the stay in the wilderness happened after the coming of Christ.

V.17 talks about „the rest of her offspring (...) those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus”. Are the Christians the offspring of Israel or, more metaphorically, of the Church, the messianic community? Next, these „commandments of God” suggest a continuity with Israel and the Law, but the „testimony of Jesus” points toward a new stage.

We can think that the Woman is both Israel which bore the Messiah and the Church persecuted after his coming⁷. We cannot find any significant distinction between them – one symbol relates to one reality in which we could at the utmost discern two periods of time or an internal transformation.

Rev 21,12-21a

Let us now discuss the vision of the celestial Jerusalem in Rev 21 and particularly vv. 12-21a. The chosen section can be separated from the whole description. Vv. 9-11 contain an introduction, vv. 12-21a have

⁶ Cf. H. Muszyński, Znak Niewiasty według Apokalipsy, in: U boku Syna. Studia z mariologii biblijnej, ed. J. Szlaga, Lublin 1984, 115-127.

⁷ Cf. A. Jankowski, Apokalipsa Św. Jana, PSNT 12, Poznań 1959, 336.

a chiasmic structure and constantly use the number 12; from v. 21b on new motives enter.

At the beginning (vv. 12-13) we find the description of twelve gates with twelve angels; the gates have the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on them – as in the vision from Ezek 48,31-34. The city of the saved is presented as Jerusalem inhabited by Israelites. Nevertheless, the next three „twelves” apply to the new community: „the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (v. 16); cf. Eph 2,20f.

Vv. 15-18 show the extraordinary dimensions of the celestial Jerusalem; they are also based on the number twelve. Next, in vv. 19-20 we return to the motive of the twelve foundations about which we learned before that they were marked with the names of the apostles; these verses refer accordingly to the Church rather than to Israel. The foundations were built of twelve kinds of jewels. The jewels can be associated with the apostles but also with the tribes of Israel – the twelve precious stones from the breastpiece of the high priest (Ex 28, 17-21; 39, 10-12). The idea of Christ as a foundation should also be mentioned (1 Cor 3,10ff; Rom 15,20)⁸. For our subject the relation between the jewels and the apostles and Christ is the most relevant, but we should also note the association between the symbolism of the twelve tribes and of the apostles (cf. Mt 19,28).

Finally, in v. 21 we find the twelve gates previously identified as symbols of the twelve tribes. Their building material, pearls, is also extremely precious.

The chiasmic structure of the text, following the pattern ABCB'A' (Israel – Church – celestial Jerusalem – Church – Israel) and the consistent use of the twelve result from a well-considered plan. The author intended to join and harmonize the motives he evoked. The particular images prove the same intention: the tribes of Israel are the gates to the eternal Kingdom and Christ with the apostles its foundation. In an overwhelming unity of the vision of the completely perfect celestial Jerusalem no element could claim to have a predominant importance.

Images of the People of God from the OT

Some names given by the OT to Israel refer in the Book of Revelation to the new community of the saved, still seen as the same People of God.

⁸ About 12 jewels: U. Jort, *The Precious Stones in the Revelation of St. John XXI 18-21*, *STh* 24(1970), 150-181; W. W. Reader, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation 21: 19-20*. *Tradition, History and Modern Interpretation*, *JBL* 100(1981), 433-457. Also P. Prigent, *op. cit.*, 340 f. I was able to propose a new solution based only on the Greek names of the twelve jewels. Their Greek first letters (ICXCCC-XBT-XYA) form an abbreviation of a christological confession: *Iesous Christos Soter, Christos Basileus Tapeinos (kai Telos?)*, *Christos Hyios Anthropou*. Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Apocalypse 21,19-20; des titres christologiques cachés dans la liste des pierres précieuses*, *NTS* 33/1987/1, 153f.

The new Jerusalem (Rev 21,2) is „the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev 21,9; cf. Hos 2, 19,21; Isa 54, 6; Ezek 16). We find the expression „my people” (Rev 18,4) and „his people” (Rev 21,3) know e.g. from Isa 48,20; 51,11; Jer 50,8; 51,45. „The camp of the saints and the beloved city” (Rev 20,9) is reminiscent of the journey through the desert (e.g. Nb 2,2) and the words of love directed to the earthly Jerusalem (Ps 78,68; 87,2; Jer 11,5; 12,7). The Lamb and 144,000 of saved shall stand on Mount Zion (Rev 14,1)⁹.

Conclusions

Most of the data presented above are not entirely new¹⁰. It was nevertheless necessary to discuss them once more, because there are still many scholars who want to avoid the constant duality of interpretation „Israel or Church?” and join one of the two „camps”. We had then to eliminate the unilateral solutions. Moreover I was able to make some new observations, especially concerning the exegesis of chapter 21.

However, it is not sufficient to stop at the rather obvious conclusion that the Revelation talks about one People of God seen in the eschatological perspective. We should examine how it presents the relation between Israel and this reality we call the Church. The fact that their images are so interwoven in the text is often explained with the help of historico-redactional hypotheses. It is supposed that the author adapted a Jewish apocalypse for Christian purposes, leaving in the text some not up-to-date elements. No convincing reconstruction of such a source has been proposed as yet; besides, the author could quite consciously use these Jewish strata of the source! Many exegetes stress the unity of the language in the Revelation, its consistent thought and the orderly plan of the whole work, even of some impulses of inspiration or minor external influences often pushed the author beyond the planned schemes.

In the texts discussed above we have found the different motives so closely and harmoniously interwoven, that it could not be viewed as an accidental mixture resulting from joining two literary strata. In particular, the symmetrical, chiasmic structure of Rev 21,12-21a had to be consciously

⁹ Cf. Jankowski op.cit., 335f, 338 and ad locum.

¹⁰ ...but they are rarely associated. The relation between Church and Israel was however analysed recently: O. Böcher, *Israel und Kirche in der Johannesapokalypse*, in his: *Kirche in Zeit und Endzeit. Aufsätze zur Offenbarung des Johannes*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1983, 28-57 (but only pp. 33-40 are closely related to the subject of the Church; other sections provide the historical background and treat the influence of the Old Testament on Rev). The author affirms that the Church is presented with important features of Israel (main texts: Rev 7 and 12; many OT and intertestamental references are quoted). The final conclusions however (p. 57) stress too strongly the new in the portrait of the Church as if the imagery related to Israel were applied to the Church seen as a new Israel contrasted with the „old” one. The author thinks that the conflict with the synagoge could have formed to some extent the theological vision.

created in this form the very beginning. Elsewhere the duality of meaning is contained in only one symbolical image (crowd, the Woman). We discover in the book not a number of inconsistencies, but an intended theology of an author using images related both to Israel and to the new community. We must conclude that the apparent „duality” results first of all from our point of view, from our preconceived ideas about Israel and the Church. For the author of the Revelation they were one, and therefore he freely used the images of both¹¹. He saw no substantial difference between the community of the twelve tribes and the community of the twelve apostles, and he even intentionally rejected any attempts to separate them. Maybe, he was conscious of the looming division and wanted to point at their unity in the perspective of salvation.

Israel always seem a starting point; later we find messianic and universal enlargements. Nevertheless we cannot find any discontinuity or state that the servants of the Lamb were sharply distinguished from Israel. If we call the new community the Church, we must immediately add that it appears as identical with Israel, even if transformed and knowing the Messiah. According to the Book of Revelation the people of all the nations, races and languages who believe in Him, enter the Israel of the twelve tribes and become true Jews. It is not a „new Israel” different from the old one, but the same People of God. We can even suggest that the author of the Revelation would prefer to call the community of all the Christians Israel rather than the Church, applying the word „church” *ekklesia* to local churches (Rev 1,3; 22,16); and as for the Christians, he would likely call them Jews...

¹¹ At this point a question about the identity of the author could be asked. A prophet from the end of first century? Or, traditionally, John the Apostle? The place of the theological thought of the Revelation in the New Testament theology depends to some extent of the answer. I think a considerable evidence for John the son of Zebedee can be quoted:

a) The fourth Gospel should be related to a disciple from Jerusalem, responsible for the main body of Jerusalem tradition in the Gospel – if not for the main redaction. He is the beloved disciple (= John the Elder?). In any case, the son of Zebedee can be excluded. Now, if we deny moreover the apostolic authorship of the Revelation we arrive at the conclusion that the second century tradition about the literary activity of John the son of Zebedee was unfounded. We should have an explanation for this persistent tradition.

b) The ancient evidence for his authorship (Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus) is quite considerable. The doubts started later.

c) The data from the Gospels concerning John correspond to the contents of Rev. He could see the Transfiguration (Mk 9,2), was particularly interested in the eschatological future (Mk 10,37) and eschatological punishments (Lk 9,51); „Boanerges” (Mk 3,17) describes his temperament quite well.

d) His high authority over many churches (Ap 1,4) and a good knowledge of the Palestinian tradition (e.g. Aramaic Bible – cf. L.P. Trudinger, Some Observations concerning the Text of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation, JTS 17/1966/, 82-88) should also be remembered.

e) The fact that the author wrote about the twelve apostles as if he were not among them remains the principal obstacle. Nevertheless, these mentions can be explained by the eschatological hope of John imperfectly expressed in Mk 10,37 par. and ultimately based on Mt 19,28.

The integration of the community of the saved with Israel is presented in the eschatological perspective. It results from the general character of the book and not from an idea that Israel and the Church would be separated now and reunited in the future. Nothing suggests any separation; the same crowd of the saved is described as Israel and as a multitude of the servants of the Lamb. The eschatology is not a science of the future; what is historically „tomorrow” explains „today’. The Israel of the Book of Revelation is defined by the universal and salvific destiny awaiting the twelve tribes.

Considering the relation between Christianity and Judaism we tend to remember rather the conflicts recorded in the NT. They were, however, mainly internal disputes within the Jewish religion which was multiform, and in many aspects universalistic and missionary. Therefore some exegetes refuse the notion of the „primitive Church”¹², putting forward the hypothesis that it became detached only at the end of the first century. Beforehand it existed as a community rooted in Israel and growing inside it – like in the Parable of the Leaven. Jesus and his first followers wanted not to separate themselves from Israel but to win it over! Their lack of success should not however determine our ideas about God’s plans concerning Israel¹³.

According to the whole NT and the Apocalypse the basic particularity of christianism consists in the person of Jesus Christ and in what he brought us: the new way of salvation through Him, the new relation between God and man; briefly: – what is called the New Covenant. Nevertheless this New Covenant was to be given to the same People of God, in order to make them a universal world-wide community. The separation between the Church and Israel seems a later historical phenomenon transferred into theology. We should acknowledge more clearly our appartenance to Israel. It should also be stressed that the people called Jews today belong in God’s intention to the same people of God.

MICHAŁ WOJCIECHOWSKI

¹² Particularly E. Trocmé, *Le christianisme primitif: un mythe historique?* EThRel 49/1974/1, 15-29.

¹³ Cf. M. Czajkowski, „Czyż Bóg odrzucił lud swój?” (Rz 11,1). Rola Izraela w historii zbawienia dzisiaj, SThV 23/1985/2,45-54.