

# FIDELITY AND THE MEMORY OF ISRAEL, THROUGH THE FIGURES OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

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“The world holds together, wrested from the shadows and from the nothing, by the presence of the Church. With Israel, we have become the guardians of history and the shepherds of creation.”

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Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not principles to be comprehended, but existences to be perpetuated. The life of one who becomes a member of Abraham's covenant perpetuates Abraham's existence. For the present is not remote from the past: Abraham is always standing before God. (Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man*)

“To separate Jesus' message from the context of the faith and the hope of the chosen people is to misunderstand it.”<sup>1</sup> If there is some truth to this warning, then we would not be able to speak about the Christian sense of fidelity without inquiring into Israel's experience of the matter. Or better: we would not be able to speak about Christ himself without asking how, in his own fidelity to God and to men, he recapitulates the fidelity of Israel.

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<sup>1</sup>Benedict XVI, “Jesus' Will for the Church,” General Audience, 15 March 2006.

The fact that Israel's fidelity has something to do with memory is something that belongs, or should belong, to the realm of unanimously shared evidence. The fact that the object of this memory, on the other hand, is the *mirabilia Dei* on behalf of his people constitutes a different sort of evidence; but however inadequate this evidence may be, it is nevertheless irrefutable. Indeed, our first task is to respond to the question *why* the existence of Israel consists in reawakening memory, again and again. This question amounts to asking ourselves what it is that constitutes the original mystery that Israel is constantly invited to rediscover in this act of recollection which nourishes her fidelity.

We would like to show in the following pages that Israel's memory is ultimately founded on being generated by God, even prior to the covenant she made with him. If this is true, then the "conjugal" fidelity that God expects from his people would cease to exist to the extent that Israel lost her awareness of being born of God, of being generated by him.

### 1. *The fidelity of God that man confesses*

It is God who teaches fidelity to Israel. God is the first Faithful One, as is underscored in the attribution to him of *émet* (cf. Ex 34:6; Is 49:15–16, etc.). That is why the covenant that he forms with man will never be broken on his part (cf. Jer 31:32b); and the first duty that falls to the human partner is to ask God never to cease giving him the fidelity that he would be incapable of on his own. From age to age, the first act of fidelity consists in confessing that one is always potentially unfaithful, by asking again and again for the grace of remaining faithful: "May he incline our hearts toward him, so that we may follow all his paths and keep the commandments, the laws, and the ordinances that he gave to our fathers" (1 Kgs 8:58). By making love a commandment, doesn't the *Schema Israël* (cf. Dt 6:5) reveal to us that it is God, and he alone, who is able to create in man the capacity to love him?

When, to his own chagrin, man stripped himself of this grace and the temptation to infidelity got the better of his good intentions, the only thing he had left was to beg God's forgiveness. Countless are the situations in which man had to beg again for this forgiveness; and when the supplication reaches its logical peak, it arrives at the hope of a heart that is finally "pure" and of a spirit that is finally

“firm,” that is, of a new creation that is as astonishing as the first one: “O God, *create* in me a pure heart, restore in my breast a firm spirit” (Ps 51:12). The prayer of the repentant sinner makes known the decisive event of salvation through his act of repentance; he makes manifest the New Covenant in which God will take Israel as his bride “forever, in righteousness and in justice, in tenderness and mercy,” and above all “in fidelity” (Hos 2:21–22).

We know the central character, in Israel’s memory, of the recollection of the departure from Egypt, which is celebrated each year on the occasion of the Passover (Ex 14). The paschal *Hagada* opens with the moving ritual of the four questions posed by the youngest son at the moment of the evening meal: “What makes this night different from every other night? For every night we eat leavened or azyme bread, and this night only the *matsa*. For every night we eat any kind of vegetables, and this night *maror*.<sup>2</sup> For every night, we do not dip even a single time, and this night, twice. For every night, we eat sitting upright or reclining, and this night we all recline.”<sup>3</sup> Every Jew knows that by celebrating this ritual he is fulfilling the precept of Exodus 13:14: “When your son asks you ‘what does this custom mean?’ you will say to him: ‘By strength the hand of the Lord brought me out of Egypt.’” But certain commentaries go even further in affirming that through the questions put to the father of the family, it is God himself who is being addressed. The commemoration interrogates him, not only in order to avoid being unfaithful to the past, but, paradoxically, in order to become as well the memory of the future: it is thus that “in certain families, the child would exclaim, ‘Papa! I want to ask you four questions.’ He would say this even if his father were no longer among the living, for his questions also have a hidden meaning: we are asking our heavenly Father why we have not yet had a right to the Redemption and why this festive meal takes place only once a year.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, we are asking why God’s fatherhood has not yet come to fulfill and surpass the shortcomings of our own—including those that are simply connected to the finitude of our lives.

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<sup>2</sup>Lettuce or horseradish.

<sup>3</sup>A. Steinzaltz, *La Hagada de Pâque*, with commentary (Paris: Bibliophane-Daniel Radford, 2003), 37.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

The *Hagada* also indicates the manner in which one has to recount the departure from Egypt to four different sons: a good son, a bad one, a simple one, and one who is too young to be able to pose questions. The figure of the bad son is particularly interesting, because he reveals the memory that is unfaithful and indeed is so because it sins against God: “What does this chore mean for you?” he asks insolently. “‘For you’ and not for him,” the *Hagada* says. “Because he has cut himself off from the community, he has denied the essential. You too, set his teeth on edge (cf. Jer 31:29) and say to him: ‘On account of this the Eternal acted for me when I departed from Egypt.’ ‘For me’ and not for him. If he had been there he would not have been saved.” The bad son is the incarnation of the infidelity of forgetting, which dissociates from the people the one who sins in this way (cf. Dt 16:3b), because it forbids him to bless God’s fidelity by saying, “Blessed is He who keeps His promise to Israel.”

## *2. Put to the test of fidelity: Isaac’s perspective*

Fortunately for the memory of Israel, the good sons in Israel outnumber the bad ones. And the paradigm of the good son is Isaac, the one about whom the story in Genesis tells us very little after recounting the episode in chapter 22 in which his father Abraham hears God’s command to offer his son in sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> When we think of the Passover as Christians, we too often forget to go back further in the books of the Law than Exodus and to inquire into the history of Abraham. This negligence is all the more culpable given that our own paschal liturgy is careful to include the story of Abraham’s sacrifice in the readings of the Vigil Mass, before recounting the crossing of the Red Sea—extending, incidentally, a Jewish tradition according to which one was supposed to read, in the celebration of Passover, the texts relative to four mysteries: Creation, the sacrifice of Abraham, Exodus, and the Redemption at the end of time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The rest of the story of Isaac’s life comes essentially down to his marriage with Rebecca (Gn 24:67) and the famous episode of the blessing that his son Jacob obtains from his father through a ruse, to the detriment of Esau (Gn 27).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. *Codex Neofiti* 1.

What we call the “sacrifice of Abraham” (Gn 22) is an adventure that is shared by a father and a son. In the Jewish tradition, the episode is known under the name “*Aqedat Yitshaq*” (the binding of Isaac), abbreviated as “*Aqedah*” (the binding). This term makes allusion to the most dramatically charged moment in which Abraham, who has firmly resolved to obey all the way to the end, binds Isaac fast to the wood of the holocaust (Gn 22:9).

Even a cursory reading cannot fail to notice a point that is common to the two stories: the sacrifice of Abraham and the crossing of the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt (Ex 14). In the two cases, what is put to the test is faith in God. Also in both cases, it is not put to the test as a result of man’s presumptuousness in trying to exist without God (as in Gen 3), but as a result of God himself and the paradoxical, and even apparently absurd, way that he leads. The test is not only whether man will rebel against God, but whether he will play God against himself—the God who gives what he promises and the God who seems to want to take back what he has given—as if God suddenly fell into self-contradiction, as if he were struck with madness and simply forgot his promises and wanted to wipe from the face of the earth the sole evidence of his promises, namely, the son that Abraham and Sara bore in their old age, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the people gathered together under Moses’s guidance, which the wonderful signs performed against Egypt had revealed to the eyes of the world as a people under God’s protection.

Now, this test of faith crystallizes around the father-son relation, and first around the one between Abraham and Isaac. Before Abraham’s submission to God, Isaac keeps his silence, if we except the question that he puts to his father: “there is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the holocaust?” (Gn 22:7). But the meditation of Israel completes here what is otherwise merely hinted at: in a disconcerting, and for us even scandalous, way, Israel is accustomed to underscore what we would have to call a complicity between Abraham and his son. Thus, commenting on and developing the phrase “the *two of them together* went ahead” (Gn 22:6), a Targoum presents Isaac as twice calling his father using the term “Abba” (“dear father,” “beloved father”), which the Gospel of Mark transmitted to us in relation to Jesus’ prayer (Mk 14:36). Another Midrash text subsequently insists on the agreement between the father and the son in this dramatic moment: “Abraham went ahead in order to bind—Isaac in order to be bound. Abraham went

ahead in order to sacrifice—Isaac in order to be sacrificed.”<sup>7</sup> And it is not at all impossible that the gospels themselves suggest this association with the communion of wills between Abraham and Isaac when they report Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan to us (Mk 1:8–11ff.),<sup>8</sup> and Paul hints at it, too, in the grande finale of the letter to the Romans, chapter 8: “If *God* is for us who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us. . . . Who will separate us from the love of *Christ*?”

### 3. *From fidelity to intercession*

The important thing, for the Jews here, is thus not to remember a “happy ending” in which God profited from a—to be honest, completely macabre—*mise en scène* intended to verify Abraham’s obedience in order to reveal to him that he is not so bad and that he condemns human sacrifices. In directing our attention not only to Abraham but also and perhaps above all to Isaac and to his communion of will with his father, the point is to show in Isaac’s attitude what God awaits from Israel herself in the midst of her tribulations. For Israel’s tribulations do not have as their sole cause her own sin, but also the sin of the world, which is mysteriously placed on Israel’s shoulders. This is what is at stake in her fidelity: constantly handed over to death, Israel is called to imitate Isaac’s gift of self. Not only does Abraham have to live his fatherhood by losing his son, but Israel herself has to live her filiation by ceaselessly allowing herself to be lost—as if there were no *memory* except in the fact of accepting the loss of that which could preserve the memory by covertly dispensing with the act of remembering; as if there were no *fidelity* apart from the extraordinary surpassing of what is the very guarantee that fidelity has not been kept in vain. We will leave aside the question of knowing whether the things present themselves thus

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<sup>7</sup>*BerR* 56, 3.

<sup>8</sup>Mark’s Gospel (1:11) uses the expression *huios agapetos* (“beloved son”) which corresponds to Gn 22:2 (septuagint): “take your *beloved son*,” 22:12 and 22:16. In these three cases, the Greek *agapetos* paraphrases the Hebrew *yahid*, “unique.” Cf. P. Grelot, *Dieu le Père de Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Desclée, 1994), 163: “The story of Jesus’ baptism shows that God and Jesus have the same relationship as that between Abraham and Isaac.”

in God's eternal plan: it suffices for us to note how they present themselves *hic et nunc*, in man's sinful state which we experience.

But from this perspective, everything happens as if man, having finally achieved this conception of fidelity that surpasses all human measure, ended up in the position of having to call in turn on God's memory: "And now," affirms the *Codex Neofiti* by giving the word to Abraham who has returned from Mount Moriah, "when my children find themselves in a time of distress, *may you recall the Aqedah* of Isaac their father, and listen to the voice of their prayer; hear them and deliver them from every distress."<sup>9</sup> The *Aqedah* is in fact the principle of every later deliverance, beginning incidentally with the deliverance from Egypt itself:

At the moment in which the Israelites entered into the sea, Mount Moriah was already moved from its place, with the altar of Isaac erected on top of it, and the vine shoots placed around it, and Isaac as bound and stretched out upon the altar, and Abraham, so to speak, raising the knife, prepared to cut the throat of his son.<sup>10</sup>

Isaac's attitude has a paradigmatic character for every prayer that Israel addresses to God. What holds true for the Jewish memory with respect to Isaac holds true also for our own memory with respect to Christ's obedience: "who will separate us from the love of *Christ*?" Paul asks immediately after having underscored the incredible choice of the Father who preferred us to his Son: "He did not spare his own Son, he handed him over for our sakes: how could he fail, in giving his Son, to give us all things?" To this astonishing choice of the Father corresponds the astonishing ratification of the choice by the Son: for this reason, the apostle continues, in joining ultimately the two persons of the Father and the Son, "I am certain of it: neither death, nor life . . . nothing will be able to separate us from the love of *God* manifested in *Jesus Christ our Savior*" (Rom 8:38–39). And it is precisely this loving conspiracy between God and God that we recall in the celebration of the Eucharist when we call on the memory of God himself ("look, O Lord, upon the Sacrifice that you

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<sup>9</sup>*Codex Neofiti* 1; cf. *BerR* 56, 10.

<sup>10</sup>*Mekhilta de R. Ishmael*, Va-yehi III, 100; *Mekhilta de R. Shim'on b. Yohai*, 59. Texts cited by E. U. Urbach, *Les sages d'Israël. Conceptions et croyances des maîtres du Talmud* (Paris: Cerf-Verdier, 1996), 519.

yourself provided for your Church”) in order to request from him the granting of the *epiclesis* and the application of the infinite merits of the sacrifice of his Son to this particular moment of our history, both common and individual.

#### 4. *Christ's fidelity to his own begetting*

In Christ, we are given the chance to see one who is faithful to his divine sonship precisely because he allows himself to be expropriated, as the hymn to the Philippians proclaims (2:6–7f.). In doing this, he takes the opposite position of his brother humans' rejection of sonship, those who made the divine condition a *harpagmos* (Phil 2:6), an object of prey to seize through violence and death. But Jesus himself had some experience with this temptation: “If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread” (Mt 4:3), whispered the Tempter in the desert, thus suggesting to him to prove that he was the Son by ceasing to act like a son—for the son is the one who does not give himself life but who receives it from his father. And this initial temptation was a prelude to the final temptation, on the Cross: “if you are the son of God, save yourself and climb down from that Cross!” (Mt 27:40). But Jesus does not agree to save himself. Precisely on the Cross we witness the abyssal event of a double expropriation: the abandoned Son is dispossessed of his Father, and the Father who abandons “into sinful hands” the Son of his love is dispossessed of his Son. For all that, there is no need to say that the communion between the Father and the Son is broken; instead, we confess that this communion continues to exist in an absolutely paradoxical way within this double expropriation: this is the unfathomable and wholly divine mystery, of which the relationship between Abraham and Isaac nevertheless remains the Old Testament prefiguration par excellence.

And it is there, in this situation that exceeds all analogy, that the prayer of the Son continues to rise up toward the Father. If the spiritual intuition of Israel's meditation on the *Aqedah* of Isaac is valid, it is here that its validity is proved: “And now, when my children find themselves in a time of distress, *may you recall* the *Aqedah* of Isaac their father, and listen to the voice of their prayer; hear them and deliver them from all distress.” It is gripping in this light to reread Psalm 22, which Christ intones on the Cross: after the word of unfathomable distress that opens the psalm (“My God, my



God, why have you abandoned me?”), the Just One that the sinners put to death reminds God of the acts of justice and of salvation that he performed in days past. And the essential part of this recollection is not only to underscore the contrast between the *mirabilia* of the past and the present situation of the Righteous One, but also, against all expectation, to fulfill the Psalmist’s exclamation: “You have responded to me: and I proclaim your name to my brothers, I praise you in the midst of the assembly” (Ps 22:22–23).<sup>11</sup>

The most important thing we need to see here is that the begetting that occurs under the sign of gift is capable of continuing to exist under the sign of abandonment, up to the point of overcoming this very abandonment. This is the aspiration of Israel’s prayer, and it is what the only-begotten Son’s paschal sacrifice achieves as he fulfills Israel’s prayer in his person. The glorification of Easter thus reveals that the gift has definitively overcome the abandonment, and that the generation of the Son by the Father can henceforward be communicated to those whom he has made his brothers. It is no doubt for this reason that, when he preaches in Acts 13, Paul curiously refers to the generation passage from Psalm 2 as evidence for the Resurrection: “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm: ‘You are my Son, today I have *begotten* you’” (Acts 13:32–33). The glorification of Easter thus appears as the definitive incarnation of the divine generation and of the fidelity of God in our world. And for this reason, even if violence, falsehood, suffering, and death remain at its heart, the world will never again be what it once was: according to Origen’s beautiful line, “The Church is the world illuminated by the Savior.”<sup>12</sup>

##### *5. Put to the test of fidelity: Abraham’s perspective*

As we affirmed at the outset, the ultimate object of the fidelity of the memory of Israel is not the election, but in the first place the

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<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, the reversal of the situation that we see in Psalm 22 is sometimes only implied, or even completely unimaginable, as in Psalm 88, which concludes without the tiniest glimmer of hope: “my company is the darkness.”

<sup>12</sup>*Commentary on Saint John VI*, 304.

generation by God as a wresting from death. The episode of Gen 22 allows us to verify this on the basis of Isaac as a figure of Christ, but we can see it just as clearly in the figure of Abraham.

Because it is a question here of the memory of the Jews, it is not useless first to recall how Abraham became Jewish. While normally one is Jewish by birth, that is not how Abraham, the first Jew, became Jewish. It is God's call to leave Ur and its idols that transformed him into a Jew, insofar as he obeyed in faith (Gn 22): "Not all the sons of Adam are sons of Abraham, but the sons of Abraham are sons of Adam. The first Jew was a pagan who was chosen."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this inaugural event is merely the first moment of Abraham's becoming a Jew: this process includes a further step, namely, when he changes from Abram to Abraham, i.e., when at the age of 99, having known "the test of faith in God's fidelity,"<sup>14</sup> he achieves a new paternity over "a multitude of peoples" (Gn 16:5). Isaac, whom Abraham and Sara are rendered capable of generating in their old age (Gn 21), will be the guarantee of the truth of this promise. That is why, if each of the tests that Abraham undergoes had the effect of "Judaizing" him more and more, the decisive proof of his fidelity is still to come: The order given by God to sacrifice Isaac (Gn 22) will constitute as it were the crowning of this series of the laborious steps in the coming to be of a new identity.

We recall that the letter to the Hebrews, as it contemplates the faith of the "ancients" (11:2), pauses at Abraham's trial and has this to say: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking he did receive him back" (11:17–19).

As we have seen, the restitution of Isaac to Abraham is in fact not a restitution: This is what is underscored in the expression "figuratively speaking," or if you will, "prophetically speaking." What Abraham receives, prophetically speaking, at the conclusion of

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<sup>13</sup>P. Beauchamp, *Le récit, la lettre et le corps. Essais bibliques* (Paris: Cerf, 1982), 205.

<sup>14</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2570: the Catechism comments on Abraham's first prayer expressed in words "I went forth without a child" (Gn 15:2–3) as a "complaint reminding God of his promises which seem unfulfilled."

this scene of sacrifice is no longer the Isaac from before the trial, but rather Isaac as figure of Christ.<sup>15</sup> The fruit of Abraham's fidelity to God is precisely this: he who was nothing up to this point but the father of Isaac becomes from this moment on the father of the one who, one day, will be called by the evangelist Matthew "son of David, son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1)—the Christ. Of course, strictly speaking, Abraham does not generate Christ. But he is himself generated to a new paternity that leads directly to Christ; and thus it is that he sees in advance the day of Christ and he rejoices in it (cf. Jn 8:56). Hence God's reiteration of his promise: "because you did this, because you did not refuse to me your only begotten son, I will fill you with blessings," etc. (Gn 22:16ff.). Henceforward, Abraham is able fully to understand that the one in whom he has trusted is "the God who gives life to the dead and calls the nothing into existence" (Rom 4:17). He who obeyed God by leaving his family (Gn 12:1), that is, by accepting the amputation of his identity, achieves his definitive identity and receives his descendants: this is how "our Father Abraham" is born to his paternity, a birth that we, along with our older brothers, recall from age to age.

The Jewish memory is not in the first place the memory of election, even if the election disrupts history and thus causes it in fact to *be* history;<sup>16</sup> what constitutes the memory of Israel is in the first place the memory of being born. Franz Rosenzweig attempted to explain this in terms that set Judaism in opposition to Christianity: the Christian faith, according to him, is "the content of a witness, it is faith in *something*. It is thus precisely the opposite of the faith of a Jew. Jewish faith is not the content of a witness, but the result of a birth. He who is begotten in Judaism bears witness to his faith by continuing to engender the eternal people. He does not believe in something. He is himself belief."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Which thus points to Mary who, faithful in the test of the Cross of Jesus, will herself receive one day as a son "all the men that the sacrifice of Christ causes to be born into divine life" (preface of the Mass in honor of Mary, Mother of the Church, based on the passage in Jn 19:26–27), that is to say, the ecclesial Body of her Son. At the foot of the Cross, her maternity will grow until it reaches universal dimensions.

<sup>16</sup>"Where there is no election, there is no history" (Jean-Marie Lustiger, *La Promesse* [Paris: Parole et Silence, 2002], 142).

<sup>17</sup>F. Rosenzweig, *L'Étoile de la rédemption* (Paris, 1992), 404.

It is easy to reply to Rosenzweig that the Christian faith is not faith in “something,” but faith in Someone. But in doing so we ought not to dismiss what is astonishingly prophetic in his words. We have our foundation, to be sure, on a witness, but this witness is in fact that which the Church renders to her Lord who gave birth to her on the Cross from his open side and which has extended to each of her members the Spirit of sonship.

#### 6. *The memorial of Christ given to his Church*

What significance does Israel therefore have in relation to the Church? A first point to recall with certainty is that Israel is not primarily a figure of the Church, but first of all a figure of Christ himself. This point is essential in order for the Church to avoid taking herself for Christ and thereby repeating the original sin with respect to Israel: thinking of herself as existing purely and simply *in his place*, while she does not exist except “grafted” onto him, onto the one who remains the “whole olive tree” (Rom 11:17ff.). The existence of the Church is indeed always second with respect to the existence of Christ, just as she is second with respect to the existence of Israel. Two consequences follow from this, one with respect to the Church, the other with respect to Christ.

First, with respect to the Church. The Church’s fidelity to God consists in being always “subordinate to Christ” just as the wife ought to subordinate herself to her husband as to the Lord (Eph 5:22). If the wife ceased to subordinate herself to her husband, if she began to put herself in his place, she would deny to him the vocation that is his, namely, “to give himself up for her” and to love her “as his own body” (Eph 5:25.28), just as she would deny to her children the call to honor “their father and their mother” (Eph 6:2; cf., Ex 20:12) and to die to their own will in order to be able to be born all the way to the end.

Then, with respect to Christ. The memory celebrated by Israel of her generation by God does not first of all announce the memorial of the Church, but the memorial that Christ himself made of his own begetting. When the hour comes to institute the memorial, he does so in view of his imminent passion, and his supreme renunciation already coincides with his universal sovereignty: “while they were at supper, . . . knowing that *the Father placed everything in his hands*, and that he came from God and was going to

God, he rose from the table and removed his clothes” (Jn 13:2–4). Removing his omnipotence and his royal dignity,<sup>18</sup> Jesus commemorates his divine begetting, in anticipation of his passion and in loving his own “to the end” (Jn 13:1).

Whether Jesus’ Last Supper was a Passover meal or not, we find at its center this very precise act of recollection, the singular effect of which is to open up a future: that of being glorified by the Father. L. Bouyer years ago amply demonstrated, by making reference above all to the *Berakoth* treatise of the *Mischnah*, that the Jewish blessings (*berakoth*) constitute the place par excellence of the fidelity of Israel to her God in making “the whole of the existence of the pious Jew a universal and constant sacrificial ‘benediction’,” but also in fulfilling the priestly office that, making the past present, anticipates and makes possible the opening to the future, “in a supplication elaborated for the sanctification of the Name [of God], the coming of his kingdom, and the fulfillment of his entire will.”<sup>19</sup> Illustrating this observation by multiple *berakoth*, L. Bouyer cites in particular this festive *berakah*:

Our God and the God of our fathers, may the memorial of ourselves, and of our fathers, the memorial of Jerusalem, your city, the memorial of the Messiah, the son of David, your servant, and the memorial of your people, of the whole house of Israel, rise up and come, may it arrive, be seen and accepted, heard, recalled and mentioned before you, for the deliverance, the good, the grace, the compassion and the mercy, on this day [here the specific feast is mentioned]. Remember us, Lord, our God, at his word in order to do us good, visit us on his behalf and save us for him, giving us life by a word of salvation and mercy.<sup>20</sup>

We see that this text makes repeated use of the word “memorial” (in Hebrew *zikkaron*). This word is to be understood, not as a simple recollection, but as a “secret pledge, given by God to his people,” implying “a continuity, a mysterious permanence of great divine deeds, of the *mirabilia Dei* commemorated by celebrations,” and constituting “for the Lord himself a permanent testament of his

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. St. Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium* 55, 6–7.

<sup>19</sup>L. Bouyer, *Eucharistie* (Tournai: Desclée, 1996), 63.

<sup>20</sup>Treatise *Berakoth* III, 49a (*Eucharistie*, 87)

fidelity to himself.” From there, the natural passage of the recollection we make of God to the recollection that God must make of us—for the same divine fidelity that was once manifested has to be manifested once again for those who celebrate today. “Our subjective commemoration is nothing but the reflection of an objective commemoration, established by God, who gives testimony in the first place to him himself of his own fidelity. Hence this formulation of prayer, which is so characteristic, and which must pass from the synagogue to the Church: ‘Remember us, Lord.’”<sup>21</sup> There can therefore be no doubt that the eucharistic *anamnesis* finds its origin right here, the *anamnesis* that brings to mind for us a past event (*recolitur memorial passionis*) in order to gather up the present fruit (*mens impletur gratia*) and to anticipate its eschatological fulfillment, the consummation in glory (*et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*).<sup>22</sup>

Already in the Jewish benedictions, as for us Christians in the eucharistic synax, it is not man who is the principal actor. Instead, it is God himself who perpetuates his own acts of salvation: “everywhere I will make my name heard, I will approach you and I will bless you” (Ex 20:24). It is he himself who places in man’s hands the indefectible pledge of his own fidelity (“I keep the Lord before me without letting go; he is at my right hand, I cannot be shaken,” Ps 15:8<sup>23</sup>)—on the condition, as we saw above, that this pledge be received by its beneficiaries in an act of total release, as manifest in the fact of returning immediately back to God, in an act of irreversible sacrifice, the very One he has just given, in order to offer ourselves in a filial act which is his own: “we offer you his Body and Blood, the sacrifice acceptable to you and the source of salvation for the whole world.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Bouyer, *Eucharistie*, 88.

<sup>22</sup>We recognize here Aquinas’s *O sacrum convivium*: “*O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur. Recolitur memoria passionis ejus, mens impletur gratia, et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*”: “O sacred banquet in which Christ is eaten. The memory of his passion is recalled, the soul is filled with his grace, and the pledge of future glory is given to us.”

<sup>23</sup>See P. Lenhardt, *A l’ecoute d’Israel en Eglise* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2006), esp. 168ff.

<sup>24</sup>Eucharistic Prayer IV.

7. *The two fidelities that sustain the world*

It is striking and overwhelming to observe how the Jewish tradition after Christ preserves and develops what is for us Christ's own act in his memorial. It is in this sense that, for a number of Talmudic schools, the study of the Law is not only a science or an art, but a mission that sustains the world in existence and keeps it from falling back into the nothing: the memory of Israel incarnates the renewal of God's fidelity to the permanence of creation.<sup>25</sup> To say that "Israel is responsible for the memory of the world,"<sup>26</sup> is thus to underscore that this is the mission she has received. Her memory (*zékher*) remains what makes possible the generations (*toldot*), or, in other words, the many new departures by which history remains history: for "the history of the universe is [not] a series of physical events, but a series of generations, the generations of the heavens and of the earth."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the first act of fidelity on Israel's part consists once and for all in simply continuing to exist, all the while knowing that this remaining in being is always, from the human perspective, threatened by annihilation, but also that the destiny of the world depends mysteriously on this stubborn insistence on surviving. "Speaking to God, the Rabbi de Kosnitz said to him one day: 'Lord of the world, deign to save Israel, I beg you. And if you won't, then save the Goyim!'"<sup>28</sup> It is in this way that the continued survival of Israel is the paradigm of all fidelity. It is also the paradigm of all joy, if one understands by this word anything that is in an authentic sense a foretaste of heaven. He "who does not experience the taste of Paradise that is brought by the fulfillment of a precept in this world will not be able to experience the taste of Paradise in the world to come."<sup>29</sup>

There can be no doubt that we have to reawaken our awareness that the same thing ought to be said in relation to us

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<sup>25</sup>It is thus that the famous Talmudist Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn (1759–1821), a disciple of Gaon de Vilna (1720–1797) and inspired by the Kabbala, placed study and good deeds at the level of the ontological support of the universe: cf. *L'Âme de la vie (Nefesh Hahayyim)* (Paris: Verdier, 1986), esp. 229.

<sup>26</sup>J.-M. Lustiger, *La Promesse*, 49.

<sup>27</sup>H. Atlan, "La mémoire du rite: métaphore et fécondation," in *Mémoire et histoire* (Paris: Denoël, 1986), 33.

<sup>28</sup>M. Buber, *Les récits hassidiques* (Paris: Plon, 1963), 390.

<sup>29</sup>A. Heschel, *Les bâtisseurs du temps* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957), 64.

Christians. From this perspective, the world holds together, wrested from the shadows and from the nothing, by the presence of the Church. She has taken over responsibility for the fidelity of a humanity that remains unfaithful, but which from this moment on carries in her, as a woman carries her child, the sacrament of its fidelity. With Israel, we have become the guardians of history and the shepherds of creation. If there “is no history except as a function of God’s choice,” “of an Election,”<sup>30</sup> and if “history is ultimately a duration that takes its meaning from the relation to God that calls and towards which we are moving,” it is in celebrating the memorial of Christ and by living it in light of what we celebrate that we become responsible for the meaning of creation and for the continuation in existence of this world, which makes its way, along with us, toward death, and which is wrested by the Lord from the shadows of the “land of oblivion” (Ps 88:13) in order to be led toward the extraordinary light of the Kingdom. Here is the place to cite the famous words of the *Letter to Diognetus*:

In a word, what the soul is in the body, the Christians are in the world. . . . The soul is enclosed in the body: and yet it is she that sustains the body; the Christians are as it were detained in the prison of the world, and yet it is they that sustain the world. (IV, 1.7)

But, someone will object, isn’t it rather God who sustains the world? The novelty consists precisely in the fact that man, who has entered into covenant and is called to live fidelity to God, discovers in Christ the new dimension of his mission to watch over the world in cooperation with divine action: the meaning of his existence is nothing less than contributing to the redemption of the universe. From this perspective, assuming that he knows God, he is unable to conceive this titanic effort as dependent on his own resources. Instead, he envisions it in the first place as a liturgy that aims to recall to memory, “to rediscover, recollect and liberate the sparks of holiness scattered into the shadows of the world.” Such is “the function, the reason for all the precepts and all the ritual acts: man holds the keys that are able to release the chains of the Redeemer.”<sup>31</sup> At the heart of creation, which groans with the pains of giving birth

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<sup>30</sup>Lustiger, *La Promesse*, 48.

<sup>31</sup>Heschel, 61–62.



(cf. Rom 8:22), “the *Shekina*, the presence of God, is in exile. Our duty is to bring God back into the world, into our lives. To worship God is to extend his presence into the world.”<sup>32</sup>

Within this grandiose, and perhaps even immoderate perspective, fidelity is compatible only with the most hidden humility: the humble attention to what God demands, and the readiness to do what he demands, everything that he demands, and nothing but that, but to do it as if everything depended on it, because, in fact, everything *does*: “when Israel accomplishes God’s will, it reinforces the power of the Most High, for it is written: ‘In Elohim, we reinforce the power’ (Ps 60:14). Over and over again, the Zohar affirms: ‘The sins of men cause breaches on High,’ or conversely. . . Moreover, the Psalmist exhorts us: ‘Give power to Elohim!’ (Ps 68:35).”<sup>33</sup> This humble attention has an aspect of *cultus*, for the whole of worship is recapitulated in it: life as a whole is this “spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). “And our Sages declare in the same spirit: ‘Worship is a necessity for the Most High.’”<sup>34</sup> Let us listen once more to Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn:

And so consider and understand the importance of the reality of an increase in and growth of benediction. How imperious is the necessity of our sacred service in general for sustaining and preserving worlds, and for calling down a powerful influx of benediction and of holiness in them; this occurs through the process of the divine association with worlds, the holy service, before being considered, according to the superior will, as their nourishment. . . Such is the will and the glory of God, for a motive known by Him alone, a motive whose mystery will remain impenetrable to us.<sup>35</sup>

#### 8. Conclusion: Preserving the Name

There is no fidelity of man to his own call of being man (“create man,” says philosophy) that does not have its origin in an

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<sup>32</sup>A. Heschel, *Dieu en quête de l’homme. Philosophie du judaïsme* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 170.

<sup>33</sup>Volozhyn, *L’Âme de la vie (Nefesh Hahayyim)*, 11.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

*anamnesis*, even unarticulated, even hidden, even atheistic, even constantly tempted to be unfaithful, of the paternal call that brought him to his humanity<sup>36</sup>: how much more true it is that the believer's fidelity to the Covenant that is the charter of his existence will depend on the living memory of his being generated by God. We hear over and over again the observation that our world suffers from a crisis of fidelity; the relativizing (and often the abandonment) of conjugal promises is symptomatic of the depth of this evil. More or less confusedly, and more rarely too, we sense that this crisis of fidelity is not without a connection with the crisis of the filial bond. With the Jewish people, our mission is to recall and proclaim that this bond is the very substance of the traditions of Israel, that it gives an account of the meaning of the human existence of Christ—of him who, recapitulating all the prophetic figures, lived to the end in his flesh and in the gift of his person his fidelity to his being begotten as Son in order to incarnate the Spousal God of the Old Testament in the gift of himself for his Church: “He loved the Church, and he gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25).

In our day we are not permitted any illusions: what we have, here, is not merely a case of forgetfulness that has to be fixed, but rather a battle that has to be fought. The memory of being generated by God is not merely a victim of man's amnesia; it is the object of a hatred, of a destructive fury. Perhaps for the first time in history, a civilization aims to mobilize the totality of its resources, beginning with those of science and technology, in order to attempt to “have a right against sonship, indeed to have a son's right, and to eliminate it so completely that even its name disappears.”<sup>37</sup> To preserve the name; to suffer outrages for the Name (Acts 5:41); to suffer for the Name (Acts 9:16); to die for the Name (Acts 21:13): what else can we expect, because the One who has come into the world in order to manifest this Name to men (Jn 17:6) did so in no other way than through death, and indeed death on the Cross. “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before you” (Jn 15:18). But this is the same Son who, invested with “all the power of heaven and on

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<sup>36</sup>The whole question of the moment of “hominization” ought to be posed on the basis of these premises if it is to have theological import. What makes man man is not a particularly evolved stage of his brain or of his technical possibilities but the paternal call that God addresses to him at the moment of His choosing.

<sup>37</sup>M. Vacquin, conference at Notre Dame de Paris, 25 March 2007.

earth,” shared this Name with us so that we might go out, that we might make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them (Mt 28:18–20). Indeed, “in revealing his Name, God reveals at the same time his fidelity which is always and forever, valid for the past (‘I am the God of your fathers,’ Ex 3:6) as well as for the future (‘I will be with you,’ Ex 3:12). God, who reveals his Name as ‘I am,’ reveals himself as the God who is always there, who draws near to his people, in order to save them.”<sup>38</sup>

We can synthesize all the preceding reflections in a compact sequence: election, generation, covenant. The first term, election, is a plan that God formed for us “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4); the second, generation, occurs in the instant—or rather in a series of moments outside of the series—as the call to a life and a freedom according to God that gives flesh to the election; the third, finally, unfolds over the course of time up to its final consummation, as a constant call to be faithful to the memory and to the testimony of the deed. It is thus that the Church, united to her Lord as the bride to the bridegroom, fulfills her mission of “sewing up time”<sup>39</sup> and saving the world.—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.* □

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<sup>38</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 207.

<sup>39</sup>The expression comes from M. Serres.