



## 4. THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

The divine election of Israel is a theme that is often presented as contradicting the universality of divine love and the principle of universal human equality, one of the main achievements of modernity.

The fact that Israel is “chosen” does not mean that it is better than others, or that it thinks it is: God chose a small people to carry out his plan for the benefit of all humanity. From the call of Abraham - the first person in the Bible to be called a Jew (*‘ivri*) - the universal purpose of this individual choice is clear: “In you all the families of the earth shall be called blessed” (Gen 12:3b).

But in the Bible, the focus on universality begins with Noah, long before Abraham. In fact, it is with him - that is, with the new humanity that emerged from the Flood - that the first covenant is made.

In Judaism, therefore, there is a dual structure of covenant and election, articulated in Noachism (the covenant with Noah and his descendants) and Mosaicism (the covenant of Moses). While the one who enters into the covenant of Moses is bound to obey 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), the *noachide* (the descendant of Noah and thus every human being) is bound to obey seven commandments: 1) establishment of courts (every human society needs justice) 2) prohibition of blasphemy; 3) prohibition of idolatry; 4) prohibition of adultery; 5) prohibition of murder; 6) prohibition of theft; 7) prohibition of eating any part of a living animal (prohibition of cruelty to animals). By keeping these commandments, the Noachide will enter the world to come, i.e. he will have a share in eternal life.

Some authors consider the Noahic Covenant to be compatible with all cultures and all different ways of being human: in this sense, it can indeed be called universal. Indeed, the fundamental message of the Hebrew Bible is that universality, the covenant with Noah, is only the context and prelude to the irreducible plurality of cultures.

If one examines the relationship between Jacob and Esau on the one hand, as well as that between Isaac and Ishmael on the other, one can see how a more correct attention to the texts can lead one to see possibilities for reconciliation between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, even where there are apparently irreconcilable conflicts. The election of the one is not at odds with the election of the other. This idea was amply developed by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *Not in God's Name*: “Unity in the heavens creates diversity on earth. The same is true of civilisations. The fundamental message of the Hebrew Bible is that universality - the covenant with Noah - is only the context and prelude to the irreducible plurality of cultures, those systems of meaning through which human beings have sought to understand the relationship between themselves, the world and the Source of Being. The Platonic assertion of the universality of truth

is valid when applied to science and the description of what is. It is not when applied to ethics, spirituality and our sense of what ought to be. There is a difference between *physis* and *nomos*, between description and prescription, between nature and culture. Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same, but the ways in which they do so are almost infinitely variable”<sup>17</sup>.

In Christian theology, one’s own election does not replace Israel’s, but complements it, in the sense that it realises the openness to the nations that is promised to Israel. The Second Vatican Council states: “Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God’s saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ - Abraham’s sons according to faith - are included in the same Patriarch’s call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). This is the foundation that enables Jews and Christians to work together to repair the world (*tikkun olam*), which all humanity so desperately needs.

Recent examples of such active collaboration in the field of study are the two texts mentioned in the bibliography, *La Bibbia dell’Amicizia* and *Not in God’s name*. In the former, Jews and Christians present their readings of the sacred texts in a common discovery of the riches of the Word; in the latter, they discuss difficult passages of Scripture which, when misinterpreted, have caused serious damage in past centuries and risk continuing to do so unless they are addressed in a new way.

### Bibliography

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<sup>17</sup> J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Bloomsbury Continuum 2003.