

Regeneration: The Hope of Israel

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1. The teacher of Israel

During the legendary nightly conversation between Nicodemus and the Lord Jesus, the latter makes a very remarkable statement. After speaking up to three times about regeneration as a necessity to see or enter the kingdom of God, He criticizes Nicodemus for not knowing the concept of 'regeneration':

“Are you the *[not ‘a’, but ‘the’]* teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” (John 3 : 10)

After that He continues with:

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3 : 12)

Both these statements are highly controversial. How could Nicodemus have known anything about regeneration? With what right does the Saviour reproach the teacher of Israel? When using a concordance, we will find that it is the Lord Himself, who uses the word 'regeneration' for the first time. Often one would make us believe that the good man knew nothing about regeneration. After all, it is a new teaching of the Lord Jesus. What is imputed to Nicodemus, however, is that apparently, he does not respond to the words of Jesus right away. Yet the words of the Lord are very clear. As the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus is expected to know the meaning of the concept of regeneration. Therefore, it is not our duty to check whether the Lord's blame is right. Of course it is justified. Our task is to investigate where Nicodemus has been in default as a scribe. The question that remains is: Where and how does the Old Testament speak of 'regeneration'? For this must be the case when we consider the words of the Lord Himself. The other difficult aspect is that the Lord claims that He has spoken of 'earthly things' and 'heavenly things'. Were there two different subjects raised? The Lord spoke only about regeneration, did He not? And indeed, only one subject was being discussed. But to which category should we reckon this subject? Does 'regeneration' belong to the earthly things or to the heavenly things? If we decide to reckon 'regeneration' to the heavenly things, what are the earthly things, then? And if we decide to reckon regeneration to the earthly things, what are the heavenly things,

then? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is not very well known. Not because it is so difficult to find, but because the questions are overlooked. An analysis of the conversation between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 : 1-21 teaches us that this dialogue can be divided into two parts. In the first part, the Lord and Nicodemus speak in turn. After the Lord has pointed out the necessity and the character of regeneration, Nicodemus, in uppermost confusion, asks:

“How can these things be?” (John 3 : 9)

After this question of Nicodemus, the Lord blames him for his ignorance and says:

“Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you [*plural*] do not receive Our witness.” (John 3 : 10, 11)

It is striking that the Lord addresses the people of Israel through Nicodemus. This is evident from the word 'you' in this verse, which is in plural form. He blames Nicodemus and his students ('the teacher of Israel') not only for not knowing anything about regeneration, but also for not accepting His testimony. In addition, the Saviour says that He speaks what He 'knows' and testifies what He has 'seen'. And still Nicodemus and the people do not accept His testimony. With these words, the Lord suggests that what He speaks comes directly from the Old Testament, from which He 'knows' and in which He has 'seen'. But from that, Nicodemus and his students could also 'know', and in that they could have 'seen' as well. Precisely because the Lord can refer to the Jewish Old Testament, His reproach towards them is justified. They should have known this, either by studying the Scriptures or by the 'testimony' of the Lord Jesus. But even His testimony, which was based on the Scripture, was not accepted. They simply did not believe Him. That is why He states:

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:12)

The first part of the dialogue ended in verse 11 with the remark that Nicodemus did not accept the testimony of the Lord Jesus about regeneration. So, he did not

believe it either. Now when verse 12 speaks again of things not believed by Nicodemus, they are found to be 'earthly things'. The conclusion is then that regeneration, as had just been discussed and of which Nicodemus should have known, belongs to the 'earthly things'. The normal, objective meaning of these words is that the Lord, until that moment, had only spoken of earthly things, which were however not accepted by His audience. But then the conversation takes a magnificent turn, in response to the question: "How can these things be?" The 'teacher of Israel' falls silent. But 'the teacher of God' goes on to explain how a mortal being, born in sin, can become a child of God by personal regeneration:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
(John 3 : 16)

It is a clear answer: Regeneration is achieved through faith. This personal regeneration through faith in the Lord is a Biblical truth, which Nicodemus simply should have known. Even though the Lord reproaches him for his ignorance, He also reveals to him that everlasting life, a fruit of regeneration, can only be received by faith:

“[...] that whoever believes in Him [...]” (John 3 : 15, 16).

“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 3 : 18)

In the following I hope to show that this truth also extensively emerges in the Old Testament. Still the question remains: Are these earthly or heavenly things? The answer is not so easy in this regard. In any event, it must be clear that in His first statements the Saviour speaks to Nicodemus about the individual regeneration:

“Unless one [...]” (John 3 : 3, 5).

According to verse 12 the Lord had merely spoken of 'earthly things'. From this it follows that 'individual regeneration' in any case is part of the 'earthly things'.

And as we will see later, this personal regeneration is indeed mentioned in the prophecies, in connection with the Israelites, to whom an eternal future in the land of the fathers was promised. For the Scriptures teach that God created men to live on the earth. Now when man fallen into sin is reconciled with God through regeneration, this does not necessarily change his destiny. God created man for the earth, and the redeemed man will indeed live on the earth. Why else would God create a new earth in the future? Of course, that new earth will serve as a dwelling-place for the redeemed. And most certainly, Israel occupies a prominent place among the redeemed. That is why, in any case, regeneration belongs to the earthly things. Whether we consider the salvation of individual sinners or the collective resurrection of a whole nation, makes no difference. But, you will say, does not a regenerated man go to heaven? Now we have arrived at the heavenly things. The case is that a believer will generally live forever on the new earth. But there is a very big exception. That exception concerns those who come to believe during the period in which the Lord hides His face for Israel and the nations. In other words, this exception concerns those who live as believers under the dispensation of the mystery. After Israel rejected her Messiah, the Lord gathered for Himself a people out of all the nations. This people is the Church, the body of Christ. All who are part of this redeemed people, are called with a heavenly calling. They have a heavenly citizenship. They expect their Saviour from heaven, and will indeed spend eternity in the land the Lord has promised them: heaven. The point is, therefore, that man can only be saved by regeneration based on faith. This salvation generally means that the regenerated will live forever on the new earth. That is the usual meaning in relation to the 'earthly things'. The exception however applies to the believers from the time between the first and second advent of Christ. They are saved in exactly the same way: by regeneration based on faith. But their future is different. They look forward to their future and inheritance in heaven. Well, these are the heavenly things.

Indeed, these heavenly things Nicodemus could not know, as the truths concerning the Church were only revealed later by the apostle Paul. They are part of the great 'mystery'. The difference between these 'earthly things' and 'heavenly things' determines exactly the great distinction between Israel and the Church as chosen people. Not their descent determines this difference, for that is precisely the same. Just like the Church now, Israel will in the future be gathered from all the nations.

The Israel that will soon possess the Promised Land in the kingdom of the Messiah, consists of exactly the same kind of people as the Church. All have been regenerated by grace and by faith. The difference is only in the future destination, and is related to God's purposes for them. And then Scripture teaches that God chose Israel for the earth, and the Church for heaven. I have no intention to go into this any deeper. My subject is not the Church or eschatology, but regeneration. What this is about is that regeneration can have both earthly and heavenly consequences, depending on the dispensation in which that regeneration was established. But how shall we understand the heavenly things, if we do not understand the earthly first? For 'regeneration' in the Old Testament belongs to the earthly things. It is not a part of the mystery. Therefore, regeneration is not something that is exclusively related to the Church. Regeneration is the way from an old creation to a new one, and is therefore fundamental for a correct understanding of God's way with a fallen world. And that is what Nicodemus should have known.

2. The birth of Israel

“As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born.” (Ezekiel 16 : 4, 5)

When we engage ourselves with the regeneration of Israel, we must first realize that regeneration is only possible if there has been a birth first. The rules that apply to personal regeneration, also apply to this earthly aspect of regeneration. As a human being must first be born the 'natural' way from his parents to be able to partake in regeneration, in the same way Israel was sometime born in a 'natural' way. In fact, the comparison between a person and a whole people is purely Biblical. God acts with peoples exactly the same way as with individuals. Therefore, God also speaks to the nations as if they were persons. The truth in 1 Corinthians 15 concerning 'natural' and 'spiritual' therefore does not only apply to the individual, but also to the separate nations.

“There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body [...]. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual [...].” (1 Corinthians 15 : 44, 46)

After all, the word 'body' not only applies to the human body, it also applies to any organized unit. Also in English, we speak of 'public bodies' for example, with which we allude to certain organisations, not individuals. We also know solid, gaseous and liquid bodies in physics; and in mathematics the regular bodies of geometry. This broad meaning of the word 'body' explains why it is applied to a whole nation. After all, a nation is an organized unity. There are thus two types of bodies: the natural and the spiritual. We have already seen that the spiritual body arises by regeneration or resurrection. In principle, that is the same. The natural body simply arises by birth. This applies to a person, but also to a whole nation. And indeed, in the verses from Ezekiel quoted above, Scripture speaks about the birth of Israel. Hosea also speaks in the same way:

“Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; for she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband! Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and expose her, as in the day she was born [...].” (Hosea 2 : 2, 3)

These words are not very flattering. Do they not remind us of what the Scriptures say about the birth and descent of the natural man? Man, who as a descendant of Adam has been 'born in sin' and of whom the Scriptures say:

“There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3 : 10-18)

The natural birth of Israel as a nation was of course the Exodus out of Egypt. It was then that the earthly nation of Israel arose. In fact, it is striking how strongly the events around the Exodus resemble a normal birth. In both cases, by the way, we speak of 'deliverance'. The Jewish systematics indicate that Egypt is actually the mother of Israel. After all, Israel was born out of Egypt. Hence the special relationship that always existed, still exists and according to the prophecies, will exist between these two countries. It is the relationship between a mother and a daughter. In the time that the patriarch Jacob, under the name 'Israel', settled in Egypt with all his family, Egypt was actually pregnant. In Egypt, the family of Jacob expanded into a mature people. Hence the labour pains were bound to come. Egypt suffered from the labour pains that came over her. Although we often speak of the 'ten plagues', there were only nine. Nine plagues only came over Egypt. The tenth plague actually came over both Israel and Egypt. Both peoples were the victim of the tenth plague. But both peoples could escape through the blood of the Passover to the door post. The nine plagues of Egypt correspond with nine months of human pregnancy. Why nine? The Hebrew letter 'teth' represents the nine. This word means 'womb'. The nine is the womb. That is why the number nine in the Bible represents judgment. But it is a judgment, from which something good, something new, emerges. It is a judgment, a suffering, from which the new creation arises. It is the judgment of the old creation, the mother, but it brings about the new creation. Therefore, the nine is also mentioned in connection with the suffering of the Lord Jesus:

“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” (Mark 15 : 34)

The ninth hour was the time when it was settled with the old nature. The natural body - the first body - was judged and forsaken by God, because it had to be replaced by the spiritual body - the resurrected body. The new creation. For the new creation arises along a path of suffering from the old creation. The mother suffers to be able to bear the child. Why is that? Because natural birth is an image of regeneration. That is true for the birth of a human being and it is true for the birth of the people of Israel. It is true for the deliverance of a human being and true for the deliverance of the people of Israel. And then it is time. Egypt finally thrust Israel

off. It took trouble, it is actually unnatural. Israel had for some centuries been part of the mother body of Egypt. But God's 'laws of nature' must have their course and Israel is on its way. She descends until she finds her way blocked by the waters of the Red Sea. The bond with Egypt is still very strong. Already at that point Israel reproaches Moses for leading them out of Egypt. (Exodus 14) But there is no way back any longer. And as it happens with human birth, it also went here: The waters broke.

“[...] and the LORD caused the sea to go back [...] and made the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.” (Exodus 14 : 21, 22)

The waters were divided and Israel was born, delivered. And in that situation the Lord finds her.

“[...] on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you [...]” (Ezekiel 16 : 4)

Apparently, the delivery was not entirely complete. When the Lord found her there, the umbilical cord was not cut off yet. Now we read in the following verses that He washed and cleansed her from her blood and anointed her with oil, but not that her navel cord was cut.

“Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth [...]” (Ezekiel 16 : 9, 10)

The navel cord is the child's original feeding line. It is the connection with the body of the mother. And that is precisely the tragedy of Israel. Again and again this connection with Egypt is expressed. Again and again there is this longing to go back to the food, the fleshpots of Egypt. And even many centuries later, when Israel threatens to collapse under the pressure of Assyria, she does not seek her salvation with the Lord, but in Egypt. The further development of the new-born baby proceeds exactly as prophesied shortly after her birth. Deuteronomy 27 and 28 give a complete and chronological report of all the blessings and curses she

would receive, as a result of her being obedient or disobedient to the Lord, her God. As it is with the old nature, it is a history of ups and downs. More downs than ups! And as the old nature returns to her earthly origin, Israel returned to her earthly origin. As natural man returns to 'mother earth', "for out of it he was taken", Israel returned to her mother, from which she was taken. Indeed, that is the meaning of the last verses of Deuteronomy 28.

“Then the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known [...]. And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart [...]. Your life shall hang in doubt before you [...]. And the Lord will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, ‘You shall never see it again.’ And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.” (Deuteronomy 28 : 64-68)

Until only but a few decades ago this was the end of the earthly existence of the Jewish state. For these words refer to events AD 70, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the Jewish people were partly eradicated and partly dispersed among the nations. Many thousands of Jews then sought refuge in Egypt, and indeed tried to sell themselves there as slaves. Due to this vast supply of Jewish slaves, however, the market value of a slave decreased, so that there were no buyers anymore. Everyone was already provided. This is how Israel returned to her natural origin. She ended where she had begun: as a slave in Egypt.

3. The carcass of Israel

When man returns to his origin, he returns to dust. After all, that is (on the one hand) his origin. When Israel returns to her origin, she returns to Egypt. That is why, in both cases, one could speak of death. Israel died. The state Israel had vanished from the earth. Hence, the same Deuteronomy 28 speaks of Israel as if she were a carcass:

“Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away.” (Deuteronomy 28 : 26)

Now, however, it is true that the Biblical term 'death' has nothing to do with 'cease to exist', but everything with 'separation'. Partir c'est mourir un peu: Separation is to die a little. For man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8 : 3) Where man or a people abandons the words of God, he dies. At least, that is what the Scriptures say. Death is broken fellowship. Biblical death is the result of broken fellowship with Him, who is and gives life. That is why this carcass stands for the dead state of Israel. It is a body, an organized unity. But it is dead. There is no longer fellowship with the God who gave life to this nation. Since the so called 'triumphal entry into Jerusalem' on the last day of the 69 weeks of Daniel, God has interrupted His interference with the state. Since that day, the Jewish state has been a dead state. A carcass. About this, among other things, speaks Deuteronomy 31:

“[...] this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land, where they go [...] and they will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, AND I WILL FORSAKE THEM, and I WILL HIDE MY FACE FROM THEM [...] AND I WILL SURELY HIDE MY FACE IN THAT DAY because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods.” (Deuteronomy 31 : 16-18)

God left Israel that He Himself had begotten and He hid His face from her. Therefore, Israel died. This truth is repeated in the prophecies many times, unto which 'we do well that we take heed':

“Of the Rock who BEGOT YOU you are unmindful, and have forgotten the God who FATHERED you. And when the Lord saw it, He spurned them, because of the provocation of His SONS and His DAUGHTERS. And He said: 'I will HIDE My face from them, I will see what their END will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is NO FAITH.’” (Deuteronomy 32 : 18-20)

In this verse, we find all the truths mentioned above. The Lord is the begetter of Israel. But He has hidden His face from her, because of her unfaithfulness, resulting in her termination. He, who is life, has left her. This termination has a sequel:

Not only has Israel become a carcass, she also starts to decompose. That is the meaning of the following words:

“And I said: ‘Hear now, O heads of Jacob, and you rulers of the house of Israel: Is it not for you to know justice? You who hate good and love evil; who strip the skin from My people, and the flesh from their bones; who also eat the flesh of My people, flay their skin from them, break their bones, and chop them in pieces like meat for the pot, like flesh in the caldron.’ Then they will cry to the Lord, but He will not hear them; He will even hide His face from them at that time, because they have been evil in their deeds.” (Micah 3 : 1-4)

Here the leaders of Israel are addressed. They are held responsible for what has come over the people. They are partly the reason for the death of the nation. Does this not remind us of the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus? They should have known and teach the law. They could know what the Lord had already announced through Moses. But they did not believe. That is why they are partly held responsible for the death and decomposition of the body, the state of Israel. The Lord has hidden His face from Israel. He broke the relationship with His people. And because of that she died and started to decompose.

So far the history of natural Israel. A history that, moreover, accurately corresponds to the life course of an unbelieving individual. As Israel, natural man does not wish to depend on the things God has promised him in His word. This will result in death. It is the inevitable result of the first birth. But with death not everything is finished. The story continues.

“The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ So I answered, ‘O Lord God, You know.’” (Ezekiel 37 : 1-3)

We are already familiar with this picture. It is the situation that arose in the first verses of Micah 3. Meanwhile, flesh and skin have disappeared. What remains is a collection of very old bones. They were so old that Ezekiel did not dare to make a ruling. It is obvious what these bones represent:

“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” (Ezekiel 37 : 11)

That is what is left of Israel. Very dry bones in a plain. They are no longer the mountains of Israel. No longer mount Zion, on which the throne of David and the Son of David stood. No longer mount Moriah, on which the temple, the house of Jehovah was built. No longer the mount on which the Messiah had proclaimed the laws of the Messianic Kingdom. And no longer the heights, on which Israel had served her idols. Everything had become flat. There had been no highlights for a long time. And at the sight of that desolate plain, the question is heard: "Son of man, can these bones live?" Nicodemus, can these bones live? O Lord God, You know. They will live. There is not only birth, but there is also regeneration. There is life after death. A life through Christ. A life through His resurrection. A life after His resurrection. That applies to the individual believer, but also and especially to Israel. What occupies us here is the way in which this regeneration of Israel is established.

“Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.””” (Ezekiel 37 : 4-6)

Firstly, it is remarkable that the bones are addressed. They are considered to have ears and to be able to listen. And not only that. Verse 11 teaches us that these bones can also speak. As stated earlier, the collection of bones represents 'the whole house of Israel'. That is why the separate bones represent the individual Israelites. And they can listen and speak. And although the bones together form a collective, because they belong to only one body, they are addressed individually. After all, every Israelite has his own personal responsibility, within His people.

Well, the Lord addresses them and tells them how He will turn them into a living body again, an independent nation. God's plan for this is found in verses 5 and 6. Strictly speaking, something becomes alive when spirit enters it. That already was the case with Adam's body, that the Lord had formed from the dust of the earth. It was and remained dead matter until God breathed the 'spirit of life' ('nishmat chavim') into his nostrils. After all, the Spirit gives life. Thus, our personal regeneration has also been achieved by receiving the Holy Spirit. What is remarkable about the Lord's words in Ezekiel 37 : 5 and 6 is, however, that He announces twice that He will put breath (= spirit) into the bones. Verse 5 is quite clear:

“[...] Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.”

God will bring breath into the very dry bones so that they will live. That is normal when someone receives spirit from the LORD. What does not seem to be normal is the next verse:

“I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live [...]” (Ezekiel 37 : 6)

Although verse 5 speaks only about receiving the spirit (= breath) and the related revival of the bones, verse 6 speaks about sinews, flesh and skin, before mentioning the breath and life again. According to the usual linguistic rules, however, verse 6 should be the continuation of verse 5. Thus, when we read these verses in sequence, it successively speaks of:

1	BREATH	verse 5
2	LIFE	
3	Sinews	verse 6
4	Flesh	
5	Skin	
6	BREATH	
7	LIFE	

Now the question is, how it is possible that these very dry bones seem to have to become alive twice. Because that is the impression we get at first glance. Well,

it is actually impossible. If the story begins with the revival of the bones, it cannot end with it, and vice versa. However, the problem is not as complicated as it seems. Apparently this prophecy deals with two things. In the first place, the bones are addressed. These bones, as parts of the body to be formed, are clearly types of individual Israelites. Therefore verse 5 does not speak of the regeneration of the nation as such, but of the regeneration of individuals. Even when the kingdom of the Messiah was announced in the days of the Lord Jesus and the apostles, the preaching was not addressed to the nation as a whole, but to the 'men of Israel'. We find a beautiful example of this in the sermon of Peter on the well-known day of Pentecost. Initially he addresses the 'men of Judea' and 'all who dwell in Jerusalem'. "Men of Israel, hear these words [...]" (Acts 2 : 14, 22) But he concludes with:

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2 : 36)

The point is that the message of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah, cannot be addressed to the nation as such. For who actually is the state? No, the message was preached to every Israelite, so that the whole nation would come to believe. "Therefore (in this way) let all of the house of Israel (the nation as a whole) know assuredly that God has made this Jesus [...] both Lord and Christ."

We also find this simple principle in Ezekiel 37 : 5 and 6. The way to the regeneration of the nation of Israel is through the members of that nation. The conversion of the nation of Israel is the combined result of the conversion of every Israelite. This conversion of the individual Israelite is the subject of verse 5. The prophecy was primarily aimed at the individual bones. The question to Ezekiel was not whether these bones would form a living body again, but whether these bones would revive individually. And what should Ezekiel say exactly?

“O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! [...] Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.” (Ezekiel 37 : 4, 5)

Therefore, this verse is not yet about the collective regeneration of the state of Israel, but about the regeneration of individual Israelites. Thus it speaks of per-

sonal regeneration, Nicodemus. Hereafter follows the prophecy of the sinews, the flesh and the skin. It must be clear that this relates to the formation of the body as a whole. And when the body is complete, about the same thing happens as in Adam's case. God breathes His breath into it, bringing the restored body to life again. In summary, we can say that verse 5 speaks of the regeneration of Israelites individually, while verse 6 is about the regeneration of the state of Israel as a 'body'. And, also according to other prophecies, the latter is the result of the first. We must really keep in mind here that, until now, the book Ezekiel has not spoken of what happened, but about God's will regarding His chosen people. No future events were mentioned, but only God's will for Israel was announced. And as with individual people, also with the people of Israel that is something quite different. Do not our deeds naturally differ from the will of God for our lives either? Verses 5 and 6 show us the will of God, but verses 7 and 8 show us what really happened:

“So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.”
(Ezekiel 37 : 7, 8)

So it went wrong. What happened did not correspond to what Ezekiel had prophesied. He had prophesied 'as he was commanded'. So it was not his fault. Besides, the message has always been preached in Israel. (Romans 10 : 18) But only rarely did it produce the desired result. A discouraging thought for those who preach the Word of God. For what exactly happened? Well, the only right thing was the sequence: sinews, flesh, skin. But the most important thing did not happen. What should have come first was the breath, which would have made the bones alive. That is what the Lord wanted. But it did not come. And therefore, the glorious outcome did not come either. Indeed, a body did arise. But it was dead. Just as dry as the bones themselves still were. If we compare this with the words of the prophecy, we see that the phase of individual regeneration of the Israelites has been skipped. What did arise, was a body. This should have been a part of the collective regeneration of the state of Israel. But before we shout 'hallelujah', we must first ascertain that there is in fact no regeneration here. Birth is the generation of new life. But whatever happens here, no new life can be found. What has been

generated, is merely a carcass. A dead body. The carcass of Deuteronomy 28 : 26. A body still separated from the source of life. The bones are reassembled. There are sinews again and there is a skin again. But it is still as dry as it was before. Now the only question is: Where do the Scriptures say that this was the will of God? In any case not in verse 4 and 5.

It is not hard to determine in what way the verses 7 and 8 have been fulfilled in our days. We do not have to scour the newspapers to find out whether breath came into the bones. That just never happened. "There was no breath in them." What did happen was that a sound was heard, or more precisely: a voice. This voice indicates a message that was preached, words that went out. A voice that is clearly related to the beginning of Israel's national restoration. We recognize the appearance of the book "Der Judenstaat" in 1896 by Dr. Theodor Herzl, who, contrary to earlier writings on the same subject, found resounding. He propagated the foundation of an independent Jewish state in an otherwise random part of the world. The adhesion became so great in a short time that Herzl decided to organize an international Zionist congress, meeting in Basel for the first time in 1897. And that is the 'stir', the movement that followed the 'voice'. Remember however, that neither voice nor movement are mentioned in the prophecy of verse 5 and 6. It therefore went beyond the revealed will of the Lord. Instead of the voice and movement of people, there should have been breath and life of God. Instead of Herzl's voice, God's voice should have been obeyed. And Herzl was certainly not a believing Christian.

No breath, no life. Therefore, no living body. After the voice of the movement, follows the coming together of the bones. And indeed, soon, the Zionists began the colonization of Palestine, which, until then, was still in Turkish hands. From all parts of the world Jews began to return to the land of the fathers. All this because indeed the sinews, the nerves, came into being. 'Sinews' indicate organization, interrelationship. This organization is undoubtedly the 'Jewish agency', the Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901, with the primary purpose of purchasing and exploiting land in the Holy Land. An organized and purposeful activity, but also an honest one. For the land was bought honestly, was it not? After that, flesh came upon them. Flesh is muscle strength. That is why we recognize here the formation of the army, the 'hagana'. Finally, it was covered with skin on May

15, 1948. The foundation of the Jewish state was completed by the declaration of independence. The body was complete. But according to God's standards it was dead. The translation of verse 8 is certainly misleading. It does not say: "[...] and He covered them with skin [...]," but: "[...] and the skin covered them over." God did not do that. God had wanted to breathe His Spirit, His life, into the dry bones, but this did not happen. Still nothing has changed since the famous day of Pentecost. Maybe, just like that day, a few thousand people have come to believe, but that certainly does not mean that 'all Israel' has been saved. According to the words of the prophet, breath should now have come into this carcass. But breath did not come. It did not come because no breath had come into the dry bones either. It started out wrong, and that is why it will also end wrong.

The current situation of the state of Israel is again exactly the same as in the days of Jeremiah and as in the days of the Lord Jesus: a small Jewish state in a small part of the promised land. A small, unbelieving Jewish state that does not care about God's words, summoning Israel to believe in her Messiah for thousands of years now. It is the situation at the end of the 69th week of Daniel 9. Therefore, it is time for the still future 70th week to begin. Hence the only remark of the Lord Jesus Himself in this regard:

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be [...]. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”
(Matthew 24 : 21, 28)

4. The regeneration of Israel

“Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord God: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.” (Ezekiel 37 : 9, 10)

What is most remarkable in this part of Scripture is the fact that neither the Lord nor Ezekiel even say a single word about what happened previously. There seems

to be no disappointment concerning the prophecy not being fulfilled immediately. No word about the development of this carcass. Nor can any happiness be discovered concerning this national restoration of the Jewish state. Could there be any delight in the arising of a carcass anyway? No, both the Lord and Ezekiel remain silent. What does strike, is the rush with which the Lord instructs Ezekiel to prophesy again:

“Prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, son of man [...].”

Even 3500 years later, prophesying to Israel does not help. The prophet must therefore address the spirit directly now. The spirit, that had not come. Thus, the question remains why the Spirit had not come immediately after Ezekiel's first prophecy. From the New Testament, the answer can be given readily. The Spirit only enters those, who accept Him. We receive the Spirit by faith in the one, who gives us the Spirit. We receive the Spirit by our surrender to Him. That is how it went with us, and so it is with Israel. But because Israel was chosen by God for a particular purpose, God will force Israel to repent. He is the one who will choose for Himself a remnant from Israel. He will pour out His Spirit upon Israel, as a fulfilment of the so often repeated promise in Joel 2. This pouring out of His Spirit however, has several aspects. First, those who accept the Spirit come to believe in the Lord, the Messiah of Israel. That is what we see here at the end of Ezekiel 37. But this outpouring of the Holy Spirit is also called an outpouring of fire, or judgment. That is the other aspect of the coming of the Spirit. He passes a judgment on the old nature. A judgment on the non-believer. It is the judgment of the great tribulation, the 'time of Jacob's trouble' in the second half of the seventieth week of Daniel 9. (Jeremiah 30 : 9) The result of this tribulation will be that only the believers of the house of Israel will 'remain'. It is the 'believing remnant' of which Paul and the prophets have spoken so often. For "so shall all Israel be saved." (Romans 11 : 26) What is important in Ezekiel 37 : 9 is that the initiative for the repentance of Israel does not come from Israel herself, but from God. He will send His Spirit, with all due consequences. It is also remarkable in this verse, that Ezekiel is not asked to call the Spirit to breathe upon the carcass already present, but "upon these slain" (plural). The Spirit will not come into the nation as it is, but into the separate members of the nation. Just as the initial prophesy of verse 5 described it. It is therefore completely wrong to assume that God restores the 'failure' of the

original prophecy afterwards. It is out of the question that God, after the arising of the carcass by mistake, would then decide to breathe His Spirit directly into the carcass.

The original prophesy of verses 5 and 6 first required the regeneration of the individual Israelites which would ultimately result in the regeneration of the state of Israel. Now that the story has taken another turn and an unbelieving state has arisen, without first the regeneration of the members of that state, God apparently has no intention of giving His Spirit to the state as such. Where man goes his own way without Him, God does not give His blessing afterwards. No, the Spirit must come "upon the slain." It is plural. The Spirit must enter the individual Israelites. It just starts all over again: first, the individual regeneration, subsequently the regeneration of the nation. But let us see what the result of this second prophecy of Ezekiel is:

“So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.”
(Ezekiel 37 : 10)

The Spirit came into them. Not into him, the carcass, but into them, the dry bones. The individual Israelites become regenerated, which results in the arising of an "exceedingly great army." A great community arises. That is the regeneration of the nation as such. And then immediately God's own explanation of all these things follows:

“Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.’”
(Ezekiel 37 : 11, 12)

"These bones are the whole house of Israel." Which bones? The bones that came to life again in the previous verse. These 'regenerated' bones are the whole house of Israel. What is "the whole house of Israel"? The Jewish people? Apparently not.

The rest of this chapter explicitly states that it is not just about the Jewish people, the descendants of the kingdom of Judah. It is about the descendants of all twelve tribes of Israel. All twelve tribes will become alive again. That is why this prophecy about the revived bones cannot be fulfilled in our day. Even though we recognize a Jewish state in Palestine, it is not an Israelite state. The use of the name 'Israel' is not correct. Primarily because this state does not represent all twelve tribes of Israel. In the second place because, in the Scriptures, the name 'Israel' is reserved for a believing Jacob. When God's will in relation to the people is fulfilled, the twelve tribes of Israel will form a believing state. "These bones are the whole house of Israel." Furthermore, note the word 'therefore' with which verse 12 begins. What is announced in verse 12 appears to be the result of the contents of verse 11. So we ask the question: Why will God raise up Israel from her graves? The answer is given in verse 11: Because "they say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost: and we ourselves are cut off!'" Well, they do not say this today. On the contrary. They even have more hope now than in previous centuries. They eagerly look at the foundation of the state of Israel as the fulfilment of God's promises for His people, passed on to them through His prophets. And although many Christians seem to assume likewise, this is utterly incorrect. Although the arising of the Zionistic Jewish state is in accordance with certain prophecies, it is not the fulfilment of the promises. It is in accordance with what God predicted would happen (through the prophets), but not with what God promised (through His prophets) to do Himself. And that is certainly not the same. Only when they will give up their own hope and will say: "We ourselves are cut off." When they will no longer trust in themselves, but will call on the name of the Lord in faith. Only then will the Lord fulfil His promises to Israel. And He will do it Himself. But until then the Lord is hiding His face. Is that not God's way with every individual sinner? Only when one places his trust (his faith) entirely on the Lord, will he receive Spirit and life and be regenerated.

In connection with the regeneration of the nation of Israel, another important question remains. Where did that breath (spirit), which brought the state to life, come from? From Gog, yes, but that is not what is stated here. It says:

“Come from the four winds, O breath [...].”

The obvious explanation is that 'the four winds' stand for the four wind directions. And instead of concluding that the spirit comes from the north, the east, the south and the west, we say that it actually comes from everywhere. And did not the Lord say to Nicodemus that we do not know from where the wind (= pneuma = spirit) comes? In itself, it is a correct explanation, but it is not complete. The correct Biblical answer to the question of the four winds, is, that it signifies the place to which Israel was dispersed. Where this place is located geographically, is not important now. God has dispersed Israel to the four winds, and from there He will bring them back to the land of the fathers. The expression is directly connected to the words of the Lord Himself, and to the prophecies of Deuteronomy already quoted:

“And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the FOUR WINDS [...]” (Matthew 24 : 31)

“And then He will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the FOUR WINDS [...]”. (Mark 13 : 27)

“Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God drives you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the Lord your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it [...]” (Deuteronomy 30 : 1-5)

These verses convey many things, the correct order of which is found in Deuteronomy 30. After her dispersion and return to Egypt in Deuteronomy 28 : 68, Israel, in her exile, "will call them to mind." They will repent to the Lord their God. With

all their heart and all their soul. Not in Palestine, but beyond. And in response to that conversion, the LORD will gather them back to their land. He will gather them from the ends of heaven. From the four winds. That is how the regeneration of the state of Israel will take place. No spirit will be breathed into an already developed carcass in Palestine. The Spirit will come into dispersed Israelites all over the world. And from there, those regenerated Israelites will be gathered to form a living body in the Promised Land. Thus comes the Spirit from the four winds. In all the prophecies about this national regeneration of Israel, the appearance of the carcass is ignored. In Ezekiel we find this appearance, but not a word is said about it. In the Lord's speech during the 'second sermon on the Mount', in Matthew 24, only the carcass is mentioned, but not exactly what happens to it. Also there, the regeneration of Israel is only mentioned after the appearance of the Lord at the end of the seventieth week. Not in Deuteronomy or in any other prophecy about the regeneration of Israel, the return in unbelief of our days is mentioned. Lack of this is significant enough. The regeneration of Israel is still unfulfilled prophecy. It will take place at the end of the great tribulation in the seventieth week of Daniel. Only after the labour pains, a new (believing) state of Israel will be born, as fulfilment of God's promises.

5. Gilgal

In the meantime, we have seen how the concept of regeneration actually occurs in the Old Testament. What we have not seen, however, is the word itself. It cannot be found in a concordance. But that does not mean that the Hebrew word for 'regeneration' is not found in the Bible. We do not know it as a word, however, but as a place name. It is spelled as 'gimel-lamed-gimel-lamed', and pronounced 'gilgal'. Generally, 'gilgal' is said to mean 'wheel', and one is totally unfamiliar with the deeper meaning of 'regeneration'. A meaning that is recognised by the world. Therefore, we first want to see where that meaning actually comes from. Hebrew words have a meaning that is highly dependent on the letters that a word is composed of. No other language, in my knowledge, shows this particularity. This wonderful phenomenon is linked to the fact that every Hebrew letter has its own meaning, which is also taken along in the word in which it appears. Now Gilgal is written as: G-L-G-L and what immediately stands out is that there are actually two different letters, G and L, and this letter combination repeats

itself. 'Gilgal' thus consists of twice the combination G-L. It seems clear to me that we would be well on our way if we can determine the meaning of those two merged letters. Well, this is the Hebrew word 'gal', which means 'form'. It relates to everything that is given a certain 'shape' or 'form'. In Scripture, it is used for the first time for the heap of stones which Jacob has erected at the place where he made a covenant with Laban, and from which he subsequently reconciles with his brother Esau.

“And Laban said, “This HEAP is a WITNESS between you and me this day.” Therefore its name was called Galeed.” (Genesis 31 : 48)

'Gal' is that heap of stones and 'eed' means 'witness'. These words are contracted into 'Galeed'. Typologically, this already has a very far-reaching meaning. First of all, because that 'witness' is none other than the Lord Jesus. It is one of His names and titles. We read about Him:

“Incline your ear; and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you—The sure mercies of David. Indeed I have given him as a witness to the people, a leader and commander for the people.” (Isaiah 55 : 3, 4)

This witness is the Son of David, who will rule His people after Israel's regeneration. In the New Testament, we also find words of equal importance:

“And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.” (Revelations 1 : 5)

Here in Genesis 31, however, this 'witness' is identified with a 'heap' of stones. “[...] This heap is a witness [...] this day.” That should not surprise us, for a stone, in any form, is a type of the Lord Jesus. Whether it is the rock that Moses struck, or the pebble from the brook with which David defeated Goliath. Or the chosen cornerstone, the stumbling stone. Or the stone cut down without hands, from Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Or the stone upon which Jacob rested his head, so that he saw the heaven opened. The same stone that was then erected and anointed.

Is not that stone Christ? The resurrected, risen, regenerated Saviour? This 'gal', this heap, is a type of the Lord Jesus. He,

“who, being in the FORM [*gal*] of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the FORM of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in APPEARANCE [*gal*] as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him” (Philippians 2 : 6-9)

'Gal' therefore stands for 'form', assuming a particular shape. When this combination of letters repeats itself, thus forming the word 'gilgal' (also pronounced 'gal-gool'), the meaning seems clear: It is about taking a certain shape for the second time. This fundamental meaning is applied in practise in various ways. The most well-known is the translation with 'wheel'. Or as a verb with 'to roll' or 'to turn'. After all, when an ordinary carriage wheel starts to run from the rest position, it reaches its old position after just one rotation. The wheel again takes its original position, though it finds itself in a different place. Well, that is regeneration. The person who is regenerated, takes up his original position in relation to God. His debt has been taken away. He is back at the starting-point of before Adam's fall. That is also the meaning of the New Testament word for 'reconciliation' ('katalage'). But not only that. He is no longer in the garden of Eden. He is no longer part of the old creation. He is a new creation in Christ. He is in the original position, but not in the same place. No longer in Eden, but in Christ.

This meaning of 'gilgal' is certainly unknown in Christian circles, but not beyond. The basic concept of regeneration is also explained differently. The original Divine and Biblical meaning, just like many other truths, is violated and applied to the teachings of men and demons. For often 'regeneration' is thought to be the same as 'reincarnation'. This demonic doctrine of reincarnation is actually substituted for the doctrine of regeneration and, mind you, the same words are used. One believes to have eternal life by being born in another form after death. This teaching is then often referred to as 'regeneration'. In the unbelieving world, the Hebrew word 'gilgal' is translated with 'reincarnation'. The elementary difference between 'reincarnation' and 'regeneration' is, however, that 'reincarnation' means 'becom-

ing flesh again', while 'regeneration' refers to 'becoming spirit'. The fact that one is very well aware of the basic meaning of 'gilgal' is the widely-used term 'the wheel of regeneration'. An expression that even has been currently used as the title of a book about reincarnation. Consequently, anti-Christian sources confirm that the word for 'wheel' also means 'regeneration'.

The name 'Gilgal' is used in the Scriptures for the first time in Deuteronomy 11 : 30:

“[...] Gilgal, beside the terebinth [*oak*] trees of Moreh?”

Here it is simply topography, without a direct connection to a certain event. What is noticeable though, is, that it is mentioned in connection with oak forests. Oaks and oak forests often play a major role in the Bible. Not because it is so interesting to know which trees Abraham and the patriarchs and some of the judges found in their immediate vicinity. Of course, it also has a spiritual, typological meaning. For an Israelite that meaning must have been clear. For the word for 'oak', 'alah', also has the meaning of 'oath'. Therefore, the oak reminded an Israelite automatically of the oath that the Lord had sworn to Abraham. The oath with which He confirmed His covenant. The oak is therefore a sign of the covenant with Abraham. The covenant that in Abraham and in his seed after him, all the generations of the earth would be blessed. The oak is the confirmation of God's promise that the nation of Israel would inherit the land of Canaan. A promise that has never been fulfilled. A promise that will be fulfilled after the regeneration of Israel. Hence the connection between Gilgal and the oak forests. Moreover, it would be easy to write a whole book on the typological significance of the oak and the acorn and everything related to it. For example, how the oak bears the sign of the circumcision and thus points to the crucifixion and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. How the oak is therefore a type of regeneration. How our ancestors still knew that the oak was the symbol of the faithful God, and therefore held their court sessions under a big oak. How they sometimes, as in the Bible, buried their dead at the same place, having faith in the resurrection. How on the oak a parasite is grown, that produces red crimson. This crimson is a symbol of sin, that flourishes at the expense of God's covenant with Abraham. In brief, the oak, just like circumcision, points to regeneration; the taking away of the old nature and the revealing of a new creation:

“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.” (Colossians 2 : 11)

And what is this circumcision of Christ?

“Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” (Colossians 2 : 12, 13)

And that is exactly what regeneration is: Putting away the old nature and being resurrected from the dead with Christ. Like Peter, the 'apostle of the circumcision', writes:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1 : 3)

Unfortunately, it is not possible to elaborate on all these aspects of the oak. Here we must settle for the deduction that 'gilgal' is already related to circumcision and therefore to regeneration, the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. And Nicodemus should have known that.

“O My people, what have I done to you? And how have I wearied you? Testify against Me. For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, from Acacia Grove to Gilgal, that you may know the righteousness of the Lord.” (Micah 6 : 3-5)

This is the last time 'Gilgal' is mentioned in the Bible. But it refers to the first time it played a role in Biblical history. Israel is summoned here to remember what hap-

pened on the way from Shittim to Gilgal. We find an account of this in the book of Joshua. It is the story of Israel's entry into Canaan. The road from Shittim to Gilgal was directly across the Jordan. It led straight through the water. As the path through the waters of the Red Sea meant the birth of Israel, the path through the Jordan symbolises the regeneration of Israel. It was therefore to be expected that the first camping site on the other side of the Jordan would be named 'Gilgal'. But let us find out what the Scriptures say about this event:

“Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove [*Shittim*] and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over.” (Joshua 3 : 1)

Joshua means 'Jehovah saves'. Strictly speaking this name is identical to the Greek name 'Jesus'. There are indeed historical examples of Jews with the name Joshua, who, in the days of the Greek civilization, the days of the Lord, called themselves 'Jesus'. This mere fact proves that Joshua typifies the Saviour of Israel. For Joshua is the one who leads his people out of the desert into the Promised Land and there delivers them from their enemies. That is exactly what the Lord will do as well after the conversion of His people. He will join the believing remnant of Israel that was saved in the desert (read e. g. Revelation 12), and from there will advance to Palestine and Jerusalem. The prophet Micah speaks of this event, for example. Micah, who summoned the people to remember what happened on the road from Shittim to Gilgal. The same Micah who spoke of the chopping of the bones and the stripping of the skin. This Micah says:

“I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together like sheep of the fold, like a flock in the midst of their pasture; they shall make a loud noise because of so many people. The one who breaks open will come up before them; they will break out, pass through the gate, and go out by it; their king will pass before them, with the Lord at their head.” (Micah 2 : 12, 13)

It is the same as what Joshua did. But every still unbelieving Israelite must remember that this Joshua had been in the land before. The Lord has been in the land before. But the people did not want to listen to Him, as it did not want to

listen to the testimony of Joshua. But just like Joshua, the Lord will appear a second time to finally lead them into the Promised Land, after many, many years of wanderings.

“[...] and they set out from Acacia Grove [Shittim] and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there.” (Joshua 3 : 1)

'Shittim' is from the same root as the word 'satan'. It means 'adversary'. The word is also used for the wood used in the tabernacle. Besides, none of this wood was visible. It was the original building material, but the shittim-wood was covered with gold. It begins with the adversary, the satan. We are delivered from his power by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes us a new creation in Him. Israel pulled up from Shittim and approached the Jordan, where they lodged. For that is the road that not only Israel, but also the world takes. For the world has satan himself as its starting point, with the result that the road ends in darkness. This was also the subject of the nightly conversation between the Lord and Nicodemus:

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” (John 3 : 19, 20)

But there is a way out of this darkness. For the Light has come into the world. John says about the 'light of the world':

“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1 : 11-13).

But Scripture teaches us that the time will come that His own shall accept Him. Then they will pass from darkness to the light. When Israel will eventually believe in His name - for that is the explicit condition - the whole nation will also be regenerated. That is precisely what 'the apostle of circumcision' writes to the 'pilgrims of the dispersion':

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” (1 Peter 2 : 9, 10)

Peter quotes from the prophecy of Hosea, which in the first place relates to the people whom God has set aside. It is no longer 'My people' (Ammi), but 'not My people' (Lo-Ammi). They are the people that He has removed from the priesthood. (Hosea 1 : 6-10; 4 : 6) That Paul also applies this prophecy spiritually to the Church (Romans 9 : 25, 26), does not diminish the literal meaning of the prophecy. Israel will be God's people again. Israel will be drawn from her present blindness and darkness. Israel will obtain mercy again (Ruhama). Israel will be regenerated (1 Peter 1 : 23). The same prophet also states how that will happen:

“Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up.” (Hosea 6 : 1)

When Israel turns "to Him who strikes them" (Isaiah 9 : 13), and acknowledges that the Lord Himself was the one who tore them, then Israel will indeed be regenerated. The literal translation of a part of one of Peter's speeches to the people of Jerusalem is:

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3 : 19-21)

The people were called for repentance so that Christ would return from heaven to fulfil all other prophecies. That was the preached perspective. The preaching was focused entirely on the regeneration of Israel, with consequently the return of Christ.

“And they commanded the people, saying, “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it.” (Joshua 3 : 3)

This is the assignment given to Israel: Follow the Ark of the Covenant. This ark was the very heart and centre of the tabernacle. After Moses received the two stone tables on the Sinai, it did not go well for long. Even before Moses could pass the law to the people, it was already broken:

“So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing. So Moses’ anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.” (Exodus 32 : 19)

The law, and thus the two stone tables, could not possibly remain intact when they were entrusted to natural man. Therefore, "by the deeds of the law, no flesh shall be justified." (Romans 3 : 20) But the Lord gave His people two new tables, which this time had to be kept in a wooden box (Deuteronomy 10) and later in the Ark of the Covenant. The ark, as a custodian of the law, is thus a type of the Lord Jesus, who fulfilled and accomplished the law in Himself. Hence the people had to follow the ark. It is after all a type of the leader of Israel. This following of the ark, as a flock of sheep follows the good shepherd, was the usual procedure during the journey through the desert, but in this special case of the Jordan's passage, there is much more to tell. The picture here is that Israel would take the same path as her Messiah. The whole nation would have to take the way He took. It was the way through the Jordan waters. The way through death, but also the way of resurrection, the way of regeneration. There is a clear connection here to the prophecies of Hosea and Jonah. The 'sign of Jonah' is not only applicable to the Lord Jesus, but also and especially to the entire Jewish nation. The tragedy of Israel is that she refused to accept her Messiah as king and follow Him. But despite this refusal, she still follows. She follows Him in His humiliation and oppression. She follows Him in death. However, in the future she will follow Him in His resurrection. In the days of the book of Acts, Israel refused to follow her Lord. However, this has not resulted in the breaking of the bond between the Lord and His people forever. On the contrary, the result is that they will follow Him later. They will follow Him in the regeneration. (Matthew 19 : 28) They will go the same way, but not simultaneously with Him, but at a distance:

“Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before.” (Joshua 3 : 4)

Israel had to follow the ark, but at a distance. After the ark descended to the bottom of the river, the people had still a long way to go before they would see the ark again. It is the way they had not gone before. It is the way of Lo-Ammi. The dispersed and blind people. It is the time when the Lord hides His face from Israel. But eventually, Israel will repent. They will meet Him in the waters. In exile among the nations, which are symbolised by the waters, they will believe. And when "so all Israel shall be saved," the Lord will finally reveal Himself to her. Like Israel passed the ark at the bottom of the Jordan and the ark itself arrived on the other side at Gilgal after everything else, the Lord, who has hidden His face for so long, will reveal Himself to her again. Then they will see Him whom they pierced and ask:

“What are these wounds between your arms?” (Zechariah 13 : 6)

And He will say:

“Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.”
(Zechariah 13 : 6)

Then they shall confess:

“[...] yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53 : 4, 5)

It is this confession from the mouth of Israel, that the appearance of the Messiah on the Mount of Olives is waiting for.

6. Faith

It is indisputable that God has a plan for the people once chosen by Him. The fact that the implementation of that plan requires certain conditions seems to be more and more forgotten. I therefore deliberately ignored certain information about the time of the regeneration of Israel in the previous chapter. Many Scriptures cited there, explicitly discuss the time and the context in which all these things will happen. The reason I did not elaborate on them is because I was not dealing with the moment in time there, but with the way in which these things will happen. Because, unfortunately, today there is quite some confusion among believers about this last issue. Many seem to miss the fact that the regeneration of Israel, just like the individual regeneration of a sinner, is only achieved on the condition of faith. Actually that was already visible in the prophecy of Ezekiel 37. For the first phase in the regeneration of Israel is the regeneration of the individual Israelites. First, the bones must become alive: Only afterwards, those living bones will form a body that will also be raised to life. So first comes the regeneration of the Israelites individually, and thereafter, as a result, the regeneration of the state of Israel. And as the regeneration of the individual Israelite is the work of God Himself, which is done on the condition of faith, so also the future regeneration of the state of Israel will be the work of God Himself, on the condition of faith.

The apostle Paul was well aware of these Biblical truths. After having written eight chapters on the fact that man, during all dispensations and centuries, is only justified by and through faith, in Romans 9-11 he has no other message for Israel. In addition, we must remember that Israel in the days of Paul was completely identical to the Israel of our days. Also in those days, the dispensation of the mystery had already begun. (Romans 16 : 25) Even then, most of the Israelites were scattered among the nations. Even then, a small Jewish state existed in Palestine, with Jerusalem as the capital. Even then, the Gospel of God (Romans 1 : 1) was preached to all nations. And what does the apostle Paul say in those circumstances about the connection between the Gospel and Israel?

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.” (Romans 1 : 16)

It must be clear that this verse teaches that both Jew and Gentile can only be saved by way of faith. That was then and still is now. The situation has not changed. For Israel there is no other message than for the Gentiles. That is what Paul repeats many times in the next eight chapters. And on why Israel has still not been regenerated, he says in chapter 9:

“[...] That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”” (Romans 9 : 30-33)

Israel's mistake is clearly mentioned here. That mistake was that they sought to be justified by the works of the law and not by faith. (Where did I hear that before?) They sought to establish their own righteousness. (Romans 10 : 3) However, not the law, but faith leads to salvation. Not only for the Gentiles, but first and foremost for the Jew. It is remarkable that Paul uses quotes from the Old Testament in the above-mentioned verses, about the stumbling stone in which one must believe. For justification by faith is not specifically New Testamental, but it is already taught in the Old Testament. It is a truth of all ages. Faith is the prerequisite for all Divine blessings, also and especially regarding Israel. Returning to the aforementioned stumbling stone, the apostle says:

“For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? (Romans 10 : 11-14)

And again, he quotes the Old Testament, in which Israel was already called to repent and believe. For already Joel teaches that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered, and he says that especially with regard to Israel. It is remarkable that one can sometimes hear the preaching of the exact opposite.

For some teach that 'all Israel' will be saved because God has called them and because Israel is God's chosen people. But Scripture teaches otherwise. Not the ones who are called by God, but those who call on God will be saved. God has called many, but we know only too well that despite that, only few are chosen. Not the called, but the chosen, namely the believers, will be saved. Therefore, the people that God has chosen is not an unbelieving, but a believing Israel. God put aside an unbelieving Israel, but He will once again accept a believing Israel. The Lord will reveal Himself in the future to a believing Israel. A believing Israel will be regenerated. But the Lord will hide His face from an unbelieving Israel. The prophets make absolutely no secret of the fact that when the appointed time for the regeneration of Israel comes, all Israelites who are not yet believing, will perish in what is called 'the time of Jacob's trouble'. For only believers, only regenerated people, will be able to enter the kingdom of the Messiah of Israel. As the Lord already told Nicodemus:

“[...] unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3 : 3)

“[...] unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3 : 5)

And as also the apostle Paul confirms:

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God [...]”, (1 Corinthians 15 : 50)

The statement of Paul: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10 : 4) gives a striking description of the position in which the people of Israel find themselves today. For the death and resurrection of Christ (Messiah) has put an end to the working and the dispensation of the law. Therefore, also the unbelieving Israel is free from the law today. Or do you not know that:

“[...] the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long

as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband.” (Romans 7 : 1, 2)

And the husband died. The husband of Israel was the Lord Himself, who gave His life to deliver her. The law was the "tutor to bring us to Christ," (Galatians 3 : 24) because Christ is the end of the law. Israel is free from the law, but not yet saved. Deliverance from the law is not enough for eternal salvation or for regeneration. Before the days of Moses, no man had ever lived under the law, but this did not mean they were saved. And that is exactly what Paul says: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10 : 4) Deliverance from the law is not enough: One must believe in Christ, the stumbling stone. That was true under the old covenant. That was true in the days of Paul. And that is still true today. An Israelite is not automatically saved just because he is an Israelite:

“[...] For they are not all Israel, who are of Israel.” (Romans 9 : 6)

Even after the deliverance from the law, he must come to believe in the Messiah of Israel, as well as every heathen. That is not a far-fetched explanation of this one verse, but it is the explicit statement the apostle himself gives in his letter to the Hebrews. This whole letter is actually a call to Israel to believe in the king of Israel, who, awaiting the conversion of Israel, is seated at the right hand of God in heaven, and is the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, for all who have called on Him. But especially in chapters 3 and 4 he points to the need for faith. Not only in this dispensation, but also already in the one preceding. In these chapters, Paul points out to the Jews that they, who were delivered from the slavery of Egypt, did not automatically enter the Promised Land. Certainly, by God's election Israel was led out of the house of bondage, out of slavery. But only those who believed what God had spoken eventually entered the Promised Land. Unfortunately, those were only two persons of the more than six hundred thousand: Joshua and Caleb. For there was a condition attached to the entry into Canaan. Up to three times Paul repeats a statement of the Lord to Israel:

“IF they shall enter into My rest.” (Hebrews 3 : 11; 4 : 3, 5 AKJV)

Our translation is somewhat unclear, but the word 'if' indicates a certain condition: Only under a certain condition could Israel enter the rest. Well, Paul says, that condition is faith. For those, who had not, in the desert, placed their trust in the Lord, but always complained that they would die in the desert, did just that. They died.

“So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.” (Hebrews 3 : 19)

The position of Israel today is identical to their position then. Israel was delivered from the slavery of Egypt, as she is now delivered from the yoke of the law. Israel is on the way to the rest the Lord had promised. For He promises rest to all who believe His Word and come to Him. That is especially true for the people of Israel.

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.” (Hebrews 4 : 9)

Indeed, God has promised Israel rest. He promised the coming of a kingdom of peace under the reign of the Prince of Peace. There remains a rest for the future of Israel. But, just like in the past, only those of Israel who believe, will attain that rest. Therefore, the apostle rouses the Hebrews to:

“[...] be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4 : 11)

The unbelief of Israel in the desert was the wrong example. The good example is that of the only two Israelites who experienced the exodus from Egypt and also went into the rest. For these two men, Joshua and Caleb, testified of their faith in the Lord:

“But Joshua [...] and Caleb [...] who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: [...] ‘If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, [...]. Only do not rebel against the Lord [...].’” (Numbers 14 : 6-9)

But Israel as a whole has always remained rebellious. At least according to the Scriptures. And that determines our attitude towards Israel. The apostle, who so often called on all the believers to follow him, leaves no doubt about his attitude with regard to Israel. First of all, he prayed for Israel. But mind you, he did not pray for their state or city. He had learned Jeremiah's lesson well. The Lord had repeatedly forbidden Jeremiah to pray for the small, unbelieving Jewish state in Judea (Jeremiah 7 : 16; 11 : 14; 14 : 11, 12; 29 : 7), and on occasion he indeed refused to do so. (Jeremiah 21 : 2 etc., 37 : 3 etc.) Paul knew very well that blessings for a state or city can only be given if the inhabitants are believers. Therefore he says:

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” (Romans 10 : 1)

Paul prays for the salvation of individual Jews. Not for Israel as a nation, as a collective, but for the individuals of the nation. He speaks of a plural. Therefore, for example, it does not say 'that she might be saved' (singular), but 'that they might be saved' (plural). For only after the individuals of the nation have become believers, God can bless them. Only then can He give them the blessings He promised them as a nation. Only then can He answer the prayer for the peace of the city and the state. And He will indeed do that. But awaiting that, the apostle prays for their individual salvation. And not just that. It will not remain just a prayer:

“For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites [...]” (Romans 9 : 3, 4)

“If by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them.” (Romans 11 : 14)

The 'apostle of the Gentiles' was thus actively involved in the preaching of the Gospel to Israel. The Gospel is, after all, the power of God unto salvation for both Jew and Greek, on condition of faith. And therefore we pray for Israel. Not for the state and the city, but for their salvation. Therefore, we preach the Gospel of Christ, not only to the Gentiles, but especially and primarily to Israelites. For indeed, only he who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But, says the apostle Paul:

“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10 : 14, 15)

The "they" in these verses are Israelites. All this is not even said about sinners in general, but especially about Israel. As Joel already said, Israel must call on the Lord before the day of the Lord, the Messianic Empire, will begin. But one can only call on someone in whom one believes. But how could Israelites believe in someone of whom they have never heard? Therefore, the Gospel must be preached to them. And therefore, even today, God still commissions believers, who preach the Gospel as Paul did: first to the Jew and also to the Greek. For no other name is given under heaven. Not Herzl, not Zionism. But, on the contrary, it is Jesus Christ, the living Messiah of Israel, by whom a lost sinner is regenerated to become a child of God. First the Jew and also the Greek:

“For there is no partiality with God.” (e. g. Romans 2 : 11)

And with that we are back with the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus. The Saviour in fact ignored Nicodemus' question, and told this Jewish leader bluntly: Be regenerated first. As an orthodox Jew, Nicodemus undoubtedly had Messianic expectations. Undoubtedly, he hoped for the coming of the Messiah, to deliver His people from the oppressors. But when Nicodemus met Him personally, He did not say: "I am the Messiah and will deliver your people." The Lord did not respond to the Messianic expectation that the teacher of Israel had just expressed. No, for before the Lord will reveal Himself as the Messiah, Israel must first call on the name of Jehovah. That is why the Lord so often admonished His disciples to not speak of anything that had to do with His kingship. For before one can accept the Lord Jesus as king, one must accept Him as the deliverer first. The deliverer from sin and from the law. First one must be regenerated. And that is the first and only thing the Lord speaks about with Nicodemus. First, one must believe in the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. That is why the Lord tells him:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
(John 3 : 16)

That is what the Lord preached to the teacher of Israel: justification by faith. For, like the people, Nicodemus did not believe (yet) (verse 12). And therefore, in verses 15 and 16, the Lord repeats the statement that everyone who believes in Him, i. e. Jew as well as Gentile, will receive eternal life by regeneration. And He adds:

“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 3 : 18)

Are you a believer already? Or do you, as Israel does today, seek to establish your own righteousness? Do you perhaps seek your righteousness through works instead of through faith? Well, neither your own works, nor the works of the law, nor the works of Zionism, can justify man.

“But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” (Romans 4 : 5)

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Bible Study Series 'Regeneration'

'Regeneration' is the great theme of the Bible. The Biblical message is not only that Jesus, as the Lamb of God, died for the sins of the world and thus satisfied the righteousness of God.



If one died for all, they all died. (2 Corinthians 5 : 14) And when all, whether believing or not believing, are dead, then all have perished. (1 Corinthians 15 : 18) But the story does not end at the cross! On the contrary.

According to the Bible, God's work encompasses the forming of a new creation from the old, current one. He is forming a new man from the old man, a new Israel from the old Israel, a new creation from the old one. In reference to mankind this is called, among other things, 'regeneration' or 'resurrection'. However, many other expressions are used for that same work of the Creator, who said, "Behold, I make all things new."

Unfortunately, it is often thought that God, just like man, is interested in an improvement of the old. Many Biblical truths have fallen into oblivion, among which also the truth that He, the Creator, is busy bringing about a new definite humanity and world, in which regenerated believers, are already partaking. May these pages serve to remind you of this forgotten truth.