

Postscript and Prospect

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I AM GRATEFUL to Emmanuel Perrier and Trent Pomplun for their rich and generous responses to my brief paper. Naturally I cannot here address all the issues they raise.¹ For the moment I will simply try to explain why, despite my having learned much from their presentations, the basic question with which all of us are concerned—how we Christians can square our faith in the irrevocable election of the Jewish people with our faith in the universal primacy of Jesus Christ—remains puzzling to me.

Near the beginning of “*Quasi in Figura*” I suggested that sustained reflection on the election of Israel is difficult to come across in the Christian tradition. Whatever truth there may be in this generalization, it does not fit Thomas Aquinas (as I knew well enough at the time, but had not yet connected the dots). In his late *Lectura* on Romans, St. Thomas presents not only an exegetically detailed treatment of Jewish election, but a profound affirmation of God’s undying love for the Jewish people, rooted in the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.² Three interlocking points made by St. Thomas deserve particular mention (all of which Thomas, of course, sees as the authoritative teaching of St. Paul).

1. The election of Israel is not simply God’s favor toward those who meet basic spiritual criteria, but has an irreducibly “carnal” character.

¹ I hope to deal with these matters more adequately in a forthcoming book on Christ and Israel in St. Thomas and contemporary theology.

² On this see Steven C. Boguslawski, O.P., *Thomas Aquinas on the Jews: Insights into His Commentary on Romans 9–11* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), and Jean Miguel Garrigues, O.P., “Les prérogatives inaliénables du peuple juif selon saint Thomas commentant saint Paul,” *Revue Thomiste* 103 (2003): 145–58.

It is God's special love for the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *secundum carnem*. Paul "ascribes dignity to the Jews on account of their origin . . . that is, because they are descended according to the flesh from the patriarchs, who were most greatly acceptable to God."³

2. Basic to Israel's election is a promise of salvation. As Perrier and Pomplun rightly emphasize, this is, and can only be, salvation in Jesus Christ. At the same time, this promise has an inextricable link to fleshly descent. God promised salvation not only to the patriarchs, but to their descendents *secundum carnem*, and God does not go back on his promises. "God from all eternity freely elected both the fathers and their children, but in a certain order, namely that the children would obtain salvation for the sake of the fathers." In just this way, "an abundance of divine grace and mercy has been shown to the fathers, so that for the sake of the promises made to them, their children might also be saved."⁴
3. Rooted as it is in God's own promise, the election of Israel according to the flesh is irrevocable, and thus permanent. This does more than guarantee that the Jewish people will abide until the end of time, and will play a decisive role in the eschatological drama to come, important as both these affirmations are. Nothing, Thomas emphasizes, can undo God's electing love for Israel, not even the hostility (*inimicitia*) of the majority of Jews towards Christ and his gospel. For Thomas Romans 11:29 is Paul's deliberate reply to the objection (evidently voiced by Christians in Thomas's world as well as in Paul's) that "even if the Jews were once most dear to God on account of their fathers, the hostility which they exhibit against the gospel rules out their future salvation." Thomas, following Paul, brushes this objection aside: "The Apostle says this is false. . . . [H]e means that if God gives a certain people a gift, or calls them, this is 'without repentance,' because God does not change his mind about this."⁵

³ *In Rom* 9, 1 (no. 745): Paul "describit dignitatem Iudaeorum ex origine . . . quia scilicet secundum carnem sunt progeniti ab illis patribus qui fuerunt maxime Deo accepti." Here, as often, Aquinas takes Deuteronomy 4:37 (God "loved the patriarchs, and elected their seed after them") as a basic scriptural locus for the distinctive character of Jewish election.

⁴ *In Rom* 11, 4 (no. 923): "Deus ab aeterno eligit gratis et patres et filios, hoc tamen ordine ut filii propter patres consequerentur salutem . . . per quamdam abundantiam divinae gratiae et misericordiae . . . quae intantum patribus est exhibita, ut propter promissiones eis factas, etiam filii salvarentur."

⁵ *In Rom* 11, 4 (no. 924): "Posset enim aliquis obviando dicere quod Iudaei, et si olim fuerint charissimi propter patres, tamen inimicitia, quam contra Evangelium exercent, prohibet ne in futurum salventur. Sed hoc Apostolus falsum esse asserit . . .

"Supersessionism" has more and more become a term of abuse rather than of description; it typically expresses the user's moral revulsion at the theological views to which he attaches it, rather than saying anything specific about the content of those views. If, however, we take "supersessionism" to mean specifically that God's election of the Jewish people according to the flesh has ceased with the coming of Christ, then St. Thomas repudiates supersessionism in his *Lectura* on Romans, as explicitly as one could wish.

Why, then, should there still be a problem about the election of Israel for Thomas, or any other theologian who similarly affirms its irrevocability? Because, in a word, the election of Israel cannot be a thing of the past, but the Jewish religion, it seems, must be. Yet it also seems impossible that the Jews can abide until the end of time as a people distinct from the nations without the practice of Judaism. So if God wills the election of Israel irrevocably (as Thomas asserts), it seems that he must also will the practice of Judaism—of the "old law"—irrevocably (which Thomas denies). Conversely, it seems that if God does not will the practice of the Old Testament law irrevocably, then he cannot will that the election of Israel be permanent. Let me spell this out, I hope not too briefly.

In "*Quasi in Figura*" I concentrated, as others have done, on St. Thomas's contention that the "ceremonial law," which forms the basis of distinctively Jewish practice and religious life, becomes "death dealing" (*mortifera*) after the passion of Christ (or, more precisely, after the announcement of his saving passion and glorification has been adequately "promulgated"). This might foster the misleading impression that the basic problem in thinking about the relationship between Christ and the Jewish people is soteriological. How, that is, can Jews who practice God's revealed law in good faith exist in the perilous condition of mortal sin, while Thomas seems to hold, and subsequent Catholic teaching certainly does, that even gentiles wholly outside the sphere of public revelation are not thereby excluded from salvation in Christ?⁶

This is surely an important question but not, I think, the really basic difficulty. Aquinas already includes the salvation of the Jews in his understanding of their election, and both of my interlocutors make valuable

quasi dicat: quod Deus aliquid aliquibus donet vel aliquos vocet, hoc est 'sine poenitentia,' quia de hoc Deum non poenitet."

⁶ See *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3: "Si qui tamen salvati fuerunt quibus revelatio non fuit facta, non fuerunt salvati absque fide mediatoris. Quia etsi non habuerunt fidem explicitam, habuerunt tamen fidem implicitam in divina providentia, credentes Deum esse liberatorem hominum secundum modos sibi placitos et secundum quod aliquibus veritatem cognoscentibus ipse revelasset, secundum illud Iob XXXV, *qui docet nos super iumenta terrae*."

suggestions about how this might be taken to work (in particular Perrier's observation that when St. Thomas calls the old law after Christ "*mortifera*," this has to be read in light of his own nuanced account of the circumstances under which an act can, and cannot, count as mortal sin). The more basic problem, it seems to me, is theological in the strict sense. Its home is the doctrine of God, and it concerns what God can coherently be understood to will.

St. Thomas's characterization of the ceremonial law as "dead" (*mortua*) brings this out. Unlike the notion that the law is *mortifera*, this is a wholly objective state of affairs, a fact about the law that does not depend on anyone's attitude towards it. The law is "dead" in that it now has no "power" (*virtus*), or any obligation that it be observed.⁷ What brings the power of the old law to an end is the passion of Christ. As Perrier notes, this traditional claim, emphatically affirmed by Aquinas, does not stem from anti-Judaism. That is: Aquinas's claim that the old law, and to that extent Judaism, is "dead" follows not from prior convictions about the Jews and Judaism (whatever these may have been in Thomas's own case), but from prior convictions about the supremely world-transforming significance of the cross.

No one attains salvation except through Christ, who brings life out of death by joining us to himself. In order to have a share in the salvation accomplished by his passion, those who lived before his coming must be united to him, or become his "members," no less than those who live after him.⁸ The great dignity of the "old law" was its divinely given power to elicit in Israel the faith which joins to Christ, by serving as a complex figure of his future incarnation and passion. But the passion of Christ, which makes the difference for all creation between life and death, heaven and hell, is not a Platonic idea, accessible in the same way at all times and in all places. It is a temporal event, with a before and after. The salvation accomplished by the cross of Christ must therefore change the world. It must bring life where before there was death, heaven where before there was hell. While there must be saving access to Christ before his advent (otherwise he is not the savior of all), his passion must change radically the *way* in which we have saving access to him. Everything—

⁷ ST I–II, q. 103, a. 4, ad 1: "[M]ortua, idest non habentia virtutem et obligationem . . . mortua, quia neque vim aliquam habebant, neque aliquis ea observare tenebatur."

⁸ ST III, q. 68, a. 1, c: "Manifestum est autem quod nullus salutem potest consequi nisi per Christum." Therefore "nunquam homines potuerunt salvari, etiam ante Christi adventum, nisi fierent membra Christi" (ad 1); here, as often when he makes this point, St. Thomas invokes Acts 4:12 (cf. ST II–II, q. 2, a. 7, c).

above all our provision for being joined to Christ, or becoming his member—must be different after than it was before. Otherwise Christ died to no purpose (Gal 2:21).⁹ His passion, that is, cannot liberate all from sin and death by *happening* at a particular time and place, by being a temporal event, if anyone's access to salvation is unaffected by whether this event has actually occurred.

Aquinas deliberately aims for as high a view of the old law as he believes is compatible with this affirmation.¹⁰ But the idea that the ancient rites retain the power to elicit saving faith in Christ after his advent, just as they did before, cannot be part of such a view. Israel's ceremonies have, as Perrier stresses, been fulfilled by Christ. In other words, the future saving event to which, as a whole, they once gave divinely mandated access has now come to pass. As a result they can no longer give access to this event, any more than the statements "The once for all saving event *will* come to pass" and "The once for all saving event *has* come to pass" can both be true at the same time.¹¹ The high place the ceremonies have in the purposes of God before the coming of Christ is just what requires that they lose this place after he has come.¹²

There are many reasons why one might hold that God does not simply permit the practice of the Mosaic law after Christ, but wills it as a positive good. It might be because permanent Torah observance is a necessary condition for the irrevocable election of the Jewish people, as I have suggested. It might be to provide a permanent witness as to whence salvation has come, as Perrier suggests. More harshly, Thomas proposes that it offers Christians an abiding testimony to the truth of their faith from their "enemies" (whether this counts as a good reason is another matter).¹³ In any case, if the temporal event of Christ's cross has the world-transforming power upon which St. Thomas insists, then the practice of the Mosaic law after Christ, even if there is nothing "deadly" about it, can no longer grant access to Christ. It can no longer serve as a *figura*

⁹ See, for example, *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 2, *sed contra*.

¹⁰ See in particular *ST* III, q. 62, a. 6, with its critical assessment of other views (including Aquinas's own earlier interpretation of circumcision).

¹¹ *ST* III, q. 68, a. 1, ad 1: "[A]lio signo manifestatur fides rei iam praesentis quam demonstrabatur quando erat futura: sicut aliis verbis significatur praesens, praeteritum et futurum."

¹² *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, ad 1: "[R]itus autem legis cessabat tanquam impletus per Christi passionem, utpote a Deo in figuram Christi institutus."

¹³ As in *ST* II–II, q. 10, a. 11, c: "Ex hoc autem quod Iudaei ritus suos observant, in quibus olim praefigurabatur veritas fidei quam tenemus, hoc bonum provenit quod testimonium fidei nostrae habemus ab hostibus, et quasi in figura nobis repraesentatur quod credimus."

of Christ, a sacramental means by which human beings draw near to him in faith. So if God positively wills the practice of Judaism after Christ, it seems that he cannot will union with Christ for those called upon to practice it. In that case the vocation of humanity to union with Christ is not universal, and he is not the universal savior. St. Thomas and normative Catholic teaching insist, however, that the vocation of humanity to union with Christ is utterly universal; it is the will of God for each human being in every time and place. In that case it seems that God cannot positively will (though he might of course permit) the practice of Judaism after Christ. And without positively willing the practice of Judaism, it seems that he cannot will the election of Israel.

This, it seems to me, is the root theological problem about Christ and Israel. We have compelling reason to think that God wills a range of temporal realities which appear, on reflection, not to be entirely compatible with one another: the cross as the transformation of the world, the vocation of all humanity to life in union with the Crucified, the irrevocable election of Israel, the permanent practice of Judaism. Obviously this is not St. Thomas's problem alone. In fact one of the merits of St. Thomas (which I did not nearly enough appreciate in "*Quasi in figura*") is to have brought this problem out with exceptional clarity. Most theologians who write about Judaism and Christianity sense this difficulty, and imply or propose various solutions to it—though rarely with the sympathy and perception of Perrier and Pomplun. It remains, I think, a pressing problem for Catholic theology, calling for our most faithful and creative labor. N V