

## **A Light to the Nations — from Progressive Reduction to Progressive Expansion**

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In the previous article Rabbi Jacob Chinitz has made a short and useful contribution to understanding the phrase “a light to the nations” from a Jewish perspective. Jacob Chinitz’s contribution is critical of fellow Jews, for example Israel’s first prime minister David Ben Gurion and others with similar opinions. Ben Gurion’s understanding of Israel’s role was more extreme than is often realized. He talked about how “The Tanakh shines with its own light”, which to him meant that there is no need for traditional Jewish exegesis. J. Schoneveld comments on this in the following way:

Ben Gurion values the Tanakh so highly because it is the “identity-card” of the Jewish people, and, with Israel’s independence in its homeland, it declares again the glory of Israel — but not the glory of God, Ben Gurion adds, inveighing against a religious interpretation of the Bible.<sup>107</sup>

If it is true — as Schoneveld insists — that for Ben Gurion “the origin of Israel’s peculiarity is not its election by God but God’s election by Israel,”<sup>108</sup> then one can appreciate the critical comment Jacob Chinitz makes in his article. It raises the question, “Can the glory of Israel in the eyes of a Jew overshadow the glory of God?” Another question also becomes pressing: Has Israel chosen her God or is it God who has chosen Israel?

Jacob Chinitz’s article is also critical of Christians who, with good intentions, interpret the expression “a light to the nations” as the moral perfection of a collective body, be it the Jewish people or the State of Israel. Again a question arises: How and to what extent should Christians, who confess Jesus to be the light of the world (John 8:12), understand Israel as being a light to the nations?

Jacob Chinitz seems to indicate that the phrase “a light to the nations” is not to be understood as a “moral code” but rather as an expression of “the wonders of God’s salvation for Israel”. Unfortunately, he does not develop this understanding further and therefore leaves me, as a gentile Christian and perhaps others as well, in the dark. What does the “wonders of God’s salvation for Israel” mean *for the nations today*? And what is the connection between the wonders of God’s

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. J. Schoneveld, *The Bible in Israeli Education. A Study of Approaches to the Hebrew Bible and its Teaching in Israel Educational Literature from Israeli Schoolbooks* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 99. The book has interesting examples of how Israel’s election implies that she possesses more obligation than on any other nation; see pp. 206-222.

<sup>108</sup> Schoneveld, 96.

salvation for Israel and the final comment Jacob Chinitz makes, that “It is not fair for one nation to be a light to all nations. Let each nation be a light unto itself”? What does Chinitz mean when he says “Let us enjoy each other’s light, as we walk together in the light of God!” Reading the article, I cannot find sufficient affirmation of the expression “a light to the nations”. Perhaps the article is too short for that, or perhaps the reason is the perspective with which I read it.

In the New Testament we do find such an affirmation. A few examples will suffice here, taken from the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The purpose is to show how the Jewish Jesus-movement in the first century AD used the expression about Jesus individually and collectively about believers.

Before that we shall make a few comments about the expression and the problems relating to it.

### “Progressive reduction” in salvation history

There are four songs in the Book of Isaiah, often called the songs of the Servant of the Lord (42:1-4; 49:1-5; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). In two of these, the expression “Light to the gentiles” (*l’or goyim*, 42:6; 49:6) is used. Jacob Chinitz rightly mentions that the expression is found also in Isaiah 60:3. The context in which it is found makes it not only legitimate but necessary to relate it to the Servant of the Lord. Strangely enough, for Jacob Chinitz this is an unfortunate circumstance. However, this understanding does not detract from the role of the nation. In Isaiah 60:1-3 Zion is addressed as a collective entity.

A parallel expression in Isaiah, not to be omitted in this connection, is *l’or ammim* (51:4), a phrase synonymous with *l’or goyim*. R.N. Longenecker has shown that in the Qumran community Isaiah 51:4-5 was understood messianically.<sup>109</sup> It can hardly be emphasized enough that in Isaiah 51:4 it is the *mishpat* of the Lord that is *l’or ammim* and not the moral perfection of the people (cf. Is 49:5, “that my [God’s] salvation shall reach the ends of the world”). For Longenecker, the textual variation in IQIs<sup>a</sup> 51:4-5 indicates that the covenanters of Qumran understood God’s functions and attributes as messianic titles (for example, “my Judgement”, “my Righteousness”, “my Salvation”). Longenecker’s translation of IQIs<sup>a</sup> 51:4 is as follows,

Attend to me, my people;  
and give ear to me, my nation.  
For a Torah from me goes forth,  
and my Judgement [*Mishpati*] I will establish as a light for peoples.

If Longenecker is right, the example from Qumran shows that messianic concepts and the expression “a light to the nations” were combined in some Jewish circles even before the first century AD.

Another familiar problem in the Servant songs lies in discerning which aspect is more prominent, the individual or the corporate. In chapter 49 the two are combined. The Servant is in part identified with Israel and in part appears as God’s messenger to Israel.<sup>110</sup> In some of the texts Israel seems to be identified with the Servant, the *ebed*; in others the *ebed* is part of Israel, probably

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<sup>109</sup> R.N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 99-101.

<sup>110</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: The University Press, 1968), 246.

the “remnant”, and finally the *ebed* is seen as a single man.<sup>111</sup> O. Cullmann interprets this in light of what he calls the “progressive reduction” in the biblical *Heilsgeschichte*. By this he means that “a plurality is progressively reduced as an always decreasing minority takes over the task which was originally that of the totality”. The first essential characteristic of the Servant of the Lord is “that his vicarious representation is accomplished in suffering ... Through suffering he takes the place of the many who should suffer instead of him. A second essential characteristic of the *ebed Yahweh* is that his representative work *reestablishes the covenant* which God has made with his people.”<sup>112</sup>

In light of this, we should look at the way in which the concept of “a light to the nations” is applied in the New Testament.

### Jesus is the Servant and the Light to the Nations

Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 are quoted in the story of Simeon and Jesus in the temple in Luke 2:29-32. Jesus is God’s salvation. Salvation and light are parallel concepts. The light is for the gentiles, the nations, and thereby also the light for the people of Israel. The expression “light to the nations” is not used again in Luke, but in 22:37 we have a direct quote from the Servant Songs (Isa 53:12). Concepts from the Servant songs are, however, important elements in New Testament theology, hinted at, for example, in the story of Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration (Luke 3:22; 9:35).<sup>113</sup>

For Luke and the other evangelists there is no doubt that Jesus possesses the qualities of the Servant of the Lord from Isaiah. He is the *chosen* servant (Matt 12:18; Is 42:1; cf. also Acts 4:11, 26). But it is in Acts the question is made explicit: “Of whom does the prophet speak [in Is 53:7-8]? Is it about himself or about someone else?” We find the words on the lips of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was hardly the first to ask the question and it has become a classic theological question which is raised whenever the texts from Isaiah are analyzed. Part of modern critical theology is less clear in its answer than Philip is when he identifies the Servant with Jesus (Acts 8:35).

According to Luke, Philip was not the first making this identification. In Acts 3 and 4, Jesus is already referred to as the Servant (3:13, 26; 4:27, 39). Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus say: “I am the Servant”; it is the first Jesus-believers who use it about him. According to O. Cullmann, this confirms the existence of a very old Christology on the basis of which Jesus was called the *ebed* of the Lord.<sup>114</sup>

For Luke, Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises concerning the Servant of the Lord. He – Jesus — is the servant par excellence and therefore he is a light for the gentiles. (cf. Acts 26:23). However, the New Testament also applies the words from the Servant Songs to Jesus’ disciples. They, too, can be referred to as “a light to the nations”.

The best example of an *ebed* text being used about the followers of Jesus is Acts 13. The

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<sup>111</sup> O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 54. The thought has been developed further in O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1951).

<sup>112</sup> Cullmann, 55. Cullmann even says that “the *ebed* himself is the berith in person” (p. 65). Daniel Juster insists that “Indeed, as representative Israel, Yeshua is the light to the nations as predicted” (Isa 42:1-7), *Jewish Roots* (Rockville: Davar Publishing Co., 1986), 47.

<sup>113</sup> See for example J. Jeremias’ article, “Pais Theou” in *TDNT*, vol. V, especially pp. 705-717.

<sup>114</sup> Cullmann, 73.

context speaks of Paul and Barnabas visiting the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Asia Minor). Here the missionaries Paul and Barnabas are “a light to the nations”, for God has made them “bring salvation to the ends of the earth”. The story goes as follows:

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us “I have made you a light for the gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:44-47).<sup>115</sup>

The context in Acts 13 explains why Barnabas and Paul turned to the gentiles. The negative reason — that the Jews in Antioch rejected the gospel — is, however, not the main reason for gentile mission. Just as the basis for mission to Israel is found in the Scriptures, so, too, is the basis for mission to the gentiles. The positive reason is found in one of the Servant Songs. In other words: the Old Testament already commissions Israel to mission to gentiles. The Jewish missionaries are a light to the nations by proclaiming the gospel. The expression “to the ends of the earth” carries a certain weight in Acts since it repeats the last words of Jesus to the apostles: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (cf. Acts 1:8).

When this example is combined with Paul’s words to Agrippa II in Acts 26, the close relationship between what Jesus did and what the apostles are to do becomes very clear — expressed in Servant terminology. Paul is *appointed a servant* who will be rescued from *the people and from the gentiles* (Acts 26:16f). He is to *open their eyes* (26:17; cf. Luke 4:18). He is to witness about Jesus, of whom the prophets and Moses said that he would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the gentiles (Acts 26:23). Acts 22:14-15 could also be alluded to here. God has chosen Paul and let him to see the Righteous One (Is 53:11; cf. Acts 3:14; 7:52) and he will be a witness to all men.

From this follows that, according to Luke, Christian mission is a continuation of the mission of Jesus. Jesus is the Servant par excellence, the light to the people of Israel *and* to the nations. But there is an aspect of the ministry of the Servant of the Lord that the followers of Jesus are to fulfill. “His ‘fulfillment’ of the Servant’s role in his death and resurrection does not exhaust the meaning and application of the Servant Songs for the messianic era.”<sup>116</sup>

In other words: “the light” about which Isaiah talks is identified with Jesus in Luke 2:32, i.e., an individual personality and not a plurality. But it does not follow that the role of the “people” is eliminated. The people — or the part of the people which receives Jesus — are, like him, chosen to be servants for the Servant Jesus, to be a light for Jesus, who is the Light. They are to reflect the light, and as a collective body represent him here on earth. In themselves they are not the light.

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<sup>115</sup> The double “you” in the quote can refer to Jesus, but the introduction makes it likely that it refers to the disciples, especially Paul.

<sup>116</sup> D. Peterson, “The Motif of Fulfillment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts”, in B.C. Winter and A. D. Clarke (eds), *Ancient Literary Setting*, vol. I of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmann Publishing Co./The Paternoster Press, 1993), 95.

### **“Progressive Expansion” and Moral Perfection**

The crucial events in the history of salvation take place in Jerusalem and have as their center Jesus, the suffering Servant of the Lord. They initiate a movement opposite to the progressive reduction in salvation history. This could be called “progressive expansion”. Jesus not only *brings* light and salvation, in his person he *incorporates* light and salvation. The part of Israel, the remnant, which receives him is called to be a light for the people of Israel and for the nations. The remnant is a collective entity, shedding light on the individual person, Jesus and his saving acts. The New Testament points to a time when all Israel shall be saved. When this happens — when the people receive Jesus — the people will finally be a light to the nations. They will reflect God’s salvation, Jesus.

This raises the question of moral perfection which both Jews and Christians have to struggle with if they take seriously the words, “You shall be holy for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45). The words are repeated in the New Testament (1 Pet 1:16).

In another article in this issue of *Mishkan* I have underscored how the first disciples were not perfect people.<sup>117</sup> Classic Christian theology, based on New Testament exhortations, underlines the tension between this and the righteousness *in Christ* which God gives to men as a free gift (Rom 3:24; 4:5; Gal 2:16). Classic theology also emphasizes that the imperatives in the New Testament do not have a final, but rather a consecutive, character. The Jesus-believers are urged to love and to do good, but not in order to earn salvation. Because they are partakers of salvation — through grace and faith — they are encouraged to live in a way that is right for the people of God.

Classic Christian theology also underlines that Jesus is not only the redeemer; he is also an example for the believers. He is the gift (*sacramentum*) and the model to follow (*exemplum*). The words of the Old Testament, “Be holy for I am holy”, still challenge those sanctified through faith in Jesus (Acts 26:18).

It should also be noticed that texts from or allusions to the Servant Songs in Isaiah are used in the New Testament exhortations. The disciples are to serve *like* Jesus served (Mark 10:45). They are to show unselfishness *like* he did (Phil 2:5-11). Jesus suffered innocently and voluntarily and they are to do the same (1 Pet. 2:21-25). Suffering and commitment are, according to the New Testament, part of being “chosen”. So it was for Jesus and will be for his followers.

### **Summary**

Inspired by Jacob Chinitz’s statement about ethical perfection we can say not only concerning the Christian church but also about Messianic believers today, that we are not perfect. But we also dare to say that by God’s mercy and in his eyes we are made perfect in the perfect man, Jesus the Jew. This is the Good News. And the challenge of the Good News is this: Be like he is, you who are the light of the world (Matt 5:14). This is what disciples are, to the extent that they reflect Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12).

When we apply this conclusion to ourselves, considering the fact that Jesus the light has come, we can say to ourselves and to Israel in the words of Isaiah, “Arise, shine, for your light has come”

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<sup>117</sup> See pp. 4-5.

(Isa 60:1).

Jesus, the light and the salvation, has come from Israel. This has ramifications for both Jews and non-Jews. Therefore we must say more than “Let each nation be a light unto itself”.

We prefer the words of David H. Stern, an Israeli Messianic Jew who, in the introduction to his book *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, states:

The goal of the Jewish people is to praise, thank, confess, and make known the living God — in Isaiah’s words, to be a light to the nations [Is 49:6]. But the Jewish people will never be that light to the nations without shining forth him who is the light of the world [John 8:12].<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> David H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publication, 1988), 3.