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CHRISTIANITY AND THE ASIAN HEBRAIC HERITAGE

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Abstract

II Vatican Council rediscovered the sacramental nature of the Church and her mission as the universal sacrament of salvation. The unity and solidarity of humanity in Adam and Christ is a foundational vision of Christian salvation. Church needs to gather her resources in order to update herself and revitalize herself for serving the whole humanity. In the spirit of *ressourcement* and revitalization she needs the resourcing from the common bond between Christianity and the Jewish Hebraic heritages. It is 'intrinsic' to her life and mission and the resourcing from the Hebraic roots and elements in Christianity brings into focus many apostolic traditions and usages of the Eastern Churches in the Asian scenario. St Paul has interpreted the powerful bond between the Jewish world and that of Christianity through the metaphor of the grafting of 'wild olive branches to the cultivated olive' in Romans 11:17-18. The Hebrew treasures are identified in the letter to the Romans 9:4-5, as election, promises, covenants, the law and the worship that were all culturally and geographically bound to the Asian realities. 'Gentiles' are also called to inherit those treasures by becoming 'children of Abraham' through faith. The Church of Christ thus subsists on the

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ideals of faith and obedience of Abraham which became fulfilled in the perfect obedience of Christ. St Ephrem explains this continuity of the economy of salvation from Abraham and his progeny through Christ by way of faith and obedience. Thus the authentic Church is formed from all peoples as a new 'People from the peoples' in which the 'nation' (Israel) and the 'nations' ('gentiles') have equal access through faith. The fact of 'continuity in tradition' is well depicted in the history of salvation through the abiding biblical vision of faith and obedience.

Keywords: Asian Christianity, II Vatican Council, *Ressourcement*, Unity and solidarity of humanity, Hebraic roots, Election, Covenants, Church, Eastern Churches, Children of Abraham, Corporate Personality, Interpretation of scripture and tradition, Law, worship, Patriarchs

Introduction

With a profound sense of solidarity, the II Vatican Council addresses the whole humanity, or even the whole creation, through the medium of the 'good will' of all (GS, 22). In that deep sense of solidarity, the joy and hope as well as the grief and anguish of all men of all times are truly carried by the Church in and through all Christians (cf. GS, 1). The principal aim of the II Vatican Council, as declared by Pope St John XXIII, was to energetically strive and assist the human race to accept more favourably the message of salvation. It is "as it were, preparing and consolidating the path that can bring about that unity of the human race which is the necessary foundation if the earthly city is to be ordered into a likeness of the heavenly city, 'whose king is truth, whose law is love, and whose length is eternity.'"¹

The incarnate Son carried the whole humanity and human destiny to the magnificent glory of resurrection. The Church is called to continue that saving action in the world. Such a sort of bearing the whole world and moulding the destiny, and keeping the dignity of humanity with the whole creation, is the mission of the Church. This, in scriptural terms, urges all to become 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world' (cf. Mt 5:13-16; LG, 9, 33). This truth of being salt and light indicates the salvation historical truth of being the true 'remnant' in the world, yet organically bound to all developments in the world. In the biblical and salvation historical review one finds the dynamics and powerful functioning of the 'remnant' as the source and energy of the continued history of salvation. This dynamic truth of the

¹The opening message of the II Vatican Council delivered by Pope St John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 20; cf. St Augustine, *Epistle* 138, 3.

'remnant' remains evident in the Christian minority of the Asian scenario, where historically the Saviour was born and the Church was inaugurated in time and space.² Anthropologically and salvation historically the calling of Abraham and the patriarchs and the promises given to them are all addressed as a blessing to all nations of the world. The election, promises, covenants, the law and the worship were all culturally and geographically bound to the Asian realities, yet destined to transcend the given time and space in view of embracing the whole humanity. All those transcending and transforming antecedent gifts given to the 'old Israel' is a matter of divine plan and that cannot be sidelined. Those Asiatic, Semitic, Judeo-Christian antecedents of the Jewish way of life remain an 'intrinsic' part³ of the trajectory of the Christian way of salvation, both for orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The revitalization from the 'cultivated olive' of Jewish heritages is a priority not only for the Asian Churches, but more emphatically an urgent nourishment for the whole of Christianity.

1. Biblical Corporate Personality and Human Solidarity

The biblical and salvation historical gravity of the human solidarity, origin and destiny of humanity, the salvific divine economy, etc., are all revolving around the divine-human engagements, as revealed in the evolved biblical history of humanity. The recorded story of the divine-human engagements in the scriptures got evolved from the salvation historical events and the traditions of the human history in the world. In turn the recorded scripture now enlightens, enlivens and empowers the present Christian traditions to travel forward, as St Paul teaches, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Due to the complementarity between the scriptures and tradition, they cannot be seen essentially separated (cf. DV, 7, 21). The written scriptures, by the force and power of the Word, exert a unifying centripetal force to the living Christian tradition. The Christian

²"Blessed be God for the peoples of Asia, so rich in their diversity yet one in their yearning for peace and fullness of life. Especially now, in the immediate vicinity of the 2000th anniversary of the Birth of Jesus Christ, we thank God for choosing Asia as the earthly dwelling place of his incarnate Son, the Saviour of the world" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 50).

³Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 86, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 196.

tradition, on the other hand, works out the salvific acts in divergent sectors of humanity as a centrifugal force for embracing all human developments to be configured into the pattern and power of the paschal mystery of Christ (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:20). The solidarity of humanity in Adam and that in Christ functions as the axis (cf. 1 Cor 15:22, 45). Upon such an axis continuity and discontinuity, foundation and edifice, promise and fulfilment are all visible as integration and diversification, actualization and realization. The analogy of the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and assumes life giving transformation (Jn 12:24), describes the salvific pedagogy and the mystery of salvific transformation.

The corporate relatedness of the whole humanity is very vividly depicted in the biblical and salvation historical pattern depicted in the Hebraic sense of 'corporate personality.'⁴ This basic pattern starts with the creation of humans in the 'image and likeness of God' and proceeds through the mysteries of the incarnation of the Son of God, as God-man, the incarnational embodiment of the Church in time and space on the day of Pentecost by the power of the promised Spirit, the rebirth of Christians in baptism by the coming of the Spirit of God so as to make all 'children of God,' and the historical process by which 'a new heaven and a new earth' is being erected (cf. Rev 21:1-4).

2. The Church and the Solidarity of Humanity

A few earlier Ecumenical Councils of the Church, before the II Vatican Council, were much juridically oriented according to the Latin predominance and were also concerned with dogmatic definitions, in a way, much guided by Hellenistic analysis and definitions. But II Vatican Council has consciously set away juridicism and the thrust for dogmatic definitions in view of presenting a dialogical approach in which the Church wanted to engage with the whole humanity, to find where humans stand, surrounded by all phenomenal experiences of joy and hope, grief and anguish (GS, 1), etc. The orientation was set in the opening address of II Vatican Council by Pope St John XXIII, "Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations" (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 16).

⁴Cf. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980 (Revised Edition), 25-60.

The embodiment of the Church by the coming of the Holy Spirit continues and stands as the visible pole of the Church, as sacrament for the salvation for the whole world (LG, 48). This visible body of the Church is the 'salt of the earth' for the whole humanity, united in Christ, and guided by the Spirit, for travelling towards the Father. In reality, the Church has to be incarnated in all aspects of the human life in the world in order to initiate and foster solidarity and communion in the whole humanity (GS, 1). The consciousness of the Church's solidarity with the whole humanity has to be consciously embodied in the life of Christians and by that in the whole Church.

In a sense the most important contribution of *Gaudium et Spes* is its emphasis on the dignity of the human person, viewed from the perspective of the theological anthropology based on the scriptural revelations which can and should enlighten the so called secular liberal democracies even. Vatican II's anthropological vision is summed up in its affirmation that Christ "fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (GS, 22). The proper dignity and destiny of humanity could be achieved only in and through a conscious configuration of the whole humanity with Christ, the visible image of the invisible Triune God, from whom the project of humanity started in creation (Gen 1:26).

3. Asian Roots of Christianity and the Ecclesial Factors

Asia is the birth place of major world religions. With respect to Christianity, Asian region, with its heritages and cultures were serving as formative ingredients and elements of religiosity and rituals for salvific realization. Moreover, the earliest fruits of the Christian economy of salvation are from the Asian soil.⁵ "In 'the fullness of time' (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian!"⁶ On account of the Asian plurality and vitality in religious orientations, one finds several Christian traditions getting matured into individual Eastern Christian Churches in Asia. The variety and vitality of those traditions and Eastern Churches are fully acknowledged as vital elements of the common heritage of the whole universal Church.

The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life of the Eastern Churches, for in them, distinguished as they are for their

⁵Cf. Pope Leo XIII, *Orientalium Dignitas* (1894), No. 1.

⁶Cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 1 (Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, given on 6 November, 1999).

venerable antiquity, there remains conspicuous the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 1).

When Eastern Churches and their traditions are recognized as part of the common heritage, it is the rediscovery of the rich heritages and the salvific traditions that stood the test of time and challenges throughout the history of Christianity. They bring in rich Apostolic heritages and usages as well as glorious traditions to the enrichment of the universal Christian tradition. It is not mere tolerance or concession, but rediscovery of the treasures for the effective solidarity of the Christian witnessing and salvation of the whole humanity. Many a time-tested usages of the Eastern Churches are rooted in and empowered by the biblical Semitic, Judeo-Christian antecedents of Christianity. A rediscovery of those prominent Hebraic legacies is a must and not merely an option for the revitalization of the Church.⁷

The central thrust of the II Vatican Council is the Church's self-understanding inwardly and outwardly. In the inward self-awareness the Church describes herself as a communion of Churches in proportion to the faith and life of the members of the Churches. The sacramental nature of the Church is the central factor in *Lumen Gentium*, emphasizing the divine and human, invisible and visible, internal and external factors, as in a sacrament (LG, 1, 48). Church's self-understanding of her outward relationships is seminally provided explaining that She has to be 'leaven and a kind of soul for the human society' (GS, 40), in view of becoming 'universal sacrament of salvation' (LG, 48).

4. Revitalization of the Church

The thrust of the II Vatican Council was the updating (*aggiornamento*) of the Church which in its combined thrust demanded a proper nurturing from the sources (*ressourcement*) of faith and tradition. These thrusts of 'updating' and 'ressourcement' guided the Church to the self understanding based on biblical depictions as the 'people of God,' 'body of Christ,' 'temple of the Spirit,' and 'sacrament of salvation to the world' (cf. LG, 6, 48). The compelling orientations and guidelines for updating and *ressourcement* from the springs of revelation and faith insist on the

⁷Cf. Marwin R. Wilson, *Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage: A Christian Theology of Roots and Renewal*, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014, 21.

nourishment form the venerable Eastern Christian traditions and other sources of human history and developments. In such a *ressourcement* the Asiatic cultures and peoples have made much organic contributions to the germination and consolidation of many Eastern Christian Churches and their traditions where “the first actions for the redemption of the human race began.”⁸ Whatever *ressourcement* that is to be gathered, in and through the Eastern Christian traditions, is primarily the need and task of the universal Church.⁹

For a healthy *ressourcement*, according to the calling of II Vatican Council, one needs the proper understanding and interpretation of the ‘spirit’ of the texts of the Council. This involves a discovery of the proper hermeneutics. Through the last half a century process of implementing the thrust of the council, there evolved “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” as well as a “hermeneutic of reform” in the channels of developments. It was in the Synod of bishops of 1985 the above mentioned confronting hermeneutical poles were brought into a resolution by adopting a hermeneutic of “continuity and complementarity” as a guiding principle. In such a hermeneutic of “continuity and complementarity,” one has to go courageously beyond the text of the documents so as to be guided by the spirit of the texts.¹⁰ By assuming the spirit of the texts an interpreter can find dynamic equivalents and applications in the later contexts of the life of the Church in the ongoing historical periods. Thus the needed “continuity and complementarity” would be maintained in the process of the ‘renewal within tradition.’¹¹

There are certain common foundations and shared orientations among Christians and Jews based on their common scriptures. In any *ressourcement* with regard to the foundations of the economy of salvation there are common patrimony among the Jews and Christians. Those factors of patrimony are to be acknowledged and accepted within the broader economy of salvation that functions for all families in the world according to the promises given to Abraham

⁸Cf. Pope Leo XIII, *Orientalium Dignitas* (1894), No. 1.

⁹Cf. Khaled Anatolios, “The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*,” in Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering, ed., *Vatican II, Renewal within Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 348-49.

¹⁰Cf. Pope Benedict XVI (Josef Cardinal Ratzinger), “A Proper Hermeneutic for the Second Vatican Council,” in Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (ed.), *Vatican II, Renewal Within Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, x.

¹¹Cf. Avery Dulles, “Vatican II: The Myth and the Reality,” *America* (Feb. 24, 2003) 8-9, as referred in *Vatican II, Renewal Within Tradition*, n. 3, 142.

and the patriarchs (cf. NA 4). The *ressourcement* for the reform of the Church should go in a broader manner into the historical and contextual developments of the world. In a deeper manner it should go into the roots of the history of salvation as depicted in the Semitic Judeo-Christian realities and categories of divine revelation and human faith.

5. Christian Interpretation of Scripture and Tradition

As the written scriptures are in need of interpretation, the oral tradition also needs interpretation in order to keep up the spirit of the tradition. It is through the correct interpretation that the 'continuity in discontinuity' functions for the growth of the economy of the works of salvation through the life of faith in action. "[scriptural] texts have been developed in relation to these traditions and have contributed, reciprocally, to the development of the traditions. It follows that interpretation of Scripture takes place in the heart of the Church: in its plurality and in its unity, and within its tradition of faith."¹² It can be claimed that the Christian allegorical interpretation of scriptures evolved from the Stoic allegory through the Jewish adaptations of Aristobulus and Philo and further through Origen and Ambrose. But Origen himself sat at the feet of Rabbis and built a Christian mode upon the already adapted allegorical way of Philo who found a way to introduce the Greek bible to the Greeks.¹³ But the typological interpretations of the scriptures, based on the unity of the Testaments and the progressive nature of the divine revelation and salvific events, were already in place from the early Semitic Judeo-Christianity. Such ancient exegesis ascribed several levels of meanings to the texts. The deeper meaning of the texts, the fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*), is provided from time to time by the Spirit who inspires and guides the history of salvation.¹⁴ Interpretation under the spirit of inspiration has to go on and on.

It is an evident fact that for the Fathers of the Church, the clear teachings of Jesus in the New Testament were the main guidelines, of course by the instrumentality of the developed allegorical and typological exegeses as well. So many 'fulfilment' sayings of Jesus (cf.

¹²The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, 92.

¹³Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 7.

¹⁴Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 77-84.

Mt 2:17-18, 23; 4:14; 13:14; 26:54; 27:9; Lk 4:21; 22:37; 24:44; Jn 13:18; 17:12; 19:36) and many other typological and symbolic connectivity between the Old and New Testaments provide guidance: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15). "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Moreover Jesus was teaching with authority and clarity by going beyond the power and authority of Jewish scribes (cf. Mk 1:22). Based on the firm NT teachings and episodes, the Fathers of the Church have evolved specific Christian understanding of the unity and the complementarity of the Old and New Testaments from a Christological key. More than complementarity, the organic continuity of the testaments are celebrated, "Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and designed to dry up and wither."¹⁵ The scriptures must be fulfilled and that confesses the organic continuity with the Hebrew roots. But at the same time the fulfilment is a progress and that involves transcendence and accomplishment by announcing a sort of discontinuity.

In order to discover the interrelationship between the testaments, one needs to delve deep into the faith horizon of those texts embedded in the tradition from which those texts emerged. Faith horizon of the old Israel is the context of those texts. God's own unforeseeable initiatives are revealed in a progressive manner through the calling of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and the given promises together with the subsequent covenants,¹⁶ legal codes and the progressive stages of the realization of the divine plan. Due to the inner unity of the Testaments, re-readings of the older texts in and through the new texts bring in new aspects and fuller meanings. Jesus comes as the Messiah, as promised to Israel (Jn 1:41, 45). He came to his own, but there were mixed responses of reception and rejection. But to those who believed in him he gave the power to become children of God (Jn 1:11-12).

Historically the salvation he brought to the humanity was first offered to the Israelites (Acts 3:26; Rom 1:16). But that salvation is not absolutely for the Israelites by mere ethnic or blood relationship;

¹⁵Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, § 84, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 192.

¹⁶Cf. Aphrahat, *Demonstration XIV*, 33; Jacob of Serugh, *Homélies contre les Juifs*, IV, 87-176.

instead, through a spiritual bond that salvation is equally open to all Israelites and the gentiles; it became a universal offer (Isa 49:6; Ps 98:2-14). The gentile nations are also made equal sharers in the salvation through faith in Christ the Messiah, as effective sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7, 29). In fact those gentile nations are 'wild olives' grafted into the 'olive tree' chosen by God (Rom 11:17-18).¹⁷ As there are many such olive branches grafted to the chosen tree, there came up a broader growth. At all levels the roots are same for all new branches. The nourishing roots are designed and protected by the divine plan. The new covenant already foretold by Jeremiah (31:31-34), and the nature of which was specified by Ezekiel as attaining purification with a 'new heart' and a 'new spirit' (36:22-28), has been established in the blood of Jesus. Such a new covenant functions by "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1-4).

6. Church: Universal Sacrament of Salvation Built on the Hebraic Roots

The opening perception in *Nostra Aetate* affirms the ever drawing near of all human groups through bonds of strengthening relationships. In such a context the Church cares for enhancing the relationships with other religions also in order to foster unity and charity among individuals and nations (NA, 1). Within that broader matrix of relationships "the spiritual ties which link the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham" (NA, 4) is a deeper bond and an abiding link, more 'intrinsic' to the Christian vision of salvation.¹⁸ The Christian goals and means of salvation were in a way rooted and prefigured in the history of the progeny of Abraham. Christianity and Judaism have strong spiritual bonds and historical links. Both of them draw nourishment from the "good olive tree" (Rom 11:17-24). The Church has to be always conscious of that kinship as explained by St Paul, "they are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9:4-5). All these foundational elements of patrimony need interpretation and understanding in the mode of 'continuity in tradition.'

¹⁷Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 85.

¹⁸Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 86.

6.1. Revelation and the Divine Call

The God of revelation is a God who takes initiatives and enters into personal communication with humans in view of communion with the whole world. This is the Jewish experience in the OT.¹⁹ God's word is made known directly or through intermediaries. Quite often the divine communications are divine promises for divine-human engagements in the form of divine calling in view of human responses. The calling and the promises were given to humanity on the basis of the levels of faith-responses of biblical personalities, like Abraham (Gen 12:1-2) as a blessing for 'all families of the earth,' Jacob (Gen 28:13-15) as an intermediary so as to bless all families of the world, Moses (Ex 3:7-17) to bring the people of Israel from Egypt, David (2 Sam 7:1-17) concerning the offspring who will succeed him on the throne, and so on. When someone accepts the Word of God, that one becomes a prophet, even more than a prophet, and in such cases God speaks face-to-face with such ones, as in the case of Moses (Num 12:6-8). The prophet who receives the Word of God, by the dynamism that is received through the Word, has to consciously transmit the Word in the required action, acts of faith. Such a dynamic power became perfectly visible, in the incarnate form, in the Son, through whom God spoke in the last days (Heb 1:1-2).

6.2. Humanity and the World

The early three chapters of Genesis provide the basic aspects of the human condition in the world and the need of liberation and salvation. Humanity is created in the 'image of God' and the 'breath of God' (Gen 2:7) was infused into the humans, providing a glorious status with a multitude of potentialities of growth and perfection. All potentialities and goals promised to the humans are to be attained as human achievements and as human realizations in accordance with the more exalted divine plan for humans. Human persons cannot realize such divine plans without the human acceptance and obedience to that divine plan in faith and action, as Abraham and others did. By deviating from the exalted divine plan and slipping into selfish deviant plans, humanity committed disobedience leading to the inevitable fall. So the expulsion from paradise became inevitable and in a sense self-imposed by humans. From the expelled situation in the wilderness humans were in need of liberation and salvation. But the creative action of God, that is eternal, is the

¹⁹Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, no. 23.

foundation of hope and assurance of salvation (Isa 42:5; 44:24; 45:11; 48:13). "The God who creates the world by his Word (Gen 1) and gives human beings the breath of life (Gen 2:7), is also the one who shows solicitude towards every human being from the moment of conception."²⁰ The scriptures present the trials and ways of human liberation and salvation which is inclusive of the New Testament in which God walks along and ahead with the fallen humans for a return to the Paradise. This is the summary of the human condition and trials of humans in the world.

In the early chapters of Genesis one finds the increasing wretchedness of humanity culminating in the cleansing by flood. Only Noah, who walked with God (Gen 6:9) in obedience, is the link that takes forward the human goal to its further course of action. The orientation of 'walking with God' means 'obedience' to the divine plan. A new stage for humanity has been inaugurated in the progeny of Noah. From the posterity of Noah, precisely from the progeny of Shem, Abraham was called and a universal plan of salvation has been executed. In that plan all the families of the world would be blessed through Abraham and his posterity (Gen 12:3). This universal plan is being unveiled in the process of the OT history with its own successes and failures. From the failures of humanity the Lord is seen redeeming humanity through the suitable pedagogy by exacting justice and pouring divine mercy. Such redemption is made through the socio-political and religious development of the Semitic Judaic cultural matrix composed of covenants, laws, worship and rituals.

The New Testament anthropology is based on that OT matrix of humanity created and preserved in the 'image and likeness' of God (Gen 1:26). The humanity that is resuscitated by the incarnate Son is called to share more dynamism of the Godhead, such as, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36); "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt 5:44-45). Human wretchedness comes not from outside but from the heart of man from where comes, such as, evil thoughts, murder, etc. (Mt 15:16-20). The miserable state of the human beings is the state of 'being away from the Father's house' (Lk 15:13-16), or walking away from the Father.

²⁰Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, no. 25.

6.3. The Saving God of Israel

Exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the sea (Ex 14:21-31) are under the mighty arm of the Lord. For the miraculous crossing of the sea they praise God (Ex 15:1-10, 20-21). Exodus from Egypt and entry into the promised land are all packed with actions and thanksgiving (Deut 26:5-11). Even in the land of Canaan, they had to fight with enemies and aggressors. From the patterns of the Jewish experiences of captivity, loaded with afflictions and oppression, successes and failures, the human conditions of our times have to be seen and interpreted in and through the Christian pedagogy for salvation.

Second Isaiah gives comfort to the nation in the exile. He promised that the Lord would intervene as he did in Egypt to liberate the people from the Babylonian captivity. Later the vision of liberation began to be seen as a spiritual and eschatological factor. The spiritual liberation and salvation are depending on the faith. All nations can participate in the salvation through the Gospel which is the power of salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16; 10:9-13; 15:8-12). So the salvation is universal.

6.4. Election

For the people of Israel their strong consciousness of having been 'chosen' by God is central to their religious faith and life. They were chosen not because of their merit but because of God's plan to fulfil his economy. They were chosen to be at the service of God's plan. By such a choice they were introduced to the holy realm of service. So they need to be holy, a "holy people" (Deut 7:6; 14:2). They have become the special possession of God. They have a distinctive status and a special responsibility. In order to be faithful to the calling, they need to be holy as God is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2). Israel's response to the divine initiative has to be through the right conduct and action.

Election also stresses upon service as the hallmark. Israel as a whole has to be "the servant of the Lord" (Isa 41:8-9; 43:10; 44:1-2; 45:4; 49:3). They are to be the 'light of the nations' (Isa 49:6). They have to be witnesses to the 'one God' (Isa 43:10, 12; 44:8; 55:5). Thus, Israel needs to be, as God called, "my first-born son" (Ex 4:22; Jer 31:9) and "the first-fruits of the harvest" (Jer 2:3). Divine initiative and human responsibility are the main factors in the history of salvation. 'Disobedience and exile' is an ever recurring motif in the history of salvation. Due to the election and promises set in the context of privileges the Lord demands a high level of responsibility from his people.

In the New Testament the faith and action are prominent. Even with faith one may go wrong. Yet the faith saves, because the Lord forgives all who have faith even when they fail. The Lord knows that all are under his service. But “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce its fruits” (Mt 21:43). This is not any substitution of the old nation with a new nation, but a ‘renewed nation from all nations’ based on faith and action for fruit bearing. God’s promise of his presence with his people, Israel, the chosen people, is guaranteed to the people coming from all nations (Mt 28:19) by the eternal presence of the risen Lord with his people (Mt 28:20).

Israel’s election is not an exclusive privilege, but primarily a responsibility. In OT itself the calling of other nations are indicated (Ps 47:10; 86:9; Zech 14:16). In the New Testament Jesus teaches, “...many will come from the east and west and take their place in the banquet with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Mt 8:11; Lk 13:29). The first letter of Peter confers on all who believe (coming from all nations) as “chosen people” and “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9; Is 43:21; Ex 19:6). Formerly they were ‘not a people’ but now they are the “People of God” (1 Pet 2:10; Hos 2:23).

Gentiles are the ‘wild olive shoot’ grafted to the ‘real olive’ (Rom 11:17, 24). But they should not be boastful, as, “It is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom 11:18). Romans 9:4-5 speaks of an impressive list of God’s gifts to Israel. As stewards and caretakers of those gifts and promises, Israel had to be faithful and obedient to the divine plan in their election. Flowing from the Hebrew roots, now, one can be an “offspring of Abraham” through configuration with Christ and thus by belonging to him (Gal 3:16, 29). It is in this respect Pope St John Paul II called the Jewish people “elder brother.”²¹

6.5. The Covenants

Covenant is a loving engagement with corresponding obligations out of love and commitment. It is a practical channel for living according to the election. Election is for sonship and that is realized in the proper loving engagement and mutual relationship (Deut 30:15-16, 19; Josh 24:21-25). For any covenant partner fidelity, docility and continual gratitude in submission are the desired patterns of actions. Then the people will be transformed into a ‘Kingdom of priests and a

²¹Cf. John Paul II (discourse in the Synagogue of Rome, 13-4-1986), AAS 78 (1986) 1120.

holy nation' (Ex 19:5-6). With Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:26-27), a new stage of covenant relationship emerges and that calls for an interiorization of the law, rather than the writing of the law on the tablets (Ex 24:12; 31:18). The law has to be written by God in the hearts (Jer 31:33).

In the New Testament the law finds a new foundation in the person and work of Jesus, as one who fulfils the law and prophets (Mt 5:17). Still the covenant continues but there is discontinuity in institutions and orientations. As God-man, in Jesus there is the fuller covenantal realization. The covenant-law undergoes change as they are provisional (Gal 3:19-25) from time to time, but the covenant-promise continues, as it stands on the unilateral divine mercy offered to Abraham and his progeny (Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8). Through Christ the insufficiency of the legal covenant is surpassed and the validity of the covenant-promise is made fulfilled. Configuration with Christ in faith and the obedient life of faith, in the model of the obedient self-sacrifice of Christ, is the way of progress in the new covenant. This self-sacrifice of Christ is the new foundation and the sacrament of salvation (Heb 9:14-15). It is not out of the legality of the law, but out of love that surpasses the law and juridical orientations.

6.6. The Law

Laws are divine gifts of guidelines to arrive at the salvific values of social justice, equity, social harmony, through religious, moral and juridical discernments. They enlighten the mind and heart to discern the proper action in view of the salvific goal that pertains to the whole of the human person, body and soul, matter and spirit, etc. The written law is only 'the letter of the covenant,' but the 'spirit of the law' and its power energizes all for the progress of the history of salvation. In Christ the spirit of the law vivifies the letter of the law and the interiorization of the law and thus the sanctification process attains the final goal. This is made evident in the 'I sayings' of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) which proclaim the new identity and individuality of Christianity. In Christ the words and deeds are perfectly agreeing and yielding the fruits. Such a complementarity should be gained between the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of the law. Law, as an instrument, enables the faith to attain the promises. The Psalmist proclaims, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). Thus the law is a way of life for walking with God in order to attain the true goal.

6.6. Image of God, Breath of Life and Human Glory

For human beings, becoming 'image of God' in the world means to be witnesses of God in the world. This in Hebrew terms means to implement the will and plan of God.²² Image does not mean equality with God, but it is an analogical and sacramental possibility of assuming the will of God in view of making it manifest and incarnate in the world by deeds. The immediate challenge to everyone is to make one's own life as an image of the divine will. Only by genuine human virtues the image of God can be made manifest in the world. By avoiding duplicity, selfishness, convenient diplomacy and hidden agendas, one has to practise pure justice, pure kindness, pure generosity, etc., which needs self-sacrifice and self-emptying in the model of Christ Jesus.

The 'breath of life' infused into the nostrils of Adam (Gen 2:7) is a perennial and dynamic event as it is a divine action. When the whole humanity, national and international, lives in *shalom* with peace and prosperity, that humanity would be clothed in glory, as Adam was before his fall. It would be the glory of humanity on account of genuine covenantal relationship and mutual stewardship in the world. Each segment of humanity, with its own culture and tradition, has to grow in its own identity and individuality, so as to make the proper contribution to the total image of the world humanity on its way to a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1-2). What is needed is a balanced biblical and salvation historical humanism that avoids hopeless pessimism as well as unrealistic utopian optimism. It needs to be in combat against false human greed, pride and arrogance that are the roots of evil and the fall in the world.

6.7. The Worship

Hebraic biblical vision of worship is not absolutely confined to places and times. God's presence is not synonymous with physical structures and times. The Earthly temple and hours of worship are to lead the worshipper to the heavenly temple. It is sacramental. The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23). For the one who does true worship in God's presence could be evoked at any time and at any place. He is everywhere. The whole earth is full of his glory (Isa 6:3). Beyond attaching worship to times and places, the attention should be to attain an attitude, a lifestyle, with a response in awe, love and active obedience to the will of God

²²Cf. Marwin R. Wilson, *Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage: A Christian Theology of Roots and Renewal*, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014, 158.

rooted in the heart (cf. Heb 12:28). It is a twenty four hours mode of life.

The genuine faith of the community, in reality, would be identifying itself inwardly and outwardly with the attributes and ways of their Creator and Redeemer. In that inward and outward identification with the Creator and Redeemer, any ritual without the proper ethical life would be making one unjust. One has to have acts of compassion, mercy and justice as the foundation for one's worship, because the Lord desires mercy over sacrifice (cf. Mt 9:13; Mk 12:33). Ritual without ethics is heartless, an absurd behaviour (Isa 1:10-17; Joel 2:13; Amos 5:21-24; Mt 5:23-24). God's steadfast love is covenantal and that is always there, so in response, Israel had to show their own loyal, steadfast love for God. Fear the Lord and serve him with gratitude for all his great deeds is the ideal behaviour (1 Sam 12:24).

Israel had many temptations. Rather than relying on the Lord they began to rely on human institutions, capabilities, resourcefulness and strength. That attitude became proved as failure. God must be the object of human trust, hope and worship. Hebrew Bible finds trust in God as the focal element. The Psalmist says that those who have trust in the Lord would peacefully live in the land and they need not have any fear (cf. Ps 37:3; 56:4); "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and the Lord is his trust" (Jer 17:7). A true worship requires trusting God every day. This trust is, in a way, placing one's life in God's hands with the understanding that God alone knows what is best for everyone.

6.8. The Promise

The calling of Abraham and the promises given to him are foundational factors of the faith and life of Christians. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, ... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen 12:1-3; 18:18). The promises given to Abraham, Jacob and the patriarchs were for the whole humanity: To Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen 12:3); To Jacob, "... your descendents shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and by your descendents shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (Gen 28:14); Deutero-Isaiah instructs those who

returned from the Babylonian captivity: “Extend the dimensions of your tents and stretch the curtains of your tabernacles. Do not be constricted” (Isa 54:2). The needed human openness and wider ecumenical concerns are explicit here. The scriptural promises remain in continuity for fulfilment. But the events of the history of salvation will be varied according to the stage and the developments for the realization of the promises. The fulfilment needs diverse works and events.

6.9. The Patriarchs: The Tradition and the Way of Life

Patriarchs are the guiding leaders in the name of the ‘nation’, Israel. They represent the teaching and guiding authority and the intermediaries for the People of Israel. Patriarchs and traditions make the horizon of faith-life in the community. As a counterpart to that in the Church, there is the teaching and guiding authority. They maintain and nourish the horizon of faith by making the power of the Word alive and the Spirit’s work discernible in the world.

The earlier name given to the followers of Christ was “the People of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14,22). Only later from the city of Antioch, by the Antiochian perception, the name “Christians” emerged. In that context one aspect of the great command given by the risen Lord to his disciples indicates the need of ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Mt 28:20). This command reminds all to embrace the way of life Jesus had taught by his words and deeds in the world. Thus the legacy of ‘Patriarchs’ stands for the emergence and consolidation of the living traditions of Christianity. The starting of this legacy is with the roots in Jewish ways and the consolidation emerged through the interpretation of that way, from time to time, for meeting the challenges of the ages.

One’s salvation is attached to the fear of the Lord and the keeping of all his commandments and walking on his ways (Deut 8:6). Out of the love of the Lord one has to cleave to him and obey the commandments (Deut 11:22). When one is with the Lord, the loving heart will render obedience in a constructive manner (1 Kings 8:61), and that will secure the possession and the prosperity of the land in which they live (Deut 30:16). Walking with the Lord will ensure the prosperity in all that one does and wherever one goes (1 Kings 2:3). This is the way of life to be followed from time to time and from age to age.

7. Church: The 'People from the Peoples'

The Church is ever conscious of her developments from the Hebraic world. St Paul, from his Jewish world, emphatically affirms his basic understanding about his kinsmen and their heritages. The promises and the patterns of life offered to the people of the Semitic-Judeo lineage contain 'the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises through the patriarchs and from whom is Christ Jesus according to the flesh' (cf. Rom 9:4-5). Church is also aware of the divine plan progressing through the prophets and apostles. In that legacy the early Christian proclamation and teachings also came from the Jewish Christians.

On the road of the progress and fulfilment of the divine promises 'uprooting and grafting' are taking place in the history of salvation.²³ The uprooting is out of justice as chastisement and the grafting is out of love (mercy). This process functions as a discontinuity in continuity. Discontinuity is out of accomplishment or out of conversion from evils²⁴ and continuity is out of the quest for realization. When accomplishment (perfection) comes the types will become silent²⁵ and that is a discontinuity. There is clear continuity and discontinuity between the Nation (*Jews*) and Nations (*gentiles*) in the economy of salvation. History of salvation is historically bound to Abraham and his descendents.²⁶ The role of the Nations in the formation of the Church is in contrast to the Nation. The Church is built on the Rock, Christ, typified in Daniel 2:35²⁷ the rock on which Jacob poured oil (Gen 28:10, 18, 19). The Nation (*Jews*) fell down from the spirit of the faith of Abraham and the Nations began to imbibe the spirit of the faith of Abraham. Thus the fact of continuity and discontinuity becomes explicit. What is spoken of in Luke 2:34 about the 'fall and rise of many' is becoming realized in Christ through the Church. The falling is out of iniquity and the rising is out of justice or virtue.²⁸ All those who believe, as Abraham did, would be rising and attaining salvation in resurrection. Those who believed in him were made children of God (Jn 1:12).

²³Ephrem, *Against Heresies*, 39:10.

²⁴Ephrem, *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, 5:23.

²⁵Ephrem, *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, 5:19. As the paschal mystery of Christ became revealed in the incarnate Son, many biblical types of Christ (eg. Manna, suffering servant, paschal lamb, etc.) in the OT became fulfilled and thus the types became silent as the incarnate Son himself began to teach loudly and clearly.

²⁶Ephrem, *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, 5:9.

²⁷Ephrem, *Hymns on the Resurrection*, 3:17.

²⁸Ephrem, *Commentary on Diatessaron (CEC)*, II, 16.

Divine blessings and perfection through the realization of the promises to Abraham stands as the foundational vision of the Bible and that of the Christian vision of salvation (cf. Gen 12:2-3; 17:1-8; 18:17-19). The search now is to find out how the 'New People of Israel' truly emerges from the old Israel (nation) and the so called 'gentiles' (nations)? St Ephrem, from the Syriac tradition, finds the Church of Christ emerging both from the People (Israel) and the Peoples (Gentiles).²⁹ This vision of St Ephrem is quite holistic, universal and aptly inspiring for a rediscovery of the nature of the 'new people of God,' the 'new Israel' emerging from all peoples of all cultures and lands. Ephrem's vision of Church as 'People from the Peoples' gives enough direction for the current concerns of world peace, religious harmony and development, communion of Churches, ecumenical concerns of Christians, etc. This vision furnishes a valid theological answer. In the global humanity many patterns of corporate living and communitarian undertakings are emerging. In all those instances and stages, mutual trust and fidelity, on a Hebraic covenantal model, are the foundations for progress and fulfilment. Such coming together into single bodies and social integration are signs of a single plan of God in progress for the fulfilment.

Ephrem's biblical vision and interpretation of the biblical narratives of the call and promise to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:2-3; 17:1-8; 18:17-19) which was repeated to Jacob the patriarch (Gen 28:14) and the episode of Noah (Gen 6:9-22; 9:8-17) are the basis for a universal, holistic and polyvalent interpretation of the plan of salvation for the whole humankind in different ages. Israel was asked to function as the 'leaven' in the mass,³⁰ so the Church also was established from the 'People and the Peoples' (cf. Eph 3:6) to function as 'the light of the world and the salt of the earth' (LG, 9, 33) for the right transformation in the world. It is the faith in Christ and the life according to that faith that makes one a 'real member of the Church of Christ.' Everyone who is carnally from Abraham may not be a 'true son of Abraham,' anyone who is a mere member of the visible Church may not be a 'true faithful' and not a 'son of Abraham' by faith. It is through faith Abraham became righteous and acceptable to God. Similarly through faith one can become a legitimate 'son of Abraham' in the New Testament (cf. Gal 3:6-8). From another angle, by the faith in Christ the true and living humanity is under a 'building up' in the world, by

²⁹Cf. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 41-68 for a symbolic depiction.

³⁰Ephrem, *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, 5:9; *Hymns on the Nativity*, 8:8.

a plan known to God alone (cf. NA, 4), from all world cultures and religions with their historical progress.

Conclusion

The unity and solidarity of the whole humanity is a basic factor to be achieved for the universal salvation, for which the Church is the sacrament of communion. The unity and solidarity of humanity in Adam and Christ is a foundational vision of Christian salvation. This unity of humanity is very much concretized in the biblical history of salvation and it is instructed through the biblical episodes. The biblical history of humanity has evolved through the Semitic Judeo-Christian heritages and roots that are basically Asian. Eastern Christian Churches have a unique patrimony that is received and maintained from the biblical roots of Hebraic heritages and the Asian characteristics. The updating and resourcing orientations of the Church in Asia remain in a privileged position to be nourished from the so called 'cultivated olive' of Hebraic roots of Christianity. The nourishment from the Hebraic roots is a duty of the universal Church. The interlink between the Hebraic roots and the Christian developments, heading towards fulfilment, has to be seen as an organic development, with the dynamics of 'continuity in tradition.'

The Pauline metaphor of the "grafting of the 'wild olive' in the 'cultivated olive' of Jewish roots" (Rom 11:17-18) is a rich deposit of Christian symbolic theology of salvation. Almost in the same line, the biblically and salvation historically saturated theological vision of St Ephrem on the Church as the new 'People from the Peoples' (cf. Eph 3:6) also serves as a profound typological and symbolic theology of the Church. There is an inherent discontinuity from the Jewish level of understanding that is apologetically gleaned from their failure to believe in Christ. Yet there is continuity with the Jewish ways from the fundamentals of election, promises and the covenants in a dialogical manner in continuation of the spirit of the covenants. The whole efficacy depends on faith and with faith the 'New People' is formed from both the 'people' and the 'peoples' or from the 'nation' and the 'nations.' There is a new order and a new identity inherited and achieved through faith in Christ. Hence it is faith in Christ that counts and not any mere consanguinity with the progeny of Abraham. So also it is not any nominal membership in the visible Church that is primary, but the faith in Christ and the witnessing life of that faith in the world that counts for the salvation.