

On the Road to Becoming Flesh:  
Israel as the Womb of the Incarnation in the Theology of T. F. Torrance  
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“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John. 17: 3).

In Jesus Christ, the Father’s eternal Son himself has come to be with fallen Israel, and in Israel with the human race in its alienation from God. In him the rich and abounding and beautiful life of the Triune God has intersected the broken, sinful and shame-riddled existence of fallen humanity. Through his incarnate life, death, resurrection and ascension, the covenant between God and Israel has been filled with nothing less than the Son’s own relationship with his Father, and his own anointing in the Holy Spirit, and his own relationship with humanity, and with all creation. Jesus Christ is “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” and he is “the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit” (John 1:29-34). He is both the one who brings the very life of the trinity into our fallen existence, making all that he is and has accessible to us in our terrible darkness, *and* the long awaited and faithful servant of the Lord, who, from inside Adam’s fall and from Israel’s side of the covenant relationship, loves his Father with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength. The very sonship of Jesus now fills Israel’s side of the covenant. This ‘new’ covenant is the blessed life of the Triune God earthed in Jesus within the ‘old’ covenant between God and Israel, and in Israel with the human race, and all creation.

At the heart of this magnificent vision of Professor Thomas F. Torrance is the *incarnation* of Jesus Christ, the Father’s eternal Son and the One anointed in the Holy Spirit. But the incarnation did not happen in an historical vacuum. So to understand Jesus and his covenant-fulfilling work, we must, as Torrance argues, see him in the actual historical context in which he entered into human history, and we must understand him in the light of the antecedent eternal relationship he has with his Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we will explore Torrance’s vision of Israel as *the womb of the incarnation*. “The supreme instrument of God in the salvation of the world is Israel, and out of the womb of Israel, *Jesus*—the Jew from Nazareth.”<sup>2</sup> In and through his long and passionate dialogue with Israel, Torrance argues, God was at work preparing the “womb for the Incarnation,”<sup>3</sup> the “womb for the birth of Jesus,”<sup>4</sup> or “the matrix for the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

This ‘womb for the incarnation’ is an image rich with levels of meaning. On the

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<sup>1</sup> See MED, p. 13ff.

<sup>2</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 149. See also RET, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> MED, p. 42.

most general level, it refers simply to Israel as the unique sphere within fallen creation where God re-establishes personal relationship with his fallen creation. More specifically, ‘the womb’ refers to the provisional *way of communion* that God established with fallen humanity within Israel. From a slightly different angle, it refers to a *revolutionary* conceptual matrix of ideas, categories, concepts and structures of human thought which were hammered out on the anvil of Israel’s fallen mind for the reception of the incarnational revelation. Its most precise meaning, however, is far more personal and relational and fiery.

The covenant between God and Israel is a personal relationship of the deepest, most intimate order, in which the Lord is seeking to do the impossible—overcome the contradiction between fallen humanity and himself and establish real communion, union and oneness. This is a relationship of accommodating love and grace and mercy, to be sure, but it is also one of pain, fear and enmity. For Israel, like the race at large, is thoroughly fallen, and its way of being is utterly alien to God. So the relationship is one of abiding love and deep conflict. And it is this conflict between the *Lord in person* and *fallen Israel* that forms the relational context that becomes the womb of the incarnation of the Father’s Son. In his incarnation, Jesus will embrace Israel’s fallen existence and enter into the contradiction between Israel and God—and he will resolve the conflict in his own experience—thus becoming in himself the One in whom Israel, and the human race, are united with the Triune God.

### **Trinity and Covenant, Creation and Israel**

To understand Torrance’s vision of Israel as the womb of the incarnation, we must first sketch the overall framework of Torrance’s theology within which his thought on Israel is thrown into sharper focus. In a general way Torrance does this for us in several of his characteristically panoramic paragraphs. One such paragraph, from a sermon on the trinity, will serve as a means of focusing our attention upon certain key themes in his thought. While speaking about the communion of the Spirit and sharing in the grace of Jesus Christ, Torrance pauses and sets the gospel of redemption in its wider context.

Behind all that we hear in the Gospel lies the fact that in creating man God willed to share His glory with man and willed man to have communion with Himself; it is the fact of the overflowing love of God that refused, so to speak, to be pent up within God, but insisted in creating a fellowship into which it could pour itself out in unending grace. Far from being rebuffed by the disobedience and rebellion of man, the will of God’s love to seek and create fellowship with man established the covenant of grace in which God promised to man in spite of his sin to be His God, and insisted on binding man to Himself as His child and partner in love. God remained true and faithful to His covenant. He established it in the midst of the people of Israel, and all through their history God was patiently at work, preparing a way for the Incarnation of His love at last in Jesus Christ, that in and through him he

might bring His covenant to complete fulfillment and gather man back into joyful communion with Himself.<sup>6</sup>

This is a comprehensive statement of Torrance's understanding of the movement not only of redemption, but also of creation. Torrance glances back to creation and eternity with God and then forward to Israel and within Israel to the fulfillment of God's purposes in Jesus Christ, through whom God 'gathers man back into joyful communion with Himself.'

There are three general points of emphasis in Torrance's thought here which need to be isolated. The first is that creation is set in the context of the grace and love of the Father, Son and Spirit. Though the trinity is not mentioned explicitly in these comments, they come within a sermon on the trinity, and the imagery is of the grace and love and communion of the triune God 'overflowing' and summoning humanity into existence, so that humanity may have fellowship and communion with God and share in the divine life. The impetus to create is 'the will of God's love to seek and create fellowship with man.' Creation is very clearly viewed as the act of the love and grace of God, at the very heart of which is communion and fellowship with humanity.

The second point is that redemption is not separated from the purpose of God in creation. The will of God's love to seek and create fellowship with man is not 'rebuffed by the disobedience and rebellion of man.' God is committed. There is a purpose and will behind creation, namely, that humanity should *be* and that we should *live in communion* with God. Torrance sees this 'will' and 'purpose' as steadfast and unchanging, not rebuffed by disobedience. The creative purpose of the triune God stands. Adam's fall does not change God, God's heart or will in any way. Thus, Torrance says that the one movement of redemption encompassing the Old and New Testament periods "is the movement of God's grace in which he renews the bond between himself and man, broken and perverted at the Fall, and restores man to communion with himself."<sup>7</sup> Redemption is the restoration and renewal of God's original purpose in creation—real communion between God and humanity.

The third point is that Israel is chosen to be the mediator of God's restoration through whom God is preparing a way for the decisive fulfillment of his creative purpose for humanity in Jesus Christ. The decision of God in creation that humanity should exist and 'have communion with Himself' and 'share in His life and glory' and God's resolute determination that this should be so in spite of sin and rebellion is always in the background of Torrance's discussion of redemption and God's dealings with Israel. "God has not willed to live alone, but to create and seek others distinct from himself upon whom to pour out his Spirit, that he might share with them his divine life and glory, and as Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell in their midst for ever."<sup>8</sup> "The whole *raison d'être* of the universe lies in the fact that God will not be

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<sup>6</sup> WCC, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> "The Israel of God," pp. 306-307.

<sup>8</sup> "The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit" in TIRT, p. 193. Cf. Torrance's comment: "The Church derives from the eternal purpose of God to create human beings and share with them the life and love which God has within himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" ("The Trinitarian Foundation and Character of Faith and of Authority in the Church," p. 82).

alone, that he will not be without us, but has freely and purposely created the universe and bound it to himself as the sphere where he may ungrudgingly pour out his love, and where we may enjoy communion with him.”<sup>9</sup> The decision behind creation, for Torrance, is entirely one of grace and arises not out of insufficiency in the being and life of God, or out of divine boredom or loneliness, but out of the immeasurable fullness of the love and joy and life of the Father, Son and Spirit.

In the context of the fall of Adam, when communion with God “was broken and interrupted by the barrier of sin and guilt,”<sup>10</sup> “God did not give up his people” and in the fulfillment of his original purpose “for the whole race God chose one people from among the others as the medium of his revelation and the special sphere of his redemptive acts leading throughout history to the fulfilment of his promise of salvation.”<sup>11</sup> Again Torrance begins with the trinity and sees the impetus of the creation of humanity in the will of the Father, Son and Spirit not to live alone but to share the divine life with humanity.<sup>12</sup> In the situation of the fall “God’s creative purpose became a redemptive purpose” or an “eschatological goal.”<sup>13</sup> The whole drama of redemption and the calling and election of Israel are viewed within this context. God elects Israel out of all the races of humanity to be the mediator through whom the restoration and renewal of communion with the human race will be carried out and fulfilled.

This interrelation of grace, creation and restoration, or grace, creation and Israel, surfaces in short statements throughout Torrance’s writings in various contexts as he sets a particular point of theology in its wider framework. So, for example, in the context of a statement on baptism, Torrance comments:

When God made His Covenant of grace with Abraham it was none other than the Covenant of grace which He established with [the] creation of the world, and which took on a redemptive purpose with the rebellion and fall of man. But with Abraham that Covenant assumed a particular form within history and with one race elected from among all the races of mankind in order that God might prepare a way within humanity for the fulfilment of His Covenant Will for all men.<sup>14</sup>

Again we see that the original purpose of God became a redemptive purpose with the fall of humanity. Abraham is elected with a view to the fulfillment of God’s original

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<sup>9</sup> *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 94-95. See also pp. 89ff.

<sup>10</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, pp. 193-194. Again we see the presupposition of the ‘fall of Adam’ and indeed here our, or the race’s, inclusion in that fall. Torrance does not, however, spell out how or in what way we were included or how we are connected with the disobedience of Adam.

<sup>11</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> It is surprising that Torrance has not provided more details here. The ‘will’ of God as this *will* to share with us the life and glory and joy of the Triune relation gives Torrance’s theology a deep coherence as well as making it a delightful theology. In our judgment Torrance would have done well to seize hold of this point and bring it into more thoroughgoing prominence.

<sup>13</sup> “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” p. 67. See also “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, pp. 120-121. See also “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” pp. 67ff.

purpose in creation. But here Torrance uses the language of the covenant. The ‘will of God’s love to seek and create fellowship with humanity,’ the decision of God not to ‘live alone’ but to give himself for communion with humanity, is thought of in terms of a ‘covenant of grace.’ This covenant is viewed as re-established or particularized with Abraham and Israel.<sup>15</sup> This ‘re-establishment’ is at least implicit in the earlier quotation from the sermon on the trinity when Torrance says ‘God remained true and faithful to His covenant. He established it in the midst of the people of Israel...’<sup>16</sup>

Referring to Karl Barth’s thought on the interrelation of covenant and creation, Torrance comments:

As Karl Barth has interpreted it, the Covenant is the inner ground or form of creation and creation is the outer ground or form of the Covenant, and the very centre of the Covenant is the will of God to be our Father and to have us as His dear children. Creation is thus to be understood as the sphere in space and time in which God wills to share His divine life and love with man who is created for this very end.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear from this quotation as well as from the earlier statement<sup>18</sup> that Torrance views the covenant of grace as established and interrelated with *creation*. In the covenant, God enters into relationship with humanity and “calls man into fellowship and responsible relation with Himself, for within the Covenant God addresses man, bestows Himself in love upon him, and asks for his response in worship and love.”<sup>19</sup>

This is the covenant of grace or as he also calls it “the one all-embracing Covenant of the overflowing love of God.”<sup>20</sup> It is grounded in the grace and love of the Triune God and in the will of God to “give Himself to His creatures” and his will for his creatures “to share in His life and glory.”<sup>21</sup> “In this Covenant God has turned to man in such a way that He wills to be man’s God, and wills man to be His dear child, and wills to have man stand and live before Him as His partner and friend.”<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the Westminster theology with its double scheme of ‘covenant of works’ in creation and subsequent ‘covenant of grace’ for only the elect<sup>23</sup> Torrance envisages the covenant of grace as the rhyme and reason behind *creation*. The covenant of grace is not viewed as originally established after the fall but rather with the creation of the human race. In this way, Torrance can speak of the world into which the Son of God descended as “a world of men which has broken the Covenant

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<sup>15</sup> See “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> See SF, p. lii.

<sup>17</sup> SF, p. lii. See also “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147. For Barth’s thought see his *Dogmatics in Outline* chapter 8, pp. 52ff and *Church Dogmatics III/ 1*, pp. 28-31; the whole of section 41. 2 & 3 and IV/1, pp. 22ff.

<sup>18</sup> “When God made His Covenant of grace with Abraham it was none other than the Covenant of grace which He established with [the] creation of the world...”

<sup>19</sup> SF, p. l.

<sup>20</sup> SF, p. li.

<sup>21</sup> SF, p. li.

<sup>22</sup> “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter VII. i-iii.

of God with His creation, shattered the communion between God and His creatures it entailed, and disowned the Fatherly love and care of God over it.”<sup>24</sup>

Antecedent to creation is the love and communion and life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which ‘refuses to be pent up’ and overflows and summons humanity into existence, and establishes humanity in covenant relationship within which “God addresses man, bestows Himself in love upon him, and asks for his response in worship and love.”<sup>25</sup> In the situation of the fall and rebellion of humanity, in which the communion between God and man was ‘broken,’ ‘interrupted,’ ‘perverted’ and ‘shattered,’ God’s covenant purpose was not abandoned but ‘took on a redemptive purpose.’ Israel is called out from the nations to be the mediator of the restoration of God’s covenant purpose in creation.

While Torrance does not provide us with a lengthy discussion of the fall of humanity in Adam, it is clear that he regards the fall as real and catastrophic.<sup>26</sup> The communion established between God and Adam was utterly shattered, and now fraught with *impossibility*.

Two particular emphases surface throughout Torrance’s writings. The first has to do with the fact that sin is not simply about guilt before God, but about the perversion of our being. Sin has affected “the very fabric of human existence.”<sup>27</sup>

Sin is, in fact, a being-in-error. It is not simply a defection from the good or a mere wounding of our being which can therefore be cured by some ‘ad hoc’ remedy. That is only to make sin a very superficial thing, and in the last resort mere appearance. Sin is a matter of being; it is total. It has to do with the inner form of our being which has become perverted. It cannot be separated from us for it belongs to the inner structure of ourselves.<sup>28</sup>

Second, Torrance is particularly emphatic upon the devastating effects of sin upon the mind. Over against the rise and authority of natural reason, and some strands of Protestant thought which assume that the human mind was essentially unaffected by sin, Torrance again and again refers to “the alienated mind of man,”<sup>29</sup> to our “carnal, hostile mind,”<sup>30</sup> “the depravity” of our “spiritual nature”<sup>31</sup> and to the “innate resistance”<sup>32</sup> and “inbuilt bias”<sup>33</sup> of our fallen minds against God. He speaks of our “fallen” and “depraved humanity”<sup>34</sup> of our “deep-seated human estrangement from God,”<sup>35</sup> and of our “alienated will,”<sup>36</sup> “our wayward humanity,”<sup>37</sup> and of our

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<sup>24</sup> “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” pp. 65-66.

<sup>25</sup> SF, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the damage of the fall of Adam see, C. Baxter Kruger, *Across All Worlds: Jesus Inside Our Darkness*. This book is available at <[www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org)>.

<sup>27</sup> STR, p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> “The Place and Function of Reason in Christian Theology,” p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> MED, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> MED, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> MED, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> MED, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> MED, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” p. 72.

“human existence laden with sin and guilt, our humanity diseased in mind and soul in its estrangement or alienation.”<sup>38</sup> For Torrance, the fall of Adam has so affected the mind of humanity, so marred its capacity for rationality and light, that it is irretrievably lost in its own self-referential judgment and confusion, and thus it is “impossible” for humanity to know God.<sup>39</sup>

It is ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ that enlightens, for Torrance, the problem of the fall of Adam. The fact that the solution took the death and miraculous resurrection of the incarnate Son of God reveals that the fall was catastrophic, leaving humanity utterly estranged and alienated at the core of its being and thinking. It is against this backdrop that Torrance sees Israel as called by God to begin the long and harrowing movement of reconciliation in which the Lord begins to find a way to do the impossible—reach fallen and alienated humanity in personal relationship.

In *The Mediation of Christ*, Torrance says that in probing into the mediation between God and humanity established in Israel he finds “a divine intention persistently at work which has to do both with revelation and reconciliation.”<sup>40</sup> “What ultimately stamps the people of Israel as so distinctive is that they are the people chosen from among the human race for the special purpose of being God’s instrument in the mediation of divine revelation and reconciliation to all peoples and nations.”<sup>41</sup> The covenant relationship established with Abraham and Israel is the “special” and “appointed sphere in history of God’s revealing and redeeming activity...”<sup>42</sup> It “marks out the sphere within Creation and history in which God’s promises are given and fulfilled and it is within that course of promise and fulfilment that conversation with God takes place...”<sup>43</sup> “It is within that Covenant that God imparts Himself and reveals Himself, entering into a subject-object relationship with man, and uses this subject-object relationship to be the sphere of His promise and fulfilment to the Covenant people.”<sup>44</sup> Or, as he also says, it is within this covenant that God establishes “his Kingdom in the midst of estranged humanity.”<sup>45</sup>

Torrance expounds God’s election of Israel under the twin headings; “Israel was called to be the *Servant of the Lord*...” and “Israel was called to be the *bearer of the Messiah*...”<sup>46</sup> There is a double emphasis. The first is that Israel was called out to

<sup>37</sup> “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> MED, p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> See “The Place and Function of Reason in Christian Theology,” p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> MED, p. 15. Later he says much the same thing. “God threw a circle of reconciling love around Israel, within which Israel was called and formed to be the earthly medium and human counterpart not only of divine revelation but of divine reconciliation,” (p. 41).

<sup>41</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88. In “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147, Torrance says that the “covenant relationship between God and Israel...was a particularization of the one covenant of grace which embraced the whole creation and constituted its inner bond and ground, and therefore carried in it the promise of a final universalization of God’s revelation in which His Word would bring light and salvation to all the peoples of mankind and indeed a new heaven and a new earth.”

<sup>42</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 194.

<sup>43</sup> SF, p. li.

<sup>44</sup> SF, p. lxvi.

<sup>45</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 307.

<sup>46</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, pp. 195-198.

serve God in his larger purpose of restoration. From the very beginning, Torrance suggests, Israel was invested with a “vicarious service,”<sup>47</sup> a “vicarious mission and function in mediating the covenant purposes of reconciliation and redemption for all mankind.”<sup>48</sup> Israel was “the one people within the Adamic race set apart for vicarious mission in the redemption of the many,”<sup>49</sup> that is, with a view to the fulfillment of God’s creative and covenant purposes for the human race at large.

By its nature this covenant was not meant to be an end in itself, for through it Israel was steadily and painfully moulded by God into being the instrument of his saving purpose, and made to provide in its very existence among the nations the basis and provisional form of a new covenantal relationship with God which would include all nations.<sup>50</sup>

The covenant relation established with Israel was “to extend far beyond the bounds of Israel, for all nations would come at last under its light and salvation and share in the fellowship it bestowed between God and man.”<sup>51</sup>

The second emphasis is upon the fact that Israel was called to be the *bearer* of the Messiah. Salvation is of the Jews, but the Jews are not the Saviour; Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, the Jew from Bethlehem, born right in the midst of Israel, is the Savior. Israel was “charged with messianic duty.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Torrance regards Israel’s history as stretching out in expectation of Christ.<sup>53</sup> But the idea of ‘expectation,’ while certainly true, can be misleading. For in Israel the Lord is not only teaching people to expect a savior to come; he is actually *preparing* the way of his coming. All through Israel’s history, God was not only instilling in Israel the hope of the Messiah, “God was patiently at work, preparing a way for the Incarnation of his love at last in Jesus Christ, that in and through Him He might bring His covenant to complete fulfilment and gather man back into joyful communion with Himself.”<sup>54</sup>

This *preparation* Torrance speaks of in terms of God forming Israel into a ‘womb’ for the incarnation. “God had adapted Israel to His purpose in such a way as

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<sup>47</sup> RET, p. 87.

<sup>48</sup> MED, p. 41. See also pp. 17, 19, 42 and “The Israel of God,” pp. 311ff.

<sup>49</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 196.

<sup>50</sup> “Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” p. 140.

<sup>51</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 197. Cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; 25:6-8; 42:1-8; 49:6, 8 and Micah 4:1-4 for universal scope of Israel’s mission.

<sup>52</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Torrance’s panoramic statement in “The Israel of God,” p. 306: “The whole historico-redemptive movement revealed in the Old and New Testaments is to be regarded as essentially one. The Old Testament speaks of the Coming One, and the Coming Kingdom; the New Testament speaks of the One who has come, and of the Kingdom as having arrived in Jesus Christ himself. The Old Testament is the revelation of the *verbum incarnandum*; the New Testament is the revelation of the *verbum incarnatum*: the center of gravity in both is the Incarnation itself, to which the Old Testament is stretched out in expectation, and the New Testament looks back in fulfillment.”

<sup>54</sup> WCC, p. 190. Cf. “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 15 where Torrance says that in Jesus Christ the “Covenant purpose of God in creation has been fulfilled and more than fulfilled.” See also “The Atoning Obedience of Christ,” pp. 68ff.

to form within it a womb for the Incarnation of the Word... .”<sup>55</sup> This organic idea aligns itself with Israel being the ‘bearer of the Messiah.’ For Torrance, Jesus Christ and his work stand in the closest personal relation to the work of God in Israel. In Israel, Torrance suggests, God “began to open up...a new and living way for the redemption of mankind” and this “was to find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”<sup>56</sup> There is continuity between Israel and Christ not only in the sense that he was born within Israel, and in the sense that Israel had the expectation of Christ, but also in the sense that he was born within God’s action in ‘opening up a new and living way’ in Israel. Israel was called out from the nations to be the people in whom communion between the Lord and fallen humanity could be reestablished and the revolution of reconciliation could begin. This new beginning in Israel forms the womb for the incarnation and work of Christ.

What Torrance envisages here needs to be viewed on two levels. The first concerns the provisional form of communion or the *covenanted way of communion* established by God with Israel. This will give us a general overall picture of the womb for the incarnation and work of Christ. Once this is established, we can then look more specifically at the *mediation of revelation* in Israel. Here we will come to the very heart of what Torrance means by Israel being the ‘womb’ of the incarnation of the Father’s eternal Son.

### **The Covenanted Way of Communion**

We have seen that Torrance views the covenant relation with Abraham as a particularization of the larger covenant of grace between the triune God and humanity established with creation. He goes on to say that the covenant with Abraham was “re-enacted with Israel as a people after its redemption out of Egypt,” in which the covenant “took on more specific shape.”<sup>57</sup> The basic feature of the covenant is relational, involving the personal address of the Lord to Israel and the personal response of Israel to the Lord, or as Torrance often puts it, the Word of God and the response of Israel. The whole fact of Israel, Torrance suggests, is a response to the Word of God.<sup>58</sup> At Mt. Sinai God spoke, and His voice was heard by all Israel and “his Word founded the covenant-community.”<sup>59</sup> Underneath this personal relationship between God and Israel, stands the unconditional and unilateral commitment of God. “In the Old Testament we have a situation in which God gathers His children into Covenant relation with Himself, and within that Covenant

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<sup>55</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 149. See also “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145 and RET, p. 87. Evidently this is what is behind Torrance’s enigmatic statement: “At last in the fulness of time when a body had been prepared the Messiah came to do the will of God” (TIRT, p. 198).

<sup>56</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 307.

<sup>57</sup> “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, p. 121.

<sup>58</sup> “The fact that *qahal* comes from the same root as *qol*, the word for ‘voice,’ suggests that the Old Testament *qahal* was the community summoned by the Divine Voice, by the Word of God” (“The Israel of God,” p. 305).

<sup>59</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 306.

He declares: ‘I will be your God, and you will be my children...’<sup>60</sup> He “promises to be their Father, and ask of them a life of faithful sonship.”<sup>61</sup>

Yet God is not naïve about the fallen state of humanity or of Israel, and thus of the *impossibility* of *real* relationship. “God knows that people are unable to offer obedience, worship and thanksgiving that are worthy.”<sup>62</sup> God “knows that his children are unable to be holy or obedient or perfect before Him; they are unable to fulfill the requirements of his Covenant Will,”<sup>63</sup> unable to love the Lord with all their heart and be faithful sons and daughters. Hence, within the covenant relationship, “in his faithfulness and mercy,”<sup>64</sup> God gratuitously,<sup>65</sup> freely<sup>66</sup> and graciously<sup>67</sup> provided “a way of worship in which they may keep covenant fellowship with him.”<sup>68</sup>

God takes responsibility for both sides of the relationship. The covenant includes within it a provision for *human response* to God. Both “I will be your God” and “you will be my people” are part of *God’s* declaration to Israel. Torrance refers to this as a way “of response to his Will, a way of obedient conformity to His Covenant which He is pleased to accept as from his people in the Covenant,”<sup>69</sup> and “a way of obedient response to his loving-kindness, a way of cleansing and restoration to fellowship with himself.”<sup>70</sup> It is critical to note that this way of fellowship is part of the covenant provision, “a vicarious way in which the covenant might be fulfilled in their midst and on their behalf.”<sup>71</sup>

The divinely provided response Torrance calls the “covenanted” and “vicarious way of response,”<sup>72</sup> or from a different angle of thought, the “third dimension.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 194.

<sup>65</sup> See “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>66</sup> See *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> See “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 16. See also “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>68</sup> *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 194. Hence, Torrance says: “Even in its Sinaitic form the covenant was essentially a covenant of grace” (p. 194).

<sup>71</sup> MED, p. 84.

<sup>72</sup> MED, pp. 37-38, 83.

<sup>73</sup> “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 15. In this essay Torrance sets out his thought on the covenanted way of response within the framework of a discussion of order in the Church and this is against the backdrop of order and disorder in creation. “In the biblical revelation the whole concept of order is viewed over against disorder and chaos. Apart from the ordering of God’s creative Word the world is without form or void, but into the ordered cosmos there has broken the disorder of sin... through the lawlessness of sin the world fell out of proportion, out of order, and was threatened with sheer chaos... but in His Covenant mercy God holds the world together in spite of its chaos, and to that end He has promulgated His law which restrains and contains disorder and chaos, and reduces it to a measure of proportion, even while it is in the grip of *anomia*, or lawlessness. But God’s Covenant contains the promise of a new order, of a new creation when all things will be restored to their obedience and perfection in the divine Will” (p. 13).

“Order in the new creation is to be regarded as a third dimension. We are not concerned here simply with the Will of God and the obedience of man, with the Law of God, and the conformity of

We normally think of the covenant as having two parties, God and Abraham, or God and Israel. And this is certainly in accordance with the Word of God in the institution of the covenant partnership. ‘I am the Almighty God; walk before me and be perfect’... There is another factor to be taken into account, however, a middle term between the polarities of the covenant, God and Abraham, or God and Israel, namely *a covenanted way of response*, such as a divinely provided sacrifice replacing the best that the human partner may think he can offer, as in the paradigm case of the offering God provided instead of Isaac, Abraham’s beloved son.<sup>74</sup>

This covenanted way of response was provided “in Israel’s Cult or *leitourgia*”<sup>75</sup> in which God provided Israel a way of relating to him, within which Israel’s fallen conscience could be cleansed and Israel’s fear of God could be calmed, so that a form of real communion between God and Israel could be sustained. Thus, Torrance says that the covenant relation “came to rest upon the twin foundation of the Sinaitic law and the Levitical liturgy, as represented supremely in Moses and Aaron, prophet and priest in essential complementarity and unity.”<sup>76</sup> At the very heart of the covenant communion between God and Israel stood the vicarious way of response to God’s law and will, which God himself provided in grace.<sup>77</sup>

There is here a double emphasis in Torrance’s thought. On the one hand, the accent falls upon the fact that both sides of the covenant relation was established and maintained by God in grace. The “whole liturgy was regarded by the Old Testament as an ordinance of grace initiated by God Himself and appointed by Him. It was not an undertaking on the part of man.”<sup>78</sup> In this way Torrance says that the covenant depended entirely upon the divine faithfulness. It was “unilaterally established and maintained.”<sup>79</sup>

Here Torrance contrasts the idea of covenant with that of the contract.<sup>80</sup> In the “biblical teaching God’s Covenant is quite a different thing from a contract, for it is wholly and graciously made by God and depends therefore entirely upon the divine

man to that divine law, but with a *third dimension*, with a divinely provided fulfilment of the divine Law” (p. 15). See also “The Place of the Humanity of Christ in the Sacramental Life of the Church,” p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> MED, pp. 84-85. See also CA, vol. 2, “The Meaning of Order,” p. 15; “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament,” pp. 121, 123; “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158; *Royal Priesthood*, p. 3; “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, pp. 194ff and *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 16. For a more detailed exegetical discussion of the cultic liturgy see *Royal Priesthood*, pp. 1-6.

<sup>76</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 307.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Torrance’s comment: “Hence the very priesthood itself, the sacrifices, offerings and oblations which the priests alone were consecrated to take in their hands, together with all the liturgical ordinances, were regarded as constituting the vicarious way of covenant response in faith, obedience and worship which God had freely provided for Israel out of his steadfast love” (MED, pp. 84-85).

<sup>78</sup> *Royal Priesthood*, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> MED, p. 41.

<sup>80</sup> The difference between covenant and contract is more thoroughly explored by Torrance’s brother, James B. Torrance. See, for example, his essay “Covenant or Contract?”.

faithfulness.”<sup>81</sup> In a contract, there is a bilateral agreement between two parties which rests on the fulfillment of certain conditions on the part of each party; whereas, in the biblical covenant, God himself pledges to fulfill *both sides* of the covenant. Thus, Torrance comments:

The covenant was not made with a holy people, nor did its validity depend upon a contractual fulfilment of its conditions on the part of Israel, for it was a unilateral covenant which depended for its fulfilment upon the unconditional grace of God and the unrelenting purpose of reconciliation which he had pledged to work out through Israel for all peoples. And therefore...it depended upon a vicarious way of response to the love of God which God himself provided within the covenant—a way of response which he set out in the liturgy of atoning sacrifice and which he insisted on translating into the very existence of Israel in its vocation as ‘servant of the Lord.’<sup>82</sup>

We will return to the latter part of this statement in a moment. The emphasis at present is upon the fact that God provided for Israel the way of response to his love. “It was God Himself who provided the sacrifice... .”<sup>83</sup> God filled Israel’s hands with his own provision so that fearful Israel could draw near to God in worship and communion.

On the other hand, Torrance is highlighting the ‘judgment’ of grace. It is the very grace of God in providing the covenanted way of response that placed the whole of Israel’s existence and even her most holy offerings under judgment. God’s provision carries with it a verdict upon the offerings of the human race. The provision meant that Israel therefore was not to draw near to God with self-made offerings of its own devising, “but only with the sacrifice, the lamb, which God himself provides.”<sup>84</sup> The completeness of God’s grace in providing for Israel declares Israel completely ‘incapable of meeting the demands of God in any way.’ This point comes forward again in Torrance’s discussion of the vicarious way of response.

This remarkable feature of the covenant was elaborately presented in the ordinances of worship that are described in the Pentateuch. Not only the general pattern of the cult but the details of the liturgy were clearly designed to bring home to the people of Israel that they were not to appear before the Face of God with offerings embodying their own self-expression or representing their own naturalistic desires, or with kinds of sacrifice thought up by themselves as means of expiating guilt and propitiating God, for that was how the heathen engaged in worship, as ways of acting upon God and inducing his favour. Thus no unprescribed oblation, no uncovenanted

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<sup>81</sup> “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, p. 123.

<sup>82</sup> MED, pp. 37-38. Cf. Torrance’s comment in “The Israel of God.” “The keeping of the covenant did not depend on Israel’s worth, but on the contrary, was conditioned by the pure outflowing love of God in the continuous act for grace, of grace for grace” (p. 308).

<sup>83</sup> *Royal Priesthood*, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

offering, no strange fire, no incense of their own recipe, and no ritual of their own inventing, were to be intruded into their worship of God.<sup>85</sup>

While the liturgy established that God in his grace provided the way of relationship, that very grace or divine provision also meant “that man may appear before him in worship with nothing in his hands but the offering or sacrifice God has graciously given him”<sup>86</sup> and therefore placed the stamp of judgment upon every other offering and sacrifice.

Alongside this stress upon the freely provided way of response stands another equally powerful emphasis that runs throughout Torrance’s discussion of the covenant relation between God and Israel. It is the fact that this way of response was to be cut or circumcised or translated into the flesh of Israel. Torrance is no extrinsic ritualist. “True worship must be done into the flesh... .”<sup>87</sup> It was not enough “for Israel formally to engage in the prescribed ordinances of worship, far less to rely upon God’s gift of sanctuary, priesthood and liturgy as guarantees of immunity from divine judgment upon its way of behaviour, apart from obedience to the Word and Truth of God... .”<sup>88</sup> That was clearly envisaged in circumcision, “the great sign of the covenant.”<sup>89</sup> The covenanted way of communion had to be cut into the life and being of Israel,<sup>90</sup> “worked into the very flesh and blood of Israel’s existence”<sup>91</sup> “in order to be efficacious reality.”<sup>92</sup>

If communion between God and fallen Israel was to be made personally real in the fullest sense, then the covenanted way of communion had to be translated into life and being in the actual, not merely ritualistic, removal of sin and guilt, alienation and enmity. Thus, Torrance says, “by its very nature the covenant envisaged that God’s laws would be put into the minds and written on the hearts of his people.”<sup>93</sup> This pointed to the future when the “divine provision would be translated from the realm of symbolic ritual into the actual existence of His people.”<sup>94</sup>

While Israel learned in its liturgy that the covenant “could be fulfilled only through an obedient response of sacrifice provided by God Himself from within the covenant,” Torrance contends, that it was “through the prophets” that Israel “learned that such an obedient response had to be translated into its very existence and life and made to issue out of it.”<sup>95</sup>

The worst thing that could be done with such a covenant would be to turn the symbolic ritual into an end in itself, as a means of acting upon God and bending His will to serve the ends of men. That is precisely what Israel tried

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<sup>85</sup> MED, p. 84.

<sup>86</sup> *The Centrality of Christ*, p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> *Royal Priesthood*, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> MED, p. 85.

<sup>89</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 109.

<sup>90</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>91</sup> MED, p. 85. See also “The Meaning of Order” in CA, vol. 2, p. 16.

<sup>92</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>93</sup> MED, p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, p. 121.

<sup>95</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 196.

to do again and again, so that God sent the prophets to protest against their use of the Cult and to demand obedience rather than sacrifice.<sup>96</sup>

Circumcision remained the “sign that at last the covenant had to be written into the heart, in the ‘crucifixion’ of self-will, in the putting off of ‘the enmity of the flesh’.”<sup>97</sup>

It was this theme of the circumcision or the embodiment of the covenanted way of communion in Israel’s life, Torrance says, that “governed the profound Old Testament conception of ‘the servant of the Lord’.... The servant of the Lord was the hypostatized actualisation within the flesh and blood existence of Israel of the divinely provided way of covenant response set forth in the cult... .”<sup>98</sup> Torrance envisages the sacrificial system as being bent forward, as it were, to the “Servant of the Lord as the chosen instrument”<sup>99</sup> in whom the covenanted way of communion would become incarnate in the flesh of Israel.

The election of the one for the many called for the election within the one people of a Servant of the Lord who would fulfil in his own body and soul the covenant-will of God for his people, and fulfil the covenanted obedience of the people to God’s will. This righteous Servant would mediate the covenant by bearing the sins of the people in himself and being cut off out of the land of the living for the sake of God’s people, so that they might be pardoned and healed and restored to fellowship with God.<sup>100</sup>

But, Torrance suggests, “once the covenant came to be enacted so deeply into the existence of Israel that it was written into the ‘inner man,’ its whole form would change. It would be a new covenant.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament” in CA, vol. 2, pp. 121-122. In *Royal Priesthood* Torrance speaks of the movement in the priestly mediation in sacrificial witness to make itself independent of the priestly mediation of the Word of God (pp. 4-5). “Against that independence and perversion of priesthood and priestly liturgy God sent the prophets, most of them out of the priesthood itself, to protest against the transmutation of liturgy into idolatry, against the transmutation of liturgical forms of witness into hardened and self-sufficient forms that only ministered to Israel’s false security” (p. 5).

<sup>97</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 309.

<sup>98</sup> MED, p. 85. Torrance is thinking here particularly of the Isaianic prophecies of which, he comments: “A messianic role was evidently envisaged for the servant in which mediator and sacrifice, priest and victim were combined in a form that was at once representative and substitutionary, corporate and individual, in its fulfilment. As the prophet struggled to bring his vision into focus something emerged which is rather startling. Time and again he spoke about the *ebed Jahweh*, the servant of the Lord who is identified with Israel, and about the *goel*, the Redeemer who is the Holy One of Israel, in the same breath. Thus, the servant of the Lord and the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, were brought together in his prophetic utterance, and yet held apart but only by a hair’s breadth, so to speak.” In another place he says that in the heart of these Isaianic prophecies concerning the suffering Servant, “the Holy One of Israel and the Redeemer are drawn closely together in an enigmatically anonymous figure in whom the suffering ordeal and priestly destiny of Israel are gathered up, personified and infiltrated with universal significance, and made to point ahead to the consummation of God’s redemptive purpose of peace in a triumphant Messianic era which will transcend the history of Israel itself” (Christian/ Jewish Dialogue, p. 141).

<sup>99</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>100</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 196.

<sup>101</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 309. Elsewhere Torrance comments about the covenant with Israel in the

This, Torrance argues, is “precisely what took place in Jesus Christ in the whole course of His obedience from His birth to His death on the Cross, for He fulfilled in Himself the Word of God tabernacling among men, the covenanted way of response to God set forth in the ancient cult, and constituted Himself our Temple, our Priest, our Offering and our Worship.”<sup>102</sup> The “‘total circumcision’ was fulfilled at last in the flesh of Christ,” the New Covenant inaugurated, “and the new and living way was opened up in the humanity of the Son of God.”<sup>103</sup> But this new covenant, Torrance says, “is not an abrogation of the old covenant but a fulfilment of it in which its essential pattern, ‘I will be your God, you will be my people,’ is raised to a higher level of intimacy and communion with God through the pouring out of his own Spirit upon his people.”<sup>104</sup>

The personal relationship established by God with Israel is the unique ‘sphere’ of God’s personal interaction within fallen creation, with and for the whole human race. This covenant relation hinged upon God’s grace in the provision of the vicarious way of response to himself through which alone Israel could draw near to God, and through which alone Israel could live in communion with the Lord. The covenanted or vicarious way of response constitutes God’s special preparation for the work of Christ, for it is in Christ that this response will be cut into our flesh and become decisively fulfilled as God’s eternally prevailing vicarious provision for communion. This is one strand that is woven into Torrance’s whole conception of Israel as the ‘womb of the incarnation.’ It is necessary now to turn our discussion of Torrance’s discourse on Israel on a different axis—that of the movement of divine revelation in Israel.

### The Mediation of Revelation

Torrance begins several of his essays on Israel by discussing the need for tools, particularly conceptual tools, in all areas of human knowledge. “If you are to make a thing, you must have tools with which to make it and give it shape. If you are to understand a thing, you must have tools with which to grasp it and shape the knowledge of it in your mind.”<sup>105</sup> “Really to get to know something we need to find the appropriate way in which to grasp it and shape what we grasp in our mind—that is to say, we need adequate modes of thought and speech.”<sup>106</sup> He goes on to query: “But what tools have you got for knowing God?”<sup>107</sup> He then speaks not of human reason, philosophy, or of the laws of logic, but of *Israel*. “The Jew has been specially singled out and fashioned by God in mind and soul and even in language to know

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light of the new covenant. “By its very nature this covenant was not meant to be an end in itself, for through it Israel was steadily and painfully moulded by God into being the instrument of his saving purpose, and made to provide in its very existence among the nations the basis and provisional form of a new covenantal relationship which would include all nations” (“Christian/ Jewish Dialogue,” p. 140).

<sup>102</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 158.

<sup>103</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 309.

<sup>104</sup> “Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” p. 141.

<sup>105</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” pp. 164-165. See also MED, pp. 15ff and SF, p. xxx.

<sup>106</sup> MED, p. 16.

<sup>107</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 165.

God, and to be the supreme instrument through which God reveals Himself to us all.”<sup>108</sup> God elected Israel out of the midst of humanity “in order to make that race into the very instrument of God’s purpose to reveal Himself to all men, and to save mankind.”<sup>109</sup> God took Israel into his hands “in order to provide the actual means, a whole set of spiritual tools, appropriate forms of understanding, worship and expression, through which apprehension of God could be made accessible to human beings... .”<sup>110</sup>

Torrance refers to these conceptual and spiritual tools or appropriate forms of understanding in various ways; such as “ideas, and thoughts and categories, and truths,”<sup>111</sup> “conceptual and linguistic patterns” and “basic concepts,”<sup>112</sup> “conceptual forms and structures,”<sup>113</sup> “permanent structures of thought and speech” about God,<sup>114</sup> “permanent authoritative patterns of understanding,”<sup>115</sup> “formal and empirical correlates” of the Word of God,<sup>116</sup> “appropriate structures of understanding and articulating the Word of God”<sup>117</sup> and as “a matrix of appropriate thought-and language-forms.”<sup>118</sup> In the variety of these expressions. the central theme is that God called Israel to himself in order to create a *revolutionary medium* in fallen and alienated human understanding through which he could begin to communicate himself to, and be known by, the race at large in its great darkness.

It is critical to note that for Torrance, Israel, like the race at large, is utterly blind and does not know God. Indeed the fallen mind of Israel is alien to the truth of God.

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<sup>108</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 164. The movement of thought in MED is the same. “What are the tools we need in order to grasp the content of divine revelation? Appropriate tools are needed for the knowledge of God, just as we need tools for almost everything else, for making things and shaping them, even for tools for making tools, which I find rather instructive”(MED, p. 15).

“What I have in mind here are not physical or electronic tools but conceptual tools. Really to get to know something we need to find the appropriate way in which to grasp it and shape what we grasp in our mind—that is to say, what we need are adequate modes of thought and speech. The need for conceptual tools of this kind is particularly pressing when we have to do with something radically new which we cannot understand by assimilating it into the framework of what we already know, and for which old patterns of thought and speech are not only inadequate but can prove quite false” (MED, p. 16).

“I believe this applies no less to our knowledge of God. If we are to know him and speak about him in a way that is appropriate to him, we need to have fitting modes of thought and speech, adequate conceptual forms and structures, and indeed reverent and worthy habits of worship and behaviour governing our approach to him. Let us consider God’s historical relations with the people of Israel in just this light. In his desire to reveal himself and make himself knowable to mankind, he selected one small race out of the whole mass of humanity, and subjected it to intensive interaction and dialogue with himself in such a way that he might mould and shape this people in the service of his self-revelation” (MED, pp. 16-17).

<sup>109</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 165.

<sup>110</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 164-165. See also MED, pp. 15ff and SF, p. xxx.

<sup>112</sup> MED, p. 28.

<sup>113</sup> MED, p. 16.

<sup>114</sup> MED, p. 27.

<sup>115</sup> MED, p. 28.

<sup>116</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 148. See also RET, p. 87.

<sup>117</sup> MED, p. 31.

<sup>118</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145. See also RET, p. 87.

So the Lord takes great measure to accommodate Israel, and meeting Israel where it is in its darkness, begins to name himself and introduce *new* ideas, ideas such as the Word of God and Spirit of God, the Name of God, covenant, mercy, holiness, grace, messiah and savior, sacrifice and forgiveness, atonement, revelation and reconciliation, prophet, priest and king, and kingdom of God,<sup>119</sup> all of which, together with the basic patterns of worship introduced by the Lord, Torrance calls, “the essential furniture of our knowledge of God... .”<sup>120</sup> Herein lies, for Torrance, the epistemological significance of Israel. Without Israel, and Israel’s long and anguished history, the human race would remain in the dark, trapped in its own self-referential confusion and blind to the truth of God.

A basic feature of Torrance’s understanding of revelation is that it is personal and relational. The revelation of God is not simply the unveiling of information about God; it is the unveiling of God himself. And it is an unveiling that actually meets Israel where it is in its darkness and alienation. “In the Hebrew idiom revelation is not only the uncovering of God but the uncovering of the ear and eye of man for God.”<sup>121</sup> In the self-revelation of God to Israel there is, for Torrance, a double adaptation, “an adaptation of divine revelation to the human mind *and* an adaptation of articulate forms of human understanding and language to divine revelation.”<sup>122</sup> The Lord stoops, accommodates and meets Israel in its carnality, and begins to transform Israel’s fallen mind and thought to receive God’s self-giving and know him. Israel was elected by God to be the ‘sphere’ within fallen creation within which God’s self-giving could be accommodated to estranged human capacities, and alienated human knowing could be adapted to receive the revelation.

This double adaptation of revelation Torrance also refers to as a “mutual adaptation of divine revelation and human understanding,”<sup>123</sup> the “actualization of God’s revelation in humanity,”<sup>124</sup> the actualization of revelation “in our historical human existence,”<sup>125</sup> and the earthing of revelation “in the clay of humanity.”<sup>126</sup> From a slightly different angle, Torrance refers to this as “the penetration of the Word of God into the depths of Israel’s being and soul in such a way that it took human shape...”<sup>127</sup> and as the translation of revelation “into basic patterns of human understanding and articulation,”<sup>128</sup> and as the Word of God clothing “itself with Israel’s language.”<sup>129</sup> While each of these variations have their own particular nuance, they are variations on the single theme of God mediating knowledge of himself to broken and estranged humanity through the correlation of his self-communication and human understanding. He clothes his Word with appropriate

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<sup>119</sup> See MED, p. 28. While this list is not comprehensive it is the only such list that can be found in Torrance’s writings. It is very surprising that Torrance does not here include ‘substitution’ or ‘vicarious substitution’ as that is one of the most decisive concepts in his thought on the mediation of Christ.

<sup>120</sup> MED, p. 28.

<sup>121</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 130.

<sup>122</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>123</sup> MED, p. 22.

<sup>124</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 138. See also RET, p. 85.

<sup>125</sup> RET, p. 85 and “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 138.

<sup>126</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88.

<sup>127</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>128</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88.

<sup>129</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

human forms. “Israel was called out from the other nations to be the unique historical partner of God’s personal and intimate self-revelation, whereby knowledge and worship of the living God might be earthed in human existence, given shape in human understanding and speech, and be mediated to the race at large.”<sup>130</sup>

This earthing of knowledge of God, or the mutual adaptation and correlation of divine revelation and human understanding, Torrance envisages as a “deepening process” which spanned “the course of Israel’s sacred history.”<sup>131</sup> Given that Israel is blind and that the Lord is committed to meeting Israel in its darkness in real relationship, it takes time, and real relating on God’s part to find a way to get through to Israel. And even at the close of the OT period, the dialogue was far from complete, for Torrance regards all that transpired through the whole history of Israel as being in *preparation* for the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

By singling out Israel from among the nations for this vicarious service and subjecting it to its long ordeal in history, God adapted Israel to his purpose in such a way as to form within it a womb for the incarnation of his Word and a matrix of appropriate forms of thought and speech for the reception of his revelation in a final and definitive form.<sup>132</sup>

So, for Torrance, the long ordeal of God’s patient and anguished struggle to get through to Israel in real relationship was only the first stage of the mediation of revelation. The work of God’s revelation in Israel prepares for the incarnation of his definitive self-expression in Jesus Christ, by whom even Israel is to be understood. What is begun in Israel has its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

There are two direct connections between the mediation of revelation in Israel and the final and definitive revelation in Jesus Christ. The first connection between Israel and Jesus lies in the fact that the “matrix of appropriate forms of human

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<sup>130</sup> “Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” p. 140. Although there is no explicit connection in Prof. Torrance’s writings this idea of conceptual tools must have its roots, at least in some way, in Torrance’s father’s missionary experience. In his article “The Emigrations of the Jews: Israel in China”, Torrance’s father, the Rev. T. Torrance, points out that “Israel was divinely appointed to be a missionary nation” and as such served “as a religious University among the nations...” (p. 59). He goes on to say that the ancient Jews in China left a fascinating legacy among certain peoples. “Their religion they called the White or Holiness Religion. We found it was a High Place worship closely adhering to that of Israel of the Prophets, but without any Canaanitish corruption. They maintained there was only one true God, the Father of men’s spirits who made Himself known both as a just Judge and as a Saviour of men.

“The arresting external features of their sacrificial ritual were a Sacred Tree, an Altar, a conical piece of white glistening Rock, and two standards-- one representing judgment or death, and one representing righteousness or life, the former being a Pole entwined with the likeness of a serpent, the latter a White Banner from which the arrow of condemnation had been removed. These spoke of Divine Salvation by means of an expiatory sacrifice, the elements of which were mercy and judgment.

“This sacrifice, however, was merely preparatory; it spoke of a great reality yet to come. The people held firmly and unequivocally the Messianic hope. But the hope differed entirely, one noted, from the present-day Jewish hope of a purely earthly Deliverer, for they looked for a Heaven-sent Sin-Bearer and Saviour, whose Name they gave as Abba-Malach-- the Father’s Messenger” (p. 62). See also Thomas Torrance, *China’s First Missionaries: Ancient Israelites*.

<sup>131</sup> MED, p. 22.

<sup>132</sup> RET, p. 87. See also “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145 and “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 149.

thought and speech” was “for the reception of the incarnational revelation”<sup>133</sup> or “for the reception of his revelation in a final and definitive form.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, Torrance reminds us that without Israel, we would have no way of recognizing Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world.<sup>135</sup> “Apart from the context of Israel we could not even begin to understand the bewildering miracle of Jesus.”<sup>136</sup> It is the revolutionary matrix of unparalleled ideas and concepts and forms of thought and speech, hammered out on the anvil of the fallen Adamic mind in Israel, that serves as the divinely provided framework for understanding Jesus Christ.

In OT Israel, God established a real conversation between himself and fallen humanity, and this conversation, this fellowship, was to become the living, relational medium for the reception of his definitive, personal self-communication in Jesus Christ. This has its counterpart in the apostles, in and through whom we are given the divinely provided interpretation of Jesus Christ. Torrance is here standing, as it were, above the whole history of Israel both in the OT and NT periods and viewing the mediation of revelation in OT Israel as God’s forging a revolutionary matrix of human thoughts, ideas, concepts and categories for the reception of God’s personal and definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ. This is the third dimension of the ‘womb’ for the incarnation. It is a revolutionary ‘hermeneutical’ or ‘conceptual’ world of thought, forged in the fiery furnace of Israel’s fallen mind, which gives new eyes for humanity to begin to see and perceive the meaning of Christ.

The second connection between the mediation of revelation in fallen Israel and Jesus Christ is of a much more fundamental and critical significance for the fuller picture of Torrance’s understanding of the mediation of Christ.<sup>137</sup> In the same movement in which God was forging the revolutionary matrix in Israel’s fallen mind, he was also fashioning or forming “a womb for the incarnation of the Word”<sup>138</sup> or a “womb for the birth of Jesus.”<sup>139</sup>

The word ‘matrix’ derives from the Latin word *mater* and is properly understood to mean a ‘womb’ or “place in which a thing is developed,” as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* states it. To this point, however, we have used the word in a more philosophical manner to denote a conceptual framework or world of

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<sup>133</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 149 and “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145.

<sup>134</sup> RET, p. 87.

<sup>135</sup> For example, in “The Israel of God,” p. 319 Torrance says that apart from the “prepared sphere of revelation and reconciliation” in Israel and the Old Testament “no one could have grasped the bewildering miracle of Jesus or begun to understand the Incarnation and the Atonement.” See also his early essay “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 166-167; SF, pp. xx and xxx and MED, p. 28.

<sup>136</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 167. “Apart from the Biblical revelation we would not have the tools to grasp the knowledge of God; apart from the long history of the Jews we would not be able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God; apart from the suffering and agony of Israel we could not understand the Cross of Calvary as God’s instrument to atone for sin and to enact once and for all His Word of love and pardon and grace” (“Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 167).

<sup>137</sup> It should be noted that while Torrance begins several of his essays with his idea of tools, this is, however, a stylistic beginning. In MED, for example, Torrance begins with conceptual tools but he goes on to set out four aspects of the mediation of revelation in Israel among which he list conceptual tools (pp. 27ff).

<sup>138</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145.

<sup>139</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 166

thought replete with new concepts, categories, information and ideas. This is to be understood as distinct from, yet very closely related to, the concept of the ‘womb’ of the incarnation in its most precise sense.

The relationship between the revelation of God and Israel’s alien mind creates a human conceptual framework which opens the way to understand the light coming in Jesus. It also creates the deepest possible pain and conflict within Israel. For revelation means the personal presence of the Lord to alienated Israel, which inevitably exposes the contradiction of Israel’s fallen way of being. This profoundly personal, and indeed fiery, relationship constitutes the ‘womb’ of the incarnation and work of Christ in its most critical sense. For it is into this grace-filled, yet agonizing and contradictory relationship that the Father’s Son will be born. It is in probing more carefully into the movement of the double adaptation of revelation and fallen human understanding that the distinction here will be clarified and what Torrance envisages as the womb of the incarnation seen more clearly.

#### (a) The Two-Way Movement

As we have noted, a basic feature in Torrance’s discussion of the mediation of revelation is that it is deeply relational and involves the Lord meeting Israel in accommodating love, and the transforming of Israel’s fallen human understanding. The Lord is determined to find a way to do the impossible—reach blind and fallen humanity in its terrible darkness and confusion. Fundamental to this mutual adaptation is a personal fellowship between God and Israel, or a two-way movement from the side of God to fallen Israel and from the side of fallen Israel to God. Torrance refers to this variously as a “historical dialogue” or a “historical reciprocity” or a “persistent and progressive reciprocity” between God and Israel,<sup>140</sup> and as a basic reciprocity between the Word of God and the response of man,<sup>141</sup> a “profound reciprocity between God and human being,”<sup>142</sup> and “a two-way movement of the profoundest and most intimate nature” between God and Israel.<sup>143</sup> “In his desire to reveal himself and make himself knowable to mankind, he selected one small race out of the whole mass of humanity, and subjected it to intensive interaction and dialogue with himself in such a way that he might mould and shape this people in the service of his self-revelation.”<sup>144</sup> The point of critical significance here is that the dialogue or two-way movement between God and Israel includes Israel’s human *reception* of God’s self disclosure, which is given a critical place in the *mediation* of revelation to the fallen human race at large.

We have already cited Torrance’s statement that all through Israel’s history “the Word of God was at work preparing the matrix for the final mediation of divine revelation to mankind, when the personal self-communication of God could be met

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<sup>140</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 148.

<sup>141</sup> This is an adaptation of the title of one of Torrance’s essays “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, pp. 137-164.

<sup>142</sup> MED, p. 34.

<sup>143</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88.

<sup>144</sup> MED, pp. 16-17.

by true and faithful reception from man.”<sup>145</sup> Torrance envisages revelation as being fulfilled and complete when God is truly and faithfully known within humanity.

In *Theological Science*, under the subsection entitled ‘The Possibility of Theological Knowledge,’ Torrance comments: “Our question is evidently two-fold. (a) How does God give Himself to be known? (b) How does man truly receive and know what is given? There is a two-fold movement, from the side of the object known and from the side of the knower, and both have to be fully considered—the way from God to man and the way from man to God.”<sup>146</sup> As H. R. Mackintosh said: “All religious knowledge of God, wherever existing, comes by revelation; otherwise we should be committed to the incredible position that man can know God without His willing to be known.”<sup>147</sup> To this should be added that all religious knowledge of God not only involves divine revelation but human reception of that revelation. Revelation and reception form, as it were, the obvious sides of our knowledge of God.

Torrance is suggesting, however, that the mediation of God’s revelation already involves human reception. God mediates knowledge of Himself to the fallen race at large through the fulfilling of his self-revelation from the side of humanity toward God. Thus, Torrance speaks not only of the mediation of revelation but of the “realisation and actualisation” of divine revelation in Israel<sup>148</sup> and “the fulfilling and actualizing of the knowledge of God in man...”<sup>149</sup> and of divine revelation completing “the circle of its own movement”<sup>150</sup> and achieving “its end in man.”<sup>151</sup> The two sides of knowledge of God, revelation and reception, are both included in the movement of the mediation of revelation.<sup>152</sup> The “movement from the side of man toward God, free and spontaneous as it is, is coordinated with the movement of God toward man, and is part of the divine movement of revelation...”<sup>153</sup>

The fulfillment of revelation from the side of God to fallen humanity and from the side of fallen humanity toward God began in historic Israel and took the basic form of a two-way movement or fellowship between God’s self-communication and Israel’s reception and knowing. This is the inner dynamic of the mediation of revelation, a growing personal fellowship between the Lord, as he stooped in grace to meet fallen Israel, and fallen Israel’s disturbed and painful struggle to know God in new and indeed foreign ways.

The covenant relation was not a “divine monologue,” to use Georges Florovsky’s phrase.<sup>154</sup> It was a living *dialogue* between God, the true and living God himself, and fallen Israel, and God did not speak over Israel’s head. For Torrance, as we have noted, the Hebraic view of revelation involves not only the unveiling or “uncovering of God” to humanity, but also as “the uncovering of the ear and heart of

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<sup>145</sup> MED, p. 18.

<sup>146</sup> *Theological Science*, p. 45.

<sup>147</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God*, p. 65.

<sup>148</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> *Theological Science*, p. 45.

<sup>150</sup> RET, p. 86.

<sup>151</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 130.

<sup>152</sup> See *Theological Science*, p. 45.

<sup>153</sup> *Theological Science*, p. 45.

<sup>154</sup> See Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. 1, p. 21.

man to receive revelation.”<sup>155</sup> This simple conception of revelation, which includes both an unveiling of God and an uncovering of the eye and ear of fallen humanity for God, is fundamental for Torrance’s whole discussion of Israel and of the mediation of Christ. It is not that the uncovering of God and the uncovering of the ear and heart of fallen humanity to receive revelation are two different acts. They go together.

This is a self-revelation of God which posits and sustains man as the partner of its full movement from God to man and from man back to God. There is created such a profound reciprocity between God and man that in assuming human form, divine revelation summons an answering movement from man toward God...<sup>156</sup>

It is the unveiling of God itself that creates reciprocity between God and Israel’s knowing as revelation summons a response from fallen Israel.

The revelation of God does not return void. “It is revelation which achieves its end in man and does not return void to God.”<sup>157</sup> Revelation not only uncovers Israel’s knowing but uncovers Israel’s knowing *for* God. In revealing himself to Israel, God was uncovering and creating, bestowing and controlling a way of human knowing that was appropriate to himself and to humanity.<sup>158</sup>

F. W. Camfield comments that “A great poem... will often have to create the very faculty of understanding and appreciating it.”<sup>159</sup> In a similar way H. R. Mackintosh quotes Wordsworth as observing that “every great or original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen.”<sup>160</sup>

The ideas here are analogous to Torrance’s discussion in two ways. On the one hand, he sees that in Israel, God created a faculty of human understanding for knowing himself, a taste by which he is not only relished, but known, and an art by which he is seen. On the other hand, these quotations are analogous in that both view the actual creation of the taste or faculty as the work of the writing or poem itself. The poem itself acts critically and creatively upon the mind. Thus, with respect to revelation Torrance comments:

Revelation involves... the freedom of God to be present to man and to open up man for God and to realize from the side of man his understanding of revelation and his obedient response to it, to effect in man real meeting with God in revelation and to give him capacity for revelation. This capacity for

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<sup>155</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>156</sup> RET, p. 85. See also “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 138.

<sup>157</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 130.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. *Theological Science*, p. 47. Knowledge of God “is a knowledge made possible under the commanding majesty of the Object which not only establishes itself in our knowledge but does not allow itself to be halted by our creaturely limitations and disabilities, for it creates, bestows, and controls a real knowledge on our part appropriate to it.” Torrance speaks of this as God being the “sole Master of our knowing” (p. 47).

<sup>159</sup> F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit*, p. 93. See also H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God*, p. 67.

<sup>160</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*, p. 263.

revelation is not to be judged in terms of the receiver, as if he could achieve it on his own, but in terms of the Giver, the Father in Heaven, who acts by his Spirit upon man, from beneath and from within man, but who effects from the side of man and issuing out of man's life a really human understanding of revelation and a really human obedience to it.<sup>161</sup>

The unveiling of God to Israel not only summoned an answering knowing from Israel, but acted critically and creatively upon Israel's knowing and pressed to achieve its end in true and appropriate human understanding.

Through the creative activity of revelation in the two-way movement of God's self-unveiling and human reception in Israel, real and true knowledge of God was being established in our fallen humanity, and divine revelation was being "anchored and realized in the conditions of human reality as well as divine Reality."<sup>162</sup> Thus, Torrance says, "in grace and wisdom God adopted a way of making himself known to his people in which the movement of his revelation fulfilled itself not only from the side of God toward man but from the side of man toward God..."<sup>163</sup>

Torrance envisages this, as we have seen, as a deepening process. He speaks of the "progressive movement of revelation"<sup>164</sup> in Israel and of the "ever-deepening spiral movement of God's self-revelation to Israel."<sup>165</sup>

Thus the mediation of divine revelation took a spiral course throughout Israel's sacred history, for the Word of God came to Israel in such a creative way that it moulded the responses it called forth, assimilating them to its self-communication so that they served the deepening process of mutual adaptation between divine revelation and human understanding...<sup>166</sup>

## (b) The Community of Reciprocity

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<sup>161</sup> "The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology" in TIRT, p. 131. Cf. *Theological Science*, pp. 45ff. The "possibility of our knowing God is grounded in His divine freedom to cross the boundary between Himself and us and to give Himself to be known by us within the conditions of our frailty on earth" (*Theological Science*, p. 50). Cf. also Torrance's comment in RET: "By revelation is meant... not some vague, inarticulate awareness of God projected out of the human consciousness, but an intelligible, articulate revealing of God by God whom we are enabled to apprehend through the creative power of his Word addressed to us, yet a revealing of God by God which is actualized within the conditions of our creaturely existence and therefore within the medium of our human thought and speech" (p. 85).

<sup>162</sup> RET, p. 85. The fuller quotation reads: "Thus the articulate self-communication of God to man includes within itself meeting between man and God as well as between God and man, for in assuming the form of human speech and writing the revelation of God addressed to man becomes at the same time the obedient response of man to God whereby revelation is anchored and realized in the conditions of human reality as well as divine Reality."

<sup>163</sup> MED, p. 31. See also RET, p. 85.

<sup>164</sup> MED, p. 31.

<sup>165</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> MED, p. 22.

In giving himself to fallen humanity, God called out Israel to be the unique partner of his self-revelation through and in whom his self-communication could be “earthed in human existence, given shape in human understanding and speech, and mediated to the human race at large.”<sup>167</sup> This earthing of divine revelation had as its inner dynamic a reciprocity between God’s self-giving and Israel’s knowing. The point to be noted now is that this reciprocity involved God and corporate Israel.

We have noted the imagery Torrance uses of the Word of God clothing itself with Israel’s language and of the translation of revelation “into basic patterns of human understanding and articulation.”<sup>168</sup> Elsewhere Torrance points out that “in order to be heard and understood, and to be communicable as Word, divine revelation penetrates into the speaker-hearer relationship within the interpersonal structure of humanity... .”<sup>169</sup> To become communicable to man, Torrance says, the Word of God “had to enter the speaker-hearer relationship within humanity and become speech to man, spoken and heard through the medium of human language.”<sup>170</sup> It had to clothe itself with human language.

We note that Torrance speaks of language as the “currency of social being” and of the fact that language “is rooted in a society and is kept alive by the exchange and development of thought that takes place through it.” He also comments:

Neither in God nor in man is word found in isolation but only in community. In God the Word subsists in the inner consubstantial relations of the Holy Trinity, and in man words have their existence in the public language of expression and communication developed by a community of persons bound together not only by a common world but by a common way of life and culture.<sup>171</sup>

Human language does not exist in its own world, but is bound up with a community of persons. Thus, Torrance says, “if the Word of God is to enter the forum as speech to man through the medium of human words it must be directed to man in community... .”<sup>172</sup>

In Israel “God’s revelation of himself to mankind did not operate in a vacuum, but penetrated into human existence in the particular life and history of one people elected as the instrument for the actualisation of God’s revelation in humanity and separated as a holy *nation* in whose midst God dwelt in an intimate and distinctive way through the presence of his Word.”<sup>173</sup> The two-way movement created by God’s unveiling of himself to Israel was not between God and individual Israelites but between God and corporate Israel. That is, “the reciprocity created by God’s revelation of himself to man takes a corporate form”<sup>174</sup> and involves a “community

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<sup>167</sup> “Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” p. 140.

<sup>168</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88.

<sup>169</sup> RET, p. 86.

<sup>170</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 146.

<sup>171</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 146.

<sup>172</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, pp. 146-147.

<sup>173</sup> RET, p. 87. See also “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>174</sup> RET, p. 86.

response to the self-revealing and self-giving of God to Israel.”<sup>175</sup> The two-way movement of the unveiling of God and the knowing response of Israel involves the corporate knowing of Israel as a community of persons in reciprocity, a “community of reciprocity.”<sup>176</sup> The concept has a double reference. On the one hand, the community of reciprocity refers to Israel as a nation in living dialogue with God. On the other hand, it refers to Israel as a corporate body of individuals in reciprocity with one another.<sup>177</sup> The community of reciprocity “is a community of persons in reciprocity both with God and with one another... .”<sup>178</sup>

Torrance speaks of this in terms of the intersecting of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the covenant relation such that it forms “a coherent community of reciprocity between God and Israel... .”<sup>179</sup> God established Israel as the community, the sphere within fallen creation and within human society with a shared culture, language and knowledge, in reciprocity with himself through which the Word of God could clothe “itself with Israel’s language”<sup>180</sup> and become communicable to humanity.<sup>181</sup> Within this vertical and horizontal covenant relation or “covenant-union” between the Word of God and Israel,<sup>182</sup> as Torrance also refers to it, he envisages the Word of God as “pressing for articulation within the corporate medium of covenant reciprocity,”<sup>183</sup> or “pressing for fuller realisation and obedient expression within the life and mind and literature of Israel.”<sup>184</sup>

With respect to the actual historical two-way movement between God and corporate Israel, Torrance says that God “used the reactions of the succeeding generations,”<sup>185</sup> or “the responses which divine revelation provoked” from Israel “whether of assent or dissent, obedience or disobedience, apostasy or reform, as the instruments for ever-deepening penetration into Israel’s existence and as the means through which it became understandable and communicable as God’s Word to man.”<sup>186</sup> “The same mighty Word that created the world and ultimately lay behind every event in nature and in history was a work in its [Israel’s] midst creating corporate reciprocity and using the responses it provoked... as instruments for its

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<sup>175</sup> MED, p. 23.

<sup>176</sup> RET, p. 86 and 46. See also “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, pp. 146ff, and MED, pp. 22ff..

<sup>177</sup> In MED, p. 23 Torrance comments: “The covenant partnership of God with Israel incorporated a brotherly covenant among the members of Israel, and that brotherly covenant was grounded in the covenant relations of God with Israel as a whole. Thus, so to speak, the vertical and the horizontal interrelations of the covenant partnership penetrated each other, constituting a coherent community of reciprocity between God and Israel, and manifesting a community response to the self-revealing and self-giving of God to Israel.”

<sup>178</sup> RET, p. 46.

<sup>179</sup> MED, p. 23.

<sup>180</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>181</sup> Cf. Torrance’s comment in RET: “In order to be heard and understood, and to be communicable as Word, divine revelation penetrates into the speaker-hearer relationship within the interpersonal structure of humanity and becomes speech to man by becoming speech of man to man, spoken and heard through the intelligible medium of a people’s language” (p. 86).

<sup>182</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145.

<sup>183</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 148 and RET, p. 87.

<sup>184</sup> MED, pp. 31-32.

<sup>185</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” pp. 88-89.

<sup>186</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 89.

deeper penetration into Israel's existence and the means through which it became understandable and communicable to man."<sup>187</sup> Elsewhere Torrance says that the responses which revelation provoked "were made instruments for its deepening penetration into its [Israel's] existence and understanding until there were forged structures of thought and speech in terms of which it became understandable and communicable."<sup>188</sup>

The important note here again is that the revelation of God is personal and relational. The Lord has no interest in failing to communicate. So he met and accepted Israel and related to Israel where it actually was in its brokenness and misunderstanding. In his creative genius, the Lord used the responses that his self-giving provoked as a means of further address to Israel. When Israel proved disobedient, God used their disobedience as a means of addressing Israel. At the same time, he used their reactions as a means of deepening his self-communication.

God used the historical experience of Israel to reveal himself more profoundly and to give himself more completely to Israel. He used the suffering and the judgment of Israel to reveal the terrible nature of sin as contradiction to God's love and grace... But transcending all, God used this nation in the ordeal of history and suffering to reveal his own infinite love and the undeflecting persistence of his will to bring forgiveness and reconciliation...<sup>189</sup>

We can think here, as an example, of the prophet Hosea, and of Israel's spiritual adultery which God used both as a means of further address to Israel, and as a means of revealing the heinousness of sin, and yet the unconditional grace and love of God for his people.

In this way Torrance says that "throughout Israel's tradition the Word of God kept creating formal and empirical correlates of its own self-utterance through which it extended its activity in space and time, progressively taking verbal and even written form through the shared understanding and shared response that developed in this people."<sup>190</sup> This, however, was far from "an easy or painless process" for Israel.<sup>191</sup>

Time and again Torrance speaks of the Word of God struggling "with Israel's ways of life and thought and worship,"<sup>192</sup> of "God's anguished struggle with Israel,"<sup>193</sup> of the "long struggle of the Word with the perverse nature of man" in Israel,<sup>194</sup> of God's "passionate struggle with this people,"<sup>195</sup> of the Word of God laying "hold upon the mind and will of this people,"<sup>196</sup> of the Word of God

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<sup>187</sup> "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 147. See also RET, p. 87; "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," p. 88-89 and "The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit" in TIRT, p. 196.

<sup>188</sup> RET, p. 87.

<sup>189</sup> "The Israel of God," p. 308.

<sup>190</sup> RET, p. 87. See also "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 148.

<sup>191</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>192</sup> "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," p. 88.

<sup>193</sup> MED, p. 15.

<sup>194</sup> "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 148.

<sup>195</sup> MED, p. 42.

<sup>196</sup> MED, p. 87.

“wrestling with our stubborn and rebellious humanity.”<sup>197</sup> Consequently, he writes of the persistent “struggle between Israel and its Lord,”<sup>198</sup> of the “suffering and ordeal of Israel,”<sup>199</sup> of the “harrowing experience” of the covenant bond between God and Israel,<sup>200</sup> of “the whole life and agony of Israel,”<sup>201</sup> of Israel breaking “themselves again and again upon the Word of God,”<sup>202</sup> of the “painful transformation” of Israel’s “mind and soul,”<sup>203</sup> of Israel suffering from the flame of the Word,<sup>204</sup> of Israel suffering “at the hand of the Word of God” as the “bearer in its existence and life of divine Revelation,”<sup>205</sup> of Israel having “ever to be broken and remade, reshaped, and realigned with the covenant will of God,”<sup>206</sup> of the conflict of revelation with Israel’s “in-built bias against it”<sup>207</sup> and deeply ingrained habits of thought and understanding.<sup>208</sup>

The most obvious point of note in this series of references is that God’s self-revelation to Israel involved an agonizing struggle. For Torrance, how could it be otherwise? Revelation means God’s self-giving and reception of God’s self-giving means communion with God. But Israel is thoroughly *fallen*. While the covenant relationship is one of love and grace and mercy, it is also one of profound pain.

From his insight into Israel’s struggle Torrance’s thought splinters into several directions. For the moment we are concerned with the two-way movement within the community of reciprocity.

In a lengthy, yet very moving passage, Torrance comments:

The Jews were chosen to be fashioned by God. But this is the constant marvel of the whole story: all through history, as the Old Testament tells us, the Jews were the most stubborn and stiff-necked people you could imagine. They disobeyed God at every great moment in God’s purpose. They knew well they were chosen by God for the special purpose of salvation, yet all through their history they fought against Him. They stoned and abused His messengers. They killed the prophets. They contradicted God to His face, and resisted Him, proving themselves utterly unworthy of His love, and broke themselves again and again upon the Word of God so that they were smitten down in suffering and agony and judgment...

*And what did God do in the face of all that?* He took this stubborn and rebellious people, took them with all their recalcitrance and resistance to His love, and subjected them to ordeal by history and judgment. He used their very stubbornness and the judgment they brought upon themselves in order to

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<sup>197</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 143.

<sup>198</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 196.

<sup>199</sup> “The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit” in TIRT, p. 196 and “The Israel of God,” p. 319.

<sup>200</sup> MED, p. 18.

<sup>201</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 308.

<sup>202</sup> “Salvation is of the Jews,” p. 165.

<sup>203</sup> MED, p. 21.

<sup>204</sup> “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History,” p. 88.

<sup>205</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 309.

<sup>206</sup> “The Israel of God,” p. 309.

<sup>207</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>208</sup> MED, p. 18.

train them. By elaborate religious ritual and carefully framed laws, by rivers of blood from millions of animal sacrifices, by the broken hearts of the Psalmists and the profoundest agony of the Prophets, by the tragic story of Israelite politics, and the shattering of their power again and again, God taught the Jews through hundreds and hundreds of years until there was burned into their soul the meaning of holiness and righteousness, of sin and uncleanness, of love and mercy and grace, of faithfulness and forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, atonement, and salvation; the meaning of creation, of the Kingdom of God, of judgment, death, and at last resurrection; the thought of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and yet the Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>209</sup>

It was through this painful and agonizing relationship between God's self-revelation and Israel's corporate response and corporate understanding and corporate reception of his self-revelation that God's self-communication began to achieve its end in human understanding, and the Word of God began to clothe itself with Israel's language.

It is along these lines of thought that Torrance envisages God as acting creatively upon corporate Israel and forging a "whole set of spiritual tools, appropriate forms of understanding, worship and expression"<sup>210</sup> and bringing into being "ways of human knowing and obedience to his revelation"<sup>211</sup> which could be used in furthering his self-communication. But Torrance also says that these ways of human knowing and obedience to God's revelation were "assumed into union with it and constituted the human expression in concept and word of that revelation in its communication to man."<sup>212</sup> That is to say, the answering movement from the side of Israel toward God was "taken up into the movement of the Word"<sup>213</sup> or "taken up into the movement of revelation"<sup>214</sup> as a "constitutive part of God's revelation to man."<sup>215</sup> While Torrance points out that the Word of God "was encountered in historic Israel as yet only in its 'formable' state (to borrow an old Augustinian expression), for it was still in the process of taking shape in the habits of the human mind and

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<sup>209</sup> "Salvation is of the Jews," pp. 165-166.

<sup>210</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>211</sup> MED, p. 31.

<sup>212</sup> MED, p. 31. Torrance can speak of this fulfillment of revelation from the side of man toward God as revelation providing "a true and faithful human response as part of its achievement for us, to us and in us" (MED, p. 31). This needs serious qualification. The two-way movement through which there was an organic correlation of revelation and human understanding was only beginning in historic Israel. Strictly speaking, it was only in Christ that the true and faithful response for us, to us and in us was accomplished.

<sup>213</sup> "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 138.

<sup>214</sup> RET, p. 85.

<sup>215</sup> "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 138. See also RET, p. 85. In MED, Torrance comments: "Throughout that persistent and progressive reciprocity which God maintained between himself and Israel, the Word of God addressed to Israel did not return to him fruitless without accomplishing his purpose of succeeding in the task he gave it. For it laid hold upon the mind and will of this people in a creative way which called forth from it responses that were taken up, purified and assimilated to the Word of God as the means of its ever-deepening penetration into the understanding, life and service of Israel, so that it could be bearer of divine revelation for all mankind" (p. 87). Cf. Florovsky's comment: "Human response is integrated into the mystery of the Word of God" (*Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. 1, p. 21).

speech,”<sup>216</sup> he nevertheless contends that through the two-way movement involving corporate reciprocity there arose in Israel “appropriate structures of understanding and articulating the Word of God which were of more than transient value, for under divine inspiration they were assimilated to the human form of the Word of God, essential to its communication and apprehension.”<sup>217</sup>

### (c) Revelation and Reconciliation

It should be clear by this point that in his ‘theology of revelation’ Torrance does not think of divine revelation and Israel as being related extrinsically. God’s self-unveiling did not merely touch the outward garments of Israel’s life and culture “in some tangential fashion, rippling the surface of its moral and religious consciousness.”<sup>218</sup> The revelation of God intersected Israel’s physical existence and, Torrance suggests, “penetrated into the innermost centre of Israel and involved itself in the concrete actuality and locality of its existence in time and space... .”<sup>219</sup> Or, as he states it elsewhere, the Word of God invaded “the social matrix of Israel’s life, culture, religion and history... .”<sup>220</sup> Viewed from Israel’s perspective, Torrance comments that “Israel found itself a people invaded by divine revelation and progressively subjected to its molding and informing power...”<sup>221</sup>

The fulfilling of revelation from the side of God toward Israel and from the side of Israel toward God involved much more than a “sudden or preternatural conveyance of mere information or bare doctrinal theorems,” as H. R. Mackintosh put it.<sup>222</sup> Revelation achieving its end in Israel’s fallen understanding means much more, for Torrance, than an extrinsic and mechanical reception and passing on of spaceless and timeless transcripts, so to speak, on the part of Israel.<sup>223</sup> The revelation of God means the presence of God himself in Israel’s corporate existence. It means “the penetration of the Word of God into the depths of Israel’s being and soul,”<sup>224</sup> the translation of the living Word of God “into the flesh of Israel,” and the restructuring of Israel’s life, thought and behavior.<sup>225</sup>

We have already noted that Torrance thinks of language as the ‘currency of social being,’ or the medium of the interchange of thought and knowledge. Thus, he says: “For new understanding to take root within Israel, it had to take shape within Israel’s language... .”<sup>226</sup> This leads Torrance, as we have seen, to the notion of Israel as the community of reciprocity. It is through the interaction of God with corporate Israel that God’s revelation began to penetrate into human society and take shape in human language. But to this Torrance adds a ‘therefore’ which is of no small

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<sup>216</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 148.

<sup>217</sup> MED, p. 31.

<sup>218</sup> MED, p. 25.

<sup>219</sup> See MED, pp. 25 and RET, pp. 86-87.

<sup>220</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>221</sup> RET, p. 87.

<sup>222</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>223</sup> See MED, p. 24.

<sup>224</sup> MED, p. 17.

<sup>225</sup> “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” in TIRT, p. 145.

<sup>226</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

importance. “For new understanding to take root within Israel, it had to take shape within Israel’s language, and *therefore* it had to remould the inner structure of the society within which that language had its home and had to determine the whole history of Israel’s physical existence.”<sup>227</sup>

Language is not only the currency of social being; its meaning is also bound up with the life and thought of the community. Or, as Torrance says, “human language has its place in the interaction of man’s physical and spiritual existence and functions through the co-ordinate levels of created rationality corresponding to determinate event and personal behaviour.”<sup>228</sup>

If revelation is to achieve its end in human understanding and communion with God, it must do so through the medium of language, for language is the currency of society. But it is not enough, Torrance suggests, for God to hand Israel statements about Himself in Israel’s community language, for that would mean that Israel would be allowed to read its prior “communal meaning,”<sup>229</sup> which, for Torrance, was inevitably pagan and carnal, back into God. This is what Torrance calls mythology—the projecting of natural and fallen human concepts into God.<sup>230</sup> If there is to be a real mediation of revelation in Israel’s language, then the thought and life within which that language has its home must be converted. “New forms of worship, thought, and expression had to be created as the context within which the Word of God could be heard and understanding of it could be established... .”<sup>231</sup> And the establishment of new forms of worship and thought and expression means the deconstruction and transformation of old forms.

Hence through the impact of the Word there were initiated in the tradition of Israel priestly and prophetic movements which entailed critical revision of previous ways of life, worship, and thought in order to break through the barriers of naturalistic and pagan convention that obstructed knowledge of the living God.<sup>232</sup>

We return here to the two-way movement. Throughout, Torrance says,

the course of Israel’s history a two-way movement of the profoundest and most intimate nature was maintained between God and Israel within which the Word of God struggled with Israel’s ways of life and thought and worship in

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<sup>227</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147, my emphasis. See also RET, p. 86.

<sup>228</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 150.

<sup>229</sup> See “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 147.

<sup>230</sup> See *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 47, 37, 69ff.

<sup>231</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, p. 148.

<sup>232</sup> “The Word of God and the Response of Man” in GR, pp. 147-148. “The historical dialogue between God and Israel...was maintained by a concentration of the speaker-hearer relation in a prophetic nucleus within Israelite society through which the Word of God assumed decisive form in the mouth of men and impinged relentlessly upon Israel’s life, interpreting its history, determining its direction, calling it out to be the people or church of God, and opening its future toward the incarnation” (p. 148).

order to break through the barriers of naturalistic and pagan convention that hindered knowledge of the living God...<sup>233</sup>

We have already cited several of Torrance's lengthy summary statements of this movement involving God's unveiling and Israel's response. The present point is that Torrance interprets this movement as the restructuring of Israel's life and thought and expression. That is to say, the mediation of revelation in Israel involved the conversion of Israel's fallen mind *and* way of being.

When we encounter something new to our knowing, our minds go through a process of progressive revision and restructuring as we attempt to grasp and understand and assimilate what we encounter, or what encounters us. "All genuine knowledge involves a cognitive union of the mind with its object, and calls for the removal of any estrangement or alienation that may obstruct or distort it."<sup>234</sup> Israel was called to be the people in whom God earthed knowledge of himself. This meant that Israel, in the course of its history, was caught up in a profound and fundamental conversion of its fallen mind, from paganism to real communion with God. For Torrance, this, however, was not simply a matter of fine tuning Israel's intellectual framework, but of a fundamental deconstruction and transformation of Israel's fallen mind and thought, worship and life, indeed of its whole existence.

On the one hand, Torrance is emphasizing that this transformation was a corporate phenomenon involving corporate Israel's understanding and knowing. On the other hand, he is emphasizing that this conversion was interrelated with Israel's life and being, soul and history. "Knowing God requires cognitive union with him in which our whole being is affected by his love and holiness."<sup>235</sup> Knowing and being, for Torrance, are inseparable. Hence, the persistent struggle between the Word of God and the mind and will and heart of Israel, between Israel and its Lord, and "between the 'ethnic' aspirations to be a nation like the other nations of the earth, and its 'laic' calling to the a people in covenant-communion with God." "Precisely because it was the bearer of divine revelation it could not be a secular nation like the others..."<sup>236</sup> for being the bearer of revelation meant living in a movement of conflict and conformity with the Word of God.

Indeed Torrance contends, with startling words, to be the recipient of divine revelation meant being the "prehistory of the crucifixion and resurrection." "To be the human bearer of divine revelation is to suffer and not only to suffer but to be killed and made alive again, and not only to be made alive but to be continually renewed and refashioned under its creative impact."<sup>237</sup>

So Torrance speaks not just of a revolutionary matrix of thought, ideas, concepts and understanding being forged in Israel but of *Israel* as the "community divinely adapted and constituted as the correlate of God's self-revelation"<sup>238</sup> and of *Israel* as "the matrix for the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ."<sup>239</sup> "God

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<sup>233</sup> "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," p. 88.

<sup>234</sup> MED, pp. 34-35.

<sup>235</sup> MED, pp. 35-36.

<sup>236</sup> "The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit" in TIRT, p. 196.

<sup>237</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>238</sup> MED, p. 24.

<sup>239</sup> MED, p. 42.

mediated his revelation through the totality of Israel's existence and mission, for Israel came into being and has continued to remain what it is precisely as the corporate counterpart to the self-revelation and self-communication of God to mankind."<sup>240</sup>

The mediation of revelation involved the embodiment of revelation in Israel's corporate existence. Israel, Torrance contends, could not be entrusted with the oracles of God "without embodying those oracles in its way of life."<sup>241</sup> Thus, Torrance speaks of the "progressive embodiment" of God's self-revelation to Israel<sup>242</sup> and of Israel becoming "in a unique way the bearers of the oracles of God"<sup>243</sup> or "the bearer of God's Word to mankind and His corporate prophet among the nations of history"<sup>244</sup> or "the human bearer of divine revelation."<sup>245</sup> Moreover, he speaks, again with startling words, of Israel as the pre-history of the incarnation and of the pre-history of the incarnation being "in a profound sense part of the movement of the Incarnation."<sup>246</sup> And of Israel as the people "in whom the Word of God is on the road to becoming flesh."<sup>247</sup> "In that ordeal the Word and the cult were not mere letter and liturgy, but were worked out into the very existence of Israel... ."<sup>248</sup> Thus, he says that "in a profound sense the Word of God within history took the existence-form of Israel."<sup>249</sup> So God-filled is the revelation of God to Israel that in Israel's reception of that revelation Israel is becoming the first form of the incarnation and the kingdom of the triune God.

We have here the point of capital importance in Torrance's thought. There are really three interrelated points. First, Torrance is emphasizing that the unveiling of God to Israel was profoundly personal and real. The revelation of God was not just a set of theological facts rippling the surface of Israel's corporate intellect. For Torrance, revelation does not mean the transmission of mere information about God. Revelation means the personal presence of God himself. To receive the revelation means fellowship and communion—indeed, union with God. The revelation of God

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<sup>240</sup> MED, p. 23.

<sup>241</sup> MED, p. 18. Torrance points out that being the bearers of the oracles of God or the elected medium of God's self-revelation made "Israel stand out as an oddity among the peoples of the earth" and "brought upon Israel intense suffering, physical and mental, in its relations with other peoples" (MED, p. 18). He goes on to say that this is the root of anti-semitism (p. 20).

<sup>242</sup> MED, p. 41.

<sup>243</sup> RET, p. 87.

<sup>244</sup> "The Word of God and the Response of Man" in GR, p. 148. "In seeking to understand the role of Israel in the mediation of revelation, therefore, we must consider, not just Jews, not just this or that prophet or this or that author in the Old Testament Scriptures, but Israel as a whole, 'all Israel', to use St. Paul's expression, that is, Israel as a coherent entity before God... This means that we must think of Israel as itself *the Prophet* sent by God, not just Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, but Israel, while Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and all the prophets are to be understood within the one body which had been brought into a special relationship with God within which it was moulded and structured as the earthen vessel to receive and communicate the Word of God to mankind. It was within Israel constituted in that way that God sent the prophets and out of Israel constituted in that way that the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament were composed and handed down" (MED, p. 23).

<sup>245</sup> "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," p. 88.

<sup>246</sup> "The Israel of God," p. 307.

<sup>247</sup> "Our Oneness in Christ and Disunity as Churches" in CA, vol. 1, p. 266.

<sup>248</sup> "The Israel of God," pp. 308-309.

<sup>249</sup> "Christian/Jewish Dialogue," p. 146.

thus involved the penetration of the Word of God into Israel's corporate being and soul. Hence, we see Torrance's comments about the Word of God being on the road *to becoming flesh* in Israel or about Israel being the *pre-history of the incarnation*. The self-giving of God to Israel was so real, so intimate it began to incarnate itself in Israel through communion.

Second, this 'first form of the incarnation' necessarily made "Israel stand out as an oddity among the other peoples of the earth."<sup>250</sup> As the presence of the Lord began to be embodied in Israel, Israel's way of being could only appear absurd to the fallen and alienated race at large. But the real presence of the Lord and his life not only made Israel strange and different from the nations; it also created conflict with them. "The fact that Israel was called to be the people 'entrusted with the oracles of God,' which it could not be without embodying those oracles in its way of life, brought upon Israel intense suffering, physical and mental, in its relations with other peoples."<sup>251</sup> The very bitterness and enmity that Israel felt in its harrowing relationship with the Lord, the nations around Israel felt because Israel 'embodied' the Lord's presence. Israel became the scapegoat of the world's rage against God. Herein, for Torrance, lies "the root of anti-Semitism;" for it is "against Israel itself that we vent our resentment."<sup>252</sup>

Third, Torrance is emphasizing that the mediation of revelation in Israel necessarily involved *reconciliation*. Here, the critical point is that Israel is fallen, carnal, pagan, and therefore thoroughly alien to God. It is one thing to reflect on the creature knowing the Creator, or the finite receiving the infinite; it is quite another when we add alienation, darkness and estrangement. How could *alienated* Israel receive the revelation of God? How could God reach fallen Israel and alienated Israel actually know God? For Torrance, only through suffering, agony and the most profound and thorough conversion. The self-giving of God has its counterpart not merely in Israel's intellectual understanding, but in Israel's communion with God, and communion with God is the fruit of the radical conversion of Israel—reconciliation.

In the service of his self-communication to humanity God entered into a living communion with Israel. But, as Torrance points out, the covenant relation was not one "between God and a holy people, but precisely the reverse. It was a covenant established out of pure grace between God and Israel in its sinful, rebellious and estranged existence."<sup>253</sup> Therefore, as God unveiled Himself to Israel, as revelation revealed and uncovered God to Israel, his self-revelation clashed with Israel's "carnal mind,"<sup>254</sup> and with its "innate resistance," and "in-built bias,"<sup>255</sup> and with Israel's "naturalistic patterns of human thought."<sup>256</sup> As Torrance says, "divine revelation was as a fire in the mind and soul and memory of Israel burning away all that was in

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<sup>250</sup> MED, p. 18.

<sup>251</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>252</sup> MED, p. 21.

<sup>253</sup> MED, p. 37.

<sup>254</sup> MED, p. 19.

<sup>255</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>256</sup> MED, p. 21.

conflict with God's holiness, mercy and truth."<sup>257</sup> The "purity of divine truth and love steadily consumed the alien preconceptions which Israel inevitably brought to its reception and understanding of the Word of God."<sup>258</sup>

The point of supreme importance here is that for Torrance, the unveiling of God to Israel is a real unveiling of *God* not just of facts about God, but *God himself*. God is the content of the unveiling. And it is an unveiling of God himself to real Israel, *carnal* and *fallen* Israel, Israel *estranged* and *alienated* from God and at *enmity* with God.

The more deeply the Word of God penetrated into the innermost depths of Israel's existence and embodied itself within it, the more it seemed to burn like fire in its bones until the great prophets who were burdened with the Word of the Lord cried out in agony. To be the bearer of divine revelation is to suffer, and not only to suffer but to be killed and made alive again, and not only to be made alive but to be continually renewed and refashioned under its creative impact. That is the pre-history of the crucifixion and resurrection of Israel in Jesus.<sup>259</sup>

The covenant relationship was one of grace and mercy and life, to be sure, but, given Israel's alienation, it was also one of pain and agony, for Israel's fallen existence was thrown into the fiery furnace of God's presence.

For Torrance, it is unthinkable to separate the revelation of God from the reconciliation of fallen humanity, as if the one involves mere information and the other mere external sacrifice. "Thus knowledge of God and reconciliation with him interpenetrate each other and establish each other. For God to reveal is to reconcile, and for man to receive revelation is to be reconciled to God."<sup>260</sup> So he speaks of the inseparability of revelation and reconciliation,<sup>261</sup> of the "intertwining of reconciliation and revelation"<sup>262</sup> and of "revelation and reconciliation" proceeding "together throughout the course of its unique mission in history...".<sup>263</sup> The mediation of revelation achieves its end only through turning the soul and mind of Israel "inside out."<sup>264</sup> Revelation and reconciliation go together and are inseparable as surely as it is God who gives *himself* to Israel and it is *fallen* Israel who is summoned into communion with God.

### **The Womb of the Incarnation**

We have seen that for Torrance creation is the act of the overflowing love and grace of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the determined purpose of sharing the

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<sup>257</sup> MED, p. 18.

<sup>258</sup> MED, p. 34.

<sup>259</sup> MED, p. 20.

<sup>260</sup> Introduction to *A Calvin Treasury*, p. xi.

<sup>261</sup> See MED, p. 15.

<sup>262</sup> MED, p. 34.

<sup>263</sup> MED, p. 36.

<sup>264</sup> MED, p. 20.

trinitarian life with the human race. With the fall of Adam and the shattering of communion between humanity and God, the ‘original’ purpose of God becomes an ‘eschatological goal.’ Israel is viewed as elected by God from out of the mass of fallen humanity to be the mediator of his great purpose of restoration for all.

In the first instance, the attention falls upon the re-establishment of ‘the one all-embracing covenant of the overflowing love of God’ with Israel and the provision of the covenanted or vicarious way of response to God through which Israel could come freely into the presence of God. But this divinely provided and vicarious response was to be translated into the flesh and blood of Israel’s existence if it was to move beyond mere ritual into personal reality.

In the second instance, the attention falls upon the mediation of revelation. As a basic concept, revelation involves both the unveiling of God to Israel and the uncovering of the eye and ear of Israel to know God. Torrance sees this as forming a very real, yet agonizing fellowship between God and Israel in which the unveiling of God is pressing to achieve its end in true and faithful human knowing—communion. It is as the unveiling of God is met with a true human knowing from the side of Israel that the mediation of revelation will have completed the circle of its own movement, and real fellowship with God and his fallen creation will be restored.

But the mediation of revelation involves the unveiling of *God* to *carnal* Israel and thus revelation achieves its end only in and through real reconciliation. The covenant relationship is so real and personal that it forms a fiery and agonizing fellowship in which the living and personal Word of God is beginning to penetrate Israel’s alienated corporate being and life, and has its counterpart in the reconciliation of Israel’s knowing and being—new covenant, kingdom, salvation. In Israel the living ‘Word is on the road to becoming flesh.’ The history of Israel is the ‘pre-history of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.’ Indeed, Israel’s history is the first form, as it were, of the Word’s assumption of our fallen flesh and of incarnational atonement.

In his vision of the necessary integration of revelation and reconciliation, Torrance is steering a way behind Western extrinsic legalism toward a thoroughly relational and incarnational understanding of the work of Christ. Israel’s history prepares for the incarnation of the Lord himself, the Father’s eternal Son. He will enter into Israel’s existence, and into Israel’s side of the covenant relationship, taking Israel’s place before the Father. Unlike Israel and Adam, Jesus will love the Father with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength. In Jesus, the trinitarian life will set up shop, so to speak, in Israel, and as he lives out nothing less than his own sonship, the one all-embracing covenant of grace will be filled—on Israel’s side—with the Son’s own sonship and life and anointing with the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself—in his incarnate life with his Father and as the anointed one—will become the covenanted way of communion—the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), for Israel and for all humanity. The original purpose of God, which birthed creation and called Israel into covenant relationship, will at last be fulfilled from inside Adam’s fall.

Representing Israel—and in Israel, the human race—Jesus will be the vicarious man in whom the provisional way of communion with God will be made abidingly and eternally real for all people. The relationship between God and Israel will be filled with the trinitarian life—forever.

In the history of Israel, God prepares a womb for the incarnation of His Son. To this point we have seen that this womb involves the creation of a revolutionary conceptual framework, forged out of Israel's fallen mind, through which the human race can begin to perceive and know God. And we have seen, that for Torrance, it is impossible for revelation to be detached from Israel's soul and corporate being, and indeed from Israel's relationship with creation. This creates a harrowing and painful ordeal for Israel, for the presence of the Lord is profoundly disturbing, creating conflict with everything Israel is in its alienation. The womb of the incarnation, in its deepest sense, involves fallen Israel's wholesale conflict with the Lord himself, as his self-revelation clashes with Israel's alienation.

Two critical questions emerge here. The first concerns the ground or basis of Jesus becoming the vicarious man, the substitute and representative of Israel and of the human race. The second concerns the relationship between 'the covenanted way of communion' and 'the mediation of revelation.' As we probe into these two questions we will come to the heart of Torrance's vision of Israel as the womb of the incarnation and reconciling work of Christ.

#### (a) The Ground of Jesus' Vicarious Humanity

Torrance is critical of Western extrinsic legalism and the way Jesus' substitution on the cross is liable to the accusation of legal fiction.<sup>265</sup> What is the basis of Jesus suffering in our place? How does what happens to Jesus have any real application to us? What is the connection between Jesus' suffering and guilty sinners? What is the ground of his substitution? While these are difficult questions for the legal tradition, the same questions face Torrance. What is the ground of Jesus becoming the vicarious man? Again and again Torrance speaks of Israel's 'vicarious mission,' and of the 'provisional form of communion' in Israel for all peoples. But what is the basis for positing Israel's vicarious role? What is the real connection between Israel and the nations? Similarly, what qualifies Jesus, so to speak, to become our representative and substitute, and how real is his substitution? Is his vicarious humanity simply the fruit of God's command, the product of an arbitrary divine decision that this is the way things would be structured? If so, how far is this position from the fiction of the legal model?

Torrance, following John and Paul and the author of Hebrews (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16ff; Hebrews 1:1-3), believes Jesus to be the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are constantly upheld. While the incarnation means that the Father's Son became a real human being, it is not to be overlooked that the one who became human was no ordinary person, but the Creator and sustainer of all things. As the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained, Jesus is the one who already has a connection with everyone in history and indeed with all creation—prior to the incarnation. His coming means the coming of the Lord, the connected one, the coming of the one in whom all creation exists, lives, moves and has its being. This is the proper

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<sup>265</sup> See "Cheap and Costly Grace" in GR, pp. 63ff; MED, pp. 50ff and STR, p. 63.

theological ground for the vicarious humanity of Christ.<sup>266</sup> When the Father's Son himself steps personally into human existence, he does so not as an isolated, radical individual, but as the one who is already connected to all creation, already the source and sustainer of creation's existence and life—including the human race. The question is not, 'on what ground could Jesus be our substitute and representative?' The question is, 'on what ground could it be any other way?'

Given who he is, what becomes of him has immediate and profound implications for the human race and all creation. If he dies, we die. If he rises again, we rise again. If he ascends to the Father, humanity and all creation ascends to the Father in him. Jesus' existence as the Son incarnate is vicarious. His incarnate relationships with his Father and with the Holy Spirit are inclusive.

It is one thing, however, to clarify the ground or basis of Jesus' vicarious life and solidarity with us in the fact that he is the one in and through and for and by whom all things were created and are sustained, but that still leaves Jesus too removed from us in our fallen state. He is our representative and our substitute, and we are included in him and what becomes of him, but how does our inclusion actually reach us in our alienation? While Jesus is not merely an external divine gift that is credited to our account in heaven, neither is he merely the one in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the one who crosses all worlds and meets us in our alienation.

One of the most powerful themes throughout Torrance's writings is his unrelenting insistence that Jesus Christ assumed our fallen flesh, without sin. Given that Jesus Christ is the Creator—the one in and through and by and for whom all things came into being and are sustained—we can see the connection that he has with the human race. But we not only live and move and have our being in him; we are thoroughly fallen and alien to his life. For Torrance, the vicarious humanity of Christ is of no value at all unless it actually reaches us in our sin and shame. Hence, he insists, with the early Church, that 'the unassumed is the unhealed.' Jesus not only became a true human being; he became *flesh*. "When the Son of God came into this world He laid hold of our humanity which had gone astray and corrupted itself. He the Holy and Sinless One assumed our 'flesh of sin' . . ." <sup>267</sup> "The incarnation of the Son must be regarded as the entry of the Mediator into a situation where the communion between God and man is broken and distorted, where the divisiveness of sin and guilt has affected the very fabric of human existence." <sup>268</sup>

This affirmation of the Son's assumption of our fallen flesh is not relegated to obscure footnotes. It appears in explicit form at least sixty-six times in Torrance's writings, and in at least nineteen different publications. <sup>269</sup> Torrance does not sweep it

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<sup>266</sup> For more on the ground of the vicarious humanity of Christ, see my essays, "The Truth of All Truths," and "The Cosmic Christ." These essays are available at <[www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org)>.

<sup>267</sup> WCC, p. 73.

<sup>268</sup> STR, p. 47.

<sup>269</sup> See STR, pp. 47-50, 53f, 75, 79; MED, pp. 48-53, 75f, 81, 92, 98; TIRT, pp. 156f, 198, 241; SF, p. lxxxv; WCC, pp. 20, 41, 73, 74, 106, 107, 165; CA, vol. 1, pp. 240f, 244f, 253; CA, vol. 2, pp. 90, 130; GR, p. 143; TCFK, p. 341; TIRC, pp. 167-169; *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 4, 133, 157, 162f, 168, 183-188, 267; *The Centrality of Christ*, pp. 17ff; "The Atoning Obedience of Christ," pp. 66ff, 75; "The Arnoldshain Theses on Holy Communion," pp. 12; "Reconciliation in Christ and in His Church," pp. 30f; "Service in Jesus Christ," pp. 4-7; "The Mission of the Church," p. 129; "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy," pp. 473-476; "Christ's Human Nature," p. 114. See also the unpublished sermon, "The

under the carpet of vague allusion and neither does he mention it in passing in some kind of hurried and embarrassed reservation. He brings it right to the unavoidable center of his writing and sees that the whole mediation of Christ hinges upon the Son's taking to himself our fallen humanity, to deny which, he contends, "is to deny the very foundation of our redemption in Christ."<sup>270</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental truth which we have to learn in the Christian Church, or rather relearn since we have suppressed it, is that the Incarnation was the coming of God to save us in the heart of our *fallen* and *depraved* humanity, where humanity is at its wickedest in its enmity and violence against the reconciling love of God. That is to say, the Incarnation is to be understood as the coming of God to take upon himself our fallen human nature, our actual human existence laden with sin and guilt, our humanity diseased in mind and soul in its estrangement or alienation from the Creator.<sup>271</sup>

The assumption of our fallen humanity, without sin, means that the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained has now reached not only our humanness, but our humanness in its carnal, alienated and broken form.

#### (b) The Intensification of Israel's Conflict with God

Such a vision is as beautiful as it is shocking. The Father's Son himself became what we are, assuming not a pristine, pre-fallen form of our humanity, but our fallen flesh itself. In living out his sonship within Adam's flesh, he brought the trinitarian life within Adam's hell and Israel's agony. There remains, however, a real question as to the relevance of Jesus' triumph for us. The problem, it seems to me, lies in the fact that the trinitarian life earthed in Adam's fall in Jesus Christ remains contained, so to speak, in him. He knows the Father and life in his embrace, and he experiences the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and has brought his life within our fallen humanity, but in what way does all that Jesus is and has reach us personally?

In turning to our second question, we can see the way forward. What is the relationship between the 'covenanted way of communion' and 'the mediation of revelation'? Are these two *different* and *non-related* lines of thought in Torrance's discussion of Israel, or are they interrelated? While Torrance himself does not explicitly relate or interrelate the two different aspects of his discussion of Israel, it is obvious that he assumes a profound interrelation. The 'covenanted way of communion' had to be 'translated into the flesh and blood of Israel.' The 'mediation of revelation' involved 'reconciliation' as its counterpart. When Torrance sets out his discussion of the mediation of revelation, in which the unveiling of God is pressing to achieve its end in human knowing through reconciliation, he is essentially

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Reconciliation of Mind," pp. 5ff and his unpublished lecture "The Hypostatic Union."

<sup>270</sup> "Romans and Reform" in CA, vol. 1, p. 175.

<sup>271</sup> MED, pp. 48-49, his emphasis.

reinterpreting the history of Israel *as* the covenanted way of communion already being translated into reality in fallen Israel. The ritual is already on the road to becoming flesh. The kingdom is already coming. The mediation of revelation, with all of its fiery conflict and gut-wrenching struggle, is the covenanted way of communion being translated into the flesh and blood of Israel's existence.

The two-way movement, or the unveiling of God and the knowing response of Israel, or the giving and receiving of revelation, forms, as it were, *the way of salvation*, the way real communion between God and fallen creation is being restored. What Torrance is actually saying is that in Israel the incarnation of the Son of God is already beginning to happen. This extraordinary relationship is so real, so intensely personal it produces a four-fold fruit.

First, the relationship between God and carnal Israel means that Israel's fallen mind is thrown into the fiery furnace of divine revelation and a new and revolutionary world of thought begins to emerge, a matrix of unparalleled concepts and ideas about God, about divine-human relationship, about covenant, salvation and kingdom, which is thoroughly 'human' but no less 'appropriate' to God, begins to form in Israel's corporate life. This new and revolutionary world of thought is the human conceptual correlate to God's self-giving—the new eyes through which humanity can begin to see and know God.

Second, insofar as Israel is able to receive the self-giving of God, the kingdom emerges in her corporate existence. "This is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God..."(John 17:3). To fellowship with God is to know God and to share in God's life, which is shalom. Thus, in Israel's real fellowship with the Lord, the Lord's abounding life begins to express itself in Israel's corporate existence. The kingdom of the triune God is beginning to emerge in Israel's family relationships and in Israel's relationship with creation.

Third, the extraordinary relationship between Israel and God makes Israel stand out as an oddity among the nations. The covenant was not between God and a perfect people, but between God and a broken people. But as Israel walked with God, her language and way of being, her culture and vision began to embody and express the divine fellowship and life, which not only made Israel different, it also called forth hostility from the nations. As the presence of God's life in Israel exposed Israel's own bankruptcy, Israel's presence exposed the bankruptcy of the nations around her. For Torrance, Israel became the international scapegoat upon whom alienated humanity poured out its wrath against God.

Fourth, insofar as fallen Israel was unable to walk with the Lord or to receive his self-revelation, there is painful conflict and rebellion. How could fallen, alien, carnal Israel possibly bear the Lord's real presence? It was too much.

It is here that Torrance's thoughts on Israel leads us behind Western extrinsic, legalism into a truly incarnational vision of reconciliation.<sup>272</sup> We return here to reflect more carefully on Torrance's insistence that the Israel involved in covenant relationship with the Lord is thoroughly *fallen*. Thus, as we have seen, for Torrance the revelation of God necessarily has its counterpart in the *reconciliation* of Israel's being and thought. And Torrance can, at points, write as though the reconciliation of

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<sup>272</sup> See my essay, "Bearing Our Scorn: Jesus and the Way of Trinitarian Love." This essay is available on our website <[www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org)>.

Israel was all but complete. That, however, is not his main point at all. In Israel we are dealing only with the *preparation* of the womb of the incarnation (or of the womb of reconciliation, salvation or the kingdom). And this preparation involves not only the beginnings of revelation and reconciliation, and the consequent revolutionary theological categories and ideas that emerged in Israel, and not only the restructuring of Israel's very way of being and the emergence of the kingdom of God; the preparation also involves *the deliberate intensification of Israel's conflict with God*.<sup>273</sup>

So long as the cords of the covenant were not drawn tight, and God remained, so to speak, at a distance, the conflict was not very sharp, but the closer God drew near the more the human self-will of Israel asserted itself in resistance to its divine vocation. Thus the more fully God gave himself to this people, the more he forced it to be what it actually was, what we all are, in the self-willed isolation of fallen humanity from God. Thus the movement of God's reconciling love toward Israel not only revealed Israel's sin but intensified it.<sup>274</sup>

To be the recipient of divine revelation means to walk with God himself, and that means both seeing the light of life and finding hope, and feeling the pain of being stripped naked with all of your illusions laid bare. The presence of the Lord meant there was no where for fallen Israel to hide. But who wants to be exposed? Who wants to have their dirty laundry aired, so to speak, before the world? Who can bear the light of life? Adam hid. Israel couldn't, for the Lord would not go away. And his presence meant that the raw nerve of Israel's death and dying and sadness were inevitably jabbed, sending Israel into rebellion, "for the more deeply revelation pierces into the roots of human being the more it intensifies the enmity of the human heart against God."<sup>275</sup>

That intensification, however, is not to be regarded simply as an accidental result of the covenant but rather as something which God deliberately took into the full design of his reconciling activity, for it was the will and the way of God's grace to effect reconciliation with man at his very worst, precisely in his state of rebellion against God. That is to say, in his marvelous wisdom and love God worked out in Israel a way of reconciliation which does not depend on the worth of men and women, but makes their very sin in rebellion against him the means by which he binds them for ever to himself and through which he reconstitutes their relations with him in such a way that their true end is fully and perfectly realised in unsullied communion with himself.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Parts of this section come from my essay, "Bearing Our Scorn: Jesus and the Way of Trinitarian Love." This essay is available on our website <[www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org)>.

<sup>274</sup> MED p. 38.

<sup>275</sup> MED, p. 21.

<sup>276</sup> MED, p. 38. See also, "Israel and the Incarnation," p. 6ff.

The astonishing point here is that Israel's rebellion was actually anticipated and strategically included in the way of reconciliation. The Lord knew that Israel would not be able to cope with his presence, and would rebel, rejecting not simply its calling, but the Lord himself. It is this conflict, indeed this rebellion of Israel and Israel's rejection of the Lord, all of which was deliberately stirred up by God, that Torrance sees at the heart of reconciliation.

“Reconciliation means sharing in all that the other is.”<sup>277</sup> But how could the Lord share in Israel's estrangement and alienation? How could the Lord bridge the gap and truly meet fallen Israel? To be sure, as we have seen, the Lord reaches out in accommodating love and patience with Israel, but such accommodation could only take the relationship so far. If real reconciliation is to take shape in Israel, all the alienation of the Adam's fall has to come to the surface. But how? How will the Lord possibly get to the bottom of Adam's fall and so bring about ultimate reconciliation?

Inconceivable as it may sound, the answer is by the Lord himself suffering Israel's wrath and rejection. “If the covenant partnership of Israel with God meant not only that the conflict of Israel with God became intensified but was carried to its supreme point in the fulfilment of the Covenant, then Israel under God could do no other but refuse the Messiah.”<sup>278</sup> And here, Torrance says, “we must clap our hands upon our mouth and speak only in fear and trembling within the forgiving love of God—Israel was elected also to reject the Messiah.”<sup>279</sup> The deepest meaning of the ‘womb of the incarnation’ is the rebellion of Israel against God, and indeed Israel's bitter rejection of the Lord himself. And it is this rejection that the Lord will suffer in person in the incarnate Son.

In Jesus Christ, the Lord comes in person into Israel's fallen existence. As throughout the covenant relationship, his presence stirred up Israel's fallen animosity and enmity, but in his incarnate presence, that animosity and enmity reaches a boiling point. Israel's response, our response—the response of the human race—to the personal presence of the Lord was intense and simple—*Crucify Him!* And we did.

Pouring our wrath and resentment, our bitterness and pain out upon Jesus, he refused to retaliate or call upon legions of angels, deliberately and willfully becoming the scapegoat for our enmity against God. We cursed the Father's Son and damned him. As he bowed before our scorn, suffering personally from our wrath, he met and embraced Israel and humanity in the trenches of our fallen, broken, traumatic existence.

For Torrance, revelation inevitably means reconciliation, and reconciliation means incarnation. Incarnation means becoming what we are. Becoming what we are means suffering from our darkness and wrath. Suffering our wrath means the Lord himself meets us and embraces us as we are at our very worst. In becoming human, submitting himself to our wrongheaded darkness, and allowing Israel and humanity to reject and crucify him, the Father's Son cut the covenanted way of communion into very core of human alienation from God. In bowing to suffer our

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<sup>277</sup> “Reconciliation in Christ and in His Church,” p. 31.

<sup>278</sup> MED, p. 43.

<sup>279</sup> MED, p. 43.



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