T.F. Torrance and *The Mediation of Revelation*

a review of chapter I, *The Mediation of Christ*

Torrance commences this chapter by addressing a subject prominent in his writings, the problem of dualism, in which he sees reality as 'torn apart' and in which 'the very essence of the Christian Gospel is at stake'. This is an issue which continues to be of concern, with evidences of dualism seen in much of the contemporary Church's faith. One example is the doctrine of Holy Scripture, in which the writings of the Bible are given a discrete authority, divorced from that of the Holy Spirit, thus creating two centres of authority within the church. The emphasis by Bloesch and others on the Reformation doctrine of Word and Spirit is an important corrective to a doctrinal position which marks off contemporary fundamentalism from historic Evangelical orthodoxy. Torrance commends modern science for correcting this way of thinking by its developing of 'dynamic, relational and holistic ways of thinking' which encourage investigations which address both the interrelations and the internal relations of things.

**Christ in Context**

As applied to the person of Jesus Christ Torrance sets forth a two-fold approach.

1. Christ is to be understood in terms of 'the actual interrelations from which he sprang', i.e. His context, both immediate and historical – Son of David, Son of Mary, and member of the covenant community, Israel

2. He is to be understood in terms of himself – his 'internal relations with God' and his nature as he has disclosed it to us in his words and deeds. Thus we move away from establishing an external, 'alien framework' into which we endeavour to fit the subject, in favour of what Torrance sees as a more scientific approach, viz. The inter-relations and internal reality of this subject.

Torrance sees this process at work in the New Testament Church in its coming to understand the person of the Risen Christ. There was no external 'grid' which would give the early Christians an 'orthodox' understanding of what had taken place at the Resurrection and who the Risen Christ was. Rather they had the existential realities of the post-resurrection appearances, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, and the prior teachings of Jesus as to his impending death and resurrection. Beyond these factors the 'Apostles and Fathers' were able to place all of this within the context of Israel. These insights led the young Church to understand that Jesus was ‘incarnate Son of God and Saviour of the world.’

This brings Torrance to his main subject in this chapter, viz. 'the mediation of Christ from the perspective of his intimate and intense involvement with Israel.' Torrance does not, in affirming the significance of Israel, pursue the path developed in recent years by several New Testament scholars (in particular those engaged in the *New Perspectives on Paul*) which at times comes close to postulating the existence of two covenant communities, Israel and the Church, creating yet another dualism with Christian theology. However, as we shall see later, his position could be seen to point in that direction.
The 'Tools' of Theology

Torrance suggests that the ability to grasp the content of divine revelation bears a resemblance to all tasks – the proper tools are required. He likens the theologian's task to that of the scientist who, as fresh discoveries are made, must 'forge new mental instruments and invent new symbolic languages' to deal with those discoveries. This is, of course, precisely what fundamentalism and much confessional theology resists. In these circles theology tends to be pursued using the tools of earlier centuries. This elicits the criticism that a major flaw of 'evangelical' theology is that it knows precisely what the results will be before the quest has commenced. To arrive at a point other than the putative 'orthodox' position is unthinkable. For this reason Torrance has come under fire from many within the Reformed and evangelical traditions.

For Torrance the 'tools' of theology are not only 'new mental instruments'; they include 'worthy habits of worship and behaviour governing our approach to him.” One is reminded of his emphasis in other places on eusebeia, the 'godliness' of the Nicene Fathers which caused them to combine orthodoxy with doxology. Torrance's talk of a scientific theology evokes the image of a cold and clinical approach to faith. But the facts are otherwise. For him proper worship and godliness are intrinsic to a scientific approach to the knowledge of God. To approach God in a worshipful spirit in acknowledgement of his holiness is to begin at the point at which God has revealed himself, and this for Torrance is what is means to be 'scientific'.

God's Relationship with Israel

Using what he describes as anthropomorphic languages, Torrance sees God as acting upon Israel in specific ways in order to make it the vehicle of his revelation:

1. He selected Israel – 'a tiny race out of the whole mass of humanity' (p.7)
2. He subjected it to 'intensive interaction and dialogue with himself'
3. He shaped it, as did the potter in Jeremiah's vision, in order to make it of service in revelation to all of humankind.
4. He 'established a special partnership of covenant kinship with Israel' so that in its subsequent history it could be the vehicle of revelation.
5. He provided Israel with 'spiritual tools', i.e. 'appropriate forms of understanding, worship, and expression' (p.5). These would enable Israel to understand God as God was in his true nature, and not as speculative thought supposed him to be.

The two-fold purpose for this unique relationship with Israel was that
1. an 'apprehension of God could be made accessible to human beings' and that
2. 'a knowledge of God could take root in the soil of humanity' (p.7)

Like Barth, Torrance held that God could not be comprehended (intellectual grasp) but that he could be apprehended (experiential knowledge).
To make possible this apprehension and knowledge God initiated a two-way movement:

1. Divine revelation was adapted to the human mind
2. articulate forms of understanding and language were similarly adapted

God thus adapted his own being, as it were, to make it possible for us to apprehend him whilst at the same time providing us with the needed capacities to respond to him. Torrance speaks of this process as 'the penetration of the Word of God into the depths of Israel's being in such a way that it took human shape and yet in such a way that the human response it called forth was so locked into the Word of God that it was used as the vehicle of further address on the part of that Word to
Thus the Word entered into the life of Israel, elicited a response from Israel, and within that relationship continued progressively to provide revelation to Israel. This progressive revelation took place within a process which involved pain, sin, backsliding, chastisement, out of which emerged a record of that revelation, the Old Testament Scriptures, and in which was strengthened that covenant bond between God and his chosen people.

This caused Israel to be unique among the nations and for it to be seen as an “oddity”. Not only was Israel the medium of God's revelation to humankind; it embodied it. Hence it was a suffering servant for whom 'divine revelation was a fire in (its) mind and the soul and memory burning away all that was in conflict with God's holiness, mercy, and truth” (p.8). Israel passed through God's refining fire in order to destroy 'ingrained habits of human thought' – not just Israel's thought but that of humankind generally – and to replace these with the new 'tools' – new ways of thinking, understanding and speaking. In all of this God was not merely orchestrating events from afar; he had made possible an encounter between himself and Israel, and was working within Israel to make it a worthy vehicle of that revelation which would culminate in the coming of Christ. That ultimate revelation would take place within the life and faith of Israel but would reach out beyond Israel to all of humankind and would in that God/man embrace all of humankind. In that event “all humanity was gathered up, transformed and fulfilled once for all” (p.9)

Torrance's “once for all” takes him beyond the confines of the limited atonement doctrine of his Reformed tradition. For high Calvinism, Christ's work was “once” but not “for all”. Christ died for the elect. He has a wider view of Christ's work. Indeed he does not see Christ's work as simply providing some sort of provisional blessing for all. Something specific took place in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that has a definite affect upon every person. As he says, “Jesus Christ constitutes in himself the Way, the Truth and the Life through whom alone access to God the Father is freely open for all the peoples of mankind”(p.9). At very least, each person is now so positioned as to be able to have access to God, in Christ, by the Spirit.

In Christ God is revealed. At the same time Christ makes the perfect human response to God. This he did vicariously. Thus whereas evangelical orthodoxy sees our justification in terms of Christ's righteousness, Torrance expands this position by seeing Christ as representing us in repentance, faith and obedience. Even though Torrance doesn't refer to it, I see the possibility of the baptism of Jesus by John being viewed as representative in the sense that one of us has made a perfect act of repentance. This accords with Torrance's understanding of Christ's vicarious humanity.

Torrance considers the role of Israel as recipient of mediator of revelation from four perspectives:

1. The covenant partnership between God and Israel involved a running conflict between divine revelation and what St Paul called 'the carnal nature' (p.10)

The relationship between Israel and God is seen as a 'love-hate' relationship. God continually blesses, acts in grace, and communicates with Israel. The story of Israel, on the other hand, is one of backsliding and rebellion as well as devotion and worship. In this Israel represents humankind with its 'latent enmity toward God'. The great truth that emerges in all of this is that God's revelation is conveyed in spite of Israel's waywardness. Indeed, in the act of revelation God not only discloses himself and his truth, he 'uncovers the ear and the heart of man to receive revelation” (p.11).

As representative of us all, Israel is resented, says Torrance. And this is 'the root of anti-semitism.' We don't like what we see in Israel. It too much resembles what we see in ourselves. Whether or not this is valid psychology, it nevertheless remains true that our 'carnal nature' with its Romans 7 ambivalence -is reflected in the life of Israel in its troubled relationship with God. When we look into the Old Testament and observe Israel, we look into a mirror. Thus, says Torrance, we 'must go
to school with Israel' to experience that renewing of the mind which only comes about as we break free from our 'carnal' ways of thinking.

Torrance is suggesting that God's self-revelation came within the context of Israel's pain and rebellion (i.e. It's 'carnal nature'). The broader principle is, of course, that God continues to make himself known to us within the context of our pain and rebellion ('carnal nature'), using them in a disciplinary way as with Israel, and healing and cleansing us, in order to make us 'partakers of his holiness' (Heb. 12:11).

2. The Election of Israel by God took the form of a community of reciprocity (p.12)

God both 'accommodates' himself to our human understanding and enables us, with our human understanding, to apprehend his self-revelation. This involves reciprocity. It also involves community. While much of the biblical teaching on prayer is addressed to the individual, ultimately it has a communal significance, prompting us to pray, 'Our Father.'

God makes his revelation known to, and through, the covenant community. Thus it is not just Isaiah or Jeremiah, but Israel as a community, to whom and through whom God speaks prophetically to the wider world. For Torrance, this means not only that Israel was the medium of divine revelation, but that it is that medium. While risking the charge of propounding a duality – the very thing Torrance so opposed - He speaks of Israel as 'a kind of church', an *ethnos*, 'a people chosen by God', which idea runs counter the the generally held supersessionist or 'replacement' view regarding Israel.

I am reminded of something said by Karl Barth to a group of German students at the close of World War II:

> Do you know the story in which the significance of the Jewish nation is best summarised? Frederick the Great once asked his personal physician Zimmermann of Brugg in Aargau: 'Zimmerman, can you name me a single proof of the existence of God?' And Zimmerman replied, 'Your Majesty, the Jews!' By that he meant that if one wanted to ask for a proof of God, for something visible and tangible, that no one could contest, which is unfolded before the eyes of all men, then we should have to turn to the Jews. Quite simply, they are to the present day. Hundreds of little nations in the Near East have disappeared, all other Semitic tribes of that time have dissolved and disappeared in the huge sea of nations; and this one tiny nation has maintained itself. And when we to-day think of Semitism or anti-Semitism, we think of the tiny nation, which remarkably still keeps to the fore, is still recognisable, physically and spiritually, so that again we can say that this man is a non-Aryan or else that he is a half or quarter non-Aryan. In fact, if the question of a proof of God is raised, one need merely point to this simple historical fact. For in the person of the Jews there stands a witness before our eyes, the witness of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in that way with us all. Even one who does not understand Holy Scripture can see this reminder.

And don't you see, the remarkable theological .... significance of the National Socialism that now lies behind us is that right from its roots it was anti-Semitic, that in this movement it was realised with a simply demonic clarity, that the enemy is the *Jew*. Yes, the enemy in this matter had to be a Jew. In this Jewish nation there really lives to this day the extraordinariness of the revelation of God. (*Dogmatics in Outline*, p.75f).

The important point in all of this is that the Christian revelation must be understood within the context of its historic roots, i.e. The story of ancient Israel. The Scriptures of both Testaments cannot be seen as 'free-floating' – they came into being within the covenant community and are not understood unless interpreted against the background of ancient Israel.
3. God's revelation came to Israel in such a way that it intersected and integrated its spiritual and physical reality  (p.15)

Revelation was not the impartation of disembodied propositions. It cannot be divorced from the lives and the land of the people Israel. Revelation was 'embodied'. The Bible differs from the Koran precisely because it is not simply a catalogue of propositions. “The Word became flesh”. God's self-revelation is known within the life of ancient Israel as God reveals 'spiritual' truth within physical activities. The Incarnation is thus not altogether a new thing. It is the ultimate expression of the fact that God has chosen to reveal himself through human means and to place his treasure in 'jars of clay'.

The point here is obvious. God does not endorse docetism. The spiritual and the physical cannot be torn asunder. God's self revelation is via the physical events in the life of Israel; God's work in our lives has to do with our “whole spirit, and soul, and body” (I Thess. 5:23).

Again, to see God's revelatory and redeeming work in the concept of the lives of real people and not merely as doctrinal concepts is to be reminded that for Torrance, salvation is a personal thing; it is 'access to the Father.' Here, as elsewhere, he follows J.McLeod Campbell's thought. The latter wrote:

.... while we should be thankful for the power which the atonement has over men's spirits, even when only partially understood and in part misconceived of, and thankful that justification, adoption, and sanctification are recognised in men's systems, though the relation in which these stand to the the atonement be artifical rather than natural, yet should we feel it desirable to attain, if it may be, to that fuller apprehension of the great work of God in Christ which will render it to us a full-orbed revelation of God, and a manifestation, not of the rectitude of of the moral Governor of the universe merely, but of the heart of the Eternal Father – connecting itself naturally with our our justification, adoption, and sanctification, and all that pertains to our participation in the eternal life which is the gift of the Father in the Son. (The Nature of The Atonement, p. 104).

4. God's revelation of himself through the medium of Israel has provided mankind with permanent structures of thought and speech about him  (p.17)

Anticipating the current emphasis on Post-modernism, Torrance notes that people today do not like to talk about permanent structures. And he concedes that 'Holy Scriptures themselves are characterised by features that have only time-conditioned significance.' He nevertheless sees non-negotiable structures – terminology which becomes not only part of the revelation but also the 'tools' referred to previously. This terminology includes: the Word and Name of God, revelation, mercy, truth, holiness, messiah, saviour, prophet, priest, king, father, son, servant, covenant, sacrifice, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and atonement. Jesus is understood within the context of this terminology. “It was because God mediated his revelation to mankind in that patient, informing way through the history of Israel and within the interpretative framework of its relation with God in salvation and worship, that people were able in that context to know God in Jesus and enter into communion with him, and to proclaim him to the world” (p.19).

Because the setting for revelation is Jewish, Torrance is critical of all who attempt to make Jesus into a Gentile or to create a 'Jesus' who fits with their particular culture or sub-culture. He calls on his readers to see Jesus 'as he really is – a Jew', and to 'enlist the aid of the Jews in helping us to interpret Jesus as he is actually presented in the Jewish Scriptures' (p.20).
Torrance points to the significance of the Second Commandment in Jewish theology and thought, and sees this as one way in which 'the Jewish mind can help us'. God, he says, is imageless. The descriptive and illustrative 'creaturely images' in the Bible enable us to understand God's nature, but they do not depict God. Western thinking, Torrance notes, moves from the seen to the unseen, whereas it is important to realise that in scientific enquiry the opposite direction must be taken because 'objectives realities' are quite often non-observable. Torrance notes that it has often been Jewish scholars who have led the way here.

Conclusion

God's self-revelation took place within the life of Israel. He both acted on the people of Israel, and called forth and enabled a response from that people. In so doing he actually adapted their minds and provided them with the 'tools' to make such a response. Even their suffering and sin became part of the revelatory process. Christ, as the fulfillment of Old Testament revelation, both revealed God and, as Man, responded to God. Israel has a permanent place in God's revelatory purposes, but the final revelation of himself is in Christ. He is both Revelation and Mediator. In the former he shows to us the true nature of God; in the latter, makes possible our access to the Father. In grace he both calls us to himself and 'adapts our minds' to make such a response.

Torrance begins the chapter by calling into question the tearing apart of 'aspects of reality that are naturally integrated.' At its conclusion he points us to the One in whom deity and humanity are one and in whom, as a result, mediation between God and humankind is possible. An echo of Torrance's mentor can be detected throughout the chapter, and I thus take the liberty of concluding with a fine statement by Barth:

Who and what is the God who is to be known at the point upon which Holy Scripture concentrates our attention and thoughts? Who and what is the God who rules and feeds His people, creating and maintaining the whole world for its benefit, and guiding it according to the good-pleasure of His will as it is directed towards this people? If in this way we ask further concerning the one point upon which, according to Scripture, our attention and thoughts should and must be concentrated, then from first to last the Bible directs us to the name of Jesus. It is in this name that we discern the divine decision in favour of the movement towards this people, the self-determination of God as Lord and Shepherd of this people, and the determination of this people as “his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Ps.100:2). And in this name we may now discern the divine decision as an event in human history and therefore as the substance of all the preceding history of the Church. What happened was this, that under this name God Himself became man, that He He became this particular man and derives from Him. What happened was this, that under this name God Himself realised in time, and therefore as an object of human perception, the self-giving of Himself as the Covenant-partner of the people determined by Him form and to all eternity. What happened was this, that it became a fact that under this name God Himself possesses His people: possesses it no less than He does Himself; swears towards it the same fidelity as He exercises with Himself; directs upon it a love no less than that which in the person of the Son He loves Himself; fulfilling His will upon earth as in the eternal decree which precedes everything temporal it is in heaven. What happened was this, that under this name God Himself established and equipped the people which bears the name to be “a light to the Gentiles,” the hope, the promise, the invitation and the summoning of all peoples, and at the same time, of course, the question, the demand and the judgment set over the whole of humanity and every individual man. As all these things happened under this name, the will of God was done. And according to God's self-revelation attested in Scripture, it is wholly and utterly in these happenings that we are to know what really is the good-pleasure of His will, what, is, therefore, His being, and the purpose and orientation of His work, as Creator of the
world and Controller of history. There is no greater depth in God's being and work than that revealed in these happenings and under this name. For in these happenings and under this name He has revealed Himself. According to Scripture the One who bears this name is the One who in His own “I” introduces the concept of sovereignty and every perfection. When the bearer of this name becomes the object of our attention and thoughts, when they are directed to Jesus Christ, then we see God, and our thoughts are fixed on Him. 

(Church Dogmatics, selections, Gollwitzer, pp.31-33).

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