



The Fiftieth Day

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Jewish and Christian aspects of Pentecost

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

It is indeed a great joy for me to speak here at the Pontifical University in Rome. It is a reunion with familiar places, for me a deeply touching return to a significant place in my life. Twenty years ago in 1993, my wife and I lived just a few meters from here in the Via Appia Nuova, in one of the first houses behind the Porta San Giovanni. From our roof terrace we saw the figures of the saints on the eastern facade of the Basilica Lateranensis. We often visited the Lateran Church to experience a moment of silence and spiritual reflection away from the bustle and noise of the city. The Apostles statues, the columns Borromini, the cloister and the museum – it was all very familiar to us.

It was an unforgettable feeling of closeness. We knew that here, eight hundred years ago, in April 1213, at the Fourth Lateran Council, important actions had been decided on, to discriminate against Jews, e.g. the order to wear obvious marks on their clothes, the "Jewish hat" and the "yellow spot." We also knew that, until recently, the church had, for many Jews, been a symbol of oppression and persecution. Yet, in the meantime, the relationship between the Church and the Jews had changed in a decisive way. The Second Vatican Council, initiated by Pope John XXIII in 1965 adopted the groundbreaking declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which, after two thousand years of distrust and hostility, put the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people under new regulations. In 1974 Pope Paul VI issued the "Guidelines" to *Nostra Aetate*, which determined "*that the spiritual bonds (...) that connect the Church with Judaism, prohibit any form of anti-Semitism and discrimination as contrary to the spirit of Christianity.*" [\[1\]](#) The "Notes on the correct presentation of Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Catholic Church," published in 1985, is the document that in detail invalidates the anti-Jewish stereotypes that had originated in the Church, and shows ways how to avoid them in the future. In 1986 John Paul II was the first pope who visited the synagogue in Rome on the banks of the Tiber River. When we lived in Rome from 1992 to 1993, we knew we were still in the middle of this historical process. Thus, the daily sight of the Lateran Church was for us no more a symbol of oppression, but one of hope.

There is a second reason that makes my presence here today into something special: Today is *Shavuot*, one of the most important Jewish festivals in the annual cycle of festivals. I spent this morning in the synagogue not far from here, in the Via Cesare Balbo, at the foot of the hill Viminale, and heard the public reading from the Torah. And in the afternoon of this Jewish holiday I speak to you in the Catholic Università Lateranense. That a Jew, after visiting the synagogue, goes straight to an ecclesiastical university to give a lecture, will hopefully one day be something normal, an event that no one is surprised about. For us, it's still rather new and almost a bit fantastic.

Shavuot is a Jewish festival, about which you may not know very much. It is originally an agricultural festival, a thanksgiving feast, of which there are two in the Jewish year, *Shavuot* in the spring, *Sukkot* in the fall – a testament to the fertility of the land, and to how highly advanced ancient agriculture was. Together, the feasts of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot* form the cycle of the three pilgrimage festivals, the *shlasha regalim* – literally meaning, 'the three, where one goes on foot,' i.e. the three pilgrim or pilgrimage festivals. The destination of the pilgrimage was the

Temple in Jerusalem.

On *Shavuot*, the pilgrims brought the first fruits of the year to the sanctuary as thanksgiving to God. Thus, the early Hebrew names of this festival are (in order of their appearance in the biblical text) *chag ha kazir bikurej ma'asejcha*, literally, 'the day of harvest of the first fruits of your work' (so named in the book of Exodus, 23:16) or, a second name from earlier time, *chag shavuot ta'aseh lecha bikurej kezir chitim*, literally, 'the *Shavuot* festival I give to you, the feast of the first fruits of the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22), because wheat was harvested twice a year in this fertile land, in spring and again in autumn. Or, in summary, the most well-known of the early names, associated with the agricultural cycle, *yom ha bikurim*, 'day of the firstfruits' (Numbers 28:26). In the passage quoted in Exodus 34.22, the name was mentioned already, which creates the relation to another Jewish festival, the feast of *Pesach*, the first of the three pilgrimage festivals: *chag ha shavuot*, literally, 'the feast of weeks.'

Shavuot means a specified time. *Shavuot* expresses that this festival will be held exactly seven weeks, seven times seven days after the *Pesach* festival, on the fiftieth day. The seven times seven, the forty-nine days in between, are counted every evening in the evening service of the synagogue. This counting is called *s'firat ha omer*, literally, 'counting of the sheaves of grain,' because, according to the early agricultural importance of the feast, it should take seven times seven days, until the grain sown on *Pesach* in the spring is ripe and can, as "firstfruits," be brought to the Temple. "Seven full weeks shall there be," commanded the Torah (Exodus 23:16) "Until the day after the seventh week shall you number fifty days and then offer a new oblation to the Eternal." From this, another Hebrew name is derived for the festival of *Shavuot*, *yom chag chamishim*, literally meaning, "the festival of the fiftieth day." This aspect of finishing or completing the Omer period, also emphasizes the name by which the *Shavuot* festival is called in the Talmud: *chag atzeret*, the ending or perfect completion.

Shavuot is the plural of the Hebrew word *shavua* or *sheva*, shin-bet-ayn – an ancient Hebrew root word, which essentially has two meanings. In the first, it is the denotation as a numerical value: seven, also the seven days of a week (two words that in Italian also have the same root, *sette* and *settimana*). In the second denotation, it means fulfillment, saturation, delight, satisfaction or oath (which also means fulfillment, namely that of a given word). As the *Shavuot* festival shows, the second meaning, 'fulfillment,' is synonymous with the first meaning of seven or the number of seven days. Seven is really a synonym for fulfillment, if one understands the maturation of grain as fulfillment to be completed in the period of seven times seven days.

Yet, also in many other places in the Bible the number seven symbolizes fulfillment: Noah and his sons received seven commandments after the flood, Jacob served seven years for Leah, seven more years for Rachel. At *Pesach* we eat the bread of affliction for seven days and nights. For seven nights the *Sukkah*, the tabernacle, shelters us. Every seventh year, in the *Shmitah*-year, we allow the fields and orchards to rest, so that earth and trees can recover, and the fruits of this year belong to the one who passes by, the poor, the wanderer or the food-seeking animal. And after this has happened seven times seven years, we celebrate a *joval*, a year of jubilee. The Jewish wedding, as well, takes seven days, so also the investiture of the high priest, who represents the people of Israel before God in the Temple.

Thus, I have presented to you the first level of meaning of the Jewish pilgrimage festivals, which is derived from the annual cycle of agriculture, and the triple pilgrimage to the Temple. The social formation of ancient Judea – the milieu in which the young Jesus grew up – was regulated by the cycle of seeds and crops, an agriculturally determined world. From the perspective of anthropologists the Law of Sinai, the Torah, is the transition from the wild, nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary existence with controlled agriculture and a corresponding legal system. Our humanness and civilization are based on this legal system. The sacrifice, the pilgrimage to the Temple of the one and only God, symbolize the very difficult way out of the lawlessness of the desert into a

higher sedentary culture.

The second spiritual level of the pilgrimage festivals is consequently the Law, the Torah, the divine revelation at Mount Sinai. The Torah precisely describes the pilgrimage festivals. Compliance is divine law, Hebrew *chok*. Because the Torah demands compliance with these festivals, they themselves become divine commandments, their sequence, their cycle, are tied to the history of the Law. Henceforth *Pesach* symbolizes the exodus from Egypt, which is the preparation for the reception of the Law. The exodus was the result of the ideological return of the Hebrews to their God, who in turn worked miracles for them – a process of repair, of the willingness of both sides to renew the old covenant. This covenant is implemented seven weeks later, on *Shavuot*, with the divine revelation of the Mosaic Law – named after the man who led the Hebrews out of Egypt – and his acceptance by the people.

On *Shavuot* the reception of the Law at Mount Sinai is celebrated in the synagogue by reading the Torah portion which contains the heart of the Sinai revelation, the Decalogue. Celebrated is also the complicated process of its adoption by the Hebrews and the people of other nations, who went out with them from Egypt. By this step, Hebrews and non-Hebrews, became the people of Israel. Since then it is manifest: For admission to the people of Israel, there are no ethnic barriers. People of every background, every skin color, can belong to the people of God as soon as they accept the Law and live according to the Law. The God who revealed himself at Mount Sinai is not the God of a singular people, but the God of all humanity. In memory of this elementary truth, the biblical book of Ruth is read on *Shavuot* after the Torah reading, the story of a stranger, a Moabite woman, who out of love and through acceptance of the Law became an Israelite.

Over the centuries, it would be shown that the performance of this Law had considerably increased the chances of the survival of its followers. In most difficult times, persecution, hardship and disasters, the people of Israel kept alive – through its fidelity to the Law. This people is a miracle of viability in its strength to survive. It has survived the attempt of its systematic annihilation in the twentieth century, and a few years later, founded the new State of Israel with undiminished strength. The Law is understood as commitment to life, as guarantee of survival, as divine inspiration, as a gift. Therefore, another Hebrew name for the *Shavuot* festival is *sman matan torah*, the feast of the "gift" or "the present of the Torah."

On this level of meaning as well, the word shavua, 'seven,' plays a crucial role. Again, the distance between the two events – *Pesach*, the exodus of the Hebrews with those peoples that went with them from the slavery of Egypt, to the day, when the refugees in the desert received the divine Law – this distance in time is specified as seven times seven days, that is, as forty-nine days. *Shavuot*, literally 'the weeks,' thus also means the fiftieth day. The number 'seven' here again is a symbol of fulfillment, maturation. At this time the maturing of the refugees from Egypt, up to the point, when they were able and willing to receive the Torah.

You see, *Shavuot* is the festival that emphasizes the central role of the Torah in the life and survival of the biblical people. Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly alluded to the central role of the Torah, e. g. on January 17, 2010, in the synagogue of Rome, when he spoke about the relationship between Jews and Christians. He referred to the closeness that exists – from a theological perspective – between the Church and Judaism: "*Our spiritual closeness and brotherhood,*" he said, "*finds in the Holy Scriptures – in Hebrew sifrej kodesh or 'books of holiness' – their solid eternal foundation (...) The Church, God's people of the New Covenant, discovers, while she considers her own mystery, her deep connection with the Jewish people.*"^[2] This deep inner connection had previously also been sensed by Pope John Paul II, when he, in 1986, visited the synagogue in Rome, he said, "*The Jewish religion is not something 'extrinsic' for us, but is, in a certain way, intrinsic to our religion.*"^[3]

Benedict XVI then quotes a passage from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. As Cardinal and

Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith under Pope John Paul II, he had been responsibly involved: "In contrast to other non-Christian religions, the Jewish faith is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant. To the Jewish people 'belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah (or Christ) (Romans 9:4-5), 'for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29)[4]

From this "spiritual closeness," from the "common heritage of Law and Prophets," stated Pope Benedict in his speech in the synagogue, "result numerous implications. I will name a few: mainly the solidarity that binds together the church and the Jewish people 'in their own spiritual identity,' and grants Christians an opportunity to promote 'a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament,' the centrality of the Decalogue as a common ethical message of eternal validity for Israel, the Church, the non-believers and the whole of humanity (...) The Decalogue – literally the 'TenWord' or the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-7, Deuteronomy 5:1-21) – which come from the Torah of Moses, represents a torch of ethics, hope and dialogue, a polar star of faith and morals of the people of God, which also enlightens and guides the path of Christians." [5]

The Decalogue, as the essence of Torah Law also guides the path of Christians, as it guided the way of the Jew Jesus, whom Christians confess, to whom they avow themselves. For Jesus was integrated into the life and faith of the Jewish people from which he came. In the tradition of his chroniclers, the Evangelists, he repeatedly emphasized his loyalty to the Law. So for example in the Sermon on the Mount, narrated by the Evangelist Matthew (5:17): "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets: I have come not to destroy, but to fulfill." And as Jesus in his own words lived his life in the fulfillment of the commandments, the life of a law-abiding Jew, so are also the events of his life, including the festivals that he observed and that would become relevant to his destiny, integrated in the cycle of festivals of the Jewish people.

At first glance, the festivals of Christianity are based on events in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Looking more closely, one finds among most of them, on a deeper level, so to speak, a previous festival, a celebration of the social and spiritual sphere of the Jewish life which Jesus lived. Jesus was in all probability born during the Jewish Chanukah festival, during the festival of consecration of lights. An indication is the symbolic meaning of light in the Christmas of Christians, especially the light-miracle in Luke 2:9. And, as narrated in the Gospels, Jesus was killed during the *Pesach* festival. The Last Supper was a Jewish *Pesach* meal, a "Seder" – the Hebrew word for the evening meal on the first day of *Pesach* – that Jesus and the disciples celebrated together. And seven times seven days later, on the fiftieth day, the disciples – all of them Jewish men – celebrated the next festival in the cycle of Torah Law, for the first time without Jesus: the festival of *Shavuot*, Pentecost.

That the Christian and the Jewish festivals are now not observed at the same time every year, is due to the different calendars used: the Jewish year runs, as before, according to the ancient Babylonian lunar calendar, while Christianity is directed by a solar calendar, which was introduced in Rome at the time of Julius Caesar (Julian calendar), and was later, in 1582, reformed by Pope Gregory XIII (Gregorian calendar). Hence the Jewish and Christian festivals can, in some years, be a few days apart, but in others be identical. This year, 2013, we celebrate the *Shavuot* festival today, on May 15, and Easter on May 19 and 20, four, respectively, five days later. That the Christian cycle of festivals, regardless of the annual calendar, still follows the Jewish festivals, can be recognized by the relationship of the festivals to each other – for example, that the time distance between Easter and Pentecost – exactly like that between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* – amounts to seven times seven days, that is forty-nine days.

On the evening of the fiftieth day, that is on the evening of the *Shavuot* festival, Jewish men meet in the synagogue for a festive evening prayer. Following this, they spend the night, according to an old custom, studying the Torah and other texts of the Bible. *Tikun leil shavuot* is the Hebrew name

of this custom, *leil shavuot* is the *Shavuot* night, the word *tikun* means change, correction, improvement (similar in Italian *correzione*, *emendamento*) and it is often used in the connection of *tikun olam*, "repairing the world." The term *tikun olam* is already found in the Talmud, first in the Mishnah Gitin 4:2, thus of an older origin, from pre-Christian times. This is also suggested by the slightly modified form (*l'taken ha olam*) as it occurs in the Jewish prayer of the Second Temple period *Aleynu le'shabeach*, and spoken at the end of every Jewish worship service.

Essentially, the term *Tikun leil shavuot* for learning in the *Shavuot* night relates to this old Jewish concept of repairing, improvement or perfection of the world. Jews begin with the premise that the Torah and Bible study leads to an improvement and perfection of the human being (Hebrew *chinuch azmi*, literally self-education) and this perfecting of individuals contributes to an overall improvement in the world. Scripturally documented is the custom of nocturnal learning at *Shavuot* for the rabbis and Kabbalists of the city of Safed (Hebrew: *Zefat*) in Galilee in the sixteenth century, but these people based their custom on one who lived much earlier, Rabbi Shimeon bar Yochai, who, in the second century, hid himself underground from the Romans and devoted himself to Torah study.

Those Jewish men also had problems with the Roman occupying forces, who, in the *Shavuot* night of the year in which Jesus died, had gathered for a night of study. The place of the meeting is mentioned in Acts 1:13 "*the room upstairs, where they were used to be staying.*" They were followers or disciples of a rabbi and scribe who, seven weeks earlier, at the feast of *Pesach*, had been condemned to death and crucified by the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate for *crimen maiestatis* – the crime of offending majesty. Around this time, many people in the province of Judea waited for the Messiah, the Redeemer-King. The Roman occupying forces saw in these movements a threat and suppressed them with brute force. Also the disciples as supporters of "a criminal who had offended majesty," had to fear persecution. Therefore, they would first have tried to hold their meeting in the *Shavuot* night according to custom.

Due to the spread of the Greek language in the Roman province of Judea, we can assume that by this time, the Greek translation of the word *Shavuot* was already on everyone's lips: *Pentecoste*. In Acts, the ritual gathering of the disciples on the evening of *Shavuot* is described in the following way (Acts 2:1: "*And when the day of Pentecoste fulfilled itself, they were all together in the same place.*" Just before, the disciples had attended the evening festival service at the synagogue, they had spoken the blessing over festive wine and bread and had eaten their evening meal. Then they met, as it is rendered in the Greek original, *epi to auto*, at one and the same place to pray together and study, as it is still done by law-abiding Jews during that night.

Acts 2:1 reports about this meeting: *And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.*

What is described in this passage of the Acts of the Apostles, is an outbreak of enthusiasm, of divine inspiration. The Jewish term for this kind of inspiration is *shechinah*, literally "the indwelling", meaning, the indwelling or the presence of God. The Hebrew word *shechinah* is based on the root *shin-chaf-nun*, to dwell, also the Hebrew word for tabernacle, *mishkan*, is related, the "earthly

residence of God" or the "place of indwelling." The *shechinah*, the Spirit of God, shall not only have her place in the Tabernacle, but, as it says in the Talmud (tractate Sanhedrin 39a), "*wherever ten are gathered to pray and to study the Law.*" In Acts 1:13 the disciples are enumerated, who used to gather after Jesus' death, they are eleven names, additionally mentioned are in verse 14 the brothers of Jesus and some women, including Mary, and since at the beginning of the report about the night of *Shavuot*, *Pentekoste*, it is said that "all" were gathered, we can clearly assume that their number would have been higher than ten people. It is then not surprising from a Jewish perspective that the *shechina* would dwell in this round of people, the "indwelling," the Spirit of God.

What is it that those present read and discussed in this learning-night that they manifested such enthusiasm? The *shechinah* is the spirit and the will of God, her workings eludes our insight to a large extent, but it avails itself of earthly means and actions, in order to reach people. Intensive Bible study and the study of Talmudic texts are in Judaism seen as the most successful method to come closer to divine inspiration. For the night of *Shavuot* the Jewish tradition suggests essentially two customs concerning the selection of texts to be studied. The rabbis Shlomo Alkabets and Josef Caro – the latter the author of the halachic work *Shulchan Aruch* that is still relevant today – are said to have, in 1533, first in Thessalonika, Greece, and later, after their immigration to the Holy Land, in the city Sefad in Galilee compiled arrangements of texts for the *Tikun leil Shavuot*. This compilation of texts contained excerpts from all twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, whereby some texts should be read in their entirety and elaborateness, such as the creation story, the history of the exodus from Egypt, the reception of the Decalogue (we here remind ourselves of Pope Benedict's speech in the synagogue of Rome and its special emphasis on the Decalogue) and the central Jewish prayer, the *Shema Israel*. Thereafter the rabbis in Safed read excerpts from the sixty-three chapters of the *Mishnah*, subsequently the *Sefer Ye?irah*, literally, the "Book of Formation", an early work of Jewish esoteric, furthermore a listing of the six-hundred-and-thirteen commandments of the Torah and excerpts from the Book *Sohar*, literally "The Beaming," the essential work of the *Kabbala*. All these texts have been collected in a special book, a kind of reading book for the 'Night of *Shavuot*.'

Another tradition for the study during the night of Shavout prefers reading the book *tehillim*, the Psalms. The Book of Psalms is, for the most part, attributed to King David, hence there is a connection between the study of the Psalms, and the reading of the Book of *Ruth* for the following morning service of the *Shavuot* festival in the synagogue, since Ruth is regarded to be the ancestress of King David. And according to Christian tradition, Jesus is considered to be a descendant of David. I therefore think it likely that the disciples did study the Book of Psalms in the night of *Shavuot* or Pentecost. Their meeting was both a traditional study session on *Shavuot* as usual, and also a night of remembrance of their recently killed, and resurrected rabbi. This is my personal hypothesis, my attempt to answer the question: What had the disciples read during the night, to prepare them to be caught up in obvious enthusiasm, so that they, as it is written in Acts 2:4, were "filled with the Holy Spirit"?

Something else speaks for the Psalms. Acts 2:11 quotes witnesses to the event, who say about the enthusiastic disciples: "*We hear them speak the mighty works of God in our own languages.*" The Book of Psalms is characterized in that it contains many passages praising "*the great deeds of God.*" And, even more remarkable in this context is the fact that the text passages with this praise of God's deeds refer to all peoples, not exclusively to the Jews. Or they speak to the Jews with the call, to pass the revelation of the divine Law on to all nations of the earth. This is meant, when it is said that the disciples are "speaking in our own languages;" they are giving their message to all peoples of the earth.

In order to remind us, I will quote some Psalms in which this universal message is called for:

(The translation used here is the New Revised Standard Version. transl.)

Psalm 7:7: *va'adat le'umim t'sovevejcha*, Let the assembly of the peoples (nations) be gathered around you.

Psalm 9:8: *ve hu joshpot tevel be zedek, jadin le'umim be mesharim*, He judges the earth with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity.

Psalm 19:1-4: *ha shamaim misparim kvod-el (...) b chol ha arez jaza cum u vikzeh Tevel milejhem*, The heavens are telling the glory of God (...) their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Psalm 22:27-28: *js' ve cheru jashvu Adonai kol el afsej arez ve jishtachavu lifanejcha mishpachot kol goyim, ki ladonaj melucha ha ba u Moshel goyim*. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

Psalm 36:7: *ma jakar chasdejcha Elohim u adam vnej be zel kafejcha jechesajun*. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All sons of Adam may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 40:16: *jashishu ve jsmechu becha kol mevakshejcha*, but may *all* who seek you be glad and rejoice in you.

Psalm 45:17: *askirah shimcha be chol dor va dor ve al ken amim jehoducha le olam va ed*, I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations. Therefore *the peoples* (nations) will praise you forever and ever.

Psalm 47:9: *malach Elohim al goyim*, God reigns over the nations.

Psalm 57:9: *odejcha ba amim, asamerecha be le'umim*, I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples, I will sing your praises among the nations.

Psalm 66:8: *barechu amim elohejnu ve hashmi'u kol tehilato*, Bless our God, O *peoples*, let the sound of his praise be heard!

Psalm 67:4-5: *joducha amim, elohim, joducha amim kulam, jismechu va jeranenu le'umim ki tishpot amim mishor u le'umim baarez tachechim, selah. Joducha amim, elohim, joducha amim kulam*, Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the *peoples* with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the *peoples* praise you, O God; let all the *peoples* praise you.

Psalm 72:17: *jehi shemo le olam lifnej shemesh jonon shemo e jibarechu vo kol gojim jashrehu*, May his name endure for ever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May *all nations* be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy.

Psalm 96:3: *saperu va gojim k'vodo, be chol ha amim niflotav*, Declare his glory among *the nations*, his marvellous works among all the peoples. (The entire psalm is an appeal to the children of Israel to act in this sense among the nations.)

Psalm 97:6: *higidu ha shamajim zidko ve ra'u kol ha amim k'vodo*, The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and *all the peoples* behold his glory.

Psalm 98:2: *hodija Adonaj jeshuato le ejnej ha gojim gila zidkato*, The Lord has made known his

victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the *nations*.

Psalm 102:22: *Be hikabez amim jachdu u mamlachot la'avod et Adonaj*, when *peoples* gather together, and kingdoms to worship the Lord.

Psalm 105:1: *hodu ladonaj kiru veshmo, hodiju va amim alilotav*, O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the *nations*.

Psalm 135: the entire Psalm is an appeal to Israel to praise the name of the Lord and *to bear witness to his deeds*.

Psalm 145:9: *tov Adonaj la kol ve rachamav al kol ma'asav*, The Lord is good to all and his compassion is over *all that he has made*.

Psalm 148: The whole Psalm is an appeal to Israel to praise God in the world and among the peoples (nations).

Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is the universal claim of the Law so strongly pronounced as in the Psalms. The message of the Torah, the revelation from Mount Sinai, is addressed to all peoples. All of us, both Jews and Christians, are called to spread it in the world and to proclaim it. That was the message, which the disciples read and learned from the Psalms during the night of the *Shavuot* festival which they, on the spot, proclaimed to the various peoples in their own various languages.

The men and women, who had gathered in this night for study and in commemoration of Jesus, were captured by the *shechinah*, by the Spirit of God. They were made capable to express themselves in languages, they had previously not know, to proclaim God's Law to strange peoples. We humans do not exactly know, in which way the inspiration reaches us, how we are gripped by the *shechinah*, the Spirit of God. It seems to us a mystery that we are unable to explain. Nevertheless, we can in our own strength endeavour to come close to this state. In Judaism one assumes, that learning, reading, studying, the appropriating of knowledge keep us receptive for this state of being inspired. This is what the disciples did in the night of *Pentecoste*. Here they were gripped by the Spirit and inspired for the task that lay ahead. We should follow their example.

I thank you for your attention.

[1] Guidelines and proposals concerning the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, cited in *Kirchlicher Anzeiger* for the Diocese of Aachen 45, 1975.

[2] Pope Benedict XVI: In his oration given in the synagogue in Rome on January 17, 2010: *Spiritual Closeness, and Fraternity*. cited in *Freiburger Rundbrief* 3/2010, S.199 ff.

[3] Pope John Paul II: Oration given in the synagogue in Rome, April 13, 1986, cited in *Jüdische Zeitung*, Berlin, March 2009.

[4] Pope Benedict XVI: *Spiritual Closeness and Fraternity*, cited in *Freiburger Rundbrief* 3/2010, S.199 ff.

[5] *ibid.* 15

Chaim Noll, originally Hans Noll, was born in 1954 as son of the writer Dieter Noll in Berlin (East). He studied mathematics in Berlin and Jena, followed by a study of art and art history. Noll was a master student of the Academy of Arts. He denied the early 80s the military service and was committed to a psychiatric clinic. 1984 Noll expatriated, went to the West, and worked as journalist and began a career as a writer. From 1992 to 1995 he lived in Rome and went from there to Israel,

where he is naturalized in 1998. He now lives in the Negev desert and is Writer in Residence and a lecturer at the Center for International Student Programs of the Ben Gurion University of Beer Sheva. His literary works include poems, stories, novels and essays.

Translated from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll with editing by Dr. Mel Andersen