

# SAINT AELRED OF RIEVAULX MEDITATIONS ON THE JEWS

## THREE DAYS IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

When He was twelve years old, Jesus too went up to Jerusalem. Now this journey has a meaning which may not be apparent to you: Christ left the synagogue at Nazareth to come into the church of the Gentiles, and to show His presence on earth. He was twelve years old at the time, and that was a very fitting age for Him to leave Nazareth for Jerusalem, as I shall explain. He had not come on earth to set aside the law, but to bring it to perfection. And therefore He added to the ten commandments given to Moses in the Old Testament the two commandments of the New Testament which we must keep if we would be perfect: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'<sup>41</sup> There are few words in this twofold law of charity, but yet it sums up everything that we must do, and it brings the law and the prophets to perfection.

And so the boy Jesus, unbeknown to His parents, continued His stay in Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup> Yes, even to this day Christ is in the temple which is His church, but the Jews, who are His parents by race, do not realize it. Joseph is still in Egypt, and it is the Egyptians, not the Jews, who call Him the Saviour of the world.<sup>43</sup> For while He is distributing fine wheat to the Egyptians, who are Gentiles, His own brethren are perishing for want of the Word of God, among the unclean spirits of the land of Canaan. 'His parents thought He was among their travelling companions,'<sup>44</sup> Saint Luke explains. But why should they go on thinking that even now? Do you still think, sons of Israel, that Christ keeps company with you, when your own prophet Jeremiah tells you quite plainly that He has forsaken His home, and has done with His chosen people?<sup>45</sup> 'My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest. She has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her.'

What signs have you seen, what marks of grace does He bestow on you, that you should even imagine that He is still with you? What has happened to the temple now? Where are the daily sacrifices and the priests

to offer them? What has become of that altar which stood in Jerusalem? Does the ever-burning fire still flame? When it dies, how can there be burnt sacrifices, since they may be offered on no other hearth? Either these things are no longer yours, or you have them against God's command. And therefore, you do not have Christ. In days gone by you did have Christ, for every event of the Old Testament foreshadowed His coming. But when He did come, types and prophecies had no more significance. Yet you still rely on them, and look out for their fulfilment, although your waiting will be in vain. How you persist in your errors! How blind you are to the things about you!

No, the Jews do not see how the prophecies have been fulfilled, and the law brought to perfection. Still they think that He is with them, as they seek Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances. Whom are you looking for, sons of Juda? From the mountainside has already fallen that stone no hand had quarried,<sup>46</sup> and do you still go on searching? Scattered as you are throughout the world, you sin against Christ wherever you go, and still you do not see Him. Your Amen rises up from the lands of every nation to give praise to God and His Anointed; you sing Alleluia to God the Father and God the Son, your Hosanna rings out to your Creator and Redeemer. What need have you to search further? Where the sun is, there He takes up His abode, so that no one may escape from its burning heat.<sup>47</sup> Why, then, do you turn and look elsewhere?

But do you really seek Him among your kinsfolk and acquaintances? For if you look in Isaiah you will read: 'The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib. But Israel does not know; my people does not understand.'<sup>48</sup> How, then, can you hope to find Him? And if you ask David, he will tell you that your feast has turned into a trap, a snare to recoil on you. 'Ever the blind eye is yours, and the bowed back.'<sup>49</sup> If you are so blind you will never see Him. When you look again, and search in Jeremiah, you read: 'The priests did not say "where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me.'<sup>50</sup> What the prophet says proves that you cannot hope to find Him. Then you turn to the book of Moses, but to this day, when Moses is read out a veil hangs over your hearts,<sup>51</sup> and so you are condemned to go on seeking.

## CHRIST'S JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

'Return, return, O Shulammitte'<sup>52</sup> to Jerusalem, and you will find Him. You can read how, when someone told Jesus that His mother and His brethren were waiting for Him outside the house,<sup>53</sup> He did not go out to see them. And why does He not come out to meet you now? Because you must go in yourselves, and then your search will be ended. 'They made their way back to Jerusalem,' the gospel tells us, 'and it was only after three days that they found Him.' But Isaiah tells us that only a remnant of Jacob will turn back to God,<sup>54</sup> the Mighty One, countless though Israel be, as the sea sand. But when will they turn back to God? Surely, it will be after three days—a time we must long for with all our hearts.

When, oh when will Israel come back to the Lord their God, and fear their king, David?<sup>55</sup> When will they all accept one ruler and come up out of the land of darkness? O good, sweet Jesus, when will this be? When wilt Thou look in mercy on Thine own people and family,<sup>56</sup> for it is unheard of that a man should bear ill will to his own flesh and blood? Then share Thy bread with the hungry,<sup>57</sup> O Lord, and give those poor wanderers a welcome to Thy house. How long must Cain wander in wretchedness and misery, flying from his fellow men?<sup>58</sup> How long must he travel over that very earth which opened its mouth and received from his hand the blood which Thou didst shed in dying for us like another Abel? Hast Thou not already poured sevenfold retribution into his lap,<sup>59</sup> when everywhere the elder serves the younger;<sup>60</sup> when the yoke of oppression bears down on them wherever they go, and the sword of persecution is turned on them in every place? Is there none to rescue them, none to bring them help? In the end they will come back, I know, like the dogs who go scavenging about the cities,<sup>61</sup> and they will be faint with hunger for the word of God. But that will not be till day is drawing to its close, for 'it was only after three days that they found Him in the temple.'

Now when Jesus went into our Jerusalem, the Church, He hid on the first day from the Jews who were His brethren, and from the Synagogue that had mothered Him. Instead He preached to the Gentiles, just as the apostles were to do after His death. Why they did so was explained to the Jews by Saint Paul: 'Since you declare yourselves unfit for eternal life, we have turned our attention to the Gentiles.'<sup>62</sup> And it was the hearts of the Gentiles that were flooded with the light of heaven when our Lord taught

in the temple on the first day. Banishing the mist and darkness of their former faithlessness, their new-found gift of faith pours its brightness into the minds of those who were once deemed lost and condemned to darkness for evermore. But the joyous light of day is overclouded by the darkness of persecution, for the princes of this world are filled with hatred and anger against Christ's followers. They order crosses and racks and fetters and wild beasts, and every conceivable kind of torture to be made ready, in order to stamp out the Christians and their hated religion. Although most of Christ's children overcame these tortures by the strength of their faith, many gave way and were mourned with great sorrow by the saints. But day always follows night, and the brightness of God's mercy and pity banishes the darkness of hatred and persecution.

On the second day then, the rulers are converted to Christ, and they throw down the heathen temples, and consecrate to the memory of the martyrs, shrines which were formerly used for the worship of demons. Little by little, as the truth of the Holy Spirit permeates men's hearts, the night of faithlessness and Godlessness is routed. But again a shadow is cast on this shining day by the cloud of heresy. The error is brought to light by the doctors of the Church, who are tireless in their efforts to preserve the faith which they have pondered for so long. And as the cloud of heresy leaves the hearts of Christ's followers, the sun of righteousness beams down again on a world freed from fatal danger.

But even now, evening is falling and the third day is nearly done.<sup>63</sup> Dreadful perils come upon us with that dusk, for the light of the third day is put to flight by the abandoned life of false Christians whose wickedness enshrouds a fast ageing world. Love grows cold in the hearts of men,<sup>64</sup> as they see wickedness at large, while we long for the dawning of that day when His mother, the Synagogue, will find Jesus at last, as the stories of Enoch and Elijah show she will. For surely it is after she has entered that temple which is the church, that she will find Him as He sits there among the elders and doctors, the Mediator between God and men.<sup>65</sup> And as Jesus Christ, true God and true man, sits there, He is an example to us all. As He listens, He shows young children how they must be attentive to God's word. His questions show young people how they must inquire diligently into the truths of their faith. He shows those who are older how they must spread God's message to men, just as He, although only twelve years old at the time, gave instruction to the elders and doctors in Jerusalem.

## ISRAEL'S SEARCH FOR GOD

Yes, the house of Jacob will echo with shouts of gladness and rejoicing, when the Jewish people recognize the true Joseph at the end of the world, and hear the news that He is still alive, just as was told to Jacob long ago: 'Your son Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.'<sup>66</sup> But when they hear this good news, every tongue will ask the question that our Lady asked: 'Son, Why hast Thou treated us so? Think what anguish of mind Thy father and I have endured, searching for Thee.'<sup>67</sup> Why, then, didst Thou treat them so, Joseph, son of Jacob? Thy mother is dead, and endless grief crushes Thy father at her loss and Thine. Distress surrounds Thy brethren on all sides. Great hardship and unhappiness bear down on Thy birthplace. How canst Thou, then, turn away from Thine own people and guide the Egyptians along the way of salvation? 'Why didst Thou treat us like this?' Thy brethren go into Egypt to search for food, and then return to their own land. And although they see that Thou art Lord of the earth, they do not recognize Thy face. That face, so unsurpassed in beauty, that the whole of Egypt gazes on with wonder, is concealed from Thine own kith and kin.

'Why hast Thou treated us so?' Thou dost look on Thine own family as strangers, accusing them of evil and threatening to punish them, for although Thou art merciful and kind to everyone else, Thine own people find Thee harsh and cruel. 'Why didst Thou treat us like this?' The prodigal son Thou didst tell of, swallowed up his patrimony<sup>68</sup> in the company of harlots. He gave himself to lovers of wood and stone,<sup>69</sup> and exchanged the glory of the imperishable God for representations of man and bird, beast and reptile.<sup>70</sup> And when he returned to his father's house after spending many years away from home, he was given the flesh of a fatted calf to eat, and the purest blood of fine grapes to drink. He ate and made merry amid music and dancing. But what happens to the children of Israel? They stand outside like strangers,<sup>71</sup> although the covenant, the giving of the law, the temple worship and the promises belong to them, and although theirs is the human stock from which the Saviour came. Only a new miracle can rebuild the temple and restore its priesthood, bringing the scattered sons of Israel back to the Jerusalem that they love so dearly. At last they will find Christ in their own land of Juda, and will no longer worship in the woodland plains.<sup>72</sup>

'We have been looking for Thee in great distress,' the Blessed Virgin said. Great, too, has been the distress of Israel, for the miracles and wonders of days gone by are shown to them no longer. The voices of the prophets are heard no more, and no holy oil anoints the king and the high priest. All these things bore witness to Thy coming, O Lord, and so Israel could not believe that Thou hadst gone to grace another dwelling with Thy presence. They never thought that Thou, Who wast God's gift and promise to them, hadst left Thy chosen and favoured race in order to go to the salvation of rival nations. They never understood how it could have happened that Thou didst prefer the Gentiles, unclean with the worship of false gods and idols, to Thy one-time favourites. It was for Israel that the sea rolled back;<sup>73</sup> for Israel that manna came down from heaven.<sup>74</sup> It was Israel's thirst that was slaked with water from the rock. It was the children of Israel who went into the midst of the sea, between the walls of water. It was for them, too, that the walls of Jericho fell down.<sup>75</sup> For them the sun stood still and the moon stayed its course. And although Thou hast done all these things for Israel, Thou hast left them for the Gentiles.

When Thy coming is proved to the Jews by countless signs and miracles, they lose all hope, remembering how Thou hast called the Gentiles and driven Thine own people away. And so their search goes on. 'What reason had you to search for Me?'<sup>76</sup> Christ asks when they complain to Him. 'Could you not tell that I must be in My Father's house?' ... You are too slow of wit, too dull of heart, to believe all those sayings of the prophets! Was it not fated that Christ should suffer and then should come into His glory, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations? Have you never heard what the Father said to the Son? This is how David puts it: 'Ask Thy will of Me and Thou shalt have the nations for Thy patrimony, the very ends of the world for Thy domain.'<sup>77</sup> What reason, then, had you to search for Me? Why did you not find Me at once among the Gentiles? Did not Abraham receive this promise from God: 'All the races of the world shall find a blessing through thy posterity'<sup>78</sup> Are you still unable to see that I must be about My Father's business?

Listen, then, to what the Father says to Me in the book of Isaiah: 'It is too light a thing that Thou shouldst be My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the poor remnant of Israel. I have appointed Thee to be the light of the Gentiles. In Thee will I send out My salvation to the

furthest corners of the earth.'<sup>79</sup> And did not Jacob call Me 'the hope of all the nations,'<sup>80</sup> and Haggai say that I am 'the prize which the whole world treasures'?<sup>81</sup> Have you not read what Malachi said of Me: 'There is no corner of the world, from sun's rise to sun's setting, where My renown is not heard among the Gentiles, so revered is My name among them'?<sup>82</sup> You begrudged My love and mercy to all men, and you were afraid of My powers and My gifts to mankind. And because you gazed enviously on the salvation which was offered to those who did penance, your spite and envy blinded you so that you could not see the author of your own salvation. Therefore I have been unforgiving with the branches that were native to the tree, and I have cut them off from their natural root.<sup>83</sup> In their place I have grafted branches from another stock. But now I shall bestir Myself and give Zion redress,<sup>84</sup> for it is time now to take pity on her. Those whom I had once cast off I shall call back to My side, and gather into My embrace the people I had scattered over the earth. I shall take into My house again those whom I had driven out of My company,<sup>85</sup> for you must all know that I am with you every day, until the end of time.

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## NOTES

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|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 41 Mt 22:37.   | 56 Eph 5:29.              | 71 Rom 9:5.         |
| 42 Lk 2:43.    | 57 Is 58:7.               | 72 Ps 132:6.        |
| 43 Gn 41:45.   | 58 Gn 4:11.               | 73 Ex 14:21.        |
| 44 Lk 2:44.    | 59 Ps 79:12; cf. Gn 4:15. | 74 Ex 16; 17:6.     |
| 45 Jer 12:7–8. | 60 Gn 25:23; Rom 9:12.    | 75 Jer 6:20; 10:13. |
| 46 Dn 2:34–35. | 61 Ps 59:6.               | 76 Lk 24:25–26, 47. |
| 47 Ps 19:6.    | 62 Acts 13:46.            | 77 Ps 2:8.          |
| 48 Is 1:3.     | 63 Lk 24:29.              | 78 Gn 22:18.        |
| 49 Ps 69:23.   | 64 Mt 24:12.              | 79 Is 49:6.         |
| 50 Jer 2:8.    | 65 1 Tm 2:5.              | 80 Gn 49:10.        |
| 51 2 Cor 3:15. | 66 Gn 45:26.              | 81 Hg 2:8.          |
| 52 Sg 6:12.    | 67 Lk 2:48.               | 82 Mal 1:11.        |
| 53 Mt 12:47.   | 68 Lk 15:30.              | 83 Rom 11:21.       |
| 54 Is 10:21.   | 69 Jer 3:9.               | 84 Ps 102:14.       |
| 55 Hos 3:5.    | 70 Rom 1:23.              | 85 Mt 28:20.        |

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## SOURCE OF TEXT

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx (ca. 1110–67), Cistercian Abbot of Rievaulx, chapters 8–10 (presented here in order) of his *On Jesus at Twelve Years Old* (*De Jesu puero duodenni*, written sometime between 1153 and 57), translated from the Latin by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (for its first appearance in English), published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1956, and reprinted by The Saint Austin Press, London, in 2001, pages 39–48.

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