

A PATH TO THE PROMISED LAND

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Ioan Chirilă, *Israel – întoarcerea acasă.*
Interviu realizat de Diana Suciu

[Israel – the return home. Interview by Diana Suciu]
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Israel – the return home is an autobiographical volume, in which Rev. Professor Ioan Chirilă relates the circumstances in which he arrived in Israel and talks about the research activity he carried out in that land full of history, the people he met, the libraries he frequented, as well as the spiritual experiences he went through in those places. The volume is written based on an interview conducted by Dana Suciu, who asks the questions in a dynamic way, often asking for more details, but without straying from the chronological thread of events. And in the answers, Dana Suciu gets not only a historical and touristic overview of Israel from the perspective of a specialist in biblical and Judaic studies but also a testimony from personal experience of living in the holy places. This is why, in the prologue to the volume, he points out that “readers will be captivated by Israel perceived by a theologian, a priest in the exercise of faith, an interreligious mediator [...], who presents the social, urban, human, tourist landscape – deconstructed and analysed on the dimension of faith, with emotion and lucidity, with analytical sensitivity” (p. 8).

The content of the book is divided into three parts: ‘At the Edge of Paradise’, ‘Searches’ and ‘Kabbalah and Silence’. Rev. Ioan Chirilă’s journey to Israel is seen in its extended development. His vocation to theology, which he had been aware of since childhood, was fostered by visits to the Rohia Monastery (Romania), then by attending classes at The Orthodox Theological Seminary in Cluj-Napoca (1980-1983) and courses at the Theological Institute in Sibiu (1984-1988). The desire to visit Israel was born during his student years, following a visit to the priest Professor Nicolae Neaga, who showed him some photographs of Israel. Then, in his heart, Father Ioan Chirilă tells himself that he must go there, that he must see the places in the photographs for himself. Shortly afterwards, in 1990, Archbishop Teofil Herineanu urged him to do a

PhD program in the Old Testament, and with the start of his studies at the University Degree Theological Institute in Sibiu, he effectively entered the field of biblical studies and Judaism. Wishing to understand the dynamics of Romanian-Jewish relations, he also enrolled in another doctorate at the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the “Babeș-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, to write a thesis on Romanian-Jewish relations in Transylvania in the 18th-19th centuries (1991-1996). To understand the texts of Scripture in the language in which they were written, he studied Hebrew at the Institute of Assyriology and Babylonian Studies of the University of Budapest (1992-1993). In 1994-1995 he went to the Holy Land for the first time for a research internship. This research period was followed by others and numerous visits to the Holy Land each year. During his years in Israel, Father Ioan Chirilă makes the most of all the time he has at his disposal, studying in libraries in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, frequenting museums and literary cenacles, and engaging in archaeological research at sites such as the city of Nimrod, Jericho, Qumran, Masada and Jerusalem.

In the interview, Rev. Ioan Chirilă shows how he perceived the places he went through. The geography of Eretz Israel is placed face to face with his inner geography. He remarks that, on the spot, he understands clearly/differently the text of the Holy Scriptures, he acquires a different perception of events, he becomes aware that there is a logic other than the human one, he tries to enter into that logic and, gradually, the events he read about in the Scriptures seem to unfold before his eyes. When he is in Hebron, for example, he tries to read through the dust the traces which God left in this world when he visited Abraham; when he goes to Sinai, he imagines the atmosphere in which the tablets of the Law were received; coming down from Mount Tabor and seeing the city of Nain in the distance, the whole scene of the resurrection of the widow’s son in that city unfolds before his eyes; at the feast of the Passover, he undergoes a revelatory experience with the descent of the holy light. These are moments in which a historical and theological synthesis is articulated through his presence in those places, moments of spiritual insight, and of recalling and updating the main events of salvation history.

The experience in the Negev desert has a special place. The astonishing desert landscape fascinates Rev. Ioan Chirilă, he observes that, in that vast, deserted, peaceful territory, the night seems to be no longer night, the sky is bright, and the starlight gives the impression that you are in front of a field of wheat, stretched as far as the eye can see. Standing for a short time in the desert, he draws out the lesson that space can offer: “to reach the kingdom of God, you must be guided by the sky, not the earth.

Let it advise you, guide you, direct you. This is how the effect of heaven works on the inside. In the desert, you really realise where you are and where you want to go [...]. The earth was not built to swallow the sky, but to hide itself in the sky. This is the lesson of the desert, of the wilderness” (p. 46). In the desire to clothe himself in the heavenly dwelling, man strives to learn to live eternity in the time he spends in the body, in his earthly dwelling (cf. 2Cor 5:1-4). Knowing God and growing in relationship with him is not conditional on being in a particular space, but it can be enhanced by it. There are places where God’s presence can be felt more strongly. The focus, however, is on the search for a state. This is why Rev. Prof. Chirilă points out that “that privileged state could have been acquired, without a doubt, in another place, not necessarily in Israel” (p. 48), even in Magoaja, on the hills of childhood, but it can be made complete by the presence in such places as the desert, that place where aware of loneliness, man lifts up a pure prayer to God, and the darkness is transformed into light by feeling the presence of the Sun of Justice (Mal 3:20).

In walking through Israel, Rev. Ioan Chirilă acquires a deep sense of understanding the other. He becomes familiar with an environment marked by religious and cultural diversity, where otherness is felt much more strongly than at home. By living with different ethnic groups and entering a dialogue with them, he comes to overcome differences and feels the need for communion. In the book, he reports that he was active in several literary circles organised by Jews of Romanian origin and that he was involved in meetings of Palestinian-Christian-Jewish dialogue, where he promoted the views of the Holy Fathers on the topics discussed. Such cultural interactions have strengthened an understanding of the social fabric of Israel, which is why, at the challenge of Diana Suci, she deals with topics related to the law of retaliation in the Jewish mind and the preservation of the identity of Romanian Jewish groups settled in Israel, *kibbutzim* as a form of community organization, or conversion to Judaism.

In the last part of the interview, some elements of comparative Christianity-Judaism theology are discussed, Kabbalah and uncreated energies, the relationship between Jewish and Christian mysticism, the role of the master in the two spiritual approaches, and the prayer of silence. It also deals with Freemasonry and its Jewish roots, with Jewish holidays and the idea of miracles. Finally, Dana Suci wants to find out whether there is a connection between the Kabbalah and uncreated energies and opens this theme in the hope that it will be developed and analysed in detail in a later volume.

Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă confesses at one point that “beyond the sphere of research, I return to Jerusalem for the beauty of the place [...], for peace and happiness” (pp. 76-77). To know a place intimately, to feel it as a source of peace and tranquillity, despite the tension and turmoil perceptible in its territory, is to relate to it as “home”, as a place of training and spiritual and academic growth. The experience of his years spent in Israel is used by Ioan Chirilă in his research and teaching activities, since among the courses he teaches at the master’s level there are some on introduction to Judaism and analysis of Jewish society, in which he insists on the need to understand the other and promotes elements aimed at opening the way to interreligious dialogue.

Beyond the personal, engaging and meaningful insight that will be found in the pages of the volume, the reader will be able to become familiar with a balanced approach to Israel, overcome certain stereotypes and prejudices about Judaism and the Jews, and will have a useful bibliographical guide for their next visit/pilgrimage to the Holy Land.