

The Bible and Israel



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I.

Not a Political but a Theological and Exegetical Matter

Introduction

The belief that Israel is a nation before God forever is one held almost fanatically by many professing Christians, especially Christians of a premillennial dispensational persuasion. In fact, to deny that the modern “State of Israel” (as she is called) located in the Middle East is the people of God is heresy in some circles. Reformed Christianity teaches unashamedly that the *church* (made up of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ) is God’s chosen people. In some circles, that teaching will be labelled today as “replacement theology” (the belief that the church *replaces* Israel), “supersessionism” (the belief that the church *supersedes* Israel) or simply anti-Semitism (hatred for the Jews).

Nevertheless, the question concerning Israel’s status is not a political or a social question, but a *theological, biblical, and exegetical* question. Neither the U.S. Department of State, nor the U.K.’s Foreign Office, nor the European Parliament, nor the United Nations General Council decides who Israel is; that question must be determined from the word of God.

While the world has *its* view of Israel, reflected, for example, in its preoccupation with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East, the Christian is interested in the *Israel of God*: “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). In this pamphlet, we want to explore that question.

Israel: A Concise History

The name “Israel” first appears in Genesis 32:28 when the name of the man Jacob was changed to Israel. The nation or the people of Israel, therefore, derive their name from him. The origin of the people of God must be sought earlier, of course, in Abraham, who is the great father of Israel (and Jacob’s grandfather).

Before that, God's people were found (after Adam, Eve and Abel) among the descendants of Shem, as opposed to the descendants of Cain (Gen. 4:16-5:32).

The first mention of the *land* that should later be called *Israel* is in Genesis, where Abraham was promised the land of Canaan as his everlasting possession (Gen. 12:7; 13:15). Many Christians still believe that the people of Israel (the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, etc.) still possess an inalienable, divine right to the land. However, this betrays a gross misunderstanding of the significance of the land, a significance that even Abraham himself understood.

Abraham himself *never* possessed the land, "no, not so much as to set his foot on," as Stephen puts it in his memorable sermon (Acts 7:5). Neither Isaac, nor Jacob, nor Jacob's sons, nor his grandsons *ever* possessed the land, except for a small plot of land in which some of the patriarchs were buried. After the death of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons), the people of Israel did not occupy the land. Instead, they languished in Egyptian slavery for some four hundred years. Not until the time of Joshua did possession of the land *begin*, and not until the time of David and Solomon did the Lord give *all* the land to the twelve tribes, and even then they did not possess it for very long.

After the reign of Solomon, ten tribes split from Judah and existed as a separate kingdom for some two hundred years. These ten tribes were taken captive by the Assyrians and were never restored. Some one hundred and fifty years later, Babylon took the remaining two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) captive and destroyed Jerusalem, which remained a heap of rubble for some seventy years.

Therefore, Israel possessed the land *in its entirety* for only about a handful of centuries. This is a far cry from *everlasting* possession, if we take God's promise to mean that Abraham and his children would be *physical* possessors of that plot of land in the Middle East *forever*, which, as we shall demonstrate, was *never* God's promise to Abraham, nor did he expect it, and it is certainly not the promise of God to the modern, secular state of Israel today.

After the return from captivity, Israel as a nation never possessed the land again. Various nations (Persia, Greece, Egypt/Syria, and Rome) governed Israel during the so-called "intertestamentary period." During that same time, when Rome rose to power, the Herods, who were descendants of Esau (and not descendants of Jacob) ruled over Israel, but even the Herods were appointed by Rome and were answerable to the Caesars. Israel, therefore, did not have her own king.

By the time Jesus Christ came into the world, Israel was a miserable vassal state of the mighty Roman Empire. A generation after the resurrection of Christ (70 AD), Jerusalem was again destroyed, and the Jews were scattered to the four corners of the earth. During that whole period no descendant of David ever sat on David's earthly throne (the last Davidic king was Zedekiah), although in God's covenant mercy the *line of David* itself was preserved until the coming of Christ.

After AD 70, when Israel's nationhood effectively ceased, the Jews remained scattered throughout the nations retaining their distinct identity as religious, ethnic Jews. We certainly admit that the Jews have been mistreated in history, even in nominally Christian countries, for the Christian church has a shameful, anti-Semitic

history. Nevertheless, as awful and shameful as the persecution of the Jews is, which every right-minded Christian certainly condemns, we have no right to allow a natural sympathy for the Jews (or for any other people or ethnic group), or a rightful condemnation of such horrors as the Holocaust, to cloud our judgment on the subject of biblical interpretation.

In 1948 Israel's nationhood was re-established, internationally recognized as an independent country by the United Nations. In 1967, having defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Israel annexed Jerusalem making it her capital city, although politically Jerusalem's status as Israel's modern capital is in dispute, many nations viewing Tel Aviv and not Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Recently, the U.S. government officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital city, which is politically but not theologically significant.

Many Christians regard Israel's restoration as highly significant in God's prophetic calendar, and even as a sign of the second coming of Christ. Others expect a mass conversion of ethnic Jews and even the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, which has lain in ruins since 70 AD or for some 1,948 years. As we shall demonstrate, not only do Reformed Christians *not* expect the temple to be rebuilt, but we also *abhor* the concept of a rebuilt temple, which would be further evidence of the rejection by the Jews of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Again I say, if God's promise to Abraham was the everlasting possession of an earthly landmass, how miserably God's promise failed! Happily, however, that was *not* God's promise to Abraham, for God's promise can *never* fail (Rom 9:6). God's promise to Abraham was richer, better, and more glorious than a measly plot of land in the Middle East: it was the possession of the new creation *in Christ* with all the saints of God (Rom. 4:13). Abraham understood it and rejoiced in anticipation of it (John 8:56; Heb. 11:13-16). Many Christians of premillennial dispensational persuasion, with their eyes fixed on the political events of the Middle East, have missed it. Let the modern Jews and Arabs fight over a plot of land in the Middle East (and let the world attempt in vain to broker peace between the warring factions), but all true children of Abraham, *including Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ*, look forward to the possession of a better, heavenly inheritance.

II.

Who is a Jew?

The Teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ

When Christ, and before him, John the Baptist, arrived on the scene, Israel was under Roman occupation. Many of the Jews expected the Messiah to come, to expel the infidel Romans, and set up an earthly, carnal kingdom in Jerusalem. Many premillennial dispensational Christians still expect the same thing—after the church has been taken away in the so-called rapture! In fact, leading premillennial dispensational theologians teach that Christ’s initial purpose in coming to Israel was to offer to the Jews an earthly kingdom. When they rejected Christ’s offer and even crucified him, God used it for the salvation of the Gentiles, saving the Gentiles through the blood of the cross. Presumably, then, if the Jews had accepted Christ’s offer, there would have been *no cross!*

John the Baptist was sent as a forerunner to the Jews, exactly because the people needed to be prepared spiritually for the arrival of the Messiah. The people of Israel had become carnal, unbelieving, and self-righteous, a people proud of their ethnic heritage who had to be shaken out of their security and called to repentance. John said to the Jews of his day: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matt. 3:9). Ethnic Jewishness, warned John, is no indication of salvation or participation in the kingdom of God. Jesus is even more explicit: “If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham ... Ye are of your father the devil” (John 8:39, 44). Jesus even declared to fruitless Israel, “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt. 21:43). What that other “nation” was will be explained later.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, neither of whom could be labelled as anti-Semitic, teach that to be a physical descendant of Abraham does not make one a true child of Abraham or a true Jew. “Jewishness” is a spiritual, not an ethnic or a political, concept.

The Teaching of Paul

Paul, another who is no anti-Semite and who is apostle to the Gentiles makes the same kinds of assertions. In Romans 2:28-29, Paul writes, “He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Take Benjamin Netanyahu, the current prime minister of Israel. According to Paul’s—and the Holy Spirit’s—definition of a Jew, Netanyahu is *not* a Jew. Take the most prestigious, most religious, most orthodox Rabbi who teaches in the leading synagogue of Jerusalem. That rabbi is *not* a Jew either. Take, on the other hand, a Christian who has never been to Israel, who has no Jewish blood whatsoever, and who is a “Gentile of the Gentiles.” He is, according to Paul’s—and the Holy Spirit’s—definition in Romans 2:28-29 a *true Jew*. Reader, whatever nationality or ethnicity you may have, if you believe in Jesus Christ *you are a Jew!* You will inherit all the promises of Abraham, while the ethnic, but unbelieving, physical descendants of Abraham shall be cast out. Listen to the words of Jesus: “I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:11-12).

In Romans 9, Paul addresses the question: If God promised to save Israel, and if salvation is found only in Christ, why have so many Israelites stumbled at the gospel and perished? Paul’s response is not to deny God’s promise, but to clarify or define *the meaning of Israel*. When God promised to save “Israel,” what did he mean? “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect, for they are not all Israel which are of Israel. Neither because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children, but in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:6-8). Do you see what Paul is teaching here? There are two kinds of people. First, there are the “of Israel.” These people belong *in an external sense* to the family of Abraham, to his descendants, and to the nation of Israel. Second, there is “Israel.” These people are the elect, the chosen of God, and the ones to whom God promises and gives salvation. The ones who are merely “of Israel” do not really belong to Israel. They are *not* Israel, writes Paul.

In other words, none of the reprobate in Israel were truly Israel; they were not counted for the seed; and they were not Jews—when they perished, *Israel* did not perish. When David’s son Absalom perished, an Israelite did not perish, for Absalom did not belong to Israel, even though he was a physical son of David! The same truth applies in every age. The reprobate Jews living in Jerusalem today are *not* Israel; they are *not* the children of God; they are *not* Jews.

In Philippians 3:2-3 the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles writes, “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision.” By these terms, the apostle refers to the unbelieving Jewish heretics who taught that salvation depends on circumcision and on keeping the Law of Moses. Paul does not call them “Jews.” He calls them

“the concision,” which is an allusion to the word circumcision—it means *mutilation*! The circumcision of unbelieving Israelites, and especially of the Judaizers, is not a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (see Romans 4:11), but is a worthless mutilation of the flesh, of no spiritual value whatsoever! Paul defines *who* the truly circumcised are in verse 3: “for *we* are the circumcision,” where the pronoun “we” is a reference to all believers in Jesus Christ. In the context of Philippi, it is a reference to *Gentile* believers in Jesus Christ: “We—Gentile believers in Jesus Christ—are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.” Thus, unbelieving “Jews” are really mutilators of the flesh, while believing Christians, of whatever ethnic origin, are Jews, for they (unlike the so-called Jews) have the spiritual reality of which circumcision was a sign and seal—they have the righteousness of faith and they are circumcised in the heart, or regenerated.

One other passage from Paul is Colossians 2, in which passage the apostle counters those who sought to persuade the Gentile Christians in Colosse to be circumcised. Notice how he argues—you are *already* circumcised, he says! The unbelieving Jewish heretics urged physical circumcision, but the Christians in Colosse had “the circumcision *made without hands*” (v. 11). Christ himself had circumcised the Colossians with an inner, spiritual, cleansing circumcision—why, then, should they seek *physical circumcision*? If Christ had put away “the body of the sins of the flesh” (v. 11), they did not need the Jew’s knife to cut off the flesh of their foreskin! Besides that, they had water baptism, which was a sign and seal to them of the washing away of their sins by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ (v. 12). Without the Jewish rite, they were “complete in [Christ]” (v. 10).

Are modern unbelieving Jews, living in the modern state of Israel, any different from the evil workers and concision mentioned here in Philippians 3 or the heretics alluded to in Colossians 2? Not at all! Indeed, the application is broader—all who teach and promote justification by works, of whatever religion or church, are dogs, evil workers and the concision; while all who embrace justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone are the true circumcision, the true Jews, the true Israelites, and truly Israel!

The Teaching of the Book of Revelation

In Revelation 2-3, the ascended Lord Jesus Christ sends messages to seven churches existing in Asia Minor in the first century AD, churches consisting of believers from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. To the church in Smyrna the ascended Christ declares, “I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9). To the church in Philadelphia Christ says something similar: “Behold I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee” (Rev. 3:9). Here, then, is the assessment of the Lord Jesus Christ himself: the unbelieving

Jews *lie* when they claim to be Jews. They are *not* Jews, but they belong to the synagogue of Satan, the accuser of the brethren and the adversary of God.

These words are not anti-Semitic—they are holy, inspired Scripture! A true Jew is a believing Christian, circumcised in the heart, and, therefore, he is a true child of Abraham.

III.

Who are the Children of Abraham?

Having identified the significance of the nation of Israel and having explained the meaning of *Jew* in the Bible, we move on to another important question—who are the children of Abraham?

Abraham is the father of the faithful, that is, the spiritual father of *those who believe*. Obviously, the Jews, as they call themselves, claim Abraham as their father: they boast physical and religious descent from him. This was so in the days of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ, but they both repudiated the claim of the unbelieving Jews: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matt. 3:9). “If ye were the children of Abraham, ye would do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). Paul makes the same assertion in Romans 9:6, 8: “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel ... They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”

Within Israel, even in the days of Christ, there were children of Israel or children of Abraham. And they were found in the most unlikely places! About Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector, Jesus declared, “he also is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9); about a crippled woman, whom he healed on the Sabbath, Jesus testified, “this woman, being a daughter of Abraham ...” (Luke 13:16); about Nathaniel, Jesus exclaimed, “Behold an Israelite *indeed*, in whom is no guile” (John 1:47), clearly implying that not all Israelites were Israelites indeed—some were Israelites in *name only*! Others, such as the high priest, Caiaphas, or Judas Iscariot, and indeed the majority of the citizens of Israel, were not children of Abraham, Jews or Israelites at all! The same thing is true of the citizens of the modern State of Israel.

The apostle Paul develops the concept “children of Abraham” or even “seed of Abraham” at some length, and makes it very clear that the children or seed of Abraham include all those who belong to Jesus Christ and who make up what we call in the New Testament the “church.” For this reason—wonder of wonders—believing *Gentiles* are also children of Abraham and partakers of the promises of Abraham!

We begin in the book of Romans. We have already seen that Paul restricts the term “Israel” to the elect Jews, excluding the reprobate from the number (Rom. 9:6-8). In verse 23 of the same chapter, having developed the subject of election and reprobation at some length, Paul writes, “that [God] might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.”

Now, notice how Paul proves his point that God elects and calls His people from the Jews *and Gentiles*. He quotes from the prophet Hosea: “As he saith also in Osee” (v. 25). This is a quotation from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10: “And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God” (Hosea 2:23). “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God” (Hosea 1:10).

How shall the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea? The answer is—by the gathering of the Gentiles!

Peter also quotes Hosea in 1 Peter 2:10, applying it to the gathering of the Gentiles. In other words, believing Gentiles gathered with believing Jews into the church in the New Testament age are called “the children of the living God” (Rom. 9:26) and “the children of Israel” (9:27). The ethnic, unbelieving Jews, no matter what their genealogical pedigree might be, are *not* the children of God, *not* the children of the promise, *not* Israel and *not* Jews!

I hope you are beginning to see the implications of this. Whatever God may have promised the Jews in the Old Testament, He did not (emphatically He did *not*) promise that to the reprobate, unbelieving majority in Israel, the “of Israel,” but only to the elect; and if a person can legitimately claim to be a Jew, an Israelite, an Israelite indeed, a child of Abraham, as all believing Christians can do, as we have seen, he or she can legitimately claim *all the promises of God*. And we do! No promises were ever made to the reprobate carnal seed; and therefore the reprobate carnal seed has no right to expect any blessings from God.

But does this mean that God has finished with the Jews, those whose ethnicity is Jewish? No, for Romans 11 teaches that throughout the New Testament age God is gathering a remnant of elect, believing Jews. Paul himself is proof of this, for he was an ethnic Jew (v. 1). God’s decree of election and reprobation is being worked out among the Jews: “there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (v. 5); “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded [hardened]” (v. 7). Throughout the New Testament age, elect Jews and elect Gentiles are engrafted into the organism of God, which is fundamentally Christ himself (see John 15).

Paul explains God’s purposes with the physical descendants of Israel: “blindness [or sovereign hardening] in part is happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved” (vv. 25-26). This does not mean that *after the Gentiles have been gathered*, God will return to his “programme with the Jews” (which supposedly has been postponed for some 2,000 years), but that *in*

the way of gathering the elect Gentiles and (at the same time) a remnant from the Jews “all Israel shall be saved.” The word “so” in verse 26 does not mean “then,” but “in this way.” Romans 11 says nothing about a reconstituted Jewish state, a rebuilt temple or a mass conversion of ethnic Jews just prior to the second coming of Christ. Believing Jews and Gentiles *together* make up the church of Jesus Christ throughout the New Testament age. There is not, and there never shall be, another way of salvation.

Before we leave the book of Romans, we examine chapter 4. There, explicitly, Paul teaches that the uncircumcision (a term used of the Gentiles) are the children of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ. Abraham is “the father of all them that believe, *though they be not circumcised*” (v. 11). In fact, Paul repudiates the notion that those who are “of the law” (those who rely on their obedience to the law to be saved, i.e., unbelieving Jews) are the heirs of the promise: “if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect ... Therefore it is of faith that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to *that also which is of the faith of Abraham*; who is the father of us all” (vv. 14, 16).

Do you believe in Jesus Christ? You are a child, a son or a daughter, of Abraham, and therefore a child of God. Unlike the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting, ethnic Jews, we may legitimately claim Abraham as our father, and with him we may claim all the promises made to him (including inheriting *the world*, v. 13).

In the next chapter, we continue our explanation by examining Paul’s teaching on the *seed of Abraham* in his epistle to the Galatians.

IV.

Galatians 3-4: The Unity of the Church and Israel

The purpose of our discussion so far is to identify the true, chosen people of God—are the people of God the modern nation of Israel, or is it the church? We have seen already that *believers in Christ*, and therefore *not* unbelieving ethnic Jews, are the true children of Abraham.

Next we turn to the epistle to the Galatians. In Galatians 3, having proved that Abraham was justified through faith in exactly the same way as believers in all ages, Paul declares, “Know ye therefore that *they which are of faith*, the same are the children of Abraham ... so then *they which be of faith* are blessed with faithful Abraham” (vv. 7, 9). On the other hand, the unbelieving Jews and Judaizers (and all those today, whether Jew or Gentile, who teach and believe in justification by works) are under the curse (v. 10), from which curse Christ has redeemed us (v. 13). Thus, “the blessing of Abraham [has come] on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ: that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (v. 14).

Notice that—the blessing of *Abraham* has come upon the (believing) Gentiles, while the *curse* of the law rests upon unbelieving ethnic Jews (and Gentiles)!

Verse 16 is pivotal. To *whom* was the promise of Abraham made, and what was the promise? Consider these texts: “Unto thy seed will I give this land” (Gen. 12:7); “all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever” (Gen. 13:15); “unto thy seed have I given this land” (Gen. 15:18); “and I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:7-8).

Did you notice the recurring word “seed” and the fact that “seed” is *singular*, not plural? Shamefully, modern translators of the Bible have obscured this truth by translating “seed” as “descendants.” But God does *not* make promises to Abraham’s descendants; he makes promises to Abraham’s *seed*. The fact that God makes promises to Abraham’s “seed” and not to his descendants is highly significant, for it identifies for us the ones to whom God’s promises are made.

God never promised anything to the mere physical descendants of Abraham, but to Abraham's *seed*. In Galatians 3:16 Paul identifies Abraham's seed: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, *which is Christ*." Furthermore, Paul identifies the seed of Abraham as those Jews and Gentiles (and there is no difference any longer, according to verse 28) who belong to, and believe in, Jesus Christ: "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29).

Do you see how earth-shattering and yet how wonderfully blessed that is? Paul explains it further in Ephesians 2-3. The Gentiles in Ephesus had, before their conversion, been "without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But now, because of what Christ had done in His life, death, and resurrection, "ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:12-13). Paul's conclusion is this: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but *fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God*; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (vv. 19-20).

In the Old Testament, Gentiles were outside, but there was a way in which a Gentile could inherit the promises of God's covenant—he became a Jew, and if he was a male, he was circumcised. This happened to Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah the Hittite, for example. Therefore, the inclusion of Gentiles in God's covenant is *in itself* nothing new. The "new" aspect in which Paul rejoices, and which Paul calls the mystery, is that Gentiles are *equal* with the Jews through faith in Christ. They no longer have to become Jews—they are equally God's children as Gentiles. Paul explains this "mystery" in Ephesians 3: "the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, *as it is now revealed* unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles should be *fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise* in Christ by the gospel" (vv. 4-6). Notice those words—a "fellow heir" is one who receives the same inheritance as all the other heirs; "a member of the same body" (or a "co-member") is one who partakes of the same blessings as the other members; and a "partaker" is a co-partaker, for he shares in exactly the same promise as the Jews. By using this language, Paul means to nullify in the minds of his readers any notion of a difference between (believing) Jews and (believing) Gentiles. Unbelieving Jews, however, have no inheritance, neither an earthly nor a heavenly inheritance; they are outside the body; and they receive none of God's promises.

In Galatians 3-4, Paul teaches that the Old Testament people of God (elect Israel) is essentially the same people as the New Testament church (consisting of elect Jews and Gentiles in one body). The apostle does this by means of an illustration in which he compares a child with a mature adult. The Old Testament people of God (elect Israel) was a child, who, although she was the heir of God's promises, was in her minority, and could not receive the promises until the time of her maturity (see Galatians 4:1). During her minority period (when she was legally a child) she

was under the law, which acted as a schoolmaster (3:24), a tutor, and a governor (4:2). Such schoolmasters were not mere teachers in a schoolroom—they were appointed by the father of the child to control the child’s life down to the slightest detail. The father gave the schoolmasters, tutors, and governors authority to legislate for the child, to determine her diet and clothing, to determine her religious and moral life, and even to punish her for disobedience. That is how we must understand the Old Testament law—the law determined Israel’s life, so that she was hemmed in on every side by precepts and ordinances: “But before faith came—that is, before the object of our faith, Jesus Christ, came—we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed” (Gal. 3:23).

Parents understand this. When your child is a two-year old, you determine their every move—you decide what they eat; you decide what they wear; you decide when they go to bed; you decide where they go; you protect them with barriers. But when a child matures, you give the child—for example, an older teenager—greater freedom: he determines his own schedule; he makes his own meals; he does his own laundry; he uses the car, and perhaps has his own car, for example. With freedom comes responsibility, however.

That is exactly Paul’s point. Old Testament Israel was a child kept under the law until she entered her maturity at the coming of Jesus Christ. When Christ suffered and died, rose again, ascended into heaven, and, crucially, poured out His Holy Spirit, He brought Old Testament Israel into the enjoyment of her inheritance. She no longer needs food laws, clothing laws, laws concerning sacrifices and other ceremonies, circumcision, and the temple, for she has the Spirit, the gospel, and the blood of Christ. Those laws that kept her distinctively “Jewish” pass away, never to return, because in her maturity she becomes the church of Jesus Christ made up of elect, believing Jews and Gentiles. Notice, however, when your two-year old grows up and becomes an eighteen year old, he matures—but he is essentially the same person. He is not a replacement person! Similarly, when Old Testament Israel grew up, entered her maturity, and became a free child of God, she was not replaced. The New Testament church of Jesus Christ is the same entity as the Old Testament people of God. Therefore, the church does not replace or supersede Israel (replacement theology or supersessionism), but the church *is* Israel—Israel in her maturity, Israel without the intolerable yoke of the law, Israel with the Holy Spirit! Therefore, the church must never seek to go back to her minority days—as if a teenager would go back to diapers—for she no longer observes the Old Testament restrictive ceremonial law. We do not keep the Old Testament feasts; we do not observe Old Testament dietary restrictions; and we do not seek to be circumcised, for example (4:9-10).

The apostle is not finished, however, for he intends to explain who our spiritual mother is, namely “the Jerusalem which is above.” To that we now turn.

V.

The Spiritual “Mother” of Believers

Having proven that the church is the same entity as Israel, the main difference being the spiritual maturity (or majority) of the former and the spiritual immaturity (or minority) of the latter (Gal. 3-4), the apostle Paul addresses the issue of motherhood—who is the spiritual mother of the believer, whether Jew or Gentile; and who is the spiritual mother of the unbelieving, carnal Jew?

Paul uses an allegory to illustrate this spiritual truth in Galatians 4, in which allegory there are two covenants, two Jerusalems, two mountains, and two kinds of sons of Abraham. First, there is “the Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children” (v. 25). This refers to unbelieving Judaism, whether in Paul’s day, or in the modern state of Israel, and it refers to all persons (whether Jews or Gentiles) who seek salvation in the law of God and not through faith alone. A large number of members of the visible church, including the reprobate among the baptized children of believers in true churches, are offspring of the “Jerusalem which now is.” They are, to use Paul’s language, “in bondage,” that is, in the spiritual bondage of sin and death. They are “born after the flesh” (v. 23; see Romans 9:6-8) and, therefore, persecute the true children of God, who are born “after the Spirit” (v. 29). Even today, adherents of false religion persecute God’s children: thus they follow in the footsteps of their spiritual father Ishmael, and not in the footsteps of Isaac. These children of the bondwoman Hagar (vv. 30-31) are, like Hagar and Ishmael, “cast out” (v. 30). When Israel rejected Christ, there was a great casting out of the children of Hagar, and great gathering in of the children of Sarah.

Second, there is “Jerusalem which is above:” she is “free, which is the mother of us all” (v. 26). This heavenly, spiritual, true Jerusalem gives birth to children who are “the children of promise” (v. 28). We (that is, all believers in Jesus Christ, regardless of ethnicity) are children of the free Jerusalem, not children of the Jerusalem in bondage (v. 31). There are echoes here of Psalm 87, in which Psalm we sing, “And of Zion it shall be said, this and this man was born in her” (Ps. 87:5). In Zion are born not only Jews, but also Gentiles—Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia: “this man was born there” (v. 4). “The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there. Selah” (v. 6).

Have you been born in Zion—not in earthly Jerusalem, but in the heavenly, spiritual Jerusalem? If you have, you enjoy all the blessings of Zion, God’s covenant fellowship, the promise of a rich inheritance, and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, even if you can trace your lineage back to Benjamin himself, and even if you are a baptized member of a true church, you were not born in Zion—and you are a stranger to all the blessings of God. Instead, you are still in bondage to sin and death with the earthly Jerusalem and her children. John develops this idea also in Revelation, where he identifies Jerusalem with the church. In Revelation 3:12 Christ commands John to write about “the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down from heaven.” That Jerusalem is the church, which becomes clear in chapter 21: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband” (v. 2). The bridal imagery immediately reminds the reader of the church in Ephesians 5 and elsewhere. John becomes explicit in verse 9, “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” What does John see—Jerusalem! “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10). The Lamb’s wife is the church; the church is the city of Jerusalem—the true, heavenly, spiritual Jerusalem, and our spiritual mother.

Paul has one more thing to say before he closes his epistle to the Galatians: “and as many as walk according to this rule, peace upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). What does Paul mean (and more importantly what does the Holy Spirit mean) by “the Israel of God” here? To answer that, we need to examine the text carefully. First, Paul pronounces a benediction (a blessing of peace and mercy) upon “as many as walk according to this rule.” The word “rule” is canon, which is a rule, standard or measuring rod. The immediate context, as well as the argument of the entire letter, demands that the rule be that *of making no distinction in the church between believing Jew and Gentile*, a rule which Paul defends vigorously in this letter. The rule is this great truth, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (v. 15); the rule is the conviction not to glory in anything except the cross of Christ (v. 14). Believers walk according to that rule, while the Judaizers, who glory in the flesh (v. 13), walk contrary to it. Those who walk according to that rule, therefore, are partakers of the apostolic blessing of peace and mercy. All those who walk against that rule, by making in the church a distinction between Jew and Gentile, are strangers to the blessing of God, and partakers of his curse (1:8-9; 3:10, etc.).

Now, what about the Israel of God? If Paul meant to bless unbelieving, carnal, earthly Israel, as she existed as a nation in his day, he would be violating his own rule. How could Paul pronounce the apostolic blessing of peace and mercy upon unbelieving Israel? The meaning is clear: the Israel of God is (as we have seen in studying many passages of this epistle) the church. The Israel of God is the body of believers made up of Jews and Gentiles. In other words, the phrase “and the Israel of God” is simply a further explanation of the phrase “as many as walk according to

this rule” and could be translated, as the Greek word *kai* is often translated, “*even* the Israel of God.”

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and thus you walk according to this rule, God’s peace and mercy rest upon you, for you—and not the carnal, unbelieving, secular nation of Israel—belong to the Israel of God. If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, but you trust in your own works to be all or part of your righteousness before God, you are under the curse of the law: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema.” (1 Cor. 16:22).

To this there remains an objection—does not the word of God state that Israel is a nation forever? How then can the Christian reject the modern nation of Israel? To that we now turn.

VI.

Is not Israel “a Nation ... *Forever*”?

Recently, the modern nation of Israel celebrated seventy years since it was established. Moreover, the United States has just moved its embassy to Jerusalem in order to recognize it as Israel’s capital city. But do such political moves have anything to do *with the Bible*? Are they the fulfilment of prophecy? Many Christians of a premillennial dispensational persuasion believe that they do. In addition, many in the premillennial dispensational camp argue that it is the Christian’s *duty* to support the nation of Israel as God’s people.

We have thus far argued vigorously from the word of God that the unbelieving Jews in modern Israel are *not* the people of God. Rather, anyone of whatever ethnicity, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes in Jesus Christ is a true child of Abraham and a genuine, spiritual Jew (Rom. 2:29; Phil. 3:3). To that clear teaching of the New Testament the modern premillennial dispensationalist retorts, “But is not Israel a nation *forever*?”

The Authoritative Interpreter of the Old Testament

Premillennial dispensationalism in an effort to promote a Jewish kingdom after the “church age” (the church age supposedly ends with the rapture) refers us to the Old Testament. However, we should note that the New Testament is the authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament. Some premillennial dispensationalists have complained that this approach to Scripture causes the New Testament to “restrict” or “oppress” the Old Testament, but that is an absurd argument.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the Old Testament period was a time of types and shadows, while the New Testament, with the coming of Christ, is a time of fulfilment: “Let no man judge you in meat or in drink or in respect of an holy day ... which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col. 2:17). The whole book of Hebrews teaches us that the sacrifices, the tabernacle, the temple and its furniture, the feast days, and indeed all other aspects of Old Testament worship

have been fulfilled in Christ. This should give us pause when we seek to interpret Old Testament passages about temples, feast days, and sacrifices!

I will illustrate with an example from Amos 9:11, “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen ...” If you read that passage without the light of the New Testament, and if you insisted on taking it literally (literalistically), what would you make of it? Would you come to the conclusion that it means that in the New Testament age the Jews and Gentiles together will form one people of God or one church, and that believing Gentiles will not need to be circumcised or keep the law of Moses to be saved? Well, that is exactly how James interprets it at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, an interpretation approved by the delegates (Peter, Barnabas, Paul, etc.) and the Holy Spirit himself (Acts 15:14–19, 28)! Only a fool would suggest that James took a totally irrelevant passage to prove a controversial point and twisted it to give it a meaning it never had in Amos’ prophecy. A humble believer must say to himself: “Clearly, my understanding of the Old Testament is flawed and carnal. I will learn from this example about how to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New. And I will pray to God to grant me light.”

Jeremiah 31:36-37

But perhaps the premillennial dispensationalist insists that his position is correct by quoting the clearest passage on the perpetuity of Israel’s nationhood: “If those ordinances (the sun, moon, and stars) depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus saith the LORD: if heaven above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD” (Jer. 31:36-37).

What a wonderful promise; but pause for a moment. Have we not learned already who the seed of Israel is? The seed of Israel is centrally *Christ*, and therefore the seed of Israel includes all who belong to him and believe in him (see Galatians 3:16, 29). The seed of Israel has nothing to do with carnal, unbelieving Jews, whether in Jeremiah’s day or in our day.

Does Jeremiah mean, therefore, that the state of Israel, as a political entity, is under the eternal blessing of God, and will always be a nation? Can we then apply this to that state in the Middle East, whose current prime minister is Benjamin Netanyahu? Can the dispensationalist appeal to this text to prove that we should support the modern state of Israel? (Notice that I am not making a political point, but a theological and exegetical one).

First, what does the text mean by “nation”? The Hebrew word is *goy*, the plural of which, *goyim*, means the Gentiles. A nation would appear to be a distinct people with a head or a people with a king. Second, how did God keep this promise in a way to satisfy the most literalistic premillennial dispensationalist? Israel only became a nation at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19; before that, Israel was a company of slaves. At Mount Sinai, God declared Israel to be a peculiar treasure (Hebrew: *segulah*;

Greek: *Laos periousios*) and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Hebrew: *goy qadosh*; Greek: *ethnos hagion*) (vv. 5–6).

What about Israel's subsequent history? Was Israel a nation when the ten tribes were carried away into captivity; was Israel a nation when the remaining two tribes were carried into Babylon for seventy years? Was Israel a nation when she existed as a plaything for the nations from the decree of Cyrus to the time of the Roman empire, and when no Davidic king ever sat on the earthly throne in Jerusalem again? Was Israel a nation when she was destroyed in AD 70; and was Israel a nation from AD 70 to AD 1948/1967 (when the Jews were scattered among the nations)? And is Israel a nation today?

Third, as we noted above, the promise of Jeremiah 31:36-37 is made explicitly to the *seed* of Israel, and not to the corporate entity known as Israel. The seed of Israel includes all those, whether ethnic Jew or ethnic Gentile, who believe in Jesus Christ, and excludes all ethnic Jews (and all ethnic Gentiles) who reject Jesus Christ. Since the Jews who returned to Israel in AD 1948 were unbelievers, Jeremiah 31 has nothing to do with them.

But what of the nationhood of Israel? In *which people* is this promise fulfilled if not in the unbelieving Jewish state in the Middle East? And is there a king to sit on David's throne? The New Testament tells us that Jesus is the son or seed of David and that he sits on David's throne: "the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). Premillennial dispensationalists are fond of asserting that this prophecy will be fulfilled in a future millennial reign, but that is impossible, for Luke 1 promises an *everlasting* kingdom, not one limited to a mere millennium. Besides that, Peter teaches in Acts 2 that Jesus Christ is already sitting on the throne of David in heaven (Acts 2:30, 33–36).

Jesus indicates the identity of the nation to whom God makes the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 when he warns the Jews of his day in Matthew 21:43, "Therefore I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." And we do not have to look too far to discover which nation that is: it is the *church*, the church of Jesus Christ, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, who are the seed of Abraham, the children of God, the Jews of the New Testament. Peter writes to the church in these words: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people ... which in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God" (1 Peter 2:9–10), but the *holy nation* is the name given to Israel in Exodus 19:5–6. Unashamedly, Peter applies that name to the church! The church is the holy nation, and since the church will never be destroyed, in her and not in the modern post-1948 state of Israel, the promise of Jeremiah 31 is fulfilled. Titus 2:14 is also instructive: Paul designates the churches in Crete as the "peculiar people" for whom Christ died, the name taken from Exodus 19:5 (Greek: *laos periousios*)!

It must not escape our notice either that the subject of Jeremiah 31 is *the new covenant*, which God promises to make with "the house of Judah and the house of Israel" (v. 31). The promise of the new covenant is twofold: first, God promises to

write his law in the hearts of his people (that is, he promises regeneration); and second, he promises to forgive his people's sins: "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" (v. 34).

Christ fulfilled the new covenant, which has nothing to do with earthly Israel, land promises, or a temple. In Matthew 26:28 he explains, "For this is my blood of the new testament (or covenant), which is shed for many for the remission of sins." In 2 Corinthians 3:6 Paul explains that he and his apostolic colleagues are "ministers of the new testament" (or covenant). The chief difference between the old and new covenants, according to 2 Corinthians 3, is that the old covenant was external ("tables of stone" [v. 3]), while the new covenant is internal ("in fleshy tables of the heart"), which fits with God's promise to write his law on the hearts of his people. Second Corinthians is a letter written to a largely Gentile church, and yet Paul applies the promises of the new covenant to the church, not to the Jews, whom he describes as blinded with a veil over their hearts so that they cannot understand the gospel of the Scriptures (see vv. 14–15). Moreover, the book of Hebrews applies the new covenant blessings to the church, not to apostate Israel (Heb. 8:6–13). In fact, the church of Jesus Christ, which enjoys the knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins, *is* the house of Israel.

Are there then no promises to the political entity known as Israel? The answer is an unequivocal "No." Will Israel as a political entity ever rebuild her temple and worship God as she did in the Old Testament? That is very unlikely, but even if she does manage to build a temple in Jerusalem and institute a priesthood, offer sacrifices, and celebrate the feasts, it will be just another sign of Israel's apostasy from God. If the sacrifices of the wicked were abominable to God in the Old Testament (Prov. 15:8; 21:27), how much more abominable would the recommencing of animal sacrifices be in the future *after the one, only sacrifice of the Son of God*? And yet there are many premillennial dispensationalists across the globe, many of them politically active, who hope and pray for such a day!

All the promises of God are in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). *All* the promises of God were made to Christ, as the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). Therefore, there can be no promise of any kind for any unbeliever outside of Jesus Christ. The calling of the Jew, as the calling of the Gentile, is to repent and believe in Jesus Christ and join the church of Jew and Gentile, male and female, bond and free, where there is no difference (Gal. 3:28). "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be upon them and mercy" (Gal. 6:16).

For they are the Israel of God!

VII.

Romans 9-11: An Overview

So far, we have proven from Scripture that the New Testament church is the *fulfillment* of—not the “replacement” for—Israel. One final chapter requires our attention: it is the greatest chapter in the New Testament dealing with God’s purposes with Israel in the New Testament age: Romans 11. Since Romans 9–11 constitute a unit in the epistle, we summarize the contents of those three chapters of God’s word to demonstrate yet again that the Bible promises salvation only to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Chapters 9–11 then begin a new section of the epistle in which Paul focuses on God’s sovereign purposes with the Jews and Gentiles.

Romans 9

In Romans 9:1–3 Paul expresses his sorrow at the perishing of so many of his countrymen who are his “kinsmen according to the flesh” (v. 3). He lists their many advantages (adoption, glory, covenants, law, service, promises, etc.), chief among which is that Christ was born of them, who is God blessed, forever (v. 5).

This leads to a possible objection: if God promised salvation to the Jews, has his promise failed? Is it “of none effect”? Paul answers in the negative—“Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect” (v. 6). Paul explains this by means of a very important principle: not all physical descendants of Abraham are true Jews; not all who are outwardly “of Israel” are truly “Israel.” The apostle demonstrates this point by appealing first to Isaac and Ishmael, and second to Jacob and Esau. The difference, says Paul, is in God’s sovereign election. Not only did God elect the nation of Israel, but he also elected *within the nation* certain individuals.

Paul answers an objection in verse 14: “Is there unrighteousness with God?” After vehemently rejecting the inference with “God forbid,” Paul proves the sovereignty of God in showing mercy to some (v. 15) and in hardening others (v. 18), illustrating his doctrine with an appeal to Moses and to Pharaoh. A second objection arises in verse 19: “Thou wilt say then unto me, why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?” Paul cuts off the objector by reminding him of his

place before God as a creature before the Creator (v. 20). Paul illustrates the absolute sovereignty of God with the potter and his clay. The potter owns the clay and has power (authority) over the clay. Out of “one lump” (humanity) the potter makes some vessels (vessels of mercy) unto honor, while he makes other vessels (vessels of wrath) unto dishonor. Some vessels are prepared for glory, while others are fitted to destruction. The potter (God) does this because he “is willing to show his wrath and to make his power known” (v. 22) and so that he “might make known the riches of his glory” (v. 23). To accomplish this twofold purpose of magnifying his wrath and mercy, God endures the reprobate in longsuffering toward the elect (vv. 22–23).

This is not abstract, because Paul immediately applies it to the reader: “even us, whom he hath called” (v. 24), appealing to Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 as proof that the calling of *the Gentiles* was prophesied in the Old Testament (vv. 25–26). Peter cites the same passage for the same purpose in 1 Peter 2:10. After quoting some texts from Isaiah as proof that God saves a remnant, Paul concludes that Israel has not attained to righteousness because she sought it “as it were by the works of the law” (v. 32). The Gentiles, who did not seek righteousness, have obtained righteousness, “the righteousness which is of faith” (v. 30). This was Israel’s fatal stumbling, as they tripped over Christ and perished, as God purposed and as the Scriptures foretold (vv. 32–33; see also 1 Peter 2:6–8).

Romans 10

Paul begins chapter 9 expressing his heartfelt sorrow over Israel’s perishing (9:1–5). He begins chapter 10 in a similar fashion, by expressing his desire for Israel’s salvation (v. 1). However, Paul does not excuse Israel for her sin of stumbling at Christ. She has not submitted to God’s righteousness and by seeking salvation in works has missed the goal of the law, which is Christ (vv. 3–4). This is all the more inexcusable because Moses made it clear that righteousness was *not* found in the law (v. 5). To seek righteousness in the law is, says Paul, to deny the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, for “it is to bring up Christ again from the dead” or “to bring Christ down from above” (vv. 6–7). Righteousness then is found only in Christ, and it is through faith in Christ and confession of his name that believers are saved (vv. 9–10). Paul then explains the necessity of preaching.

If salvation is found only in calling upon the name of the Lord (v. 13; Joel 2:32), then a series of questions must be asked: “How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? How shall they believe in him of whom (or whom) they have not heard? How shall they hear without a preacher? How shall they preach, except they are sent?” (vv. 14–15). Thus, Paul sets forth the necessity of preaching for the salvation of the elect. The rest of chapter 10 deals with the unbelieving response of Israel to the preaching: “But they have not all obeyed the gospel ... Have they not heard? ... Did not Israel know?” (vv. 16–19). Israel did hear and know, but Israel refused (“a disobedient and gainsaying [contradictory] people”) (v. 21) and God even prophesied his turning to the Gentiles: “I will provoke you to jealousy by them that

are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you” (vv. 19). This is just judgment upon Israel and it is good news for the Gentiles.

Romans 11

In chapter 11 Paul addresses an objection: if the nation of Israel has been rejected with the result that God also saves the Gentiles in one church, has God cast away his people? Chapter 11 is pivotal to understanding God’s purposes with the Jews in the New Testament age. Both premillennial dispensationalism and postmillennialism appeal to this chapter in defense of their doctrine of a *future, national conversion of Israel*. Although the chapter does not teach that, it does teach that God has promised to save ethnic Israelites in every age of New Testament history until the return of Christ. That promise is quite remarkable because it pertains to no other nation: God does not save Irishmen, Germans, Filipinos, or Americans *in every age*. While many of the proud nations of the Old Testament (the Philistines, Moabites, Edomites, etc.) have ceased to exist and (very likely) New Testament nations will cease to exist, *God has preserved a remnant of ethnic Jews* in the world. This does not mean that God will save all or even all ethnic Israelites, but he will save a remnant in every age, a remnant “according to the election of grace” (v. 5) until the fullness of Israel is brought in, so that “all Israel shall be saved” (v. 25).

However, he will save ethnic Jews in exactly the same way in which he saves ethnic Gentiles—by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul answers the initial objection (“Hath God cast away his people?”) with a firm “God forbid” (v. 1), illustrating the faithfulness of God’s promises to his foreknown people in his own (Paul’s) case (“I also am an Israelite”) and in the case of the remnant preserved in Elijah’s day (v. 4; I Kings 19), and concluding that “at this present time also there is a remnant [of ethnic Israelites] according to the election of grace” (v. 5). Gracious election and righteous reprobation operate in Israel as well as in other nations. Thus even within Israel, “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (or hardened) (v. 7). Paul proves that God hardens some (even the majority of) Israelites from Psalm 69, which Psalm even teaches the fearful truth that God hardens the reprobate *by means of their earthly prosperity* (“Let their table be made a snare,” etc.).

This leads to another objection concerning God’s hardening of the reprobate: “Have they stumbled that they should fall?” (v. 11). Paul’s answer is “God forbid,” for God’s purpose in reprobation is much greater than merely the damnation of the wicked. In inscrutable wisdom and awesome power, God ordains the hardening of the [reprobate] Jews *for the salvation of the [elect] Gentiles*.

VIII.

Romans 11 (Continued)

“Through their fall (literally, ‘their transgression’) salvation is come unto the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:11). The “transgression” here is Israel’s great sin in rejecting and crucifying the Messiah—only a hardened Israel could have committed such a gross transgression, which transgression was necessary for our salvation. The result of this transgression is: “the fall of them” (v. 12); “the diminishing of them” (v. 12); “the casting away of them” (v. 15); and their “blindness in part” (v. 25). This is God’s awful, but just judgment on the nation of Israel and on most Israelites.

Nevertheless, the judgment of the Jews brings salvation to elect, believing Gentiles (and to elect, believing Jews, too), namely: “the riches of the world” (v. 12); “the riches of the Gentiles” (v. 12); and “the reconciling of the world” (v. 15), which Paul calls the “fullness of the Gentiles” (v. 25). In addition, God purposes by the casting away of the Jewish people *to provoke some of the unbelieving Jews to jealousy* so that they believe in Jesus Christ: “to provoke them to jealousy” (v. 11); “if by any means I may provoke to emulation (or, jealousy) them which are my flesh, and might save some of them” (v. 14). In this way, the reprobation and hardening of Israel serves the salvation of elect Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament age!

Paul further illustrates this with the olive tree in verses 16–24. He begins with a general principle in verse 16: “for if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.” When studying this illustration, we must take the “organic approach,” for Paul views Israel as one living whole, not individualistically, but *corporately*; not in terms of individuals, but from the viewpoint of *generations*. The root of the olive tree is Christ (Is. 11:10; Rom. 15:12; Rev. 5:5, 22:16).

Among the branches are first, natural branches, which are the Jews in their generations; and second, wild branches, which are the Gentiles in their generations. Some of the branches, whether natural branches or wild branches, are “in” the olive tree, so that they are saved in their generations, enjoying salvation and partaking of “the root and fatness of the olive tree” (v. 17). Other branches are “cut off” from the olive tree, so that they perish in their generations through unbelief.

The “cutting off” of branches occurs in this way: perhaps a man was a faithful believer, but his son, although saved, was lukewarm. His children (the original man’s

grandchildren) were even more lukewarm, and seeing the example of their lukewarm father, they drifted from the truth. The next generation (the original man's great grandchildren) then apostatized completely. In this way, over time, branches are cut off from the olive tree: "because of unbelief they were broken off" (v. 20).

It is important to note that Paul is not teaching the falling away or cutting off of individuals, but of *generations*. A true child of God cannot perish, but an unfaithful child of God can be, and often is, judged *by the apostasy of his children*. Take, for example, the Christian who is not a faithful church member: he attends irregularly and without much commitment; he does not diligently teach his children (he is lax in requiring them to learn their catechism, for example); he allows his children to skip church and even encourages them in worldliness. Such a man must *not* be surprised when God cuts off his children and grandchildren, when they show even less interest in the truth than he did. The Bible contains fearful examples of this. Therefore, the earnest prayer of godly parents must be: "Lord, cut us not off in our generations!"

The attitude of the child of God in light of this truth is "fear" (not terror, but a holy trembling) (v. 20). Paul warns the Gentiles not to boast: "boast not against the branches" (v. 18); "be not high-minded, but fear" (v. 20). Paul also warns the Gentiles that just as the Jews were cut off in their generations through unbelief, the same thing could happen *to them*: "thou standest by faith" (v. 20); "if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he spare not thee" (v. 21); "behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (v. 22). Nevertheless, adds Paul, God can graft the Jews *back into* the olive tree. In fact, it is easier for God to graft the natural Jewish branches into the olive tree than it is for God to graft wild branches into the olive tree (11:24)!

Here, then, is God's way of salvation throughout the New Testament. Many of the Jews are cut off in their generations, so that the Gentiles can be grafted into Christ. God uses the salvation of the Gentiles to provoke the [elect] Jews to jealousy, so that they are again grafted into the olive tree in their generations. When Jews or Gentiles are unfaithful, God cuts them off in their generations, fulfilling his decree of reprobation. This process continues until the fullness of the Gentiles (v. 25) and the fullness of the Jews (v. 12) are saved. "And so," concludes Paul, "all Israel shall be saved."

The words, "and so," do not mean, "and then," as if Paul were teaching a future national conversion of Israel. Rather, the words mean, "in this way." As God gathers the elect Jews and Gentiles throughout the New Testament age, the fullness of the Jews and the Gentiles are brought in, with the result that "all Israel" is saved.

We should understand the meaning of the word "fullness" in Romans verses 12 and 25. It does not mean "all the Jews" or "all the Gentiles." It does not even mean "the *majority* of the Jews" or "the *majority* of the Gentiles." The fullness of something is simply "that which *fills up* something" or "the *full measure* of something." The fullness of a glass of water is reached when the last drop of water fills the glass.

The fullness of time was reached when the last second of time dropped into God's hourglass (Gal. 4:4).

Therefore, the fullness of the Jews is reached when the last elect Jew is saved; the fullness of the Gentiles is reached when the last elect Gentile is saved. However, notice that the fullness is reached *not* through an extraordinary mass conversion of either Jew or Gentile toward the end of history (the dream of many postmillennialists), but through the ordinary means of God gathering his church one individual at a time from the Jews and the Gentiles. Therefore, the fullness of the Jews and the Gentiles will be reached at around the same time. Paul does not teach in Romans 11 that the fullness of the Gentiles will be reached in a certain year and then the fullness of the Jews will be reached seven years, or a thousand years, or any other number of years later. When the last elect Gentile and Jew are saved, the end of the world shall come with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Paul proves that the salvation of Israel is a *spiritual*, not a political salvation: it does not consist in the restoration of their nation or the construction of a new temple, but in the *forgiveness of sins* (see Isaiah 59:20–21 and Jeremiah 31:31–34, which Paul quotes in Romans vv. 26–27). In conclusion, Paul reminds the reader of God's twofold purpose in the hardening of some for the sake of the salvation of others, ending with a stunning doxology in vv. 33–36.

The whole New Testament proclaims the same truth—for Jew and Gentile alike salvation is found only in Jesus Christ!

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