

Unit Introduction

The New Israel?

Israel and the Church

What is the relationship between the old people of God and the new people of God? Is the Christian church God's special people in the New Testament era in the way Israel was in the Old Testament era?

- *Universalists* assume God's grace is so comprehensive and indiscriminate as to include all people. God will eventually save everyone unconditionally, believers and unbelievers alike. God has no chosen people.
- *Supersessionists* claim the church is the new Israel, entirely supplanting and replacing the old Israel in God's favor.
- *Dual-covenant theologians* claim God now has two separate but equal people: Israel and the church. And there are two distinct means of salvation—the Law for Israel; Christ for the church.

The moderating position offered here avoids these extremes. The church is both broader and narrower than Israel. It is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles. But it excludes unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament both expands and narrows the definition of the people of God.

A Brief History of Jewish and Christian Relations

Paul and the earliest Jewish Christians considered themselves a part of Israel. The book of Acts presents Paul not as a former Pharisee, but as a Pharisee whose faith in the resurrection of the dead had been confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus. Among the sufferings he experienced as an apostle were floggings, beatings with rods, stonings, and the thirty-nine lashes (2 Corinthians 11:23-25). Only Jews who maintained their ties to the synagogue were subject to such forms of Jewish discipline.

By the last third of the first century, when the Gospels were written, Jews and Christians had begun to go their separate ways. The Johannine church had become so thoroughly Gentile that it could ignore the fact that Jesus and His earliest followers were Jewish themselves.

The excommunication of Christian Jews from synagogues apparently became official rabbinic policy during the late first or early second century. In the decades following two failed Jewish revolts against Rome, Jewish Christians were persecuted as cowards and traitors by non-Christian Jews, because they had refused to participate. The Synagogue no longer offered the followers of Jesus the Roman protection Judaism enjoyed as an ancient religion. Exposed

as a new religion, Christianity was made subject to state persecution. Sadly, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire during the fifth century, church and state joined forces to persecute Jews.

Some New Testament Evidence

Jesus charged His earliest Jewish followers to take the gospel to all "nations" ("Gentiles"; Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; 9:15; 22:14; 24:15-18; Romans 15:15-19; Galatians 1:15). Some did so only reluctantly (see Acts 10:9-20; 11:5-18). Jesus merely reminded His followers of God's eternal plan for salvation to be universal in its scope (see Genesis 12:1-3). Believers in Christ "were also chosen" people, just as Israel had been (Ephesians 1:1-12). The historical priority of Israel in God's eternal design was not about favoritism. Israel was chosen to be the means of bringing salvation to all (Isaiah 49:6; Romans 1:16; 2:9-11; 3:9, 22-23, 29-30; 11:25-32; Ephesians 1:11-14).

Israel's failure to live out its vocation meant that before the coming of Christ, non-Jews were "without hope and without God." They were "excluded from citizenship in Israel" (Ephesians 2:12). It had been God's eternal plan to include Gentiles in the redemption Christ made possible. But they were included only as they responded in saving faith to the preaching of the gospel (Ephesians 2:5, 8; 5:23; 6:17; Romans 1:16; 8:24; 2 Corinthians 6:2). God did not save everyone by a coercive divine decree.

The New Testament uses terminology for converted Gentiles formerly reserved for Israel alone (e.g., Ephesians 1:3-14). It refers to the "new" covenant or testament, a "new age," a "new humanity," a "new creation," but never to a "new Israel." It does identify Gentile converts as part of "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

Virtually all interpreters of Galatians through the 19th century concluded that "the Israel of God" referred to the church, consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles. Those who reject the traditional reading do so based on prior theological commitments. The phrase became controversial first among dispensational interpreters and later among post-holocaust interpreters.

The Dispensational Premillennialism of 19th century Fundamentalists compelled them to insist upon a sharp distinction between "Israel" and "the church." Following World War II, liberal interpreters rejected the traditional equation of "the Israel of God" with the "church" as anti-Semitic Christian supersessionism. Both interpretive camps correctly reject the assumption that the church had simply replaced Israel. But to take Paul's blessing on "the Israel of God" in

Galatians 6:16 as evidence that all Jews will be saved, regardless of their unbelief, reads too much into his words.

Paul did not claim Gentile-Christians had replaced Jews in the divine economy. He assumed that the Christian church was both more and less inclusive than “Israel according to the flesh”^{*} (1 Corinthians 10:18; see Romans 9:3-5). “The Israel of God” included pagans who had faith in Christ and excluded Jews who did not.

Other than Galatians 6:16, the New Testament never uses the term “Israel” to refer to Gentile Christians. Within its Galatian context, it is totally unlikely that “the Israel of God” refers only to Jewish-Christians, much less to non-Christian Jews. The traditional view—that Paul referred to both believing Jews and Gentiles—is the most plausible interpretation.

To claim for the church the title “the Israel of God” was not to deny it to Jews. Romans 9—11 clearly demonstrate that the apostle to the Gentiles was no supersessionist. All the children of Abraham were the children of God. But inclusion in the people of God was determined by faith, not by ethnicity nor circumcision. And it was not limited to Jews alone. Both believing Jews, who accepted Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, and believing Gentiles, who shared the faith of Abraham, were citizens of “the Israel of God.” All believers are the children of Abraham (see Romans 4; Galatians 3—4).

First Peter 2:9-10 is another New Testament passage that applies Old Testament descriptions of Israel (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 10:15; 1 Samuel 12:12; Isaiah 61:6; 62:12; Hosea 1:9-10; 2:23) to largely Gentile churches: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, . . . the people of God.”

Christ came to end the mutual contempt between Jews and Gentiles so as to create the church as “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15; see 1:4, 22-23; 4:4; see 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:13; Colossians 3:15). Gentiles did not become Jews or vice versa. In the church, God is accomplishing His ultimate plan for the entire cosmos—“to bring unity to all things in heaven and earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

Paul preferred to identify God’s “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15) as a “holy” people (e.g., Ephesians 1:1, 4, 13, 15, 18; 2:19), rather than as “Israel.” The church was not a political entity. He characterized it in terms of the purpose for which God recreated and reconciled sinful humanity (Ephesians 1:4; see Exodus 19:6; Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; Jeremiah 2:3; esp. Ezekiel 37:26–28). The church was to be God’s “holy” people—a unique community that would reflect God’s character.

Believing non-Jews were no longer “Gentiles” or “pagans.” Paul used that term to refer to non-Christians, not just non-Jews (1 Corinthians 5:1; 12:2; Ephesians 2:11; 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 4:5; see 1 Peter 2:12; 4:3). The church was an entirely new entity, in which formerly Gentile believers were essential constituents, not appendices (Ephesians 1:21-22).

Christian writers of the second and third centuries referred to the church as “the third race.” It was different from both Jews and Gentiles (see 1 Corinthians 10:32). Christians were humans whose identity was not determined by cultural, political, ethnic, or national boundaries. Christian status was determined by grace, not race.

Antagonisms between Jews and Gentiles did not end by divine fiat with the coming of Christ. Outside the church, Jews and Gentiles continued to exist, and so did their mutual hostilities. Christ created something new—a culturally-diverse, reconciled and reconciling community. The church was defined by faith in Christ, not by the ethnicity and religious background of its members. The saving death of Christ made possible social peace, reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:13-17). Broken and divided humanity are being recreated and reconciled as one new humanity within the church.

What about the Old Israel?

Paul agonized over the unbelief of most of his fellow Jews in Romans 9—11. His analogy of the olive tree in 11:11-24 emphasizes both the continuity and discontinuity between God’s old and new people. Unbelieving Israel had been broken off to make room for believing Gentiles. But restoration was possible. Interpreters debate precisely what Paul meant by his claim in 11:26, “And so all Israel will be saved.” Did he hope that, alongside the church, Israel might still have a role to play in God’s future salvation plans?

Jesus predicted that the kingdom of God would be taken from unbelieving Israel and given to believing Gentiles (Matthew 21:43; see Acts 28:28). Paul’s earliest preserved letter identifies unbelieving Jews, who persecuted Christians and attempted to thwart the preaching of the gospel, as destined for divine punishment (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

Faith in Christ, not Jewish descent, defines God’s people. All the redeemed—whether Jews or Gentiles—are “God’s possession,” God’s “chosen people”[†] (Ephesians 1:14; see Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 14:2; 26:18; Psalm 74:2; Isaiah 43:21; Malachi 3:17; 1 Peter 2:9).

During this quarter we will see how God called a people to a godly relationship and to be His holy people. Today, God continues to call all people to enter into a transforming relationship with himself and to live holy lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who accept this call are given the right to be called the people of God.

^{*}See William M. Greathouse and George Lyons, *Romans 9—16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition. New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008), 41-124.

GEORGE LYONS,

New Testament Professor Emeritus

Author of *New Beacon Bible Commentaries on Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians*