

WEEK 4 | ISRAEL & THE CHURCH

Something that likely became clear from our discussion of the Biblical covenants last week is the special importance of the nation of Israel in God's purposes for humanity. With the exception of the Noahic covenant, Israel and her progenitors are the focus of God's covenants with man and His redemptive purposes for creation. Despite this clarity, one of the most common mistakes in the realm of eschatology is the confusion and conflation of Israel and the church in God's program. Thus, a study of the distinction between the two is necessary in order to build a framework for understanding God's plan for the end times.

EVIDENCE FOR DISTINCTION

DISTINCT ELECTION

Israel is the only nation chosen by God to fulfill His purposes for this world. This relationship is unique, seen when God says "Israel is my first-born son" (Ex 4:22). Israel alone is "a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut 7:6. cf. Deut 4:37; 10:15-16; 14:2; 26:19). Israel as a nation is God's elect from among all the nations.

Importantly, Israel election as a *nation* does not mean that every *individual* Israelite was one of the elect. In other words, not every *physical* descendent of Abraham is a *spiritual* descendent of Abraham, something Jesus himself demonstrates in debate with the Pharisees (John 8:31-59). As one author writes,

In dealing with the concept of election, a distinction must be made between individual election and national election. The former is soteriological and results in the salvation of that individual. This type of election extends to both Jewish and Gentile individuals; and any person who has ever believed, either Jew or Gentile, was the object of God's individual election. However, the concern of Israelology is national election because only Israel is called an elect nation. National election does not guarantee the salvation of every individual within the nation since only individual election can do that. . . What national election does guarantee is that God's purpose(s) for choosing the nation will be accomplished and that the election nation will always survive as a distinct entity.¹

¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), ed. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, Charles C. Ryrie, 114.

Because God's electing purposes are eternal, we conclude that His purposes for Israel as a unique and distinct entity remains.

DISTINCT COVENANTS

As we noted last week, God entered into an unconditional and everlasting covenant with Abraham and Abraham's offspring, promising to bless them and the nations through them. This covenant became the foundation for all subsequent Biblical covenants in which God reiterates and expands on His promises to the nation of Israel descended from Abraham.

The unconditional covenants demand that Israel remain in her unique relationship with God until His promises are fulfilled in their entirety. Since that has not yet transpired, we must conclude that Israel remains as God's elect nation and His purposes for her remain. The prophet Jeremiah wrote in Jeremiah 31,

³⁵ Thus says the Lord,
who gives the sun for light by day
and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
the Lord of hosts is his name:

³⁶ "If this fixed order departs
from before me, declares the Lord,
then shall the offspring of Israel cease
from being a nation before me forever."

³⁷ Thus says the Lord:
"If the heavens above can be measured,
and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,
then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel
for all that they have done,
declares the Lord."

In other words, so long as the physical laws that govern the universe remain in place, Israel will remain God's covenant people. "There may be delays, postponements, and chastisements, but an eternal covenant cannot, if God cannot deny Himself, be abrogated."²

² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeau Bros. Press, 1958), 53.

DISTINCT TERMS

Simply put, when Biblical authors use the term “Israel,” they always mean Israel. This is not debated within the Old Testament canon. However, many scholars argue that the New Testament identifies that the church was present within Old Testament Israel, and that national Israel no longer has a place in God’s plan and purpose for the world. They would argue that the New Testament authors use the terms “Israel” and “church” interchangeably to refer to the same group of people.

Is this true? A brief survey of the New Testament uses of the term “Israel” shows this is not the case. The New Testament uses the term “Israel” 73 times. Of these, vast majority indisputably refers to ethnic, national Israel. Generally, only three are disputed: Romans 9:6, Romans 11:26, and Galatians 6:16. A brief study of each of these, however, will demonstrate that they also refer to national Israel.

1) *Romans 9:6 – But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel. . .*

If viewed in isolation, this verse could be understood to be drawing a distinction between ethnic, physical Israel and a true, spiritual “Israel” that is the church. However, the context of the passage makes clear this is not the case.

Backing up to verses 1-5, we see Paul is sharing the burden he has for his fellow Jews, his “kinsmen according to the flesh” (vs. 3). This statement alone makes clear that Paul is referring to ethnic Israel, a fact that is strengthened by the subsequent statements referring to the many privileges Israel received by virtue of her relationship to God. His burden is that God’s elect nation failed to respond to the gospel and rejected Jesus the Messiah. In light of this, Paul adamantly states that God’s word to Israel has not failed *because* while the nation as a whole rejected Jesus, many Jews believed, demonstrating that they were both physical and spiritual offspring of Abraham.

“Paul is simply acknowledging that within the nation of Israel there are believing Jews and unbelieving Jews.”³ The entire passage is a discussion about the spiritual state of the Jewish people, Paul’s kinsmen, and his expression of faith that God’s word regarding Israel has not failed.

³ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 112.

2) *Romans 11:26 – And in this way all Israel will be saved. . .*

Many Covenant theologians argue that the term “Israel” here refers to the church, and Paul is saying that all the church will be saved. Once again, the greater context of this verse leads to interpreting “Israel” as a reference to ethnic Jews. This verse comes at the conclusion of Paul’s discussion in chapters 9-11. His whole purpose in these chapters is to demonstrate, as noted above, that God’s “word” regarding Israel and His purpose in electing Israel has not failed.

Further, the immediate context also leads us to conclude that “Israel” is a reference to ethnic Jews. In verse 25 Paul references a partial hardening has come upon Israel, a clear reference to ethnic Israel. Later in verse 26, he references “Jacob,” again a clear reference to ethnic Israel. Given this context, it would make viewing “Israel” in verse 25 as having anything other than the same referent an unnatural interpretation of the text. It is much more logical to view all three terms as referring to the same entity: ethnic Israel.

3) *Galatians 6:16 – And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.*

Many Covenant theologians see this verse as identifying “them,” believing Gentiles, with “the Israel with God,” the implication being that the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, is the true Israel. The core of this interpretation is how they render the Greek conjunction *kai*, which above is translated as “and” but can also be translated as “even.” The latter option would give an exegetical meaning to the final clause so that them = Israel of God.

While this is a possible translation, the most common and normal way to render *kai* is the simple coordinating conjunction “and,” which would not lend itself to an exegetical structure equating “them” with “the Israel of God.” If we are going to favor a minority rendering for *kai*, we must have clear textual indicators for doing so. These are lacking in this passage. In fact, throughout Galatians Paul has endeavored to argue that both Jew and Gentile, though different people groups, are saved by faith alone. In this conclusion, he affirms that both believing Jews and believing Gentiles will be blessed by God for holding true to this conviction. It would be out of place for Paul to suddenly lump together two groups that he has regarded as distinct throughout the letter.

In conclusion, the New Testament authors are consistent in maintaining the distinction between Israel and the church. Both are integral parts of God’s plan and purpose for this world in their own unique ways.

DISTINCT STARTING POINTS

Israel and the church were founded and began at different times in history and, thus, cannot be regarded as the same entity. Israel's inception is described in detail in the Old Testament. It began with God calling Abraham and entering into a covenant with him, promising to create a great nation from his offspring. Over the next 700 years, the growth and formation of this nation is described and culminates at Sinai where God enters into a covenant with the nation to be His "treasured possession among all people" (Ex 19:5).

The beginning of the church is described in the New Testament, in Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost. While this point is contested, there are several lines of evidence that identify this day as the beginning of the church and the church age:

- 1) In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I *will build* my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Note Jesus uses the future tense "will build" to speak of his activity in building up the church. The "rock" is the confession Peter just made, that Jesus is the Christ—a confession that could not have been made before Jesus' first advent. Thus, during Jesus' ministry the church was still something future, not a present reality.
- 2) Paul describes the church as "the body of Christ" (Col 1:18, 24; Eph 2:16; 3:6; 5:23, 30), and that Jesus is the head of the body. The body could not have functioned without its head, and Paul tells us clearly that the Father "gave [Christ] as head over all things to the church, which is his body" when "he put all things under his feet" (Eph 1:22-23). This took place at Christ's ascension to the right hand of God after completing his work of redemption (Heb 1:3; 10:12-13). Thus, the church could not have existed prior to Christ's ascension.
- 3) The church is formed when believers are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). This ministry of the Holy Spirit did not begin until Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit (Acts 2:17-18). Prior to that, the Spirit did not indwell believers nor did He baptize believers, as Jesus himself makes clear (Acts 1:5, 8). Thus, the church could not have existed prior to Pentecost.
- 4) When Peter reflects on the events that took place on the day of Pentecost, he describes it as "the beginning" (Acts 11:15). The Greek *arche* indicates a specific point in time when

something new commences. Contextually, Peter is describing the church as composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers who all receive the Spirit equally.

- 5) Paul tells us that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). The apostles were not present in the Old Testament, and Jesus had not yet come and accomplished the work of redemption. Further, the church is not seen as being built upon key Old Testament characters like Abraham or David. Thus, it is best to see the church as beginning in the New Testament era.

As you can see, there is a great deal of evidence for seeing the church and Israel as having distinct starting points, which in turn makes it impossible to view them as the same entity, or to view the church as the culmination or fulfillment of Israel.

DISTINCT NATURES

The New Testament describes the church as having a unique character that distinguishes it from Israel as a new entity in God’s program. Unlike Israel, the church is described in the New Testament as a “mystery” (Eph 3:1-12; Col 1:26-27). From the Greek *mustērion*, the idea of mystery is something not previously revealed. ‘Mystery’ denotes “that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit.”⁴ What was not revealed in the Old Testament was that God would unite Jews and Gentiles in one body that Christ himself would indwell. This “one body,” the church, was something new and different from Israel as she is revealed in the Old Testament (Eph 2:15). It would be exegetically fallacious to view the church as a continuation or consummation of Israel.

There are several features that highlight the distinctions between the church and Israel. Externally, Israel was a nation with national boundaries, a monarchy, an army, a priesthood, and sacrificial system that find no correspondence to the New Testament church without significant spiritualizing of these concrete, physical qualities.

Internally, the church is ethnically diverse but spiritually homogenous, being made up solely of regenerate believers. Israel, however, was ethnically homogenous (though it did include foreign proselytes) but spiritually diverse, being made up of some believing but predominantly unbelieving Jews. These entities operate under different covenants—Israel was under the Old

⁴ W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, vol. 3 (London: Oliphants, 1963), 97.

Covenant and has not yet begun to participate in the New covenant, whereas the church are enjoying the spiritual blessings of the New covenant.

CONCLUSION

What the above discussion demonstrates is that, exegetically, the church and Israel must be viewed as distinct entities in God's redemptive program. Thus, it is incorrect to view the church as a continuation or consummation of Israel that enjoys the covenant promises and blessings made to Israel.

Why is this significant? This distinction excludes viewing the covenant promises of land, prosperity, kingship, and blessing made to Israel as already fulfilled in the church. Instead, we must recognize that many of these promises have not yet been fulfilled and will be in the future. Thus, our eschatology—and how we interpret prophetic passages—must be shaped by these presuppositions about God's plan for Israel.