

# Who Is 'Israel' And What Is Her Future?

by Jonathan Went

## Introduction

This discussion is made all the more relevant by the fast approaching jubilee of the modern state of Israel, the recent (1997-98) attempts at an anti-missionary bill in the Israeli Knesset, and the startling growth of messianic Jewish congregations. Writing without foresight (i.e., prophecy), S. Salmond wrote in 1898 in Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible under the entry for Eschatology: New Testament Eschatology, "*Christ's teaching...knows nothing of the...grotesque descriptions of the literal re-settlement of the Jews in their own land....*" (p.751). Fifty years later how wrong could he be in reality?

In the same dictionary, A.B. Davidson, the Old Testament authority, wrote, "*A constant feature in the eschatological picture is Israel's restoration to its own land.... The question how in our day we are to interpret such prophecies is a double one.... first...what the prophets meant.... but one answer -- their meaning is the literal sense of their words*" (p.737). He goes on to qualify this by then re-interpreting in the light of so-called Spiritual covenant only New Testament doctrine and denying any valid physical return, except maybe unless there is first, a spiritual restoration.

But modern history does not negate the need for Biblical exegesis, to find out what is meant by the various Scriptures and how they have been interpreted within the Church.

## The interpretation of Israel in the Early Church

The discussion of the relationship between the early church and the identity of Israel was the basis of Peter Richardson's 1965 Ph.D. thesis. Amongst his conclusions was that 'Israel' was first applied or appropriated to the church by Justin Martyr in the 160s. "*It is a symptom of the developing take-over by Christians of the prerogatives and privileges of Jews*" (Richardson, Peter, Israel in the Apostolic Church, CUP, 1969, p.1). "A.D. 160 corresponds roughly with the beginning of the new attitude to Judaism. Prior to this time there is a measure of continuity between the Church and Israel: they are able to talk together, ... to worship together, ... but after the mid-second century these possibilities seem to disappear and discontinuity becomes more radical." (ibid.)

*"We are the true Israelitic race ... the seed of Jacob now referred to is something else, and not, as may be supposed, spoken of your people ...there are two seeds of Judah, and two races, as there are two houses of Jacob: the one begotten by blood and flesh, the other by faith and the Spirit."* (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, 135)

However, even in 160, it appears that Justin and Trypho the Jew could still debate with some degree of civility, unlike the later church fathers' blatant anti-Judaism. Richardson concludes that "*nowhere from the close of the New Testament canon is the Church explicitly said to be Israel.*" (op. cit., p.16)

Nevertheless, writers such as Barnabas and Ignatius do demonstrate an increasingly replacementist viewpoint, with the church taking over more and more of that which was previously ascribed to Israel. The question here is, did the early Christian/Messianic Jews consider non-Christian Jews a part of Israel after the beginning of the church. If so, then they cannot have considered the church as new Israel absolutely.

We meet with terms such as 'new Israel', 'true Israel', 'spiritual Israel', 'Israel after the flesh' (**1CO 10:18**) and 'the Israel of God' (**GAL 6:16**), what do they mean? Richardson also debates the existence of 2 or 3 identities, races or genus: pagans and the church, or pagans, Jews, and the church -- or even non-Jews and Jews (including grafted in gentiles).

Certainly, just prior to the ascension (**ACT 1:6**) the disciples were still looking for a restoration of the kingdom of Israel ("... will you ... restore the kingdom to Israel?"). Jesus, in helpful rabbinic fashion, leaves the question hanging without denying the legitimate enquiry: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (**ACT 1:7**). Although, 'Israel' is left undefined here, it must surely mean what it had always meant, literal Israel. Indeed, it is the question of the restoration of the kingdom 'to' Israel that is raised, not 'of' Israel. The terms of reference are literal, human and geographical/ethnocentric, not a spiritual kingdom as the word 'spiritual' has come to mean, nor even an Augustinian worldwide church-state as the kingdom or 'city' of God.

Acts describes a community of believers in Jesus as the Messiah that co-exist within Judaism, worshipping together in the temple, attending synagogue, and even Paul in his defence arguing that he had not gone against anything within Jewish religion (**ACT 23:26**). Before Agrippa, Paul went on to speak of the 12 tribes of Israel as "our twelve tribes" (**ACT 26:7**).

## The Israel of God

Earlier in his ministry, Paul had famously written to the Galatians about Judaizing (a term only used in **GAL 2:14**) and of his own upbringing in Judaism (again only used in the New Testament in Galatians 1.13-14). In this epistle he distinguished between Judaism and the church of God and then left us with the troublesome phraseology of chapter 6: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision has any strength, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them and upon the Israel of God.*" (**GAL 6:15-16**)

Just who are the 'Israel of God'? Are they 'new Israel, true Israel' or 'Israel after the flesh'? According to Ridderbos in NICNT (1953 / 81, p.227) on **GAL 6:16**, "here, Israel designates the new Israel" and "does not refer to the empirical, national Israel." John Bligh thinks that "'the Israel of God' means the Christian Church and not the whole Jewish nation" (Galatians, St Paul, 1969/70, p.493). Barnes agrees and sees it as the "true church of God," and Wilson (Banner of Truth Trust, 1979, p.126) sees it as "exclusive to the new Israel of God." Prof. Adeney in the Century Bible (p.339) sees it as referring to "true Israel in contrast with those who are only Israel 'after the flesh.'" Even the famed commentator Lightfoot (MacMillan & Co., 1865, p.215) saw reference to "spiritual Israel generally, the whole body of believers whether Jew or Gentile."

However, Duncan (Moffatt NTC, 1934/66, p.192) sees this interpretation as "not without difficulty" and prefers to interpret it as "the faithful remnant within Israel" upon whom be mercy, and indicating an early pro-Jewish date for Galatians despite its invective against Judaizers.

Although, **ROM 9:6** expresses Paul's thought that "*not all Israel are of Israel*," Burton (Galatians, ICC, 1921/48, p.358) says "there is, in fact, no instance of his [Paul] using Israel except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof." He, therefore, goes on to interpret 'the Israel of God' as pious or remnant Israel, but Jews, nonetheless.

Cole (IVP, 1965/84, p.183-4) offers both explanations, describing the one as "an olive-branch" to Israel, admittedly "on the point of a bayonet; but it is a gesture of peace and reconciliation," and the other as "the Church is new Israel," the third race, apart from Jews and pagans, that the later church fathers described.

Probably, the various expositions are inconclusive since we have here a hapax legomena (a term which only occurs once, offering no passages for comparative exegesis) in the phrase 'Israel of God' and which is not the proper opposite to Israel 'after the flesh,' which would be Israel kata pneuma 'after the spirit.'

## The New Covenant

It is interesting and often forgotten in exposition that the term 'new covenant' only occurs once in Old Testament Scripture (the Bible of the early church) -- **JER 31:31-35**. Our main definition, therefore, of its content, has to be from this verse. This yields certain oft-forgotten details. Firstly, the new covenant is only spoken of as being offered to Israel and Judah (**JER 31:31**), the gentiles are not mentioned. Nevertheless, all shall know God as one people (vs. 33-34) and importantly for our study, Israel shall not cease from being a nation before God (**JER 31:35-37**) unless the sun, moon and stars leave their orbits and man is able to measure the heavens.

So, if you wish to participate in the new covenant, technically you have to be a member of Israel and Judah! Presumably by being grafted into the vine of believing Israel (**ROM 11:17**). It is NOT that we need to become Jewish or Israeli but that we have by an act of God been made one people with believing Jews.

## Who is a Jew?

Elsewhere, Paul writes to the Romans about 'inward' or 'in secret' Jews: "*but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart; by the Spirit and not in letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God.*" (**ROM 2:29**)

In the Talmud, whoever denies idolatry, "is called a Jew": (Babylonian Talmud, Megilia, 13.1), so, a Jew is not necessarily an Israelite. In the same place, it is said that Pharaoh's daughter was called "a Jewess" because she denied idolatry, and went down to wash herself from the idols of her father's house. On the Romans passage, Dr. John Gill, the 18th century expositor, quotes the following: "...That faith does not depend upon circumcision, but upon the heart: he that believes not as he should, circumcision

does not make him a Jew; and he that believes as he ought, he indeed is a Jew, though he is not circumcised." (quoted in Gill on Romans 2.29, Nizzachon ad Gen. xvii. Apud Maji Theolog. Jud. p.252)

The circumcision of the heart or inner man is in fact an entirely Old Testament **concept (DEU 10:16; 30:6; JER 4:4)**. Outward circumcision was only a sign and saves about as well as baptism without repentance.

The Romans passage is written in parallelism and contains a wordplay on Jew and 'praise' -- for Judah meant 'praise' (cf. **GEN 29:35; 49:10**). So a man's 'judah-ism' is from God and not from man, by the Spirit and not in the outward form ('letter', "made in the flesh by hands" -- **EPH 2:11**).

### **How near?**

Paul's letter to the Ephesians mentions the gentiles being 'brought near' to the commonwealth of Israel (**EPH 2:12**) and of the two peoples being made 'one.'

"The Israelites are near unto the holy King, and the rest of the nations are far from him." (Zohar in **NUM 89:3**)

Just how near is 'near'? In **EPH 2:17**, Paul describes the gentiles as 'afar off' and the Jews as 'near,' so the gentiles are to be put on a par with the 'near' Jews in terms of salvation and reconciliation to God. The gentiles are now no longer 'strangers and foreigners' (v.19) but "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

### **Why Israel?**

Not because of her worth but because of God's choice and her acceptance. Even within Judaism it is taught that all the nations were offered the Mosaic covenant and Law yet only Israel was willing. Most of the feasts allow strangers to attend and of the law it is said "there shall be one law for you and for the stranger in your midst." Israel was not chosen for her greatness but because of the faith of Abraham and God's promises to the patriarchs (**DEU 7:6-9**).

Rev. Rob Richards of CMJ gives these startling statistics: 78% of the Old Testament writings concern Israel; 33% of UN resolutions concern Israel, yet she is only 1/12000th of the world population. As a nation of people, sometimes without land or language, the Jews have remained a people group. Despite several attempted genocides -- under Pharoah, Haman, Hitler -- they have survived. "Though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, Yet I will not make a complete end of you" (Jeremiah 30.11), "[Only] if those ordinances [moon and stars] depart from before me, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before me forever" (Jeremiah 31.36 cf. v.37).

### **The Restoration of Israel**

Returning to the nation of Israel, which shall not cease (according to **JER 31:35-37**), we read at the beginning of Jeremiah 31: *"In the latter days you shall understand it. (31v1) At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people ... I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin of Israel."* (**JER 30:24 to 31:4**)

Verse 8 onwards of chapter 31 provides sufficient evidence that this restoration was no mere return from Egypt or Babylon but a return from the "ends of the earth" to a place and time where they shall "sorrow no more at all" -- something which will ultimately be fulfilled only with the new Jerusalem of **REV 21:2, 4**.

"He that dwells without the land [of Israel] is like one, 'who has no God'" (Babylonian Talmud, Khetubhoth, 110.2)

It is now an academic question as to whether the nation of Israel will be restored. Whether this will extend from a national revival into a spiritual one is another matter. Replacement theology teachers think 'no', restorationists may think 'yes/no', Messianics, Prophecy Today, Derek Prince and Lance Lambert, amongst others think 'yes'. Who is right?

The disciples asked Jesus the same question (**ACT 1:6-7**), which Jesus affirmed by default, but said the timing was not for them to know.

## **There are perhaps four main views:**

**Replacement theology.** This sees Israel as having been replaced by the Church, the kingdom being given to another people that will bear its fruit (**MAT 21:43**). This is first seen after 160 A.D. by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.

**Parenthesis theology.** This sees the Church as a stopping of the prophetic clock, and the times of the Gentiles (**ROM 11:25**) as an indefinite parenthesis or temporary alternative plan, after which Israel will be restored and the prophetic clock and Israel's destiny will recommence.

**Judaizing theology.** This sees the Church as under judgement, and God's partiality towards Israel being shown in a restored Israel or Messianic Israel which supersedes the Church. Israel replaces the Church! This is often expressed in extreme forms of messianism or Christian zionism where the practices of Judaism are restored over and above those of the church, often without discernment as to whether they are the practices of biblical Judaism or post-biblical Judaism.

**One purpose theology.** This sees the true Church (Hebrew qahal / Greek ekklesia) as being the original purpose of an unchanging God, chosen before the foundation of the world and being the body of believers like Abraham who walk by faith and faithfulness. In the early church some writers (including Aristides, Apol. 2; Preaching of Peter in Clem. Alex., Strom. 6.5.41; Epistle to Diognetus 1) saw Christians and the Church as a third race, apart from pagans and Jews. Others saw the Church as God's pre-existent plan (e.g., 2 Clement 14.1-4; Hermas, Visions 2.4.1; 3.5.1; Haer. 1.2.2; 1.11.1; 1.12.3). It is significant that in Acts 7.38 the congregation of Israel in the wilderness is called ekklesia or church and similarly in **JAM 2:2** a meeting of Christians is called a synagogue, despite most translations ignoring the Greek of both verses. The terminology is interchangeable, the plan of God is consistent and unchangeable.

However we interpret we should be consistent and faithful to the whole of Scripture. For instance, to say that the prophetic passages of judgement and curse relate to Israel whilst those of blessing and restoration refer to the Church is to wrongly 'divide' the Word of God. Either both or neither apply to Israel and/or the Church.

## **Restoration: Physical and Spiritual**

Scripture and recent history may imply that Israel returns to the land and only then does she return to God. Political secular geographical Israel may precede spiritual restoration. (**EZE 20:30-42; 36:24-25; 37:12-13; JER 30:31; 32:37-39; JOE**).

## **Restoration: Universal**

Israel will be gathered from the four corners of the earth, the only nation to have been so scattered. The first exile and return was only to Egypt, the second was to Babylon, the third is to and from the ends of the earth. (**ISA 11:11-12; 43:5-6; JER 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 24:6; EZE 36:8-10, 24; AMO 9:14-15**).

## **All Israel**

"*All Israel will be saved,*" so **ROM 11:26** says. But who are "all Israel"? Some see them as "the elect" of **ROM 9:6**, i.e., all true Christians; others see them as exclusively Jews. Many early church writers saw 'the elect' of **1PE 1:2** as being the Jews, but which many commentators now see as believers through spiritual appropriation of the term 'elect,' despite the preceding verse's talk of "pilgrims of the dispersion" -- hardly a Christian term. In the New Testament, as in the Old Testament, Israel is always Israel. **ROM 11:25** says that "*blindness in part is happened to Israel until the fullness of the gentiles should come in.*" Now if, as most Christians do, we accept that the blindness affects physical Israel then in the next verse the 'all Israel' must still be physical Israel. The 'Israel of God' is Israel's remnant of true believers, the ever-preserved seed, never entirely cut off, unless God be deemed unfaithful to His word. If for no other reason than that of **EZE 36:22**, God will go on restoring Israel for His name's sake and because of His promise to Israel's forefathers, a promise that stretches to 'thousands' of generations (**DEU 7:9**).

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