

The Place of Israel

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The topic assigned to me is 'the place of Israel'. It is an object lesson in biblical hermeneutics, i.e. in how to interpret Scripture. For there are at least four ways in which the word 'Israel' may be used.

1. 'Israel' was that devious scoundrel, the younger son of Isaac and Rebekah. His first name was 'Jacob' (meaning 'he who deceives' or 'he who supplants'), and he amply lived up to this name. But God re-named him 'Israel' (meaning 'he who strives with God') because, having struggled with men all his life, he came at last to struggle with God for the blessing he wanted, although he was not entitled to it.
2. 'Israel' was the chosen, covenant people of God in Old Testament days, namely the twelve tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. They were commonly known as 'the children of Israel' because Israel (i.e. Jacob) was their common ancestor.
3. 'Israel' is the Messianic community, the people of Jesus, the true descendants of Abraham because they share Abraham's faith. 'If you belong to Christ,' Paul wrote, 'then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3:29). So this includes Gentiles who believe in Jesus, but exclude Jews who do not. When Paul ended his letter to the Galatians with the words 'Peace and mercy ... to the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16), he was referring to believers in Jesus, irrespective of their ethnic origin.
4. 'Israel' today for most people means the Israeli nation. Promised a national home by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, they were given it in 1948.

Thus 'Israel' has four distinct meanings. It means Jacob. It means Jews. It means Christians. And it means Israelis.

To which of these four meanings are we referring, then, when we ask about 'the place of Israel' in the purpose of God? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to concentrate (as the Bible does) on the second and third meanings, and to consider Israel's past, present and future.

1. Israel's past

Old Testament Israel was God's 'chosen' and 'covenant' people. God's covenant promise to Abraham, later renewed to Isaac and Jacob,

was: 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people.' True, for some 400 years of Egyptian slavery God appeared to have forgotten his covenant. But then at last we read: 'The Israelites groaned in their slavery, and ... God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them' (Exodus 2:23 – 25).

In consequence, God rescued his people, and about three months later at Mount Sinai God said to them:

You yourselves have seen ... how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

(Exodus 19:4 – 6)

The people of Israel never forgot those promises or that covenant. Their literature (i.e. the Old Testament) is full of expressions of wonder that God should have called and chosen them, that he should have had mercy on them and entered into a solemn but gracious covenant with them.

For example, here are five rhetorical questions asked by Moses:

'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?'

(Deuteronomy 4:7)

'And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?'

(Deuteronomy 4:8)

'Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of?'

(Deuteronomy 4:33)

'Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an

outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?’

(Deuteronomy 4:34)

Then to these rhetorical questions other passages of Scripture add statements, which in the same way affirm the uniqueness of Israel:

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you ...

(Deuteronomy 7:7 – 8)

Again, ‘He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws’ (Psalm 147:19 – 20). Israel’s sense of unique privilege permeates the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Paul gives a list of eight particular privileges which distinguished the people of Israel. Theirs alone, he writes, are:

1. ‘the adoption of sons’ (because God adopted the nation as his son)
2. ‘the divine glory’ (the shining symbol of God’s presence in the holy of holies)
3. ‘the covenants’ (by which he pledged himself to be their God)
4. ‘the receiving of the law’ (also called ‘the oracles of God’, the revelation of God’s will)
5. ‘the temple worship’ (both the sacrifices that prefigured Jesus and the psalms we use in worship today)
6. ‘the promises’ (especially of the Messiah’s coming kingdom)
7. ‘the patriarchs’ (whose stories are told in Genesis)
8. ‘the human ancestry of Christ’ (who is God over all’)

(Romans 9:4 – 5)

No wonder the apostle also says that he has ‘great sorrow and unceasing anguish’ in his heart for his people. He could wish even to be himself cursed and cut off from Christ if only thereby his people might be saved (Romans 9:2 -3)

Away then with anti-Semitism! It has been an appalling scandal in the history of Europe, and even the Christian church has been implicated. Christians should be ‘pro-Semitic’, in the sense that we recognize how the people of Israel have been highly favoured by God. We Gentiles are their debtors, Paul wrote (Romans 15:27). We owe them a huge spiritual debt,

especially in their bequest to the world of both the Scriptures and the Christ.

2. Israel's present

Who, then, according to the New Testament perspective, is Israel today? The answer will have enormously surprised most of its readers and still surprises many today. It is that true Israel is neither Jews nor Israelis, but believers in the Messiah.

We begin to trace this theme in the Old Testament. For already in the Old Testament, physical descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not regarded as enough. Many people thought it was, misinterpreting election as favouritism. But the prophets taught that God's people were not immune to God's judgment. When through Amos God began his statement 'you only have I chosen of all the families of the earth', the people will confidently have anticipated the conclusion '*therefore* I will *protect* you'. They will have been thunderstruck when instead God concluded '*therefore* I will *punish* you for all your sins' (Amos 3:2, emphasis added).

More and more, as the years passed, the prophets drew a distinction between Israel as a whole, the faithless nation, and Israel the faithful remnant within the nation.

Then John the Baptist, the Old Testament prophet, taught the positive counterpart to this distinction. Not only are there some Israelites who are not true Israel, but there are some who are not Israelites who nevertheless belong to true Israel. The Baptist said to the crowds who came to him: 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham' (Luke 3:8). In the end, God did not produce children to Abraham out of stones, but he did out of Gentiles. Jesus stunned his contemporaries by declaring: 'I say to you that many will come from the east and the west [i.e. from the nations] and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven', while 'the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 8:11-12).

It was Paul, however, as the commissioned apostle to the Gentiles, to whom God gave the full revelation of this amazing development. 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly', he wrote, 'nor is circumcision merely outward and physical'. On the contrary, 'a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code' (Romans 2:28, 29). Similarly, 'not all who are the circumcision, we who worship by the

Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh' (Philippians 3:3).

The apostle Peter also makes the same affirmation. With extraordinary God-given audacity he takes the words of Exodus 19:4-6, which applied to the old Israel and re-applies them to the Christian community. He calls them both 'a holy priesthood' and 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (I Peter 2:5, 9).

So then, paradoxical as it may seem, the true Jews today are Christians, and the true circumcision is that heart-change called new birth. The Gentile followers of Jesus who acknowledge him as the Messiah are more truly the people of Israel than those people of Israel who reject him.

How can this identification be justified? Only because we are 'in Christ'. God had promised to bless the nations through Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:1-3), and that seed is Christ. Both the Gospels' genealogies trace the human ancestry of Jesus to Abraham. Therefore the promised blessing is given to all who are in Christ, and the way to be 'in Christ' is not by birth but by rebirth, not physically by descent but spiritually by faith. 'Abraham ... is the father of all who believe', whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised, that is, whether they are Jews or Gentiles (Romans 4:11, 12). Again, 'if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3:29).

This is why we who believe in Jesus read the Old Testament as *our* Scriptures, sing the Old Testament promises as expressing *our* worship, and claim the Old Testament promises as applying to *us*. For all God's promises are fulfilled in Christ, and we are in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).

So far, we have considered (1) that in olden days 'Israel' was a *physical* designation, meaning the descendants of Jacob, and (2) that today 'Israel' is a *spiritual* designation, meaning believers in Jesus, whether they are descended from Jacob or not. This brings us to the third point.

3. Israel's future

If 'Israel' meant descendants of Jacob in the Old Testament and means believers in Jesus in the New Testament, must we conclude that God has no special future for physical Israel? That was the very question which Paul's teaching prompted Jewish objectors to ask. 'Did God reject his people?' (Romans 11:1). Moreover, two answers are given

to the question, each beginning with the emphatic negative ‘by no means!’, ‘not at all!’ or ‘God forbid!’ (Romans 11:1. 11).

First, Paul writes: ‘I am an Israelite myself.’ It is clear, therefore, that ‘God did not reject his people’ (Romans 11:1, 2). On the contrary, a faithful remnant survived, who were both descendants of Jacob and believers in Jesus. We meet many of them in the New Testament, in addition to Paul. For all the first Christians were Jews, and there are many Hebrew Christians today. What then about those other descendants of Jacob who do not believe in Jesus? This issue prompted Paul’s second question.

Secondly, ‘did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?’ (Romans 11:11). The answer again is ‘not at all!’ or ‘by no means!’ For God’s rejection of them was not final, since their rejection of Christ was not final.

In order to illustrate this, Paul now develops in Romans 11 his allegory of two olive trees – a cultivated one (representing the Jewish people) and a wild one (representing the Gentile nations). According to verse 17, some branches of the cultivated tree have been broken off (unbelieving Jews), while in their place a slip from a wild olive has been grafted in (Gentile believers).

But one day those olive branches which have been broken off will be grafted back in again (verse 24).

After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree! I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved ...

(Romans 11:24 – 26b)

In other words, the hardening of Israel is only temporary. Later, Paul seems to be saying, there will be a widespread turning of Jews to Christ.

What then about the Promised Land? Is the setting up of the State of Israel a fulfillment of prophecy? Many think so, especially so-called ‘dispensationalists’. Their argument is (a) that the prophets promised that Israel would return to the land, (b) that they delineated its boundaries, and (c) that since these promises were not fulfilled literally at the time, they must still be fulfilled in the future.

Others (among whom I include myself), however, do not hold this view. Why is this? I leave aside *political* considerations, for example, the grave injustices that have been done to the Palestinians and the risk of further Israeli expansionism (since the land promised to Abraham includes territory now belonging to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). I concentrate instead on three *biblical* arguments about the Old Testament promises.

First, the Old Testament promises about the Jews' return to the land were accompanied by the promise that they would also return to the Lord. It is hard to see how the secular State of Israel can be a fulfillment of those prophecies.

Secondly, the Old Testament promises about the land are nowhere repeated in the New Testament. The prediction of Romans 11 is that many Jews will return to Christ; a return to the land is not mentioned. Only one New Testament verse can be claimed as referring to the land, namely Luke 21:24. Here Jesus said that 'Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.' Some interpreters understand this as a promise that Jerusalem will one day be liberated from Gentile rule. But the word 'until' does not necessarily imply this. 'The times of the Gentiles' may refer not to the period of Gentile domination, after which Jerusalem will be free, but to the whole present world order, after which Christ will come in glory.

Thirdly, the Old Testament promises, according to the apostles, are fulfilled in Christ and in his new international community. The New Testament writers apply to Christ both the promise of the seed and the promise of the land. A return to Jewish nationalism would be incompatible with this New Testament perspective.

We have surveyed the biblical perspective on 'Israel'. It means in the past the chosen nation, in the present the international fellowship of believers, and in the future a growing community, including many Jews who will finally turn to the Lord.

We conclude where Paul invites us, namely to 'consider ... the kindness and sternness (or 'severity') of God' (Romans 11:22).

First, his *sternness*. The God of the biblical revelation is the God both of salvation and of judgment. Indeed, the history of Israel is a solemn warning against unfaithfulness. 'For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either' (verse 21). So let's not provoke God.

Secondly. His *kindness*. The history of Israel, and indeed of the world, is the story of the patient loving kindness of the Lord.

Just as you [sc. Gentiles], who were at one time disobedient to God, have now received mercy as a result of their [the Jews'] disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

(Romans 11:30 – 32)

God's missionary purpose (his purpose of mercy) is not yet over. The faith of Jesus still has a great future, because of the mercy of God. The religions of the world may threaten the spread of the gospel. Hinduism may try to absorb Christianity, Islam to conquer it, Marxism to drive it underground, and secularism to suffocate it. But God's mercy will triumph in the end. The 'fullness' of the Jews (verse 12) and the 'fullness' of the Gentiles (verse 25) have not yet been brought in. But God is going to have mercy on the full number of all his people.

Then we will wake up to find ourselves not a tiny remnant, but a part of that vast, indeed countless, multitude of God's redeemed people gathered in from all the nations (Revelation 7:9). Only then will God's promise to Abraham be fulfilled, that his posterity will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashores of the world.