

## God's Plan for Jewish People and the Land of Israel.



It seems to me that in trying to understand God's plan for the Jewish people and the land of Israel, there is a veil that hangs over the minds of many Gentile believers. God is clear, throughout Scripture, that He has eternal plans for the people he originally chose to be His 'treasured possession' ('segullah' = the special, particular and personal treasure of a King e.g. Deut.7:6, 14:2, 26:18). Yet some seem to think He has abandoned them and has no further use for them.

The main reason why Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, I believe, was to reject this latter view entirely. Indeed it is impossible to understand Romans (and some other Pauline epistles) unless we keep the Jewish/Gentile issue at the heart of our understanding. And it is a thread that runs all the way through Paul's letter to the believers in Rome.

It's helpful to remember that the early church in Rome went through 4 phases. First of all, it was mainly Jewish. On the day of Pentecost, there were Jewish visitors from Rome in Jerusalem and they returned home and planted the church there.

In the second phase it was a mixed church of Jews & Gentiles. But then the Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) banned all Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2), so in the third phase the church in Rome was entirely Gentile, no Jews at all. The next Emperor, Nero (54-68 AD), said the Jews could return; he knew they were good for the economy, so, in this fourth phase, the Jews returned and were coming back into the church.

However, the Gentiles didn't want them back. The Jews had been away for 12 years or so, and the Gentile Christians were saying God had finished with the Jews; they believed that Gentiles had replaced them in God's scheme of things. It was into this situation and against this background that Paul wrote his letter between 55 and 60 AD.

In his closely reasoned style, Paul asks, and answers, three important questions: Firstly, has God rejected his people Israel once and for all? Secondly, has the faithlessness of the Jews nullified the faithfulness of God? And thirdly, have God's people Israel stumbled and fallen beyond recovery?

And just so there can be no doubt, he emphatically gives the same answer to each question, 'me genoito' ~ variously translated as 'By no means', 'Certainly not', 'Not at all', or even 'God forbid' (Romans 3:4; 11:1 & 11:11).

Paul begins his letter by stating that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of **everyone** who believes, but he shifts the emphasis back onto the Jews when he uses the phrase '**first** for the Jew, **then** for the Gentile (1:16).

He then goes on to argue that even though Jewish and Gentile believers are one in Christ, (the dividing wall of hostility having been broken down – Eph. 2:11-18) and even though both have the same basis for their relationship with God (we are all saved by grace, through faith – Rms. chapters 1-8), nevertheless, God is still working his purposes out with both Jews and Gentiles in mind, two peoples (chapters 9-11).

In fact, chapters 9-11 are the climax of Paul's letter and reasoning. Unfortunately most Gentile churches neglect them.

Sometimes Paul addresses a 'Jew' and defines one as a person who has had 'inward circumcision of the heart by the Spirit' (Rms. 2:29). Sometimes he is inclusive of Jews and Gentiles and writes that Abraham is the 'father of us all', a 'father of many nations' (Rms. 4:16&17). Sometimes he says 'there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him' (Rms. 10:12). Sometimes he addresses the Gentiles in the church directly: 'I am talking to you Gentiles. In as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles' (Rms. 11:13). And of course he is happy to identify himself as an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin (11:1).

**So what is the current situation with regard to Jewish people, the land of Israel and international, world-wide mission?** At the present time, the Jewish people are still largely resistant to the gospel and the nation of Israel today is as secular as Britain. But their stubbornness does not nullify the fact that they have been specially selected by God in the past and that in the future we can expect to see God's Spirit at work among them in new and exciting ways. There is some evidence that it is already starting to happen.

Paul says that Israel has experienced a hardening in part, UNTIL the full number of the Gentile nations comes in, and then God will bring in the full number of Jewish believers (Rms.11:25-27). The hardening is temporary.

Some people believe that God finished with the Jews in AD 70 when Titus entered Jerusalem, destroyed it, killed 1 million Jews and drove them out of the land. All of this Jesus had prophesied a generation earlier. But the same Jesus also said: 'They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles UNTIL the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled' (Lk.21:24). Their demise would be temporary.

And of course in 1948 Israel was suddenly back on the world map – the state of Israel was reborn. After an exile of 1,878 years, many Jews have returned to the land God gave them. Today, 6.5 million Jews live in Israel (75% of the population). Ownership of the land was always an integral part of God's original covenant with Abraham (Gen.12:7; 13:14-17; 17:8).

Indeed some Rabbis will point to the following Scriptures as being the title deeds to the land which God gave them:

- Abraham's purchase, from the Hittite community, of the field, cave and trees at Hebron which were legally made over to him – Gen. 23:17-20.
- Jacob's purchase, from the sons of Hamor, of a plot of land at Shechem (Nablus) where he pitched his tent and set up an altar to God – Gen. 33:18-20.
- David's purchase of land in Jerusalem from Araunah the Jebusite – 2 Sam. 24:24&25; 1 Chron. 21:24-26.



Ultimately however, God's plan for the Jewish people and the land of Israel seem to boil down to whether God is a faithful God with regard to His gifts, His call and His promises.

I believe He is: 'This is what the Lord says: he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord Almighty is his name:

Only if these decrees vanish from my sight, declares the Lord, will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.' This is what the Lord says: 'Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below are searched out will I reject the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the Lord.' (Jer. 31:35-37)

'Yet Jerusalem says: 'The Lord has deserted us; the Lord has forgotten us.' Never! Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you' (Is. 49:14&15 - NLT).

And this question of God's faithfulness to what He has said was also the touchstone for Paul as he asserts: 'God's gifts and his call can never be withdrawn; he will never go back on his promises' (Rms. 11:29 – Living Bible).

Paul is clear that Gentile believers should not be boastful or arrogant towards Jewish believers but remember that we, 'wild olive shoots', have been grafted in and now 'share in the nourishing sap from the olive root'. The Jewish root supports us.

The fact that some of the Jewish olive branches have been broken off because of unbelief means that we Gentile believers should be careful, fearful even. If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare us if we wander off into unbelief (Rms. 11:17-21).

And if God could take me, a wild olive branch, and graft me into His cultivated olive tree, how much easier will it be for him to re-graft the Jews, His natural branches, back into His cultivated olive tree.

Paul ends his letter with some very practical issues where Jewish/Gentile perspectives are again in view. In Romans 14:1-6, Paul is highlighting some of the tensions that arose in the church over different Jewish/Gentile views of eating meat that had been offered to idols and also whether it was necessary to treat one day of the week as special.

Jewish believers had problems with eating meat that had been offered to the pantheon of Roman and Greek gods because of their aversion to idolatry. The Jews, therefore, chose to be vegetarians whereas the Gentiles were happy to eat such meat. And the Jewish believers wanted to retain Sabbath observance whereas this was not so important for the Gentiles.

So we see again how it was Jewish/Gentile scruples that were at the heart of Paul's argument.

Paul then proceeds to assert something even more startling. He says that as we Gentiles have now shared in the Jews' *spiritual* blessings, we owe it to them to share our *material* blessings with them as needs arise (Rms. 15:27). Therefore, every Gentile church is called to support Jewish people and give to Jewish missions. It is a debt we owe them.

Finally, there are two things which arise from what I've written here which address two other misconceptions that many of us Gentile believers seem to have.

The first is that Pentecost was the 'birth of the church' ~ it was not. The New Testament word for the church, 'ekklesia', is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'qahal', one of the words used in the Old Testament for 'the congregation' of Israel. The church is essentially those who are 'called out' and the first people to be 'called out' by God were the Jews and the nation of Israel. That is when the church was born.

It's also worth remembering that the first celebration of the Feast of Pentecost, after Jesus had ascended and where the Holy Spirit was outpoured, was almost an entirely Jewish affair!

The second thing to note is that the church has not replaced Israel. There are 72 references to 'Israel' in the New Testament and every one of them refers to ethnic Israel, not the church.

God's covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, have never been rescinded, never cancelled. "As surely as my new heavens and earth will remain, so will you always be my people, with a name that will never disappear," says the Lord (Is.66:22).

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