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BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

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ISRAEL

Through Four Lenses



ISRAEL

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I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...
Romans 11:1-2

In Romans 9–11, Paul, Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, treats his mostly non-Jewish audience to the most fully developed theological passage in all of Scripture. And what is he talking about? Israel and the Jewish people, of course! Perhaps there is some importance the Gentile reader of today should ascribe to so weighty a work. Yet, it persists that this very passage is one of the most ignored and misunderstood parts of the Bible. Perhaps this is because there is a mystery going on—the mystery of amazing Israel.

Paul does not allow his hearers the ease of ignoring or misunderstanding one of God's great mysteries. The apostle states emphatically, "...I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own opinion..." (Rom. 11:25a). Not only is ignorance not tolerated, but the same goes for arrogance, one's "own opinion." Earlier in the same chapter, Paul warned: "Do not boast against the [broken off] branches [unbelieving Israel]," and "Do not be haughty [arrogant], but fear" (Rom. 11:18a, 20b).

Something very weighty, indeed, is going on here. How curious that so many Christians could have ignored this over so many centuries. God is yet so merciful to open up the mystery of Israel to His Church in the days He has allotted you and me on this earth.

Getting Focus on Israel

We've already discovered the most prevalent Christian theological-historical view of Israel, which is to simply ignore it. But Paul forbade such ignorance and wrote the entire passage of Romans 9–11 for the expressed purpose of bringing understanding to the nations on how God perpetually regards His ancient, covenanted Jewish people. In spite of the warnings, much of the Church throughout history chose to turn aside from a correct view of this people, called by the prophet "the apple of His [God's] eye" (Zech. 2:8b).

A difficulty that arose for first-century Christians was the Jews' broad rejection of Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah. It was an embarrassment for the early Church—having been started by the Jewish Yeshua and His Jewish followers—to embrace the reality that most of the Jewish people were not following "The Way." With this, the idea that the mostly Gentile Church had superseded Israel in God's plan for the earth began to gain



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is both the
starting point
and the centre.
Derek Prince

credence. Was national Israel now replaced by the “Israel of God?” Although this phrase is found in the book of Galatians (6:16), it was never meant to imply that the Church had replaced Israel.

When viewing Scripture, one’s set of lenses bears much on one’s resulting opinion of God. Author John Wilkinson stated forthrightly, “If the plain and obvious sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.” Though over-generalized, considering the wide range of biblical interpretative methods, this seems sage advice and easily followed. Through this lens, one retains sight of a national, natural Israel continuing in God’s covenant with an expansion of a spiritual Israel coming onto the scene. Seminary professor and author J. Lanier Burns warns the student of Scripture to beware of overly simplistic “either/or” constructions when “both/and” understandings are more precise. Applying this to Israel in Romans 9–11, we do not have to pit one Israel against another in the analysis, as if there is either one or the other and the other does not count! Instead, the interpreter should look through the lens that peers into the Kingdom and see that God is fully able to have both a natural Israel and a spiritual Israel for His sovereign purpose.

The late international Bible teacher Derek Prince brought clarity on this subject. He chose the more obvious, non-allegorical presentation of Scripture that Israel is natural Israel unless otherwise specified. Owing to Israel’s centrality in the Bible, Prince placed Israel right at the center of God’s view of the peoples of the earth: “It is around God’s dealings with Israel...and the inheritance He has appointed for them that His dealings with all other nations revolve. Israel is both the starting point and the center.”

From God’s initial revelation recorded in Scripture to the human mix of ignorance, arrogance, and excess supplied over the centuries, we come now in the fear of God to peer into the mystery of Israel through these four lenses: Israel Ignored, Israel Replaced, Israel Exalted, and Israel Realized.

Israel Ignored

Almost two millennia of ignorance toward this mystery have done great damage to the health and vitality of the Church, not to mention the Jewish people. While it may have seemed expedient to ignore Israel in the period when the Jewish people seemed





permanently dispersed and inconsequential, that convenience is no longer possible. The Jewish people will not be ignored. Since the late 19th century, they have steadily returned to occupy center-stage in a rapidly unfolding world drama.

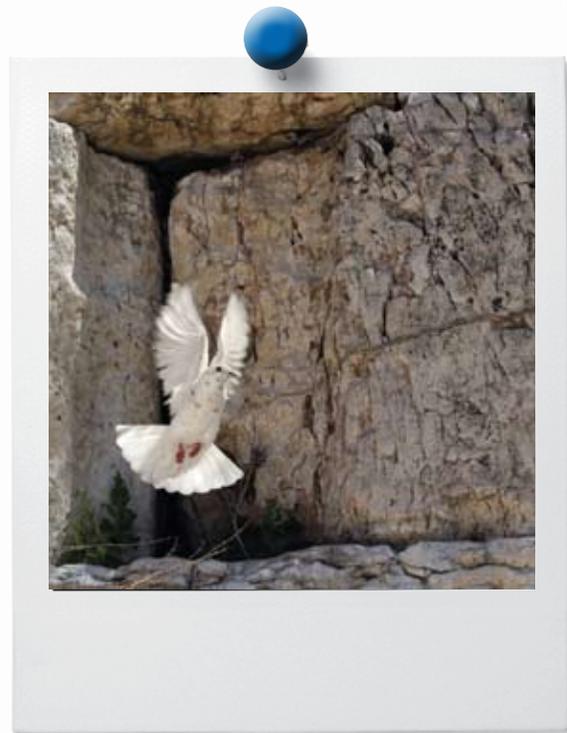
One theological approach to ignoring Israel was to consider Romans 9–11 misplaced or inauthentic in the corpus of Romans, or even all of Scripture. The theory is that the subject matter of chapters 9–11 is an unrelated topic that does not fit with chapters 1–8 and 12–16. H.L. Ellison said that the proponents of this position considered Paul's main argument done in chapter 8, so that the following chapters were "merely subsidiary." Plain reading should yield the obvious: Paul, at the end of chapter 8, exhorts that nothing can separate God's people from Him.

The question arises, "Then what about Israel? Has her unbelief separated her from God?" In his well-developed response of Romans 9–11, Paul answers the question with a resounding "God forbid!" (11:1, KJV). Concluding his argument with a mighty hymn to the amazing, unsearchable God of Israel, Paul proceeds to chapter 12, commanding the brethren—in light of God's everlasting covenant preserved with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to present their bodies a living sacrifice. There was no ill-placement there of the powerful truth of God's mercy still in store for Israel.

Then what about Israel? Has her unbelief separated her from God?

While a blessing to the Church in so many realms of theology, the reformed theologians strike a very static, sterile tone in their approach to a very dynamic Israel. In reference to God's mysterious mercy expounded in Romans 11:30–32, one Christian author writes, "References do not exclude all parallel references to some future purpose of God for Israel, but they warn the exegete [interpreter] against assuming too hastily that the entirety of Romans 11 deals with Israel's distinctive future." This theology relegates Israel to a mere teaching model—a typological role in the life of the Church.

Similarly, prophecy of Israel's return to the Land of Promise is treated as only fulfilled in the ultimate resurrection at Messiah's return. These scholars labor through intricate patterns to explain away the obvious in an attempt to justify their ignorance concerning the revealed mystery of Israel, including the biblical Land of Israel's promise. Burns said of this, "In Christian tradition it [Romans 11] has been proof-texted or neglected more than it has been thoughtfully interpreted and applied." This neglect has been to the detriment of the Church.



Israel Replaced

What is even more damaging than ignorance? Arrogance. Paul's warnings against being haughty in Romans 11:20 went unheeded by the early Roman Church and most of its theological successors through the centuries.

Paul warns of God's willingness to break off the unnatural, grafted-in branches—the Gentiles. *"For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either"* (Rom. 11:21). Is it not likely that the mostly-Gentile Church has suffered this judgment in a collective, if not individual sense? Modern evangelicalism's leaning to an individualistic, "I'm not losing my salvation" posture is prone to act arrogantly toward those "outside the camp," while not discerning the resultant judgment on the Church. In this approach, the Jewish people, so precious to God, are reduced to mere object lessons for the overly-confident Christian. One theologian displayed this arrogance when he declared, "God's faithfulness to Israel is paradigmatic for Gentile Christian use." (Editor's note: A paradigm is a model or a pattern. Thus, the implication in this statement is that God is faithful to Israel *only* so the church can be blessed.)

The only basis for God to replace Israel with the Church would be if His character was to break covenant. Since Paul in Romans 9–11 clearly contravenes this, then replacement doctrine is not sound doctrine. Sadly, the Church's credibility among the Jews has been done much damage by misguided replacement theory. Ellison observed: "No such argument will ever move the Jew as he faces the church, which has taken all his promises and left him all the curses." As the Church comes off her arrogant collective perch of replacing the very Jewish stalk into which she was grafted, there is increasing hope of regaining our credibility.

Recognizing and joining with God's blessing on Israel, and not only His judgments, is the present opportunity of the Church. If another opportunity for conviction is needed, Wilkinson delivers a stinging rebuke: "The Gentile wild olive graft should have lost its wildness by incorporation in the Jewish-Christian church as a partaker only of its blessings; but it has claimed to be spiritual Israel...and has thus proclaimed a Gentile Christendom almost as corrupt as heathendom."

Israel Exalted

It is important to recognize that Israel has also been over-exalted in the quest of some to counteract the abuses of ignorance and arrogance. Oftentimes, the pendulum is pushed too far in the opposite direction in the attempt to correct an injustice, and this has occurred regarding Israel.

As a result of this pendulum swing, some have taught that Israel, as God's chosen nation, cannot make a mistake. This

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politics, sports and
economics.



theory purports that every decision made by Israel's government is, in fact, a decision made by God. This is, of course, as untrue of Israel as it is of any duly elected human government. Others have taught variations on the theme of Jewish exclusivity in relationship with God, including the concept of "dual covenant" (one covenant for the Church and another for Israel), a theology widely disavowed among evangelical Christians.

One theologian noted that Paul, in Romans 9–11, is not dual covenant and so "does not provide a model for Jewish-Christian relations." That is correct in the former but misguided in the latter. It does not take compromise of what one believes to have a basis for God-honoring relations. It simply takes living our Christian faith in fullness while acknowledging Israel's standing Abrahamic blessing before God. With grace and truth, God proves time and again that He can manage the details in the realm of mystery.

Part of the problem in interpreting the mystery of Israel is individual versus collective understanding. While always loving individuals, God deals primarily with nations throughout Scripture. He raises up and brings down whole peoples according to His righteous judgments and mercies. He is fully able to exalt or debase His beloved Israel. He has proven this time and again. It is not for man to be the judge, but rather to be the one who blesses the work of God among the nations. Of all the nations, there is yet the singular nation, Israel, with whom He has specially covenanted to accomplish all that is lasting on the earth. Through this people, whether raised high or brought low, God has channeled to man every spiritual blessing, and many natural ones too.

While not over-exalting Israel, can we yet stand in awe that *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.), the promises, the prophets, the Scriptures, the apostles, and Yeshua (Jesus) Himself, all came to the world through this people, the "apple" of God's eye? Can we also embrace this nation's contributions in recognizing Israel's disproportionate blessing to the earth?

While only one quarter of one percent of the world population is Jewish, 15% of all Nobel Prize winners since 1899 have been Jewish. This people gave us aspirin, the polio vaccine, the diphtheria test, blood transfusions, the hepatitis vaccine, antibiotics, vitamins and much, much more that has improved and



preserved our lives. The descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lead the lists in technology, music, philosophy, journalism, philanthropy, politics, sports and economics. While it is important not to exalt Israel where God does not, there remains that one small matter raised by Paul for the Gentile Church to always remember, no matter the state of the Jewish people: *"The gifts and calling of God [in context, for Israel] are irrevocable"* (Rom. 11:29).

Israel Realized

In this discussion, we've started to realize Israel as it exists in contrast to the error of ignorance, replacement, and over-exaltation. Note that Paul uses one breath in Romans 11:28 to explain that, concerning the election, they are *"beloved for the sake of the fathers."* It should be clear that one's individual discomfort can be subordinated to the comforting of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are still with us today through the very persistent Jewish people.

Concerning the oft-debated matter of God's election, Ellison comments wryly: "It is a mystery that those following Augustine and Calvin can so cheerfully think

of God casting off His people...if one election can be cancelled, why not the rest?" God's election is indeed a mystery, but the mystery of His election concerning His betrothed Israel is not one to remain hidden. Returning to the argument of plain reading and plain meaning, Wilkinson offers this note of clarity: "We must let Israel mean Israel, and Gentile mean Gentile, or we miss the purpose of God in the miraculous origin, history, and preservation of the natural and national Israel. Observing carefully this distinction, the Holy Scriptures are easily understood, and we learn without difficulty what God intends to do with the Jews, and by the Jews in blessing the Gentile world."

Paul explains in Romans 11 that Israel is the rich natural root, and the Gentile believers are the wild, grafted-in branches. This is congruent with the passage in Ephesians where he explains that it is in the Messiah that God's dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is taken down: *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation"* (2:14). The key here is that the movement toward unity into the "one new man" of Ephesians 2:15 is primarily that of the former heathen into the cultivated fields of God's original people, the Jews. Christians recognize that entrance,

not through the Mosaic Covenant and its many requirements for Israel's sanctification, but into the Abrahamic Covenant of faith and blessing through the New Covenant.

The ignorance and arrogance lenses underscore the big relational problem that partially-blinded Israel and the ill-informed Gentile Church got into over all this. From *Understanding Israel*, the following parent-child analogy brings clarity in helping both groups get focus:

- Israel is the "parent," the source, localized with roots that need a land.
- The Church is the "child," the fruit, delocalized with many branches that need space.
- Israel is partially blind, not recognizing her own fruit and the joy it should be bringing.
- The Church is partially underdeveloped, not recognizing the wealth of wisdom and knowledge resident in the parent.
- Israel laid down its life to birth, nurture, and raise a son, the apostles, and the Church.



4x5 FILM

- The Church, maturing out of selfish adolescence, can recognize the sacrifice of Israel and repay the debt through care, comfort, and protection of its very heritage in the Lord.

This argument provides a functional framework for embracing Israel and the Church in reality. God is not bound to an “either/or” construct; He ably works out the “both/and” concerning Israel and the Church. By His grace, so can we.

Conclusion

“The church without restored Israel is like a rugby team without its star player,” offers Malcolm Hedding, executive director of International Christian Embassy Jerusalem. Restored Israel is awaiting full manifestation—Israel’s story has really only begun. Paul indicates cataclysmic changes in the earth when the natural branches of historic, covenanted Israel are back on the tree in force. The time is now for a mature Church to humble herself, recognize the ingrafting, thank God for His abundant mercy, and rise up to the full measure of the blessing of Abraham.

By Rev. Bill Adams
USA Deputy National Director

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

