

Who Is Israel?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 9:1-8, 11:11-32, Ephesians 2:14-19

Who is Israel? The question has been a tricky and important theological question for many years. Scholars and interpreters wrestled with it. Lately, because of world events, the question has become more important and more contested. The Hamas massacre and the subsequent war in Gaza have intensified the questions. Who is Israel? Who are these people to whom God made promises in the past? And what, if anything, do those promises mean for the nation of Israel as we see it today?

The 'Who is Israel' question is not new. It goes back to the Bible. Paul wrestled with this question in Romans 9-11. For those of you who don't know, Romans 9-11 is an amazing section of Scripture where Paul addresses the question: What's going to happen to Israel? What's going to happen to my fellow Jews? Paul's worried about the question because so many of his fellow Israelites have not accepted Jesus as their Messiah. They've been waiting for the Messiah all these years, now the messiah shows up and they reject him! 'Has God's promise failed?' he asks.

As you might expect Paul says, of course God's promise hasn't failed. Here's how he puts it. "It is not as though God's word has failed, for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Now there's a sentence to make your head hurt. Not all Israel is Israel?! So, there are some people we call Israel who are not Israel!? That's confusing. What's the difference between Israel and Israel?

Who is Israel? The question is at least as old as Romans 9. Broadly speaking there are 3 main approaches to the relationship between Israel and the church. On the one hand you have what many scholars call Replacement Theology or Supersessionism. Replacement theology says that the church has replaced Israel. In the Old Testament, Israel was God's chosen people. They were given the law and the promises. Unfortunately, they failed to keep the law and they failed to trust the promises. They were unfaithful, so now God has uprooted the vine of Israel and in its place he has planted the church. Israel has been replaced.

On the other side you have the view common in Dispensationalism. This view says, 'no, Israel has definitely not been uprooted and replaced, in fact all God's promises to Israel still apply.' In Classic Dispensationalism, God has planted two covenant trees. There are two covenants that God has made, two different ways to be related to him. The church covenant is the one for us Christians. It involves the sacraments and salvation by Grace through faith. When Jesus returns, the church will be raptured and we will be with him in heaven. At this point we will see his plan for the other tree come to fruition. Jesus will begin his 1000-year reign in Jerusalem and the Jews, who aren't part of the rapture, will return to him. They will return to Israel. Israel will become the supreme nation on earth, the Temple will be re-built and sacrifices will again be offered there. So, in the dispensational scheme, for Israel, the Old Testament covenant essentially stays in place and is fulfilled in the millennium. For us Christians, there's a different covenant, a different path, a different tree.

The Dispensationalists get to that belief because they read Old Testament prophecy differently than we do. They see all the Old Testament prophecies about Israel and the land are directed at the ethnic and national people of Israel. So when God says to Isaiah to exiled Israel that "foreigners will re-build your walls and their kings will serve you" they believe that this prophecy has yet to be fulfilled, but it will be fulfilled during the millennial reign of Jesus in Jerusalem when the nation state of Israel will become the dominant nation. Or, when Isaiah 2:2 says, "in those days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of mountains" they say that prophecy will be fulfilled during the millennium when Jerusalem will be the pre-eminent city of the world.

Because they believe that all the physical promises to Israel still apply and because they believe that Israel must return to the land and rebuild the temple, Dispensationalists tend to be very pro-Israel in their

politics. They say things like, 'if you stand against the nation of Israel, you are standing against God.' Which makes complete sense if you believe that all the Old Testament promises about Israel are speaking about God's plans for the physical nation of Israel as we see it today.

There is so much more to say about Dispensationalism. Way more than I could describe in 3 paragraphs, but the important thing to focus on for the purposes of tonight's sermon is the belief that Israel and the church represent two different covenants. Two different trees planted in God's Garden and each of them is being raised a different way. So, we have replacement theology which says the tree of Israel has been uprooted and replaced by the tree of the church. And then we have dispensationalism which says there are two covenant trees, both with different promises but serving the same Lord and tended by the same Lord.

What about our tradition? How have Reformed theologians traditionally answered the question, "Who is Israel?" We don't agree with replacement theology, and we don't agree with dispensationalist theology. We don't think God uprooted the tree of Israel and replaced it with the church. Nor do we think that God has planted two separate covenant trees – the tree of Israel and the tree of the church. We believe that there is only one covenant tree and that's the tree of Israel. It's still standing. It was never uprooted. The tree of Israel is still standing, but God has grown that tree and expanded that tree so that in Jesus, that tree flowered into the church. We believe that the Gentile church has been grafted into the tree of Israel and, through Jesus, that tree planted in the Old Testament has reached a new stage of growth.

When I play around with this tree image to describe what we believe about Israel and the church, that's not just me making up a nice image to help you understand, that's me following Paul. Let's go back to Romans 9-11. Remember those are the chapters where Paul is explicitly dealing with the question about the relationship between Israel and the church. There are lots of other passages in the Bible that say things that shed light on the relationship between Israel and the church; there are no other passages where the Bible addresses the question 'who is Israel?' so directly and specifically. I want to read the end of Romans 11. It's the conclusion of Paul's argument, a passage where he states his position on the relationship between the church and Israel AND he makes a prediction about the future.

Let's start reading at verse 11. Paul is speculating about how God's plan for salvation is going to go. He will use the image of a tree. Because of unbelief because they don't accept the Messiah, a large number of the Jewish branches have been cut off the tree, says Paul. In their place, Gentile branches have been grafted into the tree. These Gentile branches aren't planted in a separate tree, they are grafted into Israel's tree, into Israel's covenant, into Israel's promise. Paul hopes that when the unbelieving Israelites who've been cut off from the tree see the Gentiles enjoying salvation, they will be jealous and be drawn to Christ. Read Romans 11:11-24. Do you see the picture Paul is painting for us? There is one tree, one covenant, one plan of God. That tree was planted by God when he called Abraham, and it has always been the tree of Israel. God the gardener has tended that tree through history, growing it, tending it, pruning it. That tree was always meant to bring forth Jesus, the Messiah. But now that Jesus has arrived, many Jews have rejected the Messiah and their branches have been broken from the tree. Now many Gentiles are coming into the church. They are being grafted into the covenant tree by faith. 'But don't get cocky about your status!' says Paul to these Gentile branches. 'You were saved by grace.' Besides, says Paul, if God could graft you into the tree of Israel, even though you Gentiles are 'wild olive shoots,' think how easy it will be for him to graft all the native olive shoots back into the tree.

How many trees? One tree, right? Branches have fallen out of that tree and branches have been grafted in, but there aren't two covenants; there is only one. Jesus doesn't start a new tree; he comes out of the old tree. The shoot comes up from the stump of Jesse. Jesus represents a fresh and rich growth spurt of the old tree. So we are part of Israel, and all those Jews who don't yet accept Christ are like branches that have been cut from the tree.

But is God done with those branches that have been cut off? Is God done with those unbelieving Jews? Are these Jews cut off from the tree forever? Is there a difference between these unbelieving Jews and pagans? Yes, there is a difference. Paul has already said that it would be easy for God to graft these old

branches back into the tree that they originally came from. Now Paul goes from that into prophetic mode. He predicts what he thinks God will do. Listen. Read Romans 11:25-32. If that doesn't give you a buzz of holy excitement, I don't know what to say. Do you hear what Paul is saying? Do you hear what Paul is prophesying? The promise of God to Israel is not done. Paul sees a great return of Jews to Jesus. Their disobedience was part of the story God has been writing. God has used their disobedience to bring in the Gentiles, but God will not let that disobedience stand. God's end is mercy. God will bring them back in. All Israel will be saved!

A couple of notes here. I don't think that means every single ethnic Jew will become a Christian. I would love it if that would happen, but Paul is not preaching Jewish universalism here. I do think Paul envisions a huge movement of faithful Jews turning to Jesus. Paul is definitely saying, God is not done with Israel. His promise is still working. His Spirit is still working in a special way with them.

But also note, as it applies to the subject of tonight's sermon, when the Jews are saved, they will come to Jesus as part of the same tree, the same covenant as we have. There isn't a separate track of promise. When God grafts these Jews back into the tree their faith, their Jewishness will look like Paul's Jewishness, and, as we all know, Paul didn't practice all the old covenant practices, those had been fulfilled in Christ. As Paul said so clearly in Galatians and other places, in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus." There is only one tree, and it's the tree of Israel whose covenant promises come to full fruition in Jesus Christ.

I think this passage is pretty clear and definitive on the question, but there are other passages that paint this picture. Read Ephesians 2:14-29. There is only one household in this passage. We Gentiles, who were once far off, are brought into the household of Israel. So again, there's one family; there's one tree.

In our reading of the New Testament, the temple doesn't need to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, in Christ the church is now the temple of God. Ephesians 2:21: In Christ, Jews and Gentiles together become a building which is "a Holy Temple in the Lord." In our reading of the New Testament, those prophecies of the Israelites returning to Jerusalem are fulfilled at Pentecost where believing Jews, diasporic Jews who had come from all over the world were in the city for the feast of Pentecost see the outpouring of the Spirit and hear the gospel preached in their language. In our reading of the New Testament, the promise of inheriting the land is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus says all authority in heaven on Earth has been given to me. Now that Christ has conquered, all nations of the world belong to him and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Every square inch of creation belongs to God and his faithful people wherever they live have inherited the earth in answer to those old promises. All those Old Testament promises about Israel being restored, and inheriting the land, and blessing the nations are all fulfilled in Christ and his Church. There is one tree.

So, if this is our understanding of what the Bible teaches about Israel, what does that mean for us? It means we have a special relationship with our Jewish brothers and sisters. Even if they don't name Christ's name, they are related to us in a way that no other faith is. We share things that no other faith shares. We have special hopes for them. We have reason to believe that the day will come when God will bring huge numbers of them back into the family, back into the tree.

It also means that we don't associate the Old Testament promises with the political nation-state of Israel. As a person who holds to a Reformed view of the relationship between the church and Israel, I would not say, "If you don't support the nation of Israel, you are working against God's purposes." That's a thing that you do hear from Christians. That kind of talk comes out of the dispensational way of reading the Bible. While we see the promises of God still applying to the faith of Jewish people, we don't have the two track view that sees the promises applying to the nation of Israel. That doesn't mean we don't support Israel. There may be really good geo-political reasons for us to support the nation of Israel. On balance I would say it's good that Jews have a state of their own. But we don't say, for example, that, in order for prophecy to be fulfilled, the boundaries of modern Israel must expand until they conform to the boundaries of the land described in the Old Testament. That's the kind of talk that comes out of a dispensationalist reading of the Old Testament.

That helps to understand why I am teaching on these things tonight. It's important for us to learn our theology and to understand what we believe, but these things also make a difference in the way people interact with the issues of the day. These theological beliefs are appearing in headlines and in your social media feeds, and maybe they make you wonder, "is that what we think? Is that what we believe?" I'm trying to help you answer that question.

I do this, we do this, with deep respect and love for people who think differently. I am not trying to bash dispensationalists out there (or dispensationalists in here). I am not trying to shut down replacement theology. I am trying to humbly and joyfully teach you what's been the central and dominant teaching of the church for 2000 years on this issue.

May the Lord bless his church. May the Lord bless the Jewish people. May the Lord bring the fullness of his kingdom and may he bring it soon.

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