

ISRAEL, THE CHURCH AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

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Rebekah E. Towner

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Christians and Jews share much in common. Both Jews and Christians consider the Old Testament books to be sacred, and they both look up to such people as Abraham, David, and Moses as heroes of the faith. Perhaps most notably for Christians, Jesus was a Jew with roots going all the way back to Abraham. Israel is a theme that runs throughout Christian scripture. However, Christians have often throughout history viewed the Jewish people in an unfavorable manner, going so far as to claim that Christians are now God's chosen people and that the Jewish people can no longer enjoy the promises made to them by God throughout the Old Testament. Such a view cannot be justified through a careful reading of the Bible. With such richly intertwined histories and traditions it is necessary for Christians to develop a responsible understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church, between Jews and Christians and how to act in light of that understanding. This thesis will address this issue. To begin with, it will explore two views on this topic within Christianity that tend to neglect certain portions of scripture and over-emphasize others. In the context of these two views, provide a more balanced, biblical approach to the issue through a more careful reading of scripture, especially Romans 9-11. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to determine who the people of God are, what both the Christian and the Jewish role is within that people of God, and what the responsibility of the church is towards the Jewish people.

First, it is important to note that there is a wide range of perspectives regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians, Israel (natural descendants of Abraham) and the church. There are three general views that encompass most perspectives.

The first view deals with Christianity and Judaism from a secular standpoint. It describes the history of interaction between Jews and Christians, and seeks to explain and

solve issues in terms of social and political factors rather than dealing with the underlying theological tensions. This perspective is evident in secular news sources, for example, which deal primarily with current events rather than the beliefs and theological views of religious groups that may be at the root of those current events.

A second perspective, represented by Mary Boys and Sidney Hall among others, recognizes a main source of the conflict as theological, and presents a paradigm that deals with this issue.¹ These scholars take a pluralistic approach in observing and recognizing tensions between Jews and Christians, suggesting that, to some extent Christians must recognize that their Messiah is not necessarily for the Jews. Sidney Hall writes: "A theology accepting Jews as Jews now, but with an eschatological vision that accepts Jews only as Christians, is not a credible faith ... Genuine pluralistic spirituality is a faith that permits one to maintain the integrity of one's own faith while respecting others in the integrity of their own faith."² This statement is typical of this perspective, although there is variance within the view.

The third approach in dealing with the relationship between Jews and Christians regards Jesus Christ as the sole hope of salvation for all peoples, Jews included. Those holding to the second perspective tend to view this approach as supersessionist: that a right relationship with God is found only in becoming a part of the church. Jacob Jocz expresses this perspective: "For the church to reduce her high Christology in order to accommodate the Synagogue would spell dissolution. She stands or falls with the

¹ Sidney Hall as quoted by John J. Johnson, "A New Testament Understanding of the Jewish Rejection of Jesus", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (2000): 235.

Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

² Johnson, 235.

confession that Jesus is Lord.”³ This approach maintains that the lordship of Christ is not a subjective truth for a certain people but is a universal truth that applies to all peoples, and believes that the Bible is God-breathed and true in every detail. This thesis will confine itself to an examination of different perspectives within this third approach.

Terminology

In discussing the relationship between Israel and the Church it is necessary to define those terms. While these definitions will be dealt with in more detail later in this thesis, a summary is necessary in order to present the problem at hand. There is a distinction made in the New Testament between “spiritual” Israel and “natural” Israel. Paul makes this distinction in Romans 9, among other places: “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children... In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring” (vv. 6-8).⁴ Here, Paul discusses an Israel that is different from the ethnic Israel seen in the Old Testament: an Israel that is not based on natural descent, but on belief in a promise. There are two different concepts of Israel found in Paul's writing, and it is necessary to identify and define the difference between ethnic and spiritual Israel.

Natural Israel

David Sandmel explains from a Jewish perspective how ethnic Israel can be defined through three related meanings: “First, [Israel] refers to a *people descended* from

³ Jakob Jocz as quoted by Johnson, 239.

⁴ All scripture is the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise stated.

the patriarchs and matriarchs. Second, this people Israel has a special *covenant* with God, first established with Abraham and subsequently renewed at Sinai. Third, according to our tradition, God has given us a specific *land*, the land of Israel.”⁵ Sandmel emphasizes first the descent of ethnic Israel. This aspect of the definition of ethnic Israel refers to the natural offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as ethnic Israel. But there is more to being included in “ethnic Israel” than simply a blood connection with the patriarchs.

Sandmel next defines ethnic Israel as a people of the covenant. The first establishment of the covenant is seen in God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:

The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ (vv. 1-3)

This is the first covenant found in the Bible in which God announces his plan to establish a nation. When Israel was a just a twinkle in Abraham’s eye, it was already identified with a divine covenant. God’s covenant with Abraham is expanded and expounded upon throughout Genesis, and made again through subsequent patriarchs. The people, or sons of Israel, gain their name through Jacob. In Genesis 35, God gives Jacob the name “Israel” and promises, “A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body” (v. 10-11). God promised to Abraham and Jacob that he would make them a great nation, that they would be blessed and a blessing to all nations.

The covenant is expounded on at Mt. Sinai, as the law is introduced to the people of Israel. In a sense it is at this time that God reveals the provisions of His promises to Israel. He promises to be near, to be the God of the Israelites and to love them with a covenant love. But God also commands them to be holy according to his statutes, and

⁵ David Fox Sandmel, *Israel Judaism, and Christianity*, Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 159.

warns them against breaking the terms of His covenant with them. The covenant is dealt with most extensively in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 4 begins: "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (v. 1). This verse reveals the conditional nature of the covenant: I will give you the land, but you must follow the laws.

There are many different requirements found within the law, covering a variety of issues, but the backbone of the whole covenant is found in Deuteronomy 6: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Fear the Lord your God, serve him only"(v. 5, 13a). In a sense, the rest of the law can be understood as the outworking of the command to love the Lord and to fear Him: if you fear the Lord and love Him above all others you will obey his commands regardless of what they are. It is this quality of fearing and loving the Lord above all others that the Lord desires in his people, and it was because He saw that quality in Abraham that God chose to make a covenant with him and his offspring.

Ethnic Israel is a people of covenant with God. As natural descendants of Abraham, part of their inheritance is the promise found in the covenant God made through different patriarchs, and through Moses. As much as ethnic Israel is defined by descent, it is defined also by covenant.

Sandmel also mentions the land as a part of Israel's self-definition. This begins with the Abrahamic covenant, in which God promises to establish Abraham and his descendants in the land (Genesis 12:7). Ray Rempt discusses the connection that exists for Jews and the land of Israel: "There is something immediate and significant in the

bond between the Jews and the land.” Jews have a sense of connection to the land that, Rempt notes, is evident in the willingness of so many Jews to come to an unknown land (the newly-established modern state of Israel) without knowing where they would live or work.⁶ Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the issue of the land has been at the forefront of the minds of not only Jews, but of the western world. It is a complicated situation, involving politics, social issues, and theology and will not be dealt with in this paper.

Natural Israel can be defined, therefore, in terms of people, covenant, and land. The first category, that of people, may be the most important. Those who are ethnically Jewish, according to the authors of both the Old and New Testaments, have a connection to the covenant and the land whether they recognize that connection or not. For the purposes of this paper, then, the term “natural Israel” will refer to those who are Jews in terms of ethnicity, regardless of whether they live in Israel or practice Judaism.

Spiritual Israel

Natural Israel is referred to in the New Testament, but the sense of it is different. New Testament references to natural Israel often are juxtaposed with spiritual Israel, a concept not explicitly found in the Old Testament. Paul describes spiritual Israel in his letter to the Galatians: “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7). It seems that, unlike the Old Testament view of Israel, there is something outside of relation to Abraham and observance of the law that defines a child of Abraham. In Romans, Paul takes this line of thinking a step further: “A man is not a

⁶ Ray Rempt, *A Season for All Time*, (Woodinville: Fig Tree Publications, 2003), 40.

Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, 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). Here, he goes so far as to say that observance of the law and sharing Abraham's genetic material is not enough to say that someone is a Jew; a true Jew is a Jew in spirit. Sandmel puts it this way: "Paul has described a 'new' or, more accurately, 'true' Israel consisting of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. This true Israel is not made up of the descendants of Jacob (though they are not necessarily excluded from it); rather it is the community of both Jewish and Gentile believers, that is, the church."⁷

Later in Romans Paul addresses this issue directly. He recognizes in Romans 9-11 that there is still a natural Israel that is in some way distinct from the spiritual Israel. As seen in this passage, especially 11:26-29, there is still a place for natural Israel: "And so all Israel will be saved... As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." Paul makes clear that there remains a distinction between natural and spiritual Israel, but he also makes clear that there is a tremendous promise for Israel: "all Israel will be saved". There are two usages of the term "Israel", but does this imply two different peoples of God, and two different promises? Where one Israel begins and the other ends is a source of much debate.

⁷ Sandmel, 163.

The Debate

As seen in the above passages, the Bible could seem to show that there are two “peoples of God”. The Old Testament clearly defines the Israelites as God’s chosen people, however in the New Testament the salvation of God through Christ is available to *anyone* who will believe, even to the point of saying that the true Israel is not in the flesh or in the law, but in the spirit. The issue here is how, from a biblical perspective, room is made for both the church and for Israel in the promises that were made by God for the end of the age, if room is to be made for both groups. Is there a biblical basis for including or excluding the Jews from the promises of God in the New Covenant?

The history of the relationship between Israel and the church is strained, to say the least. There is a long history of persecution of the Jews, and Christians, or at least those professing to be Christian, have played a significant role in that. Though Christians and Jews share a great deal of tradition, they differ in one crucial point of theology: that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. It is out of this history that the relationship between Israel and the church has been strained and questioned. Different groups of Christians have employed different methods of reconciling Israel and the church. These schools of thought use the Bible to back up their claims, but they often use texts out of the context of the rest of Bible. A particular reading of the Bible results in a particular theology. A certain theology, whether recognized explicitly, or believed subconsciously, affects the way the church views their relationship to natural Israel. Therefore it is important to understand the theological bases for the different perspectives on Israel and the church.

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis is exploring this issue under the assumption that Jesus Christ is the only hope of salvation for all peoples, and that the Bible is wholly true in every detail. The two ends of the spectrum on this issue within this context are covenant theology and dispensational theology. Through a comparison of these views in terms of their definition of covenant, natural Israel, and the church, and how each view suggests that relationship between these factors plays out, some of the main points of the debate will become apparent.⁸ Analyzing these perspectives will also create a framework in which a new view can be posited.

Covenant Theology

Covenant theology, also called Reformed theology, derives its name from its emphasis on “the element of unity between the Old and New Covenants.”⁹ These are the covenants made to the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and the New Covenant in Christ. The implication of this in terms of Israel and the Church is that the Church has replaced natural Israel in terms of the promises of God made in the covenants with natural Israel in the Old Testament. Covenant theology can be traced back to such theologians as Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and John Calvin, but was first clearly defined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in 1646. Since that time it has been further developed and shaped, particularly influencing the Puritans of New England¹⁰ and so found its way into American Protestant theology. This hermeneutical system is not a

⁸ I recognize that not every dispensationalist or Covenant thinker ascribes to all these beliefs. There is a wide spectrum within each perspective and that is why labels are so dangerous. I’m seeking to present some of the distinctives of each viewpoint, not a caricature of the views.

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Last Things*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.

¹⁰ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. “Covenant Theology”.

modern craze, but is grounded in centuries of theological thought. It has evolved through the years and there is variation even within this theological stance. This section of the paper will discuss a basic Covenant position on the relationship between natural Israel and the church.

Covenant

As George Ladd has noted, Covenant theology focuses on continuity between the old and new covenants.¹¹ The new covenant in Christ is not a detached, singular entity but one that comes from a deep covenantal tradition. Covenant theologian Louis Berkhof writes: "The summary expression of the covenant is the same throughout, both in the Old and New Testament: 'I will be thy God.'"¹² Covenant theologians use various passages, including Hebrews 8 to support their concept of covenantal continuity.

This continuity, however, does not imply that the different stages of the covenant are interchangeable. In this day, according to Covenant theology, following the Levitical law is no means of salvation, but salvation is found in Christ alone. Since Christ is for gentiles and Jews alike, Covenant theologians conclude that there is only one people of God, that Israel is no longer distinct from the church, and that only one covenant exists through which all people are saved.¹³

Israel

Covenant theology acknowledges that natural Israel still exists as an ethnic group and, since 1948, a state; there is no way to not acknowledge that fact. However, "Israel"

¹¹ Ladd, *Last Things*, 9.

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 279.

¹³ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 23.

in the spiritual sense, as seen in Paul's letters, is now defined as the church. They cite Galatians 3:7 and Romans 2:28-29, among other verses to back up this claim that true Israel is now those who are in Christ.

Galatians 3:6-7: Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

Romans 2:28-29: A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, 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. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Therefore, in theological terms natural Israel is "virtually swallowed up or displaced by the church or spiritual Israel."¹⁴ Although the Jews still exist, the promises of God to the Jews now belong to the church.

In dealing with the Old Testament people of Israel, Covenant theology acknowledges that they were a literal people, but that their role was as a type of the church, and, according to Louis Berkhof, the blessings promised to Abraham "served to symbolize and typify spiritual and heavenly things."¹⁵ The literal struggles and victories of Israel as seen in the Old Testament serve to symbolize the spiritual struggles and victories faced by the church today.

Not all within Covenant theology view Israel as another nation among many. Certain theologians, whom some would consider to be more Covenantal than dispensational in their thinking on this issue, have argued that there is still a special future for natural Israel. Millard Erickson recognizes the unique position of natural Israel: that all Israel will be saved (as promised in Romans 11), but their salvation will consist in

¹⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1042.

¹⁵ Saucy, 22.

their entering into the church.¹⁶ Even within Covenant theology there is some disagreement as to the ultimate role of natural Israel in God's plan, and there are those who recognize a blessing for natural Israel that is distinct from the church. However, no Covenant theologian would argue that there is a salvation for Israel outside of Christ.

The Church

The Church, then, is the true spiritual Israel according to Covenant theology. They have entered into the new covenant within God and have become Jews through circumcision of the heart, as seen in Romans 2:29: "No, 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."

This belief of covenant theology can be seen more clearly in Wayne Grudem's analysis of the church. He uses many passages to suggest that the church is now the recipient of the promises of God to Israel, among which he cites Ephesians 3:6: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." According to Grudem, this verse states that the church receives the promises of Israel, although natural Israel has not been excluded either. However, the passage continues in saying that God has accomplished his eternal purpose *in Christ Jesus*: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:10-11). According to Covenantal thinking, this means that literal Israel may be excluded from the promises if they continue

¹⁶ Erickson, 1043.

to deny that Jesus is the Messiah. Christ Jesus (the new covenant) is the fulfillment of God's purpose. Grudem writes: "The entire passage speaks strongly of the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in one body in Christ and gives no indication of any distinctive plan for Jewish people ever to be saved apart from inclusion in the one body of Christ, the church."¹⁷ The church, then, is the new Israel, inheritor of the promises of God through the terms of the new covenant. Natural Israel participates in the promises of God, originally made to them, only as they accept the terms of the new covenant and are incorporated into the church.¹⁸

Dispensationalism

At the other end of the theological spectrum, dispensationalism was developed by John Nelson Darby in the 19th century. It has gained popularity through the Scofield Reference Bible, as well as through the works of Charles Ryrie, Lewis Chafer and others. Dallas Theological Seminary is well known for popularizing this system of theology. The term "dispensationalism" refers to the different dispensations of the relationship of God to humankind and suggests that there are different ways that God dispenses His grace for different times and people. For example, God relates to Old Testament Israel in the dispensation of the law; the church is formed and currently exists within the dispensation of grace.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 862.

Other passages are 1 Peter 2:4-10, Hebrews 8, Ephesians 2. I chose one example, but there are many.

¹⁸ Grudem, 862-3; Sandmel, 161.

¹⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), s.v. "Dispensationalism".

Dan Juster, *Israel, The Church, and The Last Days*, (Shippensburg: Destiny's Image Publishers, 2003), 13.

Covenant

Classical dispensationalism sees the Old and New Covenants as separate. The Old covenant is concerned with earthly blessings and the establishment of an earthly kingdom. It promises a land for Israel in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3) and a central place among the nations in the coming kingdom.²⁰ The church, in contrast, is defined by the new covenant, which promises spiritual life and blessing, as in John 14:3 where Jesus promises to prepare a place for his disciples in his Father's house. George Ladd states, "The two chief tenets of dispensationalism are that there are two peoples of God for whom God has two different programs and destinies."²¹ The old and new covenants serve different purposes and different peoples.

One result of this is that some dispensationalists would tend to view the promise of a new covenant as found in Jeremiah 33:31-34 as something different from Christ. There would then be, according to dispensational thinking, two new covenants: one in Christ for the church and a future new covenant for natural Israel, not yet realized, which would be some form of renewal of the Mosaic covenant.²² From the perspective of evangelical Christianity, within which most dispensationalists place themselves, this conclusion is problematic because it seems to suggest that God has two different programs for salvation. There is no continuity between the old and new covenants, or the old and new testaments, or the Jewish people and Christians. There are a variety of ways that Dispensationalists try to resolve this tension.

²⁰ Isaiah 2:1-4, 60-62, Jeremiah 33:14-15; Saucy, 28.

²¹ Ladd, *Last Things*, 9.

²² Ladd, 26.

One answer, most prominent in the theology of Lewis Chafer, suggests that the church is defined by a covenant completely separate from that of Israel.²³ This perspective does not attempt to preserve any continuity between natural Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament. A second view suggests that the church has no relationship to the new covenant of Israel found in Jeremiah 33. This view posits that there is only one covenant, but that the church is not an active participant in it. This is because, according to this perspective, the new covenant was for the physical blessings of a future earthly kingdom for Israel. "It does not apply to the church directly as a legal covenant relationship, but as a gracious, spiritual benefit."²⁴ The third view regarding the covenant says that the church participates directly in the new covenant of Jeremiah 33, but only in certain aspects of it. The church is only participating in the spiritual fulfillment of the covenant, but the physical fulfillment will be for natural Israel in the future. This differs from the second view in that the church is a participator in the covenant, rather than simply experiencing residual benefits.²⁵ While there is much internal debate, there is one key point that most contemporary dispensationalists agree on: the first covenant of God was made with Israel, and the ultimate and complete fulfillment of that covenant remains for natural Israel.²⁶

Israel

Israel for dispensationalists is simply natural, literal Israel. They are defined as the offspring of Abraham, with whom God made covenantal promises through Abraham,

²³ Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 431-432.

²⁴ Decker, 437.

²⁵ Decker, 444.

²⁶ Decker, 454-456.

Moses, and David (among others). George Ladd describes the Dispensationalist view of Israel as follows: "Israel was and remains and is to be a theocratic people [ruled by God] who are destined to inherit the promised land of Israel [as seen in the Abrahamic covenant], for whom Jesus will be the literal Davidic king [2 Sam 7:12-16], when the prophecies of the Old Testament will be literally fulfilled."²⁷ Israel is a people descended from Abraham and a people of covenant.

Church

Dispensationalists define the current age as the Church Age, the time of the Dispensation of Grace (as opposed to law). In terms of church history, this age is the time between the Pentecost of Acts and the rapture of the saints that is to come. The church is seen as a parenthesis in God's plan for the world, suggesting that the church is in no way related to the Old Testament promises, or the promise of a tribulation or judgment preceding the establishment of a new earth, and that none of these promises are being fulfilled in this age.²⁸

This parenthetical church age came about as a result of Israel's rejection of the Messiah, and will be ended before the tribulation, when the church will be brought up to heaven: "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth" (Revelation 3:10). This verse suggests that those who have faith in Christ will not experience the wrath of God that is promised on the earth.

²⁷ Ladd, 9; stuff in brackets is mine.

²⁸ Saucy, 27.

There has been a movement within dispensationalism called progressive dispensationalism that differs from the traditional dispensational perspective on the role of the church. Within the progressive view the church is not a parenthesis in God's plan, but "the first step toward the establishment of the kingdom of God". It follows from this that "God does not have two separate purposes for Israel and the church, but a single purpose – the establishment of the kingdom of God – in which Israel and the church will both share."²⁹ This view tempers some of the most extreme aspects of dispensationalism with regard to the role of the church in God's kingdom.

Analysis

Both Dispensationalism and Covenant theology have elements that align with scripture, but they tend to emphasize certain aspects of scripture at the expense of others, often without clear reason. Covenant theology tends to emphasize the importance of the church at the expense of Israel, whereas dispensationalism tends to treat the church as an afterthought and Israel as the focal point of God's plan and affections.

The more extreme forms of Covenant theology, as we have seen, argue that the church has replaced natural Israel as the people of God and recipients of the promises. It is difficult to reconcile this with Romans 11, where Paul declares that all Israel will be saved, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (vv. 26-29). Although this comment by Paul is not an exhaustive explanation of the future of Israel, it does suggest that there is a distinct plan for Israel. For Covenant theologians to suggest that Israel is

²⁹ Grudem, 860.

“just another nation” goes against Paul’s teaching in Romans 9-11, where he frequently discusses many of the unique blessings of the people of Israel.

Dispensationalism seems to be a reaction against these fallacies on the part of Covenant theology, but dispensational theology tends to swing too far in the other direction. The extreme of this view would say that there are two entirely separate programs for Israel and the church. The logical conclusion of this line of thinking suggests that there are two separate programs of salvation. This contradicts one of the basic theological ideas that dispensationalists themselves subscribe to: that Christ is the only means of salvation.³⁰

But even if dispensationalists would say that salvation is through Christ alone, certain questions remain. If salvation is through Christ alone, then natural Israel cannot find salvation outside of the church.³¹ Therefore, in order to be saved Israel must become part of the church. Dispensationalism, then, would be saying that there are two different ultimate destinies within the church. This suggestion is difficult to reconcile with passages such as Romans 10:12: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him”, or Ephesians 3:6: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.” There is *one* body, *one* promise in Jesus Christ. If Jews and Gentiles are one, they must share the same ultimate destiny.

³⁰ Rom 3:22-24, John 14:6, Acts 2:36, 4:12, 1 John 2:1-2

³¹ The church is defined as those who believe in Christ for their salvation.

As George Ladd has suggested, "the truth here, as in so many matters lies somewhere between the two poles."³² In light of these issues, this thesis will now explore an alternative view of dealing with the relationship between natural Israel and the church, one that does not seek to promote either Israel or the church over the other in a way that does not line up with the scriptures as a whole.

An Alternative Approach

There is a distinction between natural Israel and the church that is important to understand before talking about how they are to relate to each other. Israel is a literal nation. Even before they had a state they were a people characterized by a common ethnicity. The church, on the other hand, has never been a nation, and by definition, can never be a nation. Christ's command to the disciples was to make disciples of *all nations* (Matthew 28:19, italics mine); the book of Revelation says more than once that Christ has saved people from *every tribe and nation*³³. These verses show that the purpose of the church has never been to establish a natural race or nation, as was the case with Israel. Robert Saucy writes: "The church... is identified in the New Testament as a people called out of *all* nations. In distinction to Israel in her being and witness as a 'nation,' the church is called to proclaim the kingdom salvation as individuals and as a community living in

³² Erickson, 1042.

³³ Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 14:6

the midst of the nations...”³⁴ 1 Peter 2:11 refers to the church as “strangers and aliens in the world”, suggesting that this world is not home to those born of Christ.

Based on these descriptions of Israel and the church, one can see how it would be possible for Israel to be both a part of the church and yet have a distinct purpose as a nation. A Messianic Jew (an ethnic Jew who believes Jesus is the Messiah) is a part of the church, but also has a distinctive calling as a Jew. He belongs to the spiritual tribe that is the church, yet maintains a unique role due to his heritage as Jew. A new understanding of “church” and “Israel” is necessary to understanding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles both within and outside of the church.

Spiritual and Natural Israel

For Paul as seen in Romans 9-11, the Church is Israel, and Israel is the Church. “Israel” refers to “spiritual” Israel, a spiritual people of God. There has only ever been one spiritual people of God, those people, both Jew and Gentile, who have responded to God through faith. Paul presents a difference between natural and spiritual Israel that is crucial in understanding how natural Israel and spiritual Israel (also called the church) interrelate.

In the following verses, a basic issue in terminology is set up.

Romans 9:6b, 8: For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children...In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.

Romans 2:28-29: A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, 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. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.

³⁴ Saucy, 218.

Here Paul makes an important observation: not all Jews are Jews. In terms of ethnicity, this is an impossible statement. There must be two different measures or definitions of Jew. In these verses Paul emphasizes the concept of “spiritual Israel”. James Dunn writes: “The identity of ‘Israel’ is determined by God’s call... ‘Israel’ is the people called by God.”³⁵ Dunn also describes this issue of terminology in that an ethnic Jew is defined by “relation to land (as in the time of Paul), and by differentiation from peoples of other lands”, but spiritual Israel refers to a certain relationship to God.³⁶

Spiritual Israel’s Relationship to God

If “spiritual or true Israel” refers to a certain relationship with God, what is that relationship? Romans 2:29 mentions “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit”, and Romans 9:8 says “it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.” In Galatians 3 Paul provides an answer: “Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham... So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (vv. 6-7,9). These verses reveal that even in the time of Abraham himself, the one through whom all nations will be blessed, faith was the key to relationship with God. These verses do not say, “And Abraham obeyed the law, and it was credited to him as righteousness”, but that Abraham’s faith in God was the determining factor, and Abraham was called a friend of God.³⁷ So friendship with God is

³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 510.

³⁶ Dunn, 506.

³⁷ James 2:23

made possible through believing God. If spiritual Israel is defined by relationship with God, then faith is the beginning of that relationship.

When this is applied to the initial problem, that not all Jews are Jews, we can make sense of it. Not all physical descendants of Abraham have faith in God. Ethnicity is determined by birth; faith is a choice of the individual heart. As Douglas Moo states in his commentary on Romans: "Salvation is never a birthright, even for Jews, but always a gift of God's electing love (Rom. 9:14-23), a gift he is free to bestow on Gentiles as well as Jews (Rom. 9:24-29)."³⁸ Salvation comes through faith, as Paul explains in Romans 10: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (verse 9).

The Israel that Paul describes in Romans 9:6 does not belong to the ethnic Jew. Ladd writes: "Not all Jews of Paul's day can call themselves 'Israel,' the people of God, but only those who emulate Abraham's faith, and so prove themselves to be children of promise."³⁹ But if faith in God is the sole requirement for inclusion in (spiritual) Israel, then the Gentiles are not excluded. It is out of this understanding that Paul writes in Romans 10:12-13, "there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'."

³⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 554.

³⁹ Ladd, *Last Things*, 20.

The Stumbling Stone – Righteousness through Christ

Not only can Gentiles be included in spiritual Israel but many would say that in our time there are more Gentiles in spiritual Israel than Jews. Paul explains how this is possible:

Romans 9: 30-32: “The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone’.”

The stone was a symbol that was often referred to in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.⁴⁰ Throughout the New Testament, these references to the stone are applied to Christ, even by Christ himself. In Matthew 21:42 “Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone...’?”⁴¹ It is interesting to note that Jesus goes on to say to the chief priests and Pharisees whom he is talking to: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (v. 43). In other words, Jesus is saying that spiritual Israel will belong to those who will represent it well and bear its fruit by believing God as Abraham did. Relationship with God is primarily a matter of the heart, not a matter of external obedience to the law.

What does it mean, then, that the Jews stumbled over this stumbling stone in Romans 9:32? Essentially, the majority of the Jews were trying to prove their relationship to God by strict adherence to the law, rather than through believing in God through Christ. Paul testifies to this in Romans 10. He begins by saying that is not due to lack of zeal that the Jews, natural Israel, has stumbled. “They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge” (v. 2). In verses 3 and 4, Paul completes his analysis:

⁴⁰ Isaiah 8:14, Isaiah 26:18, Psalm 118:22

⁴¹ Jesus is quoting Psalm 118:22-23.

Romans 10:3-4: Since they [the ethnic Jews] did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

So the majority of ethnic Jews were trying to prove themselves worthy through zealously following the law, but that was not how God had set things up. Christ is the fulfillment of the law; therefore it is by believing in him that one becomes "right with God", and not through obedience to the law. To the Jew, simply believing in Christ as the means to be righteous probably seemed like a cheat or a shortcut. As William Barclay put it, a Jew would have had a difficult time accepting this way of "trust and acceptance" in Christ; it would have seemed "shatteringly and incredibly new to him."⁴² Christ as the means of salvation and righteousness would have been so foreign to most Jews that it makes sense that they would have stumbled over him. The Gentiles, however, had never had the law. They had never tried to be righteous by obedience to the law, so they would not have had such a difficult time with accepting the gift of grace in Christ.⁴³

As seen in the above discussion, the Gentiles were able to become a part of spiritual Israel through belief in Christ. In Romans 11:17, Paul describes this event in terms of an olive shoot: "...Some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root." Paul is speaking to the Gentiles here, saying that they have been "grafted in" to the olive tree that is spiritual Israel. This metaphor of the olive tree will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, but for the moment, will be used to emphasize one point: Gentiles were grafted into something that already existed. The

⁴² William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, rev. ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1975), 139. This book was also a resource for me in the discussion of "stumbling stone", 135.

⁴³ Barclay, 134.

believers of the New Testament, also called Christians, also called the church, by faith in Christ were *included* in the olive tree of spiritual Israel. This passage does not say that the olive tree of Israel was uprooted and replaced by a grape vine or apple tree. No, the Gentiles were included in a pre-existing spiritual community.

One Spiritual People of God

What does this imply for the original statement: “the church is Israel”? Paul does not use the word “church” anywhere in Romans 9-11. There is no distinction in the text between “Israel” and “Church”. There is a distinction between “natural Israel”, or Jew, and “Gentile”, but when Paul discusses the people of God, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, and is therefore saved,⁴⁴ he emphasizes the sameness of Jew and Gentile in Christ. “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile –the same Lord is Lord of all”. There is one Lord who is Lord of all, and one olive tree. “Church” is what the New Testament writers used to denote the people of God (the olive tree, spiritual Israel) after Christ. The Church could just as well be called Israel (Spiritual Israel, Rom 9:6) and I could be called a Spiritual Jew, or maybe a New Covenant Jew. Or, we could say that Abraham, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. were all a part of the Church. They did not have Christ yet, but they had the promise of Christ (Abraham’s Seed – Gal 3), and they lived by that promise; they had faith in that promise, and so they were children of promise.

Douglas Moo discusses Paul’s dilemma in writing about this issue: “The gospel [that Paul is writing about] is “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1) and the God of whom Paul speaks is none other than the God who has spoken and acted in Israel’s history. Paul

⁴⁴ Romans 10:13, my paraphrase

must, then, demonstrate that the God who chose and made promises to Israel is the same God who has opened the doors of salvation 'to all who believe.'"⁴⁵ It is because of this, Moo continues, that Paul cites the Old Testament scriptures so often in these chapters ⁴⁶. He must show the congruity between the Old Testament Scriptures and the gospel of Christ to show there is and always as been one people of God, one olive tree.

The Law and Christ

If there is only one spiritual people of God then the issue is no longer in determining whether Israel or the Church is the true people of God. Those terms are unclear in their precise meaning and are not juxtaposed in Paul's writing on this topic. The real point of tension for Paul is between Jew and Gentile, and how they relate to and are part of the spiritual people of God. This necessitates a discussion regarding the law and Christ as the fulfillment of the law, because God had given the law to the Jews as a means of preserving a right relationship with God. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had never had the law. The church was established in a new covenant made in Christ, and this replaced the old covenant of the law: Christ provided a complete and final atonement, where the atonement of the law was insufficient. The conflict between covenant of the law and the covenant of Christ was a main source of dissension between Jews and Gentiles for Paul, therefore an exploration of this issue is important in understanding how Paul dealt with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

First, it is important to note that Paul did not view the law as a negative thing in and of itself. The Old Testament scriptures are clear in the fact that the law was given by

⁴⁵ Moo, 550.

⁴⁶ Moo cites D. A. Koch in saying that almost a third of all Paul's quotations of the Old Testament are found in Romans 9-11. Moo, 550.

God. George Ladd writes: "Paul never conceived of the claims of the Law coming to their end because of any imperfection in the law itself. The law is and remains the Law of God (Rom 7:22, 25). The law is not sinful (Rom 7:7) but is holy and just and good (Rom 7:12)."⁴⁷ The issue that Paul was dealing with was the place that the law had taken for the Jewish people compared both to its originally intended function and the function it was to have within the context of the resurrection of Christ.

The Intended Function of the Law in the Old Testament

What was God's original intention in giving the law? God has always required faith from his people, as with Abraham, who *believed in* God and it was credited to him as righteousness. The law came after Abraham, so the law was never a vehicle for salvation or even for producing a right relationship with God: Abraham had this without the law. Dunn writes that the law was not a way to "achieve or gain life; it was, rather, primarily intended to indicate the way life should be lived by the covenant people."⁴⁸ The law could not create faith in God in the hearts of those who followed it, but ideally obedience to the law was a natural response of those who loved God.

George Ladd suggests that the law cannot be understood outside of the context of covenant. The covenant was given to Abraham as a gracious act of God, not because Abraham had earned it in any way. "Israel was constituted God's people not because of merit gained by obedience to the Law, but because of God's free election."⁴⁹ This understanding of the law challenges the idea that it was a means of earning God's favor: divine favor had already been given through the gracious covenant made with Abraham.

⁴⁷ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 503.

⁴⁸ Dunn, 516.

⁴⁹ Ladd, *Theology*, 496.

Paul reminds his readers in Galatians 3:17 that the law was given 430 years after the covenant with Abraham, and that the law does not do away with the covenant, because the covenant was based on promise. Within this context, the function of the law is not a means to *create* a right relationship with God, but rather a means of *preserving* the positive relationship to God that had already been established through the covenant.⁵⁰

There are two main ways that the law preserved a right relationship with God. First, the law gave directions for the atonement of sins. The law required animal sacrifice.⁵¹ From the beginning, God required a blood sacrifice to atone for sin. Genesis 3:21 says: "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." God had to get the skin for these garments from some animal, and this implies that an animal had to be killed. This is the first instance of God covering the shame of humankind by shedding the blood of an animal, and it may very well be meant to illustrate the origins of animal sacrifice and the importance it held in the law. Similarly in Genesis 4, God requires a blood sacrifice from the children of Adam and Eve, accepting Abel's sacrifice of the life of an animal but rejecting Cain's sacrifice of produce.⁵² Consequently, the principle of blood sacrifice is established early in biblical history. The law incorporates this requirement of God by providing for sacrifices for the atonement of his people.

Second, the law provided for the preservation of a right relationship with God by communicating God's expectations of his people. Essentially, God described through the

⁵⁰ Ladd, *Theology*, 496.

⁵¹ Leviticus 16, the day of atonement established; Lev 5-6, requires blood sacrifices for specific reasons. These are only two examples of many where sacrifice of an animal is required by the law. There were other sacrifices required for other things, as well. But the point is that atonement for sins was required a blood sacrifice.

⁵² Taken from a variety of teachings given by Gary C. Gilbertson.

law how to be holy before Him, how one who loves God would act. In theory the law aimed to prevent the need for atonement sacrifices because those following it would always be righteous before God. But it also made provision for the fact that people are sinful and therefore need a means for atonement.

From the Law to Christ

The role of the law in the life of God's Old Testament people, the Jews, ultimately raises questions for the New Testament people of God, established by a new covenant. The law, in establishing a standard for holiness *and* providing for atonement of sins, proved itself unfulfillable by humankind. If God thought that people would be able to live up to the standards of the law, there would have been no need for the provision of atonement within the law. On the other hand, within the New Testament context, if the law had been sufficient here would have been no need for the ultimate act of atonement in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The law testified to the holiness of God and the inability of humans to achieve holiness. It taught people that they needed God, that they needed atonement, because they could not be holy by their own efforts.

The purpose of the law, according to Paul in Galatians 3, was atonement for transgressions until Christ had come (v. 19). Earlier in the chapter, Paul discusses the covenant made with Abraham: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ" (3:16). What Paul is suggesting is that the law was a certain manifestation of God's grace, until the hope of a Messiah was filled.

Christ's Function as the Fulfillment of the Law

So how, according to the New Testament, did Christ fulfill the law? The law provided for atonement of sins through blood sacrifice. Christ fulfilled this as the Lamb of God, the final and complete sacrifice for all sins. Whereas the priests had to make sacrifice after sacrifice, by the sacrifice of Christ "he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14). 1 John 2:2 says of Jesus that "he is *the* atoning sacrifice for our sins" (italics mine). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ did away with the need for the atonement sacrifices of the law. [Romans 8:3]

The other aspect of the law, as discussed above, was a description of how to live righteously before God. First, Christ fulfilled this through his life, the only human to never sin.⁵³ He was the only human who ever loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, never faltering in his faith in God. That is why he was the only one who could bear the sins of the world: because he needed no atonement himself.

Christ fulfills this function of the law as a code for holy conduct through his spirit dwelling in the hearts of those who believe in him. The promise of a new covenant found in Jeremiah 33 says: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts". This contrasts with the law of the Old Testament, which was external. The New Covenant will result in God writing his law on people's hearts: it will be internal. Paul says in Galatians 2:20: "I no longer live but Christ lives in me". Later, he describes the fruit of the Spirit, or the fruit that the Spirit produces in those who have Christ living in them (Gal 5:22). This is not to say that anyone who has received the Spirit of Christ will never sin again, that his or her life will entirely reflect the character of Christ. There is a process by which the flesh is being put to death and the fruit of the Spirit becomes increasingly evident. But

⁵³ 1 Peter 1:19, Hebrews 9:14

ultimately the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ produces the character of Christ in those who believe. The law as an external guidepost for behavior becomes unnecessary when an internal guide, the Holy Spirit, is provided.

How was the law functioning in the Time of Jesus?

The reason this understanding of the intended purpose of the law and Christ as the fulfillment of the law is important in looking at the relationship between Jews and Gentiles is because, in Paul's writing, this was the main point of tension between the two groups. The Jews had the law, but the Gentiles did not. As God's chosen people the Jews had developed a pride in their righteousness, in having and living the law. Paul asserted that the function of the law for many Jews had become distorted from the original intention discussed above. The Jews were not trying to earn salvation through the law, but they were boasting in the law and establishing their identity through the law (external action) instead of through their relationship with God, which was based on faith. George Ladd explains how the Jewish distortion of the law was not about earning salvation but about pride: "God's grace grants forgiveness to the repentant man who has transgressed the Law, but the devout man who fulfills the Law, insofar as he fulfills it, does not need grace."⁵⁴ This is what Paul referred to when he wrote in Romans 10:3 that the Jews sought to establish their own righteousness. Ladd continues: "This human pride and boasting is an affront to the very character of God, who alone must receive glory and before whom no human being may boast (1 Corinthians 1:29)."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ladd, *Theology*, 500.

⁵⁵ Ladd, 501.

N. T. Wright writes that Paul believed that the Jews took extreme pride in their chosenness:

[Ethnic Israel] in seeking to establish a status of righteousness, of covenant membership, which will be for Jews and Jews only, she has not submitted to God's righteousness. The covenant always envisaged a worldwide family; Israel, clinging to her own special status as the covenant-bearer, has betrayed the purpose for which that covenant was made.⁵⁶

The Jews stumbled over Christ because he fulfilled the law, which was the righteousness they were earning for themselves. The law differentiated them from the Gentiles, and ensured for them their status as the chosen people of God. Paul himself, who boasted in the law prior to his conversion, recognized that the Christ had done away with this "special status" that the Jews believed they had. "The cross has obliterated the privileged distinction that Saul of Tarsus supposed himself to enjoy; the new life he has as Paul the apostle is a life defined, not by his old existence [as a follower of the Law], but solely by the crucified and risen Messiah."⁵⁷

In Christ, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. In the law, there was a distinction, and many of the Jews did not want to give this up. As Paul writes in Romans 10: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (v. 4); but the Jews "sought to establish their own [righteousness], and did not submit to God's righteousness" (v. 3). They forfeited their place among the spiritual people of God for the law that was no longer God's vehicle of grace; they were broken off of the olive tree of the spiritual people of God, as Paul writes in Romans 11: "But they were broken off because of unbelief" (11:20). So the Gentiles and those Jews who will surrender the law for Christ's sake are grafted into the spiritual people of God: "You

⁵⁶ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108.

⁵⁷ Wright, 122.

were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree" (Romans 11:24).

The Place of the Natural Israel

Paul has made clear that reconciliation to God comes through Christ alone, and that many of the Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah; yet natural Israel as a collective entity had been chosen by God to receive the promise (Genesis 12, 15) and the law. Are those promises revoked? Are the natural Israel cast aside? Paul says in Romans 11:1: "Did [the Jews] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!" Hope is not lost for natural Israel, and Paul goes on to explain the situation in greater detail.

First, Paul discusses why natural Israel rejected the Messiah. Romans 11:25 says that "Israel has experienced a hardening in part, until the full number of Gentiles has come in." Earlier in the chapter, Paul writes: "Because of [natural Israel's] transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (11:11). Part of natural Israel had been hardened, and that hardening resulted in the salvation of the Gentiles.

There are two main ways that this idea is seen at work in the New Testament. First, the New Testament gospels imply that if the Jews had not rejected Jesus as the Messiah, he would not have been crucified. It was the Jewish leaders who demanded of the Romans that Jesus be killed⁵⁸; although the Romans also share guilt in it, the gospel accounts point to the Jewish leaders as the catalyst if not the cause for the crucifixion of Jesus. Paul argues that Christ's death and resurrection abolished the need for the law and that anyone who calls his name will be saved (Romans 10:12-13). So, according to the

⁵⁸ Matthew 27:22-23, Luke 23:15-20, John 19:6-7

New Testament writers the rejection of the man Jesus on the part of the Jews resulted in salvation for the world.⁵⁹

Douglas Moo mentions another way that the hardness of many of the Jews resulted in salvation for the Gentiles. Repeatedly in the book of Acts, the apostles (including Paul) would go first to the Jews in a new city to preach the gospel. The Jews would often reject the gospel message, so they would then go to the Gentiles.⁶⁰ Regarding Romans 11:11, Moo suggests that Paul was probably referring to “the way in which he and other preachers would turn to the Gentiles after being spurned by the Jews.”⁶¹

In these two ways, the transgression of natural Israel allowed for Gentiles to experience the grace of God in Christ. This gives meaning and purpose to the reaction of natural Israel to Jesus and provides encouragement that God can use such a tragedy as the unbelief of his chosen people to bless the world. This is Paul’s point in Romans 11:12: “But if [natural Israel’s] transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!” Paul speaks of the Israelites not with discouragement but with the hope that natural Israel will be restored.

God has not forgotten his people

There is much evidence throughout the Bible that natural Israel has not been forgotten. In Romans 11, Paul finishes his discussion on this topic, saying:

⁵⁹ Paul goes on to say later in the chapter that Gentiles are not to boast over the Jews; the Jews are not to be condemned for the events surrounding the death of Jesus, whatever part certain Jews may have played in it. When taken in the context of Paul’s compassion and love for the Jews (see Romans 9:1-5), it is impossible to suggest that Paul would have an anti-Jewish agenda: in exhorting the Gentiles not to boast, it seems he is coming against anti-Jewish sentiment that was already growing among Gentile Christians.

⁶⁰ Acts 13:44-47, 14:1-3, 18:4-7, and others.

⁶¹ Moo, 687.

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

"The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, *for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.* (Romans 11:26-29; italics mine)

To those who would say that the Church has replaced ethnic Israel, these verses present a problem. First, "all Israel"⁶² will be saved. There is some question as to what "*all Israel*" means. Moo describes a likely solution:

"All Israel" as the OT and Jewish sources demonstrate, has a corporate significance, referring to the nation as a whole and not to every single individual who is a part of that nation. The phrase is similar, then, to those that we sometimes use to denote a large and representative number from a group; that is, "the whole school turned out to see the football game".⁶³

This seems to capture the essence of the phrase: if it is not literally *all Israel*, then at least a great number of ethnic Jews will experience a restored relationship to God through Christ. This also preserves Paul's discussion of salvation in Romans 10: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified" (v. 10). Salvation and justification are matters of the individual heart. As Moo writes: "Salvation is never a birthright, even for Jews."⁶⁴ A nation can be chosen and blessed by God, but salvation requires the choice and confession of an individual.

In practical terms, "all Israel will be saved" implies that much of ethnic Israel will come to salvation through Christ. Although Paul does not express this explicitly in Romans 11:26-29, the context of the chapter and the entire letter to the Romans provides no other option. As Moo writes, "[Paul] teaches that salvation can be found in one place only: within the one community made up of those who believe in Jesus Christ. There is

⁶² "Israel" here refers to natural Israel. In the previous verse it is juxtaposed with "Gentiles": "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in" (11:25).

⁶³ Moo, 722.

⁶⁴ Moo, 554.

only one tree, and one becomes attached to this tree by faith: Jews can be grafted back in only if they do not persist in unbelief (Romans 11:23)."⁶⁵

Secondly, the gifts and call of God are irrevocable (11:29). The promises God made to Abraham in Genesis 12 were unconditional; they were not contingent upon any particular action on the part of Abraham or his descendants. Dunn writes, "God's purpose has been firm and unchanging from the beginning"⁶⁶; God's promise to the ethnic Jews made first in Genesis, and reiterated time and again through the prophets must hold true.

Paul is faced with a dilemma: God had chosen the Jewish people (of whom Paul is one) yet many of them had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Paul knew the teaching of Jesus that there was no redemption or life outside of Christ, and so he wrestles with the fate of the unbelieving Jewish people. In Romans 9:6, he writes, "It is not as though God's word has failed"; Again in Romans 11:1, "Did God reject his people? By no means!" Dunn expresses the question this way: "If Jews are as much in need of God's grace in Christ as any Gentiles, then what does that say about God's original choice of Israel? Is Israel still God's chosen people?"⁶⁷ The bottom line here for Paul is to do with the faithfulness of God. Since much of ethnic Israel has not believed, has God's promise of faithfulness to them been revoked?⁶⁸ Paul says, again and again, "certainly not". The gifts and call of God are irrevocable.

He is perhaps not defending the Jewish people here as much as he is defending the faithfulness of God. If God does not keep his promises, then what assurance does Christ bring to those who believe? In Leviticus 26 God promises that even though the

⁶⁵ Moo, 725-726.

⁶⁶ Dunn, 528.

⁶⁷ Dunn, 502.

⁶⁸ Romans 3:3

Jews have been disobedient he will remember His covenant with them (v. 44-45). Divine promises such as these are found through out the Old Testament, through various prophets. God's faithfulness to the Jews was not contingent on their faithfulness; their disobedience was predicted and described many times, yet God always promised to be faithful. Through Christ, God promises that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved; He also promises his judgment to those who do not repent. Paul's faith means nothing if God does not keep his promises to literal Israel, for theirs are the promises (Romans 9:4).

Clearly, in Paul's understanding there remains a unique place for ethnic Israel within God's plan. If the promises to ethnic Israel were not still in effect, then the character of God would be at stake. However, Paul also makes clear that salvation for the Jews is found in Christ, just as it is for the Gentiles.

Summary of Points

To conclude this section, here is a brief review of the key points made in discussing a New Testament perspective on ethnic Israel:

1. There has only ever been one spiritual people of God. It can be called spiritual Israel, and is today what is generally referred to as the Church. Spiritual Israel, or the Church, today includes both Gentiles and Jews who have received salvation through Christ.
2. The manifestation of God's grace throughout history has shifted from the law to faith in Christ. Both the law and Christ were/are chiefly concerned about a person's heart for God, but both require external evidence of such a faith.

3. Although many ethnic Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah, there remains hope and a unique place for them in God's ultimate plan for humankind.

The perspective Paul provides on this issue contrasts with the perspectives on Dispensationalism and Covenant theology previously discussed. Dispensationalism posits that there are two separate covenants and programs for Israel and the church. However Paul shows the continuity between the two covenants, and writes that there is in fact only one olive tree representing the spiritual people of God into which both Jews and Gentiles are grafted.

Covenant Theology, in contrast, goes so far as to say that the continuity between the old and new covenants suggests that Christians have replaced ethnic Jews in terms of the promises made to the Jews in the Old Testament. Paul refutes this in admonishing the Gentiles not to boast over the Jews, and in stating that the gifts and call of God to the Jews are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). The Jewish people remain God's chosen people distinct from all other nations throughout the Bible. But salvation is through Christ for both Jews and Gentiles, and no one can experience right relationship with God outside of Christ.

For Paul, there remains a unique role for natural Israel, but this role exists in tension with the fact that the spiritual people of God are defined by faith in Jesus. Paul's perspective encompasses elements of both covenantal and dispensational theology, but maintains a balance that is lost in the modern debate between covenant theology and dispensationalism.

Conclusion: Spiritual Israel's Responsibility to Natural Israel

Romans 9-11 begins with Paul expressing his compassion and love for the Jewish people, his people. None of the comments he makes regarding some of the shortcomings Paul sees in the Jews are made in anger or bitterness. He begins these chapters with this: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (9:2-4a). Likewise, the gospels reveal more than once Jesus' feelings towards the Jews. Luke 19:41-42 says: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes'." A divine love for the people of Israel is found in the Old Testament as well. There are many references regarding God's love for and loyalty to his covenant people. Zechariah 2:18 even refers to the people of Israel as the apple of God's eye. These examples of love for the Jews found throughout the Bible should stir Christians to love and support the Jewish people: what is on God's heart should be on the heart of the Church.

This paper has not deal with the issues surrounding the state of Israel, rights to the land, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, although awareness of events and issues regarding these things is important. This thesis has taken a necessary first step in looking at these issues by setting the basis for responsibly dealing with them, but exploring the issues themselves requires a separate discussion. In uncovering the response of the church toward the Jews that is called for by scripture, "Jews" refers to all ethnic Jews, regardless of where they live in the world. This is a primarily theological analysis and for the most part has not dealt with historical and current events.

There are three main ways that scripture calls for love for and support of the Jewish people. The first begins with a statement of Jesus recorded in Luke: "O Jerusalem... I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (13:34-35; selected portions). Jesus laments the fact that Jerusalem has rejected him as the Messiah, and then links his second coming to the salvation of Jerusalem. In other words, when the Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah, he will return. The second coming of Christ is the hope of all Christians. In part, this could produce a selfish motivation for Christian concern for the Jews: when the Jews say of Jesus, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", then the church along with the rest of the world will see Christ's return.

This provides powerful incentive for those who long to see the return of Christ to encourage the Jewish people to accept Jesus as the Messiah. In Romans 11 Paul writes, "I make much of my ministry [to the Gentiles] in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (vv. 13-15). Paul greatly desires the salvation of his people, the Jews. Their rejection from the spiritual people of God because of their unbelief has brought blessing to the world; their acceptance through faith in Christ will be even greater. The church, just as Jesus and Paul did, should desire the salvation of the Jews through Christ and put that desire into action through evangelism.

Secondly, there is a clear mandate throughout the Bible for spiritual Israel (the church) to serve those in need. In Matthew 25, Jesus says, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (v. 40). Jesus makes clear through his

life and teachings the attitude that his followers are to have towards those in need. This theme is also found throughout the Old Testament, as in Isaiah 58: "I not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?" (vv. 6-7). God has always required his people to serve the helpless and hopeless. Although this requirement is not applied specifically or exclusively to the Jewish people, history has shown the ethnic Jews to be one of the most consistently persecuted and mistreated ethnic groups, often times at the hands of those who profess to be Christians. Clearly, the Jewish people are included among the oppressed. Therefore, the church (or spiritual Israel) is called to serve the Jewish people through practical means, or with the goal of improving the quality of life for Jewish people whether that is through practical support or prayer.

Again, the theme of serving those in need found throughout the Bible is not applied only or especially to the Jews. However, in God's covenant with Abraham, a specific application of this principle can be found. God promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 that He will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel (v. 3). This promise is unconditional and therefore, it still applies today to Christians and non-Christians alike: those who bless God's covenant people will be blessed, but those who curse them will be cursed. Those who believe the Bible to be authoritative will find in this promise strong motivation to serve the Jewish people.

Finally, the Bible asks the spiritual people of God to pray and intercede for the Jewish people. Joel 2:17 says, "Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD. Do

not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations.” In a New Testament context “those who minister before the Lord” includes all believers.⁶⁹ This verse, then, commands those who minister to the Lord to cry out to God on behalf of his covenant people. This command to pray is again found in Isaiah 62: “You who call on the LORD give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth” (vv. 6-7). This call is passionate: “give yourselves no rest”. Those who call on the Lord, or spiritual Israel, are to make it a priority to pray for the restoration of the Jewish people. There are many other examples like these verses found throughout scripture.⁷⁰ The call is clear: God will establish his literal covenant people and he requires support and prayer from his spiritual covenant people.

These three options: prayer, practical support, and evangelism, work together with one another to provide a complete, biblically based strategy for the support of the Jewish people. Through humanitarian aid groups, missions groups, and personal initiative, the church has been increasingly applying this strategy. In supporting the Jewish people, the church is able to discover and experience something that is, according to the Bible, on the heart of God.

The relationship between Israel and the church, Jews and Christians has received much attention in many different arenas. Some of the varying perspectives on it fail to capture the balance that the Bible shows. The Church cannot support the Jewish people in the way the Bible calls for if a balanced theology has not been established that can guide Christians into action on behalf of those “cultivated olive branches”. As Paul writes in Romans 9, he has great sorrow for the sake of his people, the children of Israel. The

⁶⁹ 1 Peter 2:5,9

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 31:7, Psalm 122:6, Psalm 83:1-4

Church is not to boast over Israel, but to desire along with Paul that the ethnic Jews be grafted back in. Only then will the spiritual people of God be complete.

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