

## SERMON: ISRAEL IN THE NT

Readings: Isa 56.1-8; Rom 11.25-36; John 8.31-38

Recap Malcolm:

**Israel**, in the sense of the people of God

- I. NOT a purely ethnic category, i.e. not every descendant of Abraham.  
BUT = election + covenant: Israel = those whom God had chosen to enter into covenant with, the descendants of Isaac (but not Ishmael), and Jacob (but not Esau)  
Rom 9.4-5  
“They are Israelites. And to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs...
- II. It included the ‘mixed multitude’ who came out of Egypt with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and gentile servants who joined themselves to Israel, and the likes of Ruth the Moabitess, and Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, who feared the God of Israel and served him.

NB. though that God cared for both Ishmael (Gen 21.8, YHWH to Hagar, “Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation”) and Esau (Gen 33.10b-11, when Jacob is reconciled to him, he says, “For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. Please accept my blessing that is brought to you...”)

God’s purpose in **election was not to limit** the number of his children/people, to exclude everyone else, but that those chosen (Israel) might be his instrument for drawing others to himself; that they might be “a light to the nations”.

God chose Israel as his agent of blessing to all peoples:

Gen 12.2f. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

In Isaiah 42:6-7 “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

Isaiah 49:6, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Other nations always in view - repeated in passages like Isa 2.1-5;19.18-25; 25; 56.1-8; Zech 8.20-23). Paul affirms this in Rom 15.8-13, quoting from the OT (Ps 18.49; Deut 32.43; Ps 117.1; Isa 11.10)

### **The problem:**

- I. Israel misunderstood her election and what keeping the covenant meant.
  - a. Presumed upon her election – God would always bless her
  - b. Mistakenly thought that by taking on/observing the outward signs of the covenant, i.e. circumcision + sabbath observance + cultic rituals (sacrifice) + ritual cleanliness/purity, they attained righteousness. Was never the case, hence the prophetic call for 'circumcision of heart' (Deut 10.16), and Paul's accusation in Rom 2.25ff. "... but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.... For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."
- II. Israel proved unfaithful and broke the covenant – idolatry, injustice, abuse of cult => failed to fulfil mission as God's servant.  
See Rom 2.17-24 "You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law. For it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

### **God's response:**

- I. YHWH, should have destroyed Israel
- II. but instead – because of his *chesed* – disciplined/pruned them, saving a remnant (Hos 11.1-9). Defeat and exile (northern kingdom 722/1, southern kingdom 587/6.) God's grace that survived.
- III. Finally, God sent his own Son, the promised Messiah, that he – the true Israelite – might succeed where Israel had failed: keeping covenant and proving faithful. More than that, he would take the punishment for Israel's failing/sin, and not only Israel's, but all peoples, that *all* might be restored to a full relationship with YHWH, his Spirit poured into their hearts.

He would make those who believed in him truly righteous, and put a new heart and a new Spirit in them (new covenant in Jer. 31 and Ezek. 36).

**In doing this, in sending Jesus, God fulfils his promises to Israel:**

- ⇒ Jesus is the seed of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed
- ⇒ He is the true light to the nations, the world
- ⇒ He is the true vine, the true Israel, to whom all who are truly God's people must belong (be attached to)
- ⇒ He instituted a new covenant, which all could enter *by faith in Him*

Election + covenant as way to become God's people = now gives way to faith + covenant.

**BUT a serious problem: The Jewish religious establishment and leadership had rejected Jesus as the Messiah,** and in doing so had rejected the God they claimed to worship, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see John 8)

On the other hand, many Gentiles had come to believe in Jesus, and so had received salvation – had received adoption as God's children.

SO

1. Where does that leave Israel/the Jewish people? Is God now finally done with them? Are they no longer his chosen people?
2. Where does that leave Jewish religion? Does God still require temple worship, the keeping of the Torah?

These are questions which

- I. the early Christians and church had to grapple with, in the apostolic age;
- II. with which the church has struggled throughout its history;
- III. and with which the Church struggles today, with the added dimension of the reconstituted Jewish state.

These = questions Paul addresses in letter to Rome - where both Jews and Gentiles in house churches, and tensions/hostilities clearly exist.

- Gentiles being arrogant towards Jews: rejected by God/replaced
- Jewish believers saying Gentile believers needed to come under Law. Jesus + Law.

Paul says both are wrong approaches:

### A. To Jews:

1. Corrects their understanding of election, covenants and Judaism:
  - Flesh was never the key, election + covenant were (as above)
  - Salvation is not by ethnic allegiance (never has been, for Jews), or outward conformity to covenant
  - but by covenantal relationship (through FAITH) which leads to life lived under the covenant,
2. What has changed = that the OT covenants and promises have been fulfilled in Jesus

A new covenant has been instituted, through Jesus' blood (cf. Exod 24)

One enters by faith – see esp. 11.30-32.

Invitation is to all: Jew and Gentile: All divisions, including race/ethnicity have been removed. In that sense, being Jewish is no advantage.

Key = faith, and in that regard all = on same footing! No need for Gentiles to become Jews first, or to come under law and be circumcised etc.

### B. To Gentiles: Don't be arrogant towards Jews, but kind and thankful

For Paul, and explicit in Romans, very imp, that:

- the Messiah would come out of Israel – Rom 1.3; 9.5; Messiah Jesus was a Jew! He is the fulfilment of OT prophecy (Rom 1.2-3)
- Because Jesus is a Jew, salvation is from the Jews - Jn 4.22-26
- and to the Jew first – Rom 1.16. God still loves Israel!
- salvation is by faith in Jesus alone – i.e. no grounds for pride/arrogance

⇒ Gentiles should:

- appreciate and acknowledge the special place Jews have had in God's plan
- recognise God's desire (which Paul shares) that all Israel should yet be saved
- acknowledge their debt to the Jews, as older brothers/sisters and the race from which the Messiah came

What advantage does the Jew have?

- None according to the flesh. Never have though!
- BUT, they have had the big advantage of having had "the oracles of God" (3.2), "and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh. Is the Christ, who is God over all" (9.4-5)

i.e. they knew the Messiah was coming, were already in covenant relationship with God, knew the great promises of what God had in store => should naturally have welcomed him, recognising he was the fulfilment of the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants. They were predisposed to accept Jesus as their own. In this sense, the 'natural' believers.

Gentiles, in contrast, had no religious background which prepared them for the Messiah. Worshipped other gods, or none. So, like 'wild plants' v's cultivated stock.

Analogy of grafting of wild branch onto cultivated olive tree" (Rom 11.11-24)

- Israel as olive tree – Jer 11.16-17 "The LORD once called you 'a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit'. But with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed, The LORD of hosts, who planted you, has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal." (cf, Isa 6.13 too, noting that in all cases it is the branches, not the stump that are destroyed, as in Rom 11 too).
- Most common image = that of Israel as the vine, transplanted out of Egypt. But fig and olive trees also used as symbol of Israel.
- In horticulture a cultivated branch would be grafter onto a wild tree, but Paul reverses the image: a wild branch onto cultivated stock.

### **Conclusion (11. 25-36):**

1. 'Mystery' – God's inscrutable ways = that the failure of Jews led to opening of doors to gentiles, not to exclusion of Israel but to make her jealous.
2. How much more wonderful it will be when Jews also accept their Messiah – a blessing to them and all nations.

### **Message to us today:**

1. No place for arrogance towards Jews: task for Christians is to make Jews jealous of our faith in Jesus such that they too want to believe and enter the New Covenant in his blood.
2. No place for Zionist fantasies, e.g. that Jews are saved apart from faith in Jesus, or that the Jewish state can do no wrong.
3. Importance of circumcision of heart. Cf. Matt 7 "not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord..."
4. The glorious eschatological hope of every knee bowing, Christ all in all.

### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What evidence is there of antisemitism in the world today? Note today's Daily telegraph article <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/29/anti-semitism-row-guardian-cartoon/> Have you witnessed antisemitic attitudes/behaviour in NZ?
2. How do you understand the idea of God's election of Israel? What do you think Paul meant when he said that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11.29)?
3. Do you agree that Jesus is the 'true Israelite'? In what ways does he fulfil Israel's call and role in the Old Testament?
4. How do you react when people say Christianity is a western religion? What do you think they mean by that? How important is it that Jesus was a Jew?
5. How do you think the Church can best witness to Jews? In what ways has the Church failed in this role in the past?
6. What does it mean to circumcise one's heart, esp. in the light of Matt 7.21-23?