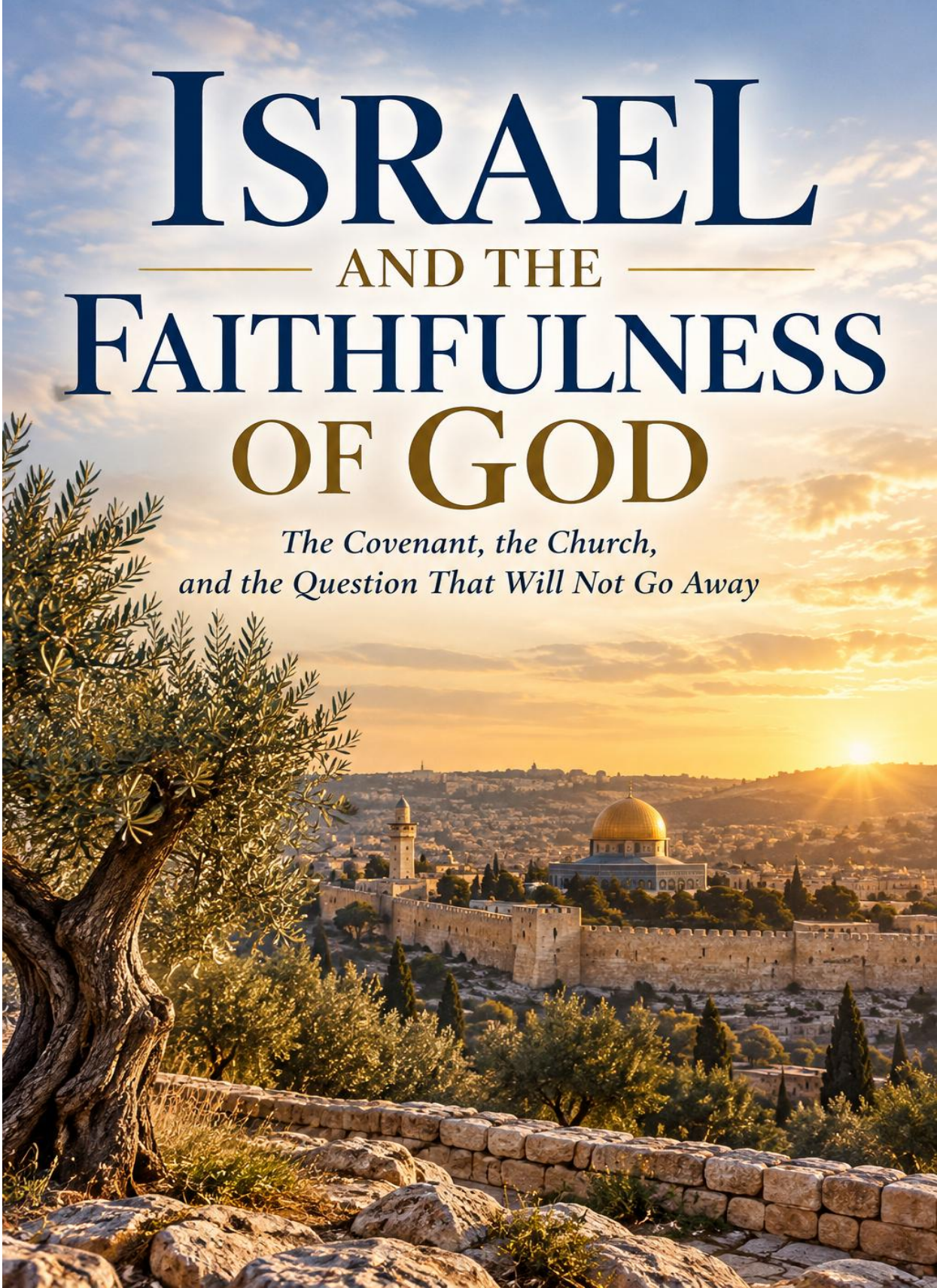




ISRAEL — AND THE — FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

*The Covenant, the Church,
and the Question That Will Not Go Away*

“Mission, Purpose, and Educational Use”

Blow the Shofar Ministry was born out of a deeply personal burden to confront the growing rise of anti-Semitism and the increasing misunderstanding surrounding Israel and the Jewish people.

This ministry exists to bring truth where there is confusion, prayer where there is silence, compassion where there is division, and unwavering support where it is desperately needed.

Our mission is to educate, equip, and inspire the Church through biblical understanding, historical awareness, and compassionate engagement, encouraging believers to stand boldly, faithfully, and lovingly with the Jewish community while actively confronting anti-Semitism in all its forms.

The educational materials, teachings, and written works produced by Blow the Shofar Ministry are provided for educational, research, and informational purposes, with the goal of promoting historical awareness, religious understanding, and the ongoing fight against anti-Semitism, hatred, prejudice, and intolerance.

Every effort has been made to acknowledge and respect original historical references, scriptures, quotations, and publicly available source materials where applicable.

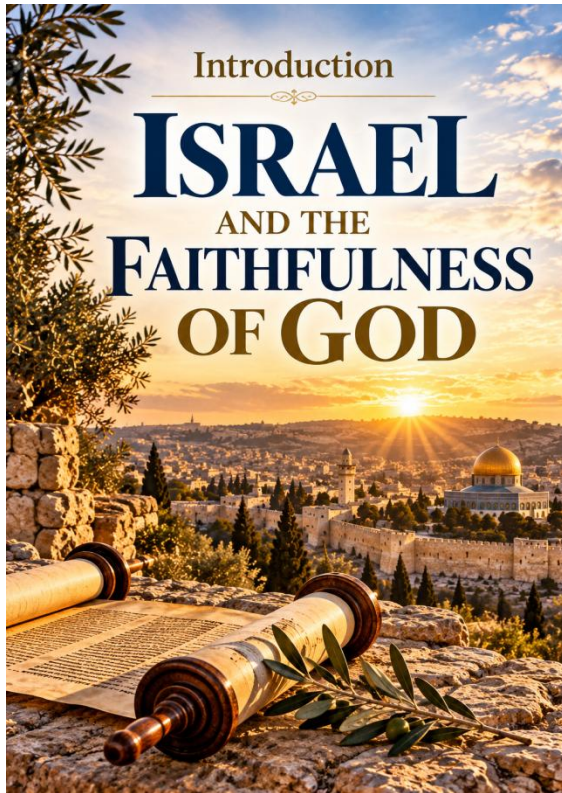
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Introduction

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

Few questions have generated more discussion, disagreement, and at times division within Christianity than the question of Israel.

What place do the Jewish people have in the purposes of God today?

Were God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob intended to continue throughout history, or were they temporary promises belonging to an earlier stage of God's redemptive plan?

Did the coming of Yeshua and the establishment of the Church bring Israel's distinctive covenantal role to an end, or did the inclusion of the Gentiles expand God's redemptive purposes without cancelling His promises to Israel?

These are not merely academic theological questions. The answers influence how Christians read large portions of Scripture.

They affect how we understand the covenants, the prophets, the words of Yeshua, the writings of Paul, biblical prophecy, the Church, the Jewish people, and the relationship between Israel and the nations. They also raise a question that reaches beyond Israel itself: What does God's relationship with Israel tell us about the faithfulness of God?

That is the deeper question behind this book.

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But within that question lies another:

Does God remain faithful to what He has promised even when the people to whom He made those promises are unfaithful?

The answer matters because the biblical story of Israel is not the story of a perfectly faithful people. Far from it.

It is the story of a faithful God dealing with an often-unfaithful people.

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Israel believed and doubted, obeyed and rebelled, worshipped God and turned to idols, listened to the prophets and rejected them. Israel experienced blessing and judgment, possession of the land and exile from it, national restoration and national catastrophe. Yet running through that complicated history is a persistent thread: the covenant faithfulness of God.

If we lose sight of that thread, we may misunderstand not only Israel but the character of God Himself.

When Christians hear the word *Israel* today, their thoughts often turn immediately to the modern State of Israel. We may think of Jerusalem, the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Arab-Israeli wars, terrorism, Gaza, the West Bank, Palestinians, settlements, security, diplomacy, and the continuing conflict that attracts worldwide attention.

Those are significant contemporary issues, but they are not where the biblical question begins.

Israel's story did not begin in 1948. It did not begin with the Zionist movement. It did not begin with the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70. It did not even begin when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Israel's story begins much earlier, with one man and one extraordinary call from God.

His name was Abram. Genesis 12 records the moment when God told Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's household and travel to a land God would show him. Then God made a series of promises that would shape the remainder of biblical history. God promised to make Abram into a great nation. He promised to bless him. He promised to make his name great. He promised that Abram would become a blessing. He declared that He would bless those who blessed Abram and deal with those who treated him with contempt. Most remarkably, God promised that through Abram "all families of the earth" would be blessed.

At that moment there was no nation of Israel. There was no Jerusalem as Israel's capital, no Temple, no priesthood, no Torah given at Sinai, no King David, no prophets of Israel, and no Church. There was simply a man responding in faith to the voice of God. Yet contained within that call were the beginnings of everything that followed. Abram would become Abraham. Abraham would father Isaac. Isaac would father Jacob. Jacob's name would be changed to Israel. Jacob's sons would become the fathers of the twelve tribes. Those tribes would become a nation. From that nation would come Moses, David, the prophets, the Scriptures, and, according to the New Testament, Yeshua the Messiah. Therefore, when we ask whether God has finished with Israel, we must first ask a more fundamental question:

What did God actually begin with Abraham?

One fact deserves particular emphasis from the beginning. Abraham did not invent the covenant. He did not approach God and ask to become the father of a chosen nation. He did not propose that his descendants should receive a particular land. He did not ask God to establish a covenant through his family. The initiative belonged to God. Again and again, the Abraham narrative contains the words "I will." God says, "I will make of thee a great nation." He says, "I will bless

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thee.” He promises to make Abraham's name great and to bless those who bless him. Later God declares that He will establish His covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. The biblical account presents God as the initiator. The covenant begins with God's purpose, God's calling, and God's promise. This does not mean that Abraham's obedience is irrelevant or that Israel's conduct does not matter. Scripture repeatedly holds Israel accountable. Covenant privilege never means freedom from moral responsibility. In fact, Israel's special calling often results in greater accountability, not less. But there is an important distinction between human responsibility within the covenant and God's faithfulness to the covenant. That distinction will become increasingly important as the biblical story unfolds.

Anyone attempting to understand the continuing significance of Israel must confront an obvious problem: Israel repeatedly violated God's commandments. The Hebrew Scriptures do not hide this. In fact, the biblical authors are sometimes more severe in their criticism of Israel than Israel's enemies could ever have been. Moses warned the people. The prophets confronted them. Isaiah condemned their hypocrisy. Jeremiah exposed their rebellion. Ezekiel described their idolatry in shocking terms. Amos condemned injustice. Hosea compared Israel's unfaithfulness to marital infidelity. Eventually judgment came. The northern kingdom fell to Assyria. Later Babylon conquered Judah. Jerusalem was destroyed. The Temple was burned. Many of the people were carried into exile.

If the story ended there, someone might reasonably conclude that Israel's covenantal story had ended. But it did not end there. The prophets who announced judgment also spoke of restoration. The God who scattered also promised to gather. The God who disciplined also spoke of mercy. The God who allowed Jerusalem to fall continued to speak about Israel's future. This creates one of the great tensions of biblical theology. How can God judge Israel severely and yet remain faithful to His covenant? The answer requires us to distinguish between judgment and rejection. They are not necessarily the same thing.

Leviticus 26 provides an extraordinary example. The chapter describes the consequences Israel would face for persistent disobedience. The warnings are severe. Israel could experience defeat, devastation, and dispersion among the nations. Yet after describing those consequences, God says, “And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away... to break my covenant with them.” The importance of this statement is difficult to exaggerate. Israel can be outside the land. Israel can be living among enemies. Israel can be experiencing divine discipline. Yet God says that He will not break His covenant. Exile itself therefore cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence that the covenant has ceased.

The prophets develop this principle much further. Jeremiah speaks of a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Ezekiel speaks of gathering, cleansing, renewal, and restoration. Isaiah repeatedly speaks about Israel's future. Zechariah focuses attention upon Jerusalem and Israel's eventual turning to God. The question therefore becomes increasingly difficult to avoid: If God intended permanently to abandon Israel, why did He continue making promises concerning Israel's future?

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For Christians, however, another event transforms the discussion: the coming of Yeshua. Yeshua was not detached from Israel's story; He entered it. He was born to a Jewish mother. He was circumcised according to Jewish law. He grew up within Jewish life. He attended synagogue. He celebrated the biblical festivals. He taught from the Hebrew Scriptures. His earliest disciples were Jewish. His apostles were Jewish. The earliest community of believers in Him was Jewish. The New Testament itself opens by identifying Him in explicitly Jewish covenantal terms: "The book of the generation of Yeshua, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Those words connect Yeshua directly with the story that began in Genesis. Abraham, David, and Messiah belong to one continuous biblical narrative.

Yeshua Himself told the Samaritan woman, "Salvation is of the Jews." Yet something remarkable happened after His resurrection. The message began moving outward from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and eventually to the nations. Gentiles who had never descended physically from Abraham began worshipping the God of Abraham. People from many nations embraced Israel's Messiah. They read Israel's Scriptures, learned from Israel's prophets, and worshipped the God of Israel. Something extraordinary was happening, but the success of the Gentile mission created a theological question that the early Church could not avoid. If Gentiles are now included, what happens to Israel?

This is where the debate becomes especially important. One Christian interpretation has held that the Church replaced Israel or became the covenant people in a way that meant Israel's previous covenantal role had reached its fulfillment or conclusion. In various forms of supersessionist theology, promises associated with Israel are understood through Yeshua and the multinational Church. Other Christian traditions have argued that this conclusion goes too far. They maintain that the inclusion of Gentiles does not require the cancellation of God's promises concerning ethnic Israel. The distinction can be expressed simply: Did God replace Israel, or did God enlarge the sphere of covenantal blessing so that Gentiles could participate in the blessings promised through Abraham while His purposes concerning Israel continued? That question cannot be answered by preference or tradition alone. We must ask what Scripture says.

Eventually we arrive at the apostle Paul, who understood the problem personally. Paul was Jewish. He described himself as "an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Yet he was also the great apostle to the Gentiles. Paul therefore stood at the intersection of the very question we are asking. He witnessed large numbers of Gentiles entering the faith while many of his fellow Jews did not accept Yeshua as Messiah. This created a painful theological problem. Had God's word failed? Had Israel's unbelief invalidated God's promises? Had God rejected the people He had previously chosen?

Romans 9–11 represents Paul's sustained response to that question. In Romans 11 he asks with unmistakable clarity, "Hath God cast away his people?" His response is immediate: "God forbid." Paul then introduces the image of an olive tree. Some natural branches have been broken off because of unbelief, while wild olive branches—Gentiles—have been grafted in. But Paul does not tell the wild branches that the tree now belongs exclusively to them. Instead, he warns them, "Boast not against the branches." He then reminds them, "Thou bearest not the root, but the root thee."

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That is an extraordinary warning. Gentile believers are beneficiaries, not originators. They have been brought into a story that began before them. They worship the God of Israel. They trust Israel's Messiah. They read Israel's Scriptures. They have received spiritual blessing through a covenantal history they did not create. Paul's warning therefore deserves serious consideration: Gentile believers must not become arrogant toward the people through whom those blessings came. Christian history forces us to ask whether that warning was always remembered.

The relationship between the Church and the Jewish people became increasingly difficult over the centuries. Christianity gradually became overwhelmingly Gentile, and the Jewish origins of the faith became less visible. Political, social, and theological conflicts deepened the separation between Christians and Jews. Over time, anti-Jewish ideas entered portions of Christian preaching and theology. Jews were sometimes portrayed not simply as people who rejected Christian claims about Yeshua but as a people uniquely cursed or abandoned by God. At various times Jewish communities experienced discrimination, forced conversions, expulsions, restrictions, false accusations, violence, and persecution within societies identifying themselves as Christian.

This history must be handled carefully. Christian history is complex. There were also Christians who defended Jewish communities, condemned persecution, and in some cases risked their own lives to protect Jews. Their courage should be remembered. Nevertheless, the darker history cannot simply be ignored. The Holocaust in the twentieth century was carried out by Nazi Germany and its collaborators under a racial and political ideology that cannot simply be equated with Christianity. Yet that catastrophe occurred on a continent where anti-Jewish Christian teachings had circulated for centuries. That history raises a painful but necessary question: If Christians come to believe that God has rejected the Jewish people, can that theology influence the way they regard Jewish people? Ideas have consequences, and theology can have consequences far beyond churches and seminaries.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 brought the theological question into an entirely new historical context. After centuries of dispersion and after the catastrophe of the Holocaust, a sovereign Jewish state again existed in part of the ancient land associated with biblical Israel. Some Christians interpreted this immediately through biblical prophecy. Others rejected that interpretation. Still others adopted a more cautious position, distinguishing the biblical promises concerning Israel from conclusions about the modern state.

That distinction is important. The modern State of Israel is a political state governed by human beings. Like every government, it makes decisions that can be examined, supported, questioned, or criticized. Biblical covenant language should not be used to place any government beyond moral scrutiny. At the same time, contemporary political controversy should not be allowed to determine in advance what ancient biblical texts mean. We should not begin with today's headlines and force Scripture to fit them. We should begin with Scripture. What did God promise Abraham? What did He promise Isaac? What did He promise Jacob? What did Moses say? What did the prophets say? What did Yeshua say? What did Paul say? Only after examining those questions can we responsibly consider what those promises might mean within later history.

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Another misunderstanding must also be addressed. To say that Israel was chosen by God is not to say that Jewish people are inherently superior to other people. Biblical election is not a doctrine of racial superiority. God did not choose Israel because Israel was the largest, strongest, or most impressive nation. Deuteronomy explicitly rejects that idea. Election involves privilege, but it also involves calling, responsibility, service, and accountability. Abraham was blessed in order to become a blessing. Israel was called not merely to receive from God but to serve God's purposes in the world.

This purpose is already present in Genesis 12, where God tells Abraham, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” The nations were therefore present in God's plan from the beginning. God's choice of Abraham was not evidence that He had abandoned humanity; it was one of the means through which He intended to bless humanity. This observation becomes enormously important when we reach the New Testament. Gentile inclusion is not an afterthought. The blessing of the nations was embedded in the Abrahamic promise from the beginning.

Christians therefore do not need to be afraid of examining these issues carefully. If Scripture teaches that Israel's covenantal role has ended, then we should be willing to follow the biblical evidence to that conclusion. If Scripture teaches that God's purposes for Israel continue, then we should be equally willing to accept that conclusion. The purpose of this book is not merely to defend a political position or repeat familiar slogans. It is to ask the biblical question seriously. What exactly did God promise? To whom did He promise it? Were those promises conditional? Were they temporary? Were they transferred? Were they expanded? Were they fulfilled? Were they cancelled? Or do some of them remain? These questions require us to read the Bible as a continuous story rather than selecting isolated verses.

One word will repeatedly confront us as we proceed: everlasting. In Genesis 17 God describes His covenant with Abraham and his descendants as an “everlasting covenant.” That phrase immediately creates an interpretive responsibility. What did the biblical author mean? The Hebrew term translated “everlasting” can carry nuances determined by context, and we must not force every occurrence into an identical definition. Nevertheless, neither should we casually reduce the force of the word simply because its implications create theological difficulty. If God calls something an everlasting covenant, we must take the description seriously. If someone believes that covenant later ended, the natural question becomes: Where does Scripture tell us that it ended?

Another important fact is sometimes overlooked. When Jeremiah announces what Christians call the New Covenant, he declares, “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” That statement does not by itself answer every question about the Church and the New Covenant, but it establishes something important. The New Covenant itself emerges from Israel's prophetic story. The Christian faith does not begin by escaping Israel's story. It emerges from within it. The Messiah is Jewish. The apostles are Jewish. The Scriptures are rooted in Israel. The New Covenant is announced by an Israelite prophet, and the gospel is first proclaimed from Jerusalem.

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Gentile Christians therefore do not enter a religious story that has nothing to do with Israel. They enter a story already centuries old. Paul's olive-tree metaphor becomes especially appropriate. The wild branches are grafted into something that already exists. They do not create the root. They receive nourishment from it.

We now arrive at the deepest reason for writing this book. The question “Has God finished with Israel?” is ultimately not only a question about Israel. It is a question about God. Christians live by promises. We trust God because we believe He keeps His word. We believe Him when He promises forgiveness. We believe Him when He promises salvation. We believe Him when He promises resurrection and eternal life. We believe Him when He promises that nothing can separate His people from His love. We believe Him when He promises that Messiah will return. Our faith therefore rests upon the conviction that God is faithful even when circumstances appear to contradict His promises.

That is precisely what Abraham had to learn. He was promised descendants while remaining childless. He was promised a nation when he did not yet possess even a son through Sarah. He was promised land while living as a sojourner. The fulfillment often seemed impossible, yet Scripture tells us that Abraham believed God.

Israel's history raises the same issue on a much larger scale. There were moments when the promises appeared impossible: slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem, dispersion among the nations, and persecution across centuries. At various points someone might reasonably have looked at the circumstances and concluded that the story was over. But biblical faith repeatedly asks us not merely to look at circumstances but to remember what God has said.

This book will therefore begin with Abraham and move progressively through the biblical story. We will examine the call of Abraham and the promises of Genesis 12. We will examine the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15 and the “everlasting covenant” of Genesis 17. We will follow the promise through Isaac and Jacob. We will consider Israel's election, the land, the Law, exile, judgment, and restoration. We will listen to the prophets. We will examine the words of Yeshua. We will consider the claim that the Church replaced Israel. Eventually we will arrive at Romans 9–11, where Paul addresses the problem directly.

We will also acknowledge differences in interpretation. Jewish readers, Messianic Jewish readers, and different Christian traditions do not interpret every passage in the same way. Those differences deserve to be represented accurately rather than dismissed. But one question will remain before us from beginning to end: What does the text actually say?

We should resist the temptation to answer too quickly. Perhaps the evidence will challenge assumptions we have held for years. Perhaps it will force us to reconsider familiar theological language. Perhaps it will cause Christians to think differently about the Jewish people. Perhaps it will also require us to distinguish more carefully between biblical Israel and the actions of a modern government. But wherever the evidence leads, our starting point must remain Scripture.

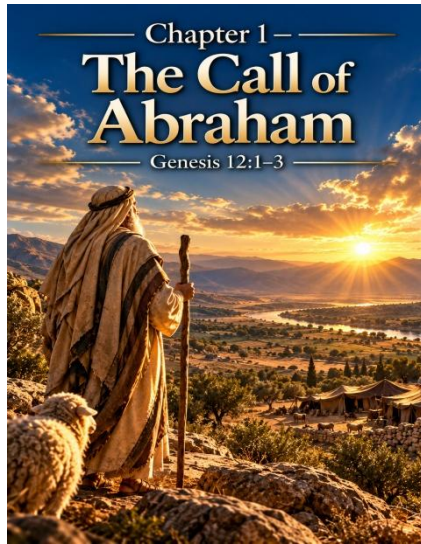
We begin, therefore, not with politics, not with 1948, not with Christian tradition, and not with contemporary headlines. We begin with a man standing thousands of years ago before a God

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who called him to leave everything familiar and walk toward a future he could not yet see. His name was Abraham. God promised him a land. God promised him descendants. God promised to make of him a great nation. God promised that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Later God would call His covenant with Abraham and his descendants “an everlasting covenant.”

From Abraham would come Isaac. From Isaac would come Jacob. Jacob would become Israel. From Israel would come a nation. From that nation would come prophets, kings, Scripture, apostles, and Messiah. Centuries later, when the question arose whether Israel's unbelief meant that God had finally rejected the people He had chosen, Paul would ask, “Hath God cast away his people?” His answer was emphatic: “God forbid.”

Between God's call of Abraham and Paul's declaration in Romans 11 lies one of the greatest stories in Scripture. It is the story we are about to examine. Beneath every chapter will remain the question with which we began: Has God finished with Israel, or is the faithfulness of God greater than the failures of His people?



Chapter 1 — The Call of Abraham - Genesis 12:1–3

Every serious discussion about Israel eventually has to return to Abraham. We may begin our conversations with the modern State of Israel, with Jerusalem, with the Jewish people, with the Church, or with biblical prophecy, but if we want to understand the biblical foundations of Israel, we must travel much farther back.

Long before there was a nation called Israel, before Moses stood at Mount Sinai, before the Law was given, before Jerusalem became Israel's capital, before David sat upon a throne, and before there was a Temple, a priesthood, or a monarchy, God called one man. His name was Abram.

That call, recorded in Genesis 12, became one of the great turning points of biblical history. What begins as God's command to one man eventually affects a family, a people, a nation, and ultimately, according to the biblical promise itself, all the families of the earth. The story that will eventually include Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, Israel, the apostles, and, from a Christian/Messianic perspective, Yeshua the Messiah, begins with God's words to Abram.

“Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

— Genesis 12:1–3

These three verses are remarkably brief considering their importance. Yet within them are themes that will develop throughout the remainder of Scripture. There is a man who has been called. There is a land to which he is being sent. There is the promise of descendants who will become a nation. There is personal blessing, but there is also responsibility. There is God's declaration concerning those who bless or treat Abram with contempt. Finally, there is the extraordinary promise that God's purpose through this one man will eventually extend far beyond his own family, because through him “all families of the earth” will be blessed.

If we want to answer the question at the heart of this book—Has God finished with Israel?—we must first understand what God began with Abraham.

Before asking whether something has ended, we must know what was established in the beginning. What did God promise? To whom did He make those promises? Were they limited to Abraham personally, or did they extend to his descendants? Were they dependent entirely upon human faithfulness, or did God bind Himself to them in some deeper way? Were they intended to last for one generation, for many generations, or for an enduring period within God's

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redemptive purposes? These questions cannot be answered from Genesis 12 alone, but Genesis 12 is where they begin.

The setting of Abraham's call is significant. Genesis places it immediately after the account of the Tower of Babel. Humanity had once again demonstrated its desire for independence from God. The people gathered together and declared, "Let us make us a name."

They attempted to establish their own security, identity, and greatness. God responded by confusing their language and scattering them across the earth. Then, almost immediately, the biblical narrative turns from humanity attempting to make its own name great to God telling Abram, "I will... make thy name great."

The contrast deserves careful attention. At Babel, human beings seek greatness for themselves. With Abraham, greatness is something God promises according to His own purposes. At Babel, humanity gathers in self-exaltation. With Abraham, God calls one man to leave what is familiar and walk by faith. At Babel, the nations are scattered. With Abraham, God begins a plan through which blessing will eventually reach those same nations.

This helps us understand something fundamental about biblical election. When God chooses Abraham, He is not declaring that He no longer cares about the rest of humanity. His choice of one man is actually connected to His purposes for many. The nations have not disappeared from God's concern. They are present in the promise from the beginning. "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." God's election of Abraham is therefore particular, but its ultimate purpose has a universal dimension. God chooses one man and one family, yet He does so with the nations already in view.

This principle will become essential for understanding Israel. Biblical election should never be confused with the idea that God chose Israel because every Israelite was morally superior to everyone else. Nor does election mean that God loved Israel and had no concern for other peoples. The biblical narrative presents election as calling, privilege, responsibility, and purpose. Abraham is blessed, but he is blessed in order to become a blessing. Israel will later receive God's revelation, but that revelation will eventually reach beyond Israel. From a Christian/Messianic perspective, Messiah Himself will emerge from this covenantal history and become the means through whom the promise of blessing reaches the nations.

The call of Abraham begins with a demanding command. God tells him, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house." Abram is being asked to leave the world he knows. He is to leave his country, his extended family, his father's household, and much of the security and familiarity associated with them. Yet God does not initially provide a detailed destination. He simply says, "Unto a land that I will shew thee."

There is something deeply significant in that command. Abram must begin walking before he knows precisely where the journey will end. He must obey before he possesses. He must trust before he sees. Faith begins not with Abram having all the answers but with Abram trusting the One who has spoken.

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The writer of Hebrews later interprets Abraham's response in precisely this way: "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Hebrews 11:8). Abraham's journey therefore becomes one of Scripture's great pictures of faith. He does not possess the fulfillment when he begins. He possesses only the promise.

That pattern will repeat throughout Abraham's life. God will promise descendants when Abraham has no son through Sarah. God will promise a nation when Abraham has only a household. God will promise land while Abraham lives in it as a sojourner. Again and again, Abraham will be required to live between promise and fulfillment. He will have God's word before he has visible evidence that God's word will be fulfilled.

This is important for the larger subject of Israel because much of Israel's biblical history also takes place between promise and fulfillment. There will be times when circumstances appear to contradict what God has said. Israel will become enslaved in Egypt. The nation will wander in the wilderness. Enemies will invade the land. Jerusalem will be destroyed. The Temple will be burned. The people will experience exile and dispersion. At various moments in the biblical story, someone looking only at circumstances might conclude that God's promises had failed. Yet Scripture repeatedly brings the reader back to what God has spoken.

The land is already present in Abraham's initial call. God tells Abram to go "unto a land that I will shew thee." This is significant because sometimes the Abrahamic promise is discussed almost entirely in spiritual terms. Certainly, profound spiritual themes emerge from Abraham's life. Faith, righteousness, blessing, and ultimately the blessing of the nations are central. But Genesis also contains a geographical element that cannot simply be removed. Abraham is called to an actual place.

When Abram eventually enters Canaan, God makes the promise more explicit: "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Genesis 12:7). The promise now contains both descendants and territory. Abram will have descendants, and those descendants are connected with a land. Genesis 13, Genesis 15, and Genesis 17 will make that connection increasingly specific.

This does not mean that every modern political question can be answered merely by quoting Genesis. The biblical land promise and the policies of a contemporary government are not identical questions. Modern Israel exists within a complicated political and historical reality involving Israelis, Palestinians, neighboring states, borders, security, warfare, diplomacy, individual rights, and international law. Scripture should not be used as a shortcut that prevents careful moral and political analysis. At the same time, modern political complexity should not cause us to erase what the biblical text actually says. Before asking how the Abrahamic promises should be understood today, we must first acknowledge what those promises were.

One of the most striking features of Genesis 12 is the repeated declaration, "I will." God says, "I will make of thee a great nation." He says, "I will bless thee." He says, "I will... make thy name great." He says, "I will bless them that bless thee." The repeated emphasis is upon what God intends to do.

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This is critical. Abram does not approach God with a proposal. He does not say, “Make me the father of a nation.” He does not ask for a land. He does not negotiate a covenant. He does not design a plan through which the nations will eventually be blessed. The initiative belongs to God.

This does not remove Abraham's responsibility. Abraham is commanded to leave, and he leaves. He is called to trust, and Scripture celebrates his faith. Later, he will be called to obey in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Yet the promise itself originates in God. Before Abraham does anything to create a nation, God says, “I will make of thee a great nation.”

This distinction becomes extremely important when considering God's later relationship with Israel. If the entire purpose originated in God, then Israel's failures raise not merely a question about Israel but a question about God's intention. Can human failure frustrate God's ultimate purpose? Can Israel's disobedience cause God to abandon everything He freely promised? Scripture certainly teaches that disobedience brings consequences. It can bring discipline, judgment, loss, and exile. But does it necessarily bring the cancellation of God's covenantal purpose? That is a separate question, and it will become increasingly important as we move through the biblical story.

The promise that Abram will become “a great nation” is particularly extraordinary when we remember his circumstances. Genesis 11 has already told us that Sarai is barren. “But Sarai was barren; she had no child” (Genesis 11:30). God therefore promises a nation to a man whose wife cannot bear children. Humanly speaking, the promise appears impossible before the story has barely begun.

God could have chosen a man surrounded by sons and grandsons. Instead, He chooses a childless man and promises descendants. The future nation will therefore exist not because circumstances made it inevitable but because God fulfilled what He had promised.

This theme of impossibility followed by divine fulfillment runs deeply through the Abraham narrative. Years will pass. Abraham and Sarah will grow older. The possibility of Sarah bearing a child will become increasingly remote. Yet God's promise will remain. Eventually Isaac will be born, and his very existence will testify that the covenantal story depends upon God's faithfulness.

Isaac will then become the father of Jacob. Jacob's name will be changed to Israel. Jacob's twelve sons will become the fathers of the twelve tribes. What begins with one childless man will eventually become a nation. A promise will become a family, a family will become a people, and a people will become Israel.

This progression is important because the word *Israel* should not be detached from its biblical history. Israel is not originally an abstract theological idea. Israel is the name given to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. The children of Israel are therefore the descendants of Jacob. The covenantal line develops from Abraham to Isaac and from Isaac to Jacob, and from Jacob emerge the tribes of Israel.

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When later biblical writers speak about Israel, they are speaking about a people whose identity is connected to this patriarchal history. When Moses appeals to God on behalf of Israel, the patriarchs matter. When the prophets speak of restoration, the covenant with the fathers remains relevant. When Paul discusses Israel in Romans, he identifies himself as an Israelite and “of the seed of Abraham.” The biblical story continues to remember where Israel came from.

God's next declaration to Abram is, “I will bless thee.” This promise has sometimes been interpreted almost exclusively in material terms, but Abraham's life demonstrates that biblical blessing cannot simply mean comfort, wealth, or freedom from difficulty. Abraham experiences famine. He knows fear. He makes mistakes. He encounters conflict. He waits painfully for the promised son. He faces family turmoil. Eventually he will face the terrifying command concerning Isaac.

Yet through all of this, God's purpose remains upon him. Biblical blessing is therefore larger than personal prosperity. It is participation in the favor, calling, and purposes of God. Abraham is blessed not because his life becomes easy but because God has entered into a unique relationship with him and intends to accomplish something through him.

This becomes even clearer when God adds, “Thou shalt be a blessing.” Abraham is not merely the destination of God's blessing; he is intended to become a channel of it. God gives to Abraham, but what God gives is not intended to stop with Abraham.

This principle is fundamental to understanding biblical election. Election without purpose can easily be misunderstood as favoritism. Biblical election, however, repeatedly involves responsibility. God calls people in order to accomplish His purposes through them. Abraham is chosen so that blessing can extend outward. Israel will later be called “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). The prophets will envision the knowledge of God reaching the nations. Isaiah will speak of light going to the Gentiles.

From a Christian/Messianic perspective, this movement ultimately reaches its fullest expression in Messiah. Yeshua is not presented in the New Testament as appearing independently of Abraham's story. Matthew's Gospel begins by calling Him “the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Paul later connects the blessing of the Gentiles directly with the promise given to Abraham.

This means that God's particular choice of Abraham and His universal concern for humanity should not be placed in opposition to each other. The particular serves the universal. God works through Abraham and his descendants in order that His blessing may ultimately extend far beyond them.

Genesis 12:3 then contains one of the best-known statements in the Abrahamic promise: “I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.” This verse has often been quoted in modern discussions about Israel, sometimes as though it were a simple formula that can be applied directly to every political decision concerning the modern state. The verse deserves more careful treatment.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

Its immediate subject is Abraham. God has placed His calling upon him, and God declares that the way others relate to Abraham will not be insignificant. Those who bless Abraham will encounter blessing, while those who treat him with contempt place themselves in opposition to God's purposes.

As Genesis unfolds, this principle becomes visible. Pharaoh's household experiences divine judgment after Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's house. Abimelech later encounters divine intervention. Abraham may appear outwardly to be a wandering foreigner without a kingdom, army, or throne, but God has attached His purposes to him.

The larger question is whether this principle extends beyond Abraham to his descendants. That question should not be answered by simply assuming either yes or no. We must follow the covenantal line through Scripture. God will explicitly confirm His covenant through Isaac rather than Ishmael. He will later reaffirm the patriarchal promises to Jacob. Jacob becomes Israel, and the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly remember God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when discussing His relationship with Israel.

Therefore, Genesis 12:3 belongs within the larger covenantal narrative. It should not be reduced to a modern political slogan, but neither should it be isolated from the descendants through whom the biblical story says God's covenantal purposes continue.

The final statement of Genesis 12:3 may be the most far-reaching of all: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." Here the horizon suddenly expands. God's conversation is with one man, but His purpose embraces the world.

This universal dimension is not introduced hundreds of years later. It is present at the very beginning. God chooses Abraham with the nations already in view. Genesis 18:18 will say that "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him," while Genesis 22:18 will declare, "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

The Abrahamic promise therefore has two dimensions that must be held together. It is particular because God chooses Abraham and establishes a covenantal line through his descendants. It is universal because God's purpose through that line ultimately reaches the nations. The two are not enemies. God does not have to abandon the particular in order to accomplish the universal.

This becomes extremely important when we reach the New Testament. Paul interprets the blessing of the Gentiles as connected to Abraham. Galatians 3:8 says, "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." Paul does not say that God's purpose through Abraham failed and therefore God created an entirely unrelated plan for the Gentiles. Instead, he sees Gentile blessing as connected with what God had promised Abraham from the beginning.

Paul later writes, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). Gentile believers therefore participate in blessings associated with Abraham through Messiah. This is a remarkable expansion of the Abrahamic promise.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

Yet it immediately raises a difficult question. If Gentiles can become heirs according to the promise, what happens to Abraham's physical descendants? Does the inclusion of Gentiles mean the exclusion of Israel? Does the expansion of Abrahamic blessing mean the cancellation of God's purposes for the people who historically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

This is one of the central theological questions of the book.

Some Christian traditions have understood the Church as replacing Israel in God's covenantal purposes. Others understand the Church as participating in Abrahamic blessing without cancelling God's continuing purposes for ethnic Israel. These interpretations cannot simply be settled by slogans. We must examine the entire biblical witness.

Paul's imagery in Romans 11 will eventually become particularly important. He describes Gentile believers as wild olive branches grafted into an existing olive tree. They do not plant a new tree. They do not create a new root. They are grafted into something already present. Paul therefore warns Gentile believers, “Boast not against the branches,” and reminds them that they do not support the root; the root supports them.

That warning should cause every Gentile Christian to think carefully. Christianity did not emerge in a historical vacuum. Christians worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They read the Hebrew Scriptures. They proclaim a Jewish Messiah. The earliest apostles were Jewish. The gospel itself went “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” Whatever conclusions we eventually reach concerning Israel and the Church, arrogance toward the Jewish people cannot be reconciled easily with Paul's warning.

We must also consider whether the promises made to Abraham were conditional. Abraham was commanded to leave, and Genesis tells us that he obeyed. His faith and obedience matter greatly. Later Scripture will celebrate both. Israel's later covenantal history will also demonstrate that obedience matters. Disobedience will bring consequences. There will be discipline, defeat, exile, and loss.

Yet consequences and cancellation are not necessarily the same thing. A father can discipline a son without ceasing to be his father. A covenant can contain consequences for disobedience without necessarily ceasing to exist. The crucial question is therefore not whether Israel's conduct matters—it clearly does—but whether Israel's failures can finally nullify promises that God Himself established.

Genesis 12 does not provide the complete answer. Genesis 15 and 17 will take us much deeper. There God will formalize His covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 15, a remarkable covenant ceremony will place unusual emphasis upon God's own commitment. In Genesis 17, God will call His covenant an “everlasting covenant” and extend it to Abraham's descendants through their generations.

That language will force us to ask what “everlasting” means in its biblical context. It will also force us to ask what kind of human failure, if any, can ultimately terminate something God Himself describes in that way.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

Nothing in Genesis 12 suggests that God's purpose is limited to Abraham's lifetime. In fact, the promises themselves make such an interpretation impossible. Abraham cannot become a great nation if the promise ends when he dies. His descendants cannot inherit the land if the promise ends with him. The nations cannot be blessed through his line if there is no continuing line. The promise necessarily reaches beyond Abraham.

Abraham is therefore the beginning, not the conclusion. The story moves from Abraham to Isaac, from Isaac to Jacob, from Jacob to Israel, and from Israel through generations of biblical history. Centuries later, God will still identify Himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” The prophets will still appeal to God's covenantal faithfulness. Paul will still describe his fellow Jews as Israelites to whom belong “the covenants” and “the promises.”

This is why Genesis 12 cannot be treated merely as an interesting story about the faith of one ancient man. The chapter establishes a trajectory that reaches across Scripture.

Imagine standing beside Abraham when God first spoke these promises. There was no nation of Israel. There was no Moses, no Sinai, no Torah, no tabernacle, no Temple, no Jerusalem as Israel's capital, no Davidic monarchy, no Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, no New Testament, and no Church. Almost everything we associate with the biblical story still lay in the future.

Yet the seeds were already present. From Abraham would come Isaac. From Isaac would come Jacob. Jacob would become Israel. From Israel would come the twelve tribes. From Judah would come David. From the house of David, according to the Christian/Messianic reading of Scripture, would come Yeshua—Yeshua the Messiah. Through that Messiah, people from nations Abraham could never have imagined would come to worship the God who first called him from his homeland.

The promise that began with one man would reach across centuries, cultures, languages, kingdoms, and continents.

And yet the question remains.

When the blessing reaches the nations, has God's purpose for Israel been completed and set aside? When Gentiles become children of Abraham by faith, do Abraham's physical descendants cease to have covenantal significance? When Messiah comes, does fulfillment mean cancellation? When Israel sins, does judgment mean permanent rejection? When the Church appears, does Israel disappear from God's purposes?

We should not answer these questions too quickly.

The biblical story has only begun.

Before Israel exists as a nation, God has already made promises. Before Israel can obey, Israel's future has already been spoken. Before Sinai, before the Law, and before the monarchy, God has called Abraham and declared what He will do.

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That brings us to the deepest question beneath the title of this book. Has God Finished With Israel? is not ultimately only a question about Israel. It is a question about God.

What kind of God makes a promise to Abraham? What kind of God binds Himself to a covenant? What happens when the human recipients of that covenant fail? Does their failure become His failure? Does their unfaithfulness cancel His faithfulness? Can God judge severely and still remain committed to what He has promised?

Israel's later history will give us many reasons to ask those questions. There will be idolatry, rebellion, unbelief, judgment, exile, destruction, and dispersion. But there will also be prophets speaking of restoration, promises of gathering, declarations of covenant faithfulness, and eventually Paul's astonishing question in Romans 11: "Hath God cast away his people?"

Paul's answer is equally astonishing in its force: "God forbid."

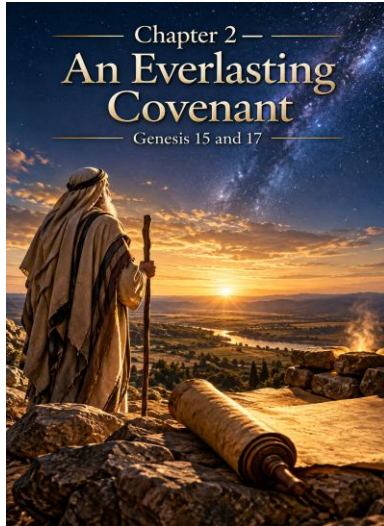
But we are not ready for Romans 11 yet.

We must first understand the covenant upon which Paul's argument ultimately rests. We must follow Abraham beyond Genesis 12 and into Genesis 15 and 17, where promise becomes covenant and where God uses a word that will echo throughout everything that follows.

Everlasting.

Before we can decide whether God has finished with Israel, we must determine what God promised Abraham, how He established that promise, to whom it was extended, and whether Scripture ever declares that His commitment has ended.

That investigation begins here, with one man, one call, and one extraordinary promise. It begins with Abraham.



Chapter 2 — An Everlasting Covenant

Genesis 15 and 17

The call of Abraham in Genesis 12 begins with a promise. God tells Abram that He will make of him a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and through him bring blessing to all the families of the earth. He also promises a land to Abram's descendants. These declarations establish the direction of everything that follows, but as the story continues, an important question emerges. How certain are these promises? Are they simply expressions of God's intention, dependent upon circumstances that may change, or will God bind Himself to what He has spoken?

Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 provide a profound answer. In these chapters, God's promises to Abraham take on an explicitly covenantal form. God does not merely repeat what He has previously said. He confirms His promises through a solemn covenant and eventually describes that covenant with words of extraordinary significance: “an everlasting covenant.”

These words stand at the center of the question this book is attempting to answer. If God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants is described as everlasting, what does that mean? Does everlasting mean only until Israel fails? Does it mean until the coming of Messiah? Does it mean until the establishment of the Church? Or does God's use of this language indicate that something about His covenantal commitment continues through generations despite the failures of those who receive it?

Before answering those questions, we must listen carefully to Genesis itself.

When Genesis 15 opens, Abram has already obeyed God's command to leave his homeland. He has entered the land God promised to show him. He has experienced famine, traveled to Egypt, returned to Canaan, separated from Lot, and witnessed God's protection and provision. Yet the central promise made in Genesis 12 remains unfulfilled. God had promised to make Abram a great nation, but Abram still has no son through whom that nation can come.

This tension is essential to understanding Abraham's story. God has spoken, but circumstances appear to contradict what God has said. The promise is clear, but the fulfillment remains invisible. Abram is living between the word of God and the realization of that word.

Genesis 15 begins with God's reassurance: “Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” Abram responds with a deeply human question. He asks what God can give him when he remains childless. The problem is obvious. How can a childless man become the father of a great nation? If Abram dies without an heir, how can the promises continue?

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God answers by directing Abram's attention away from what he can presently see. He brings him outside and says:

“Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them... So shall thy seed be.”

— Genesis 15:5

The image is powerful. Abram sees darkness, but within that darkness he sees innumerable stars. His present circumstances say that he is childless. God says his descendants will become beyond counting. Abram must decide which reality will govern his faith: what he presently sees in his household or what God has spoken concerning his future.

Genesis then records one of the most important statements in Scripture:

“And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

— Genesis 15:6

Abraham's faith does not mean that he understands how God will accomplish everything He has promised. It means that he trusts the God who made the promise. The certainty of the promise rests ultimately not in Abraham's ability to produce its fulfillment but in God's ability to accomplish what He has said.

This verse later becomes enormously important in Christian theology. Paul appeals to it when explaining justification by faith. Yet within Genesis itself, the statement appears in the middle of God's covenantal dealings with Abraham. Abraham believes God concerning a future he cannot yet see.

The discussion then turns to the land. God reminds Abram that He brought him out in order to give him the land to inherit. Abram asks, “Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” The question is significant because the subject is not merely spiritual blessing. Abram specifically asks about possession of the land.

God's response is one of the most remarkable covenant ceremonies recorded in Scripture.

Abram is instructed to bring animals, divide them, and arrange the pieces opposite each other. To modern readers, the scene may appear strange, but within the ancient world, covenant-making could involve solemn symbolic actions communicating the seriousness of the commitment being established. Jeremiah 34 later refers to people passing between the parts of a divided calf in connection with covenant obligations. The imagery communicates something far more serious than a casual agreement.

Then something unexpected happens.

Abram falls into a deep sleep.

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As darkness descends, God reveals that Abram's descendants will experience a long period of affliction in a foreign land. They will be strangers. They will be oppressed. Yet God promises that He will judge the nation that enslaves them and afterward bring Abram's descendants out.

This prophecy is remarkable because the covenant includes not only blessing but the foreknowledge of suffering. God does not promise Abraham that his descendants will experience an uninterrupted path of prosperity. Their history will contain hardship, slavery, judgment, deliverance, and eventually return.

Then the covenant ceremony reaches its climax.

Genesis 15:17 records:

“Behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.”

The imagery represents the divine presence. What is especially striking is that Abram does not pass between the pieces. Abram is in a deep sleep while the divine manifestation passes through.

Many Christian interpreters have therefore understood Genesis 15 as placing extraordinary emphasis upon God's commitment to the covenant. God is not merely asking Abraham to make a promise. God is solemnly confirming what He Himself has promised.

The following verse declares:

“In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land.”

— Genesis 15:18

The language is direct. God makes a covenant with Abram, and the land is explicitly included in that covenant.

This is important because the Abrahamic covenant is sometimes reduced entirely to a spiritual principle. Certainly, spiritual blessing is central to the promise. The nations will be blessed through Abraham, and the New Testament will draw profound theological implications from Abraham's faith. Yet Genesis itself does not separate spiritual blessing from the historical promises concerning descendants and land. They belong to the same developing covenantal story.

We should again be careful not to move too quickly from Genesis to modern political conclusions. The existence of a biblical land promise does not by itself resolve every modern dispute concerning borders, governments, security, Palestinians, Israelis, or contemporary political decisions. Those questions involve additional moral, historical, legal, and political considerations. But neither should those contemporary complexities cause us to rewrite Genesis. Our first responsibility is to understand what the text says, and Genesis clearly connects Abraham's descendants with a promised land.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

The covenant of Genesis 15 therefore contains a remarkable combination of elements. God promises descendants. God predicts suffering. God promises deliverance. God identifies a land. Most importantly, God Himself solemnly confirms the covenant.

This brings us again to the central question of the book. If Israel's later failures are used to argue that God's covenantal purposes have ended, what are we to make of a covenant whose establishment places such strong emphasis upon God's own commitment?

This does not mean human obedience is unimportant. The Bible never teaches that covenant relationship gives people permission to rebel without consequences. Israel's later history will demonstrate precisely the opposite. Disobedience brings discipline. Idolatry brings judgment. Rebellion can bring exile from the land. Yet discipline, loss of blessing, and even exile are not necessarily identical to the cancellation of the covenant itself.

That distinction becomes even clearer when we reach Genesis 17.

Years have now passed. Abram is ninety-nine years old. The promise of descendants appears, from a human perspective, even more impossible than before. Yet God again appears to him and declares:

“I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.”

— Genesis 17:1–2

Here we see something important about biblical covenant. God's sovereign promise and human responsibility stand alongside each other. God declares what He will do, but Abraham is also called to walk faithfully before Him. Covenant grace does not eliminate covenant responsibility.

God then changes Abram's name to Abraham, declaring that he will become “a father of many nations.” The change of name marks a new stage in Abraham's identity. His future is now being defined by God's promise.

Then comes one of the most important statements in the entire Abraham narrative:

“And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”

— Genesis 17:7

Every part of this statement deserves attention.

God says, “I will establish my covenant.” Once again, the initiative belongs to Him. He then says that the covenant is not merely between Himself and Abraham as an individual. It extends to “thy seed after thee.” The covenant therefore has a generational dimension.

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God makes this even more explicit by adding the phrase “in their generations.” Whatever else we may eventually conclude about the Abrahamic covenant, Genesis does not present it as something intended to disappear when Abraham dies. It is designed to continue through his descendants.

Then God uses the extraordinary expression “an everlasting covenant.”

The Hebrew expression is בְּרִית עוֹלָם — *berit olam*. The word *berit* means covenant. The word *olam* can carry the sense of long duration, perpetuity, or enduring continuance and is frequently translated in the King James Version as “everlasting.”

We should handle the word carefully. It is not responsible to assume that every occurrence of *olam* in the Hebrew Bible must mean precisely the same thing in every possible context. Words derive meaning from their context. Yet it would be equally irresponsible to weaken the word simply because its natural force creates theological questions.

At the very least, Genesis 17 makes one point unmistakable: this covenant is not presented as a short-term arrangement limited to Abraham's lifetime. God explicitly connects it with Abraham's descendants “in their generations” and calls it an everlasting covenant.

This raises a question that must remain before us throughout this book: If God describes the covenant as everlasting, where does Scripture later say that He cancelled it?

That question does not settle every theological issue by itself. Covenants can have different dimensions, and later revelation must be considered. But the burden of interpretation cannot simply be placed upon Genesis as though the word “everlasting” were insignificant. If someone argues that the covenant eventually ceased, was transferred entirely to another people, or lost all relevance to Abraham's physical descendants, we must ask where Scripture explicitly teaches that change.

God continues in Genesis 17:

“And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger... for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

— Genesis 17:8

Once again, descendants and land appear together. Abraham is still a stranger in the land, yet God speaks of future possession. The tension between present circumstances and divine promise remains. Abraham does not yet possess what God has promised, but the absence of immediate fulfillment does not mean the promise has disappeared.

Another important question now arises. Who exactly are the descendants through whom the covenantal line will continue?

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Abraham has another son, Ishmael. God does not ignore Ishmael, nor does He treat him as insignificant. Genesis records that God hears Abraham's concern for him and promises to bless him greatly. Ishmael will become fruitful and multiply exceedingly.

Yet God makes a distinction between blessing and covenant.

Genesis 17:20–21 records God's response:

“And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him... But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.”

This distinction is essential. Ishmael is blessed, but the covenantal line proceeds through Isaac. God's blessing is not restricted only to the covenantal line, but the covenant itself has a specific historical progression.

The promise therefore moves from Abraham to Isaac.

Later, the same covenantal promises are reaffirmed to Isaac. God tells him in Genesis 26 that He will give the lands to him and his descendants and will perform the oath sworn to Abraham. The covenant has not disappeared with Abraham's death. It has moved into the next generation exactly as Genesis 17 said it would.

Then the line continues through Jacob.

Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Again, the covenantal story becomes specific. The promise is reaffirmed to Jacob, and in Genesis 28 God speaks to him in language that unmistakably echoes the promises given to Abraham.

Jacob later receives the name that will define his descendants:

Israel.

This is the historical progression that must be remembered whenever we discuss the covenant: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the twelve tribes, and the nation of Israel.

The nation does not appear suddenly at Mount Sinai without a history. Israel arrives at Sinai carrying promises that are older than Sinai. Before there was a Mosaic covenant, there was an Abrahamic covenant. Before the giving of the Law, God had already made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This distinction becomes enormously important when Israel later fails to keep the Law. If God's relationship with Israel began only at Sinai, then Israel's violation of the Mosaic covenant might appear to settle the entire question. But the biblical story reaches farther back.

Israel's covenantal history begins before Sinai.

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This is precisely why, when God prepares to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt, Exodus does not say that God suddenly develops an interest in them. Instead, Exodus 2:24 declares:

“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.”

Those words are extremely significant.

The Israelites are slaves in Egypt. They do not possess the promised land. They have no kingdom. They have no Temple. Their circumstances could hardly look less like fulfillment.

Yet God remembers His covenant.

Biblically, God's “remembering” does not imply that He had forgotten and suddenly recalled something. It indicates that God acts in accordance with His covenantal commitment. The deliverance from Egypt is therefore connected to promises made generations earlier.

When God speaks to Moses at the burning bush, He identifies Himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Israel's deliverance is rooted in God's faithfulness to what He had promised the patriarchs.

This pattern will continue throughout Scripture.

Israel's behavior will fluctuate dramatically. God's covenantal faithfulness becomes the constant against which Israel's inconsistency is measured.

This does not mean that Israel can sin without consequences. Far from it. The same Scriptures that affirm God's covenant also contain severe warnings of judgment. Israel will experience defeat, exile, destruction, and dispersion because of disobedience.

But we must learn to distinguish between discipline and abandonment.

That distinction is fundamental.

If a covenant can survive judgment, then judgment alone cannot be used as proof that the covenant has ended. If God can remove Israel from the land while still remembering His covenant, then exile does not necessarily equal permanent rejection.

Leviticus 26 will later make precisely this point. After describing severe judgment and dispersion among the nations, God declares concerning Israel in exile:

“And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away... to break my covenant with them.”

— Leviticus 26:44

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That statement deserves to be read in light of Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. The God who made the covenant with Abraham knew before Israel became a nation that failure would occur. In Genesis 15, He even foretold suffering before Abraham had the promised son.

Human failure never surprises God.

This brings us back to the meaning of everlasting.

Does “everlasting covenant” mean that every generation of Abraham's descendants will automatically enjoy every covenantal blessing regardless of obedience? Scripture does not support such a conclusion. Israel's history contains too much discipline, exile, and judgment for that.

But neither does Scripture allow us casually to equate discipline with cancellation.

A more careful distinction is necessary between the existence of the covenant and the experience of covenantal blessing. Israel can experience judgment within a continuing covenantal relationship. The prophets repeatedly demonstrate this. Indeed, the very fact that God disciplines Israel can itself be understood as evidence of an ongoing relationship.

The question, therefore, is not whether obedience matters. It does.

The question is whether Israel's disobedience is stronger than God's covenantal commitment.

That question reaches beyond Israel. It touches the very character of God.

If God's promises survive only when human beings perform perfectly, then the biblical story would be a story of repeated divine failure, because human beings repeatedly fail. Abraham fails. Isaac fails. Jacob fails. Moses fails. David fails. Israel fails. The apostles fail. The Church itself has a long history containing both faithfulness and failure.

The hope of Scripture is not that God's people are always faithful.

The hope of Scripture is that God is faithful.

This is why the Abrahamic covenant matters so profoundly to the larger question of this book. The issue is not whether Israel deserves God's faithfulness. Grace, by definition, cannot be reduced to deserving. The issue is whether God remains faithful to what He has freely promised.

The New Testament will eventually return to this principle. Paul, wrestling with Israel's unbelief, will ask whether that unbelief has caused God's faithfulness to fail. In Romans 3:3–4 he asks, “For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?” His answer is emphatic: “God forbid.”

Later, in Romans 11, he asks the question even more directly:

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“Hath God cast away his people?”

Again the answer comes:

“God forbid.”

Paul's argument cannot be understood properly if we begin with Romans 11. We must understand the covenantal history lying behind it. When Paul speaks of Israel, he is speaking about a people whose story begins with promises made to Abraham and confirmed through Isaac and Jacob.

This is also why the inclusion of Gentiles must be handled carefully. From a Christian/Messianic perspective, Gentile believers participate in the blessing promised through Abraham. Paul makes that explicit in Galatians. But participation by the nations does not automatically require the elimination of the people through whom the promise came.

Indeed, the nations were already present in God's promise to Abraham.

“In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

Gentile inclusion therefore does not need to be understood as God's abandonment of His earlier plan. It can instead be understood as part of the fulfillment of that plan.

The great theological question becomes whether God can fulfill His universal purpose for the nations while still remaining faithful to His particular promises concerning Israel.

Much of Christian theology has wrestled with that question.

The answer we develop in this book must come not from preference, tradition, political ideology, or sentiment, but from Scripture.

Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 have now given us several pieces of evidence that cannot be ignored. God initiates the covenant. God promises descendants. God includes land. God foretells the future of Abraham's descendants. God solemnly confirms His promise through covenant. God extends that covenant beyond Abraham to his descendants. God identifies Isaac as the covenantal son. The promise later continues through Jacob. Jacob becomes Israel. And God describes the covenant as “an everlasting covenant.”

None of this proves that every biblical promise must be interpreted in exactly the same way after the coming of Messiah. Later revelation matters. The prophets matter. The teachings of Yeshua matter. The apostles matter. Romans 9–11 matters enormously.

But later Scripture should not be interpreted in a way that makes earlier Scripture meaningless.

If God says “everlasting covenant,” we must ask what He means.

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If He says “thy seed after thee,” we must ask who those descendants are.

If He says “in their generations,” we must ask whether the covenant was intended to continue historically.

If He promises land, we must acknowledge that land is part of the text.

If He distinguishes Isaac from Ishmael as the covenantal line, we must follow that line.

And if He later identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while acting to deliver Israel, we must recognize that the patriarchal covenant continues to shape the biblical story.

The progression is now becoming clearer. God called Abraham. He promised descendants, land, blessing, and blessing to the nations. He confirmed those promises through covenant. The covenant continued through Isaac. It continued through Jacob. Jacob became Israel. His sons became the twelve tribes. Those tribes became the people whom God would deliver from Egypt.

The story is moving from a man to a family, from a family to a people, and from a people toward a nation.

But with that development comes another question.

Why did God choose them?

Was Israel chosen simply to receive privileges unavailable to everyone else? Was Israel chosen because of some inherent superiority? Or did election carry a purpose and responsibility extending beyond Israel itself?

That question will become central as Israel emerges as a nation.

For now, however, Genesis leaves us standing before a covenant and a description we cannot easily dismiss.

God did not call it a temporary covenant.

He did not call it a covenant lasting only until Abraham died.

He did not describe it as a covenant lasting only until Israel sinned.

He called it:

“an everlasting covenant.”

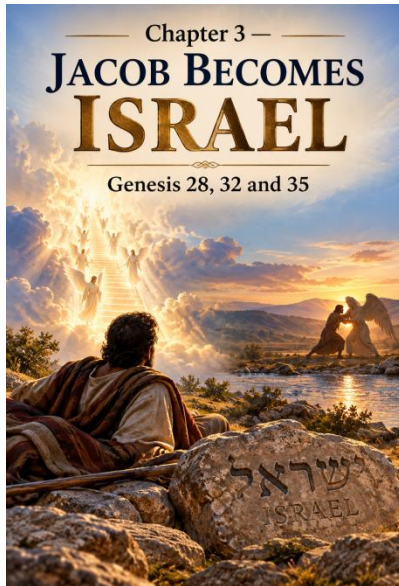
And that brings us directly back to the question at the heart of this book. If the covenant was God's idea, if God initiated it, if God confirmed it, if God extended it through Abraham's

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descendants, and if God Himself described it as everlasting, then anyone who believes that covenant has completely ceased must eventually answer a simple but profound question:

Where does Scripture say that God ended what He Himself called everlasting?

That question will follow us through every chapter that follows.



Chapter 3 — Jacob Becomes Israel

Genesis 28, 32 and 35

The covenantal story that began with Abraham does not end with Abraham. This is one of the most important facts to establish if we are going to understand what the Bible means when it speaks about Israel. God did not make promises to Abraham that disappeared with Abraham's death. The book of Genesis deliberately traces those promises from one generation to the next. The covenant moves from Abraham to Isaac and then from Isaac to Jacob. Eventually, something remarkable happens: Jacob receives a new name. That name is **Israel**. This is where the biblical identity of Israel begins.

Before Israel is the name of a nation, Israel is the name of a man. Before there are twelve tribes of Israel, there is Jacob, whose twelve sons will become the fathers of those tribes. Before Scripture speaks of the “children of Israel” as a people, it first tells us who Israel is. This distinction is enormously important because later discussions sometimes use the word *Israel* so broadly that its original biblical identity becomes unclear. If we are going to ask whether God has finished with Israel, we must first allow Scripture to tell us who Israel is.

The story begins, of course, with Abraham. God called Abraham from his homeland and promised to make of him a great nation. He promised descendants, land, blessing, and blessing to the nations. In Genesis 15, God formally established His covenant with Abraham, and in Genesis 17 He described that covenant as “an everlasting covenant” extending to Abraham's descendants through their generations. Yet Abraham had more than one son, and therefore an important question arose: Through which son would the covenantal line continue?

Ishmael was Abraham's son, and Scripture makes clear that God cared about him and blessed him. God promised that Ishmael would become fruitful and that his descendants would multiply greatly. Yet Genesis 17 makes an explicit distinction between blessing Ishmael and establishing the covenantal line. God declares, “But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee” (Genesis 17:21). This distinction is fundamental. Ishmael receives blessing, but Isaac receives the covenantal promise through which the particular line established with Abraham will continue.

The birth of Isaac therefore represents more than the birth of a long-awaited child. Isaac becomes the next generation in the covenantal story. The promises given to Abraham are reaffirmed to him. In Genesis 26, during a time of famine, God appears to Isaac and tells him not to go down into Egypt but to remain in the land He will show him. God then repeats language that unmistakably echoes His promises to Abraham. He promises to be with Isaac, to bless him, to give the lands to him and his descendants, and to multiply his descendants as the stars of heaven. Once again, God declares that through his descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

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The continuity is unmistakable. Abraham has died, but the promise has not died. The covenantal story continues. Genesis 17 said that the covenant would extend to Abraham's descendants "in their generations," and Genesis 26 shows precisely that happening. The God of Abraham now speaks to Isaac using the language of the Abrahamic promise. The covenant has crossed from one generation to another.

Isaac then becomes the father of two sons, Esau and Jacob. Once again, the existence of more than one son raises the question of the covenantal line. The biblical story eventually focuses upon Jacob. His life is complicated, and Scripture does not present him as an idealized hero. He is involved in rivalry with his brother Esau. He participates with his mother Rebekah in deceiving his father Isaac and obtaining the blessing. He is later deceived by his uncle Laban. His family life becomes complicated and painful. Jacob's story is filled with human weakness, conflict, fear, ambition, and eventually profound encounters with God.

This is important because the covenant does not continue through Jacob because Jacob is presented as morally flawless. The biblical narrative makes no such claim. Once again, we encounter the theme that has already appeared in the stories of Abraham and Isaac: God's covenantal purposes are carried forward through imperfect human beings.

Jacob eventually leaves his father's household and travels toward Haran. He is fleeing from Esau, who is furious because of what has happened concerning the blessing. Jacob is therefore leaving the land under circumstances very different from Abraham's original departure from Mesopotamia. Abraham left his homeland because God called him toward the land. Jacob is leaving the land because he is afraid for his life. From a human perspective, this does not appear to be a promising moment in the covenantal story. Jacob is alone. He does not yet have a family that could become a nation. He possesses no kingdom. He controls no territory. He is travelling away from the very land associated with the promise. Yet it is at this vulnerable moment that God appears to him.

Genesis 28 tells us that Jacob stops for the night and takes one of the stones of the place for a pillow. While sleeping, he sees a ladder, or stairway, reaching from earth to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. Above it stands the LORD, who identifies Himself by declaring, "I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac" (Genesis 28:13). Those words immediately place Jacob within the covenantal history of his family. The God speaking to Jacob is not introducing an unrelated plan. He identifies Himself as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac. The same God who called Abraham and reaffirmed the promise to Isaac now speaks to Jacob.

God then tells Jacob, "The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed" (Genesis 28:13). Once again, the land and the descendants appear together. The promise given to Abraham and reaffirmed to Isaac is now spoken directly to Jacob. God continues, "And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth... and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14). The language is unmistakable. The promise of descendants remains. The promise of land remains. The promise of blessing remains. The promise concerning the nations remains. What began with Abraham has now reached Jacob.

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This continuity is one of the most important features of Genesis. Scripture does not leave us to guess whether Jacob is connected to the Abrahamic covenant. The text deliberately repeats the language of the earlier promises so that the connection cannot easily be missed. God then adds something particularly important for Jacob's immediate circumstances: "And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest... for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of" (Genesis 28:15).

Jacob is leaving the land, but God has not abandoned the promise. He is entering an uncertain future, but God's covenantal purpose is travelling with him. The fulfillment does not depend upon Jacob being able to see how everything will happen. God declares that He will accomplish what He has spoken. This principle has already appeared in Abraham's life. Abraham had to trust God's promise before he could see its fulfillment. Jacob now faces the same challenge. He possesses the promise before he possesses the fulfillment.

Years pass. Jacob builds a family in the household of Laban. He marries Leah and Rachel and also has children through Bilhah and Zilpah. His household grows. The man who left Canaan alone eventually begins the journey back with wives, children, servants, flocks, and possessions. Something is beginning to happen that Jacob himself may not yet fully understand. The promised nation is beginning to take shape within his own household.

Yet before Jacob returns fully to the land, he must confront both his past and his future. He learns that Esau is coming toward him with four hundred men. Jacob becomes afraid. The memory of the conflict that caused him to flee now returns with terrifying force. Jacob divides his household, sends gifts ahead to Esau, and prays for deliverance. His prayer in Genesis 32 is significant because he appeals directly to the promises of God. He remembers that God told him to return to his country and that God promised to deal well with him. Jacob's hope rests not merely upon his own strategy but upon what God has said.

Then comes one of the strangest and most significant encounters in Genesis. Jacob is left alone, and during the night he wrestles with a mysterious man until the breaking of day. The struggle continues for hours. Jacob refuses to let go without receiving a blessing. Then the question is asked, "What is thy name?" Jacob answers, "Jacob." The response that follows changes the biblical story: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel" (Genesis 32:28).

This is the first time in Scripture that the name **Israel** is given to a person. Israel is not initially the name of a territory, a political state, or an abstract theological concept. Israel is first the new name given to Jacob. This fact is foundational. The explanation accompanying the new name is, "For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." The precise nuances of the name *Israel* have been discussed extensively, but the narrative itself connects the name with Jacob's extraordinary struggle with God and men. Whatever additional linguistic questions may be explored, Genesis makes the central historical identification unmistakable: Jacob becomes Israel.

From this point forward, the names Jacob and Israel can both be used for the same individual. Scripture does not entirely stop calling him Jacob, but Israel now becomes his covenantally significant name. More importantly, that name will eventually pass from the man to his

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descendants. Jacob has sons, and therefore Jacob's sons become the sons, or children, of Israel. This is how the expression "children of Israel" develops. It is not an arbitrary title placed upon an unrelated group. It is genealogical and historical language. They are the children of the man whose name God changed to Israel.

As those descendants multiply, the name expands naturally from the individual to the people descended from him. Israel begins as a person, becomes the designation of his descendants, and eventually becomes the name of the nation formed from those descendants. The progression is clear: Abraham becomes the father of Isaac. Isaac becomes the father of Jacob. Jacob becomes Israel. Israel's sons become the fathers of the twelve tribes. The twelve tribes become the people of Israel.

This means that when the Bible later speaks of Israel, we cannot simply detach the term from this history. Israel has a specific biblical identity. That observation becomes enormously important when we later discuss the relationship between Israel and the Church. Christians sometimes use the word *Israel* in several different senses. Some speak of ethnic Israel. Some speak of national Israel. Some speak of spiritual Israel. Some interpret the Church as Israel. Others sharply distinguish Israel from the Church. Still others believe there is both continuity and distinction between them.

Those debates will require careful examination later, but before entering them, we must establish the starting point provided by Genesis. The first person in Scripture to bear the name Israel is Jacob, and the people later called Israel are his descendants. This does not by itself answer every later theological question concerning the meaning of Israel. Biblical words can develop additional theological significance within later revelation. But later theological interpretation should not erase the historical and textual foundation upon which the word is built.

Genesis 35 reinforces this point. After the events surrounding Jacob's return to the land, God appears to him again and repeats the name change: "Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name" (Genesis 35:10). Scripture then says simply, "And he called his name Israel." The repetition matters. Genesis does not treat the name given in chapter 32 as a passing detail. God Himself confirms it.

Immediately after confirming Jacob's new name, God speaks words that again connect Israel with the covenantal promises: "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins" (Genesis 35:11). The promise of nationhood that began with Abraham is now spoken to the man who has just been named Israel. God then declares, "And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land" (Genesis 35:12).

The covenantal progression could hardly be stated more clearly. God refers to Abraham, then to Isaac, then to Jacob—Israel—and then to Jacob's descendants. The same land promise moves through the same covenantal line. This is not a new covenant unrelated to Abraham. God explicitly connects what He is saying to Jacob with what He previously gave to Abraham and Isaac. The line is deliberate and continuous: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the descendants of Israel, and eventually the nation of Israel.

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This is why later Scripture so often speaks of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The phrase is not merely sentimental remembrance of three important ancestors. It summarizes the covenantal line through which God’s promises are carried forward. When Israel is enslaved in Egypt, God remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When God appears to Moses, He identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. The nation that Moses will lead from Egypt does not suddenly become God’s people at the burning bush. Their story reaches backward through Jacob to Isaac and ultimately to Abraham.

This is crucial for understanding what happens at Sinai. The Law does not create the Abrahamic promises. Israel arrives at Sinai already carrying a covenantal history. The people who stand before Mount Sinai are the descendants of Israel, and Israel is Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. The Mosaic covenant will introduce obligations, commandments, blessings, warnings, and consequences that become central to Israel’s national life, but those developments occur within a story that began generations earlier.

This helps explain why Israel’s later disobedience cannot be evaluated only in terms of Sinai. Israel can violate the Law and experience severe consequences, but behind Sinai stands Abraham. Behind the Mosaic covenant stands the patriarchal covenant. The prophets will repeatedly appeal to this deeper covenantal history.

The identity of Israel is therefore both genealogical and covenantal. Israel is descended from Jacob, but those descendants also stand within promises made to Abraham and reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob. This does not mean that every physical descendant automatically lives faithfully before God. Scripture repeatedly distinguishes between covenantal identity and faithful covenantal living. Israel contains faithful people and rebellious people. There are generations that trust God and generations that turn toward idolatry. The prophets repeatedly call Israel back to covenant faithfulness precisely because Israel often fails to live according to its calling.

Yet Israel’s failure does not change the historical identity of the people. An unfaithful Israelite is still an Israelite. This distinction becomes especially important when we eventually reach Paul. Romans 9–11 wrestles precisely with the reality that many Israelites do not believe Paul’s proclamation concerning Messiah. Yet Paul does not solve the problem by simply declaring that unbelieving Jews are no longer Israel in any meaningful sense. He continues to speak of his “kinsmen according to the flesh” as Israelites and asks what their unbelief means for the promises of God. We are not yet ready to examine Paul’s complete argument, but Genesis provides the historical foundation necessary to understand his question: Israel has a specific identity.

This point also protects us from another possible misunderstanding. The fact that God chooses a particular covenantal line does not mean that God is indifferent toward everyone outside that line. Ishmael is not the covenantal son, yet God blesses Ishmael. Esau is not the covenantal son through whom the promises continue, yet Esau becomes the father of a people. The nations remain within God’s concern. Indeed, God’s original promise to Abraham already declared that “all families of the earth” would be blessed through him. Particular election and universal concern therefore exist together from the beginning.

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God's choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not evidence that He cares only about their descendants. It is part of the means through which His purposes will eventually reach beyond them. From a Christian/Messianic perspective, this becomes especially important when we consider Yeshua. The New Testament does not present Yeshua as appearing outside this covenantal history. Matthew begins his Gospel by tracing Him to David and Abraham. Luke also places Him within Israel's history. Paul identifies Him as arising from Israel according to the flesh. Messiah therefore does not erase the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He emerges from within it.

This makes the later inclusion of Gentiles even more remarkable. People who are not physically descended from Jacob begin worshipping the God of Israel and embracing Israel's Messiah. Paul describes Gentiles in Romans 11 as wild olive branches grafted into an existing olive tree. But once again the question arises: Does being grafted into the blessings associated with Israel mean that the original identity of Israel disappears? That question cannot be answered simply by redefining the word *Israel* before examining how Scripture itself uses it.

Genesis gives us a starting point. Israel is Jacob. The children of Israel are Jacob's descendants. The tribes of Israel descend from Jacob's sons. The nation of Israel emerges from those tribes. Whatever additional theological meanings may later be argued, this historical identity cannot simply be erased.

There is another profound dimension to Jacob's story that should not be overlooked. The man who becomes Israel is himself deeply flawed. Jacob's life contains deception, family conflict, fear, manipulation, and struggle. He is not chosen because Genesis presents him as morally perfect. This parallels what we have already seen with Abraham. God's covenantal purposes move forward through imperfect people.

That fact becomes almost symbolic of Israel's later national history. The nation that bears Jacob's new name will also struggle. Israel will believe and doubt, obey and rebel, worship and wander. Israel's national history will often resemble Jacob's personal history: struggle, failure, divine discipline, preservation, and encounter with God. Even the name Israel emerges from struggle. Jacob does not receive the name while sitting comfortably in prosperity. He receives it in the darkness, wrestling through the night.

There is something remarkably appropriate about that. The people who will bear his name will also wrestle through history. They will wrestle with God and with enemies, with obedience and exile, with identity and with the words of their own prophets. Yet through all of those struggles, Scripture continues to call them Israel. This should caution us against assuming that failure automatically eliminates identity. Jacob does not become Israel because he has reached moral perfection, and Israel does not cease to be Israel every time the nation fails. The biblical story is more complicated—and in many ways more remarkable—than that.

The continuity of the covenant also reveals something fundamental about the faithfulness of God. Abraham dies, but God remains. Isaac dies, but God remains. Jacob will die, but God remains. Generations change, circumstances change, political powers rise and fall, but the

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covenantal God identifies Himself across generations as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is precisely what an enduring covenant requires.

If the covenant depended upon Abraham remaining alive, it would have ended with Abraham. If it depended upon Isaac's lifetime, it would have ended with Isaac. If it depended upon Jacob's lifetime, it would have ended with Jacob. But God had already said that the covenant would continue through their generations. The movement from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob therefore demonstrates that the covenant is larger than any one individual, yet it remains attached to a specific historical line.

This combination is important. The covenant is not merely individual, because it continues through generations. But neither is it vague or universal in the sense that the specific recipients become irrelevant. God identifies Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, and then Jacob becomes Israel.

This brings us directly back to the central purpose of this chapter. Before we can ask whether God has finished with Israel, we must know whom Scripture originally calls Israel. Genesis gives us an answer that is remarkably concrete. Israel begins with a man named Jacob. God changes his name to Israel. His sons become the sons of Israel. Their descendants become the children of Israel. The twelve sons become associated with the twelve tribes of Israel, and those tribes eventually become the nation of Israel. Therefore, when later Scripture speaks of Israel, it does so against this historical and covenantal background.

That does not settle every later theological debate, but it establishes the foundation upon which those debates must take place. We cannot responsibly begin with a later theological definition of Israel and then impose it backward upon Genesis. We must first allow Genesis to establish the identity and then ask how later Scripture develops that identity.

This becomes especially important when we eventually ask whether the Church has replaced Israel. Before we can answer whether one entity replaced another, we must define both entities carefully. Before we ask whether God's promises have been transferred, we must identify to whom they were originally given. Before we ask whether Israel's calling has ended, we must understand what that calling was.

Genesis has now provided the first part of that answer. God called Abraham. The covenant continued through Isaac and then through Jacob. Jacob became Israel. The promises of descendants, land, nationhood, and blessing were reaffirmed to him, and from Israel would come the people who would carry his name. The story is now ready to move from the patriarchs toward a nation.

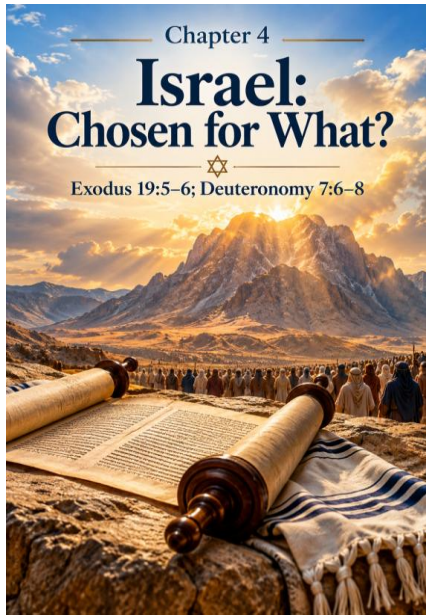
But that transition creates another important question. Why did God choose this people? What was Israel chosen to accomplish? Was election merely a privilege, or did it involve a calling? Did God choose Israel for Israel alone, or did Israel's calling somehow relate to the nations? Those questions will lead us toward one of the most misunderstood ideas in Scripture: the doctrine of a chosen people.

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Before considering what it means for Israel to be chosen, however, we should remember what Genesis has established. Israel's election did not begin with national power, military strength, political influence, or moral superiority. It began with God's promise to Abraham, continued through Isaac, and was reaffirmed to a deeply imperfect man named Jacob.

And God gave that man a new name: Israel.

From that moment onward, the name would belong not only to a man but increasingly to his descendants, his tribes, and the nation that emerged from them. Israel therefore has a specific biblical identity. And if we are going to determine whether God has finished with Israel, that identity must remain clear throughout everything that follows.



Chapter 4 — Israel: Chosen for What?

Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6–8

Few biblical ideas have been discussed, misunderstood, celebrated, and sometimes resented as much as the idea that Israel is the “chosen people.”

The expression can easily be misunderstood as suggesting superiority, privilege without responsibility, or divine favoritism based upon human merit.

Yet when Scripture itself explains Israel’s election, a very different picture emerges. Israel was chosen not because Israel was greater, stronger, more numerous, or more righteous than other nations, but because God loved Israel, remained faithful to the promises He had made to Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob, and intended to give this particular people a particular calling among the nations. To understand what it means for Israel to be chosen, therefore, we must ask a more important question: chosen for what?

The answer begins before Israel existed as a nation. In Genesis 12, God called Abraham and promised to make of him a great nation. God promised to bless Abraham, make his name great, and ultimately bring blessing to all the families of the earth through him. In Genesis 15 and 17, those promises were established in covenant. The covenant continued through Isaac and then through Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Jacob’s descendants became the children of Israel, and by the opening chapters of Exodus they had multiplied into a substantial people living under oppression in Egypt. Their circumstances had changed dramatically from the days of Abraham, but the covenant promises of God had not changed.

When God delivered Israel from Egypt, He did more than rescue an oppressed people from slavery. The Exodus was certainly an act of deliverance, but deliverance was not the final purpose. God did not simply bring Israel out of Egypt; He brought Israel to Himself. He rescued them from bondage and brought them to Mount Sinai, where the purpose of their national calling began to emerge with remarkable clarity. In Exodus 19:5–6 God told Moses that if Israel would obey His voice and keep His covenant, they would be His treasured possession among all peoples, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These words are foundational for understanding Israel’s identity because they reveal that Israel’s election involved both relationship and responsibility.

One of the most important statements in this passage is easily overlooked. Immediately after describing Israel as His treasured possession, God declares that “all the earth is mine.” This is essential to understanding biblical election. Israel’s chosenness does not mean that God ceased to care about the other nations or that the rest of humanity somehow existed outside His purposes. The God who chose Israel simultaneously declared His ownership of the entire earth. His

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sovereignty was universal even though His covenant relationship with Israel was particular. God chose one people from among the nations while remaining the Creator and Lord of every nation.

Israel's election, therefore, should never be understood as God choosing Israel against the nations. Rather, God chose Israel from among the nations for a particular purpose within His larger purposes for humanity. This principle had already been established in God's promise to Abraham. Abraham would become the father of a great nation, but the promise never ended with Abraham or his descendants. God had declared that through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. From the beginning, therefore, God's particular relationship with Abraham and Israel existed within a universal purpose.

At Sinai, God described Israel as His treasured possession. The older English expression "peculiar treasure" can be confusing because the word "peculiar" today usually means strange or unusual. In its biblical setting, however, the expression conveys the idea of a special or treasured possession. Israel was being identified as a people belonging to God in a distinctive covenant relationship. Yet this relationship did not begin at Sinai. Sinai established Israel's national covenantal life, but God's relationship with Israel rested upon promises He had already made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This becomes especially clear in the story of the Exodus. When Israel suffered under Egyptian bondage, Scripture tells us that God heard their groaning and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The language does not mean that God had temporarily forgotten His covenant and suddenly remembered it. Rather, it emphasizes that God was about to act in accordance with what He had promised. Israel's deliverance from Egypt was therefore an expression of divine covenant faithfulness. God acted because He remained faithful to His word.

This principle becomes one of the central themes running throughout the biblical story of Israel. Israel's continued existence cannot be understood solely by examining Israel's behavior. Again and again, Scripture directs attention back to the character of God, His promises, His covenant, and His faithfulness. Israel's election begins with God's initiative rather than Israel's achievement.

Perhaps the most remarkable description of Israel's calling in Exodus 19 is the expression "a kingdom of priests." A priest occupies a special position of service before God. In Israel's later religious life, priests would serve in worship, teach God's instructions, guard sacred responsibilities, and represent holiness before the people. Yet at Sinai the entire nation was given a priestly description. This did not mean that every Israelite would perform the specific duties later assigned to the descendants of Aaron. Rather, it pointed toward Israel's broader vocation among the nations.

Israel was to live in such a way that the knowledge and character of the God of Israel would become visible in the world. Israel's worship, laws, ethics, calendar, communal life, and devotion were all intended to distinguish the nation from the peoples surrounding it. Israel was not merely supposed to proclaim that its God was different. The nation was expected to live differently because it belonged to Him. The character of the God of Israel was to influence the character of Israel.

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This means that chosenness carried enormous responsibility. To be chosen was to be called, and to be called was to become accountable. Israel was not simply given promises to enjoy; Israel was given a vocation to fulfill. The Torah repeatedly connects covenant privilege with covenant responsibility. Israel was commanded to pursue justice, protect the vulnerable, care for the stranger, reject idolatry, observe the Sabbath, worship God alone, practice holiness, and order its communal life according to divine instruction. These responsibilities were not incidental additions to Israel's election. They were part of what election meant.

God also called Israel a "holy nation." Holiness in Scripture includes the idea of being set apart for God and His purposes. Israel was not called simply to become another ancient nation with a different national deity. Israel was to belong to God and therefore to live according to His instructions. This distinction reached into virtually every dimension of Israelite life. Worship was affected. Family life was affected. Agriculture was affected. Justice was affected. Food was affected. The treatment of servants, foreigners, widows, orphans, the poor, and the vulnerable was affected. Even Israel's understanding of time was shaped by its covenant relationship with God.

The Sabbath reminded Israel every week that God was Creator and that human life was not defined merely by labor and productivity. Passover required each generation to remember that God had delivered Israel from Egypt. The appointed feasts connected Israel's agricultural and national life with God's provision and redemptive acts. Again and again, Israel was commanded to remember. This command was essential because forgetting God's acts would eventually lead Israel to misunderstand its own identity. If Israel forgot Egypt, the nation could become proud. If Israel forgot the covenant, it could imitate the nations around it. If Israel forgot that its existence depended upon God's grace and faithfulness, chosenness could be transformed in human thinking from responsibility into entitlement.

Deuteronomy 7 directly confronts such a misunderstanding. Moses tells Israel that they are a holy people whom the Lord has chosen to be His special possession. But he immediately explains that God did not choose Israel because the nation was more numerous than other peoples. In fact, Moses reminds them that they were among the fewest. Israel's election could not be explained by political strength, military power, population, wealth, or human achievement.

Moses then gives the reason: "because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers." These words provide one of Scripture's clearest explanations of Israel's election. God loved Israel, and God remained faithful to the oath He had made to the patriarchs. The explanation points away from Israel's greatness and toward God's character. Election rests ultimately in divine love and covenant faithfulness rather than human merit.

This becomes particularly important because the Bible never portrays Israel as morally perfect. The biblical record is remarkably candid about Israel's failures. The wilderness generation complained, rebelled, and repeatedly questioned God. During the period of the Judges, Israel repeatedly turned away from God and adopted the practices of surrounding peoples. Israel's kings included faithful rulers but also men guilty of idolatry, corruption, injustice, and violence.

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The prophets repeatedly confronted the nation over false worship, exploitation of the poor, injustice, and covenant unfaithfulness. Eventually the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, while Judah was conquered by Babylon and Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.

None of this history is hidden. If the purpose of the biblical record were simply to glorify Israel, it is difficult to imagine why so many of Israel's failures would have been recorded in such detail. Scripture does not present Israel as a nation incapable of wrongdoing. Quite the opposite. Israel's failures become part of the biblical testimony concerning both human weakness and divine faithfulness.

Being chosen therefore does not mean being perfect. Neither does it mean being inherently superior to other people. Moses himself warned Israel against precisely such thinking. As the Israelites prepared to enter the land, he told them not to imagine that God was giving it to them because of their own righteousness. Biblical election does not provide a foundation for national pride. It provides a foundation for covenant responsibility.

Israel was chosen, but Israel could disobey. Israel was called, but Israel could fail in that calling. Israel received promises, but Israel also received commandments. Israel possessed covenant privileges, but those privileges brought covenant accountability. The biblical doctrine of election therefore cannot simply mean that Israel was "better" than everyone else. The biblical picture is far more demanding. Israel was chosen for a purpose and entrusted with a responsibility.

One of the most important aspects of that responsibility was the receiving and preserving of divine revelation. Through Israel came the Torah, the prophets, the Psalms, and the other writings that make up the Hebrew Scriptures. Israel preserved the testimony of creation, covenant, the Exodus, Sinai, the monarchy, exile, restoration, wisdom, prophecy, worship, judgment, and hope. The biblical story that would eventually influence peoples throughout the world came through the Jewish people.

The apostle Paul later acknowledged this unique role when he wrote that the Jewish people had been entrusted with the "oracles of God." He also spoke of the Israelites as those to whom belonged the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises. From a Christian and Messianic perspective, this historical role becomes even more significant because Yeshua, the apostles, and the earliest followers of Yeshua emerged from within the Jewish people and the biblical story of Israel.

Receiving revelation, however, was not simply a privilege. It was a responsibility. Israel was entrusted with preserving, teaching, studying, and transmitting the Word of God. Across generations, Jewish communities copied, studied, memorized, debated, taught, and preserved the Scriptures. Christians who read the Hebrew Scriptures today therefore encounter a sacred history inseparably connected with the Jewish people.

Israel was also called to bear witness to the reality of the one God. The confession found in Deuteronomy 6 became central to Jewish identity: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." In a world filled with competing deities, idols, temples, and localized gods, Israel's Scriptures proclaimed something radically different. The God of Israel was not merely one tribal

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deity competing against the gods of neighboring peoples. He was the Creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the sovereign Lord of history.

The God who called Abraham was the God who created humanity. The God who delivered Israel from Egypt claimed authority over kings and empires. The God worshipped in Jerusalem could not be confined to Jerusalem because heaven and earth belonged to Him. Israel's testimony concerning the one God therefore had implications far beyond Israel itself.

The prophets increasingly expressed this universal dimension of Israel's calling. Isaiah envisioned nations coming to learn the ways of God. The Psalms repeatedly called upon the nations to praise the Lord. The prophetic hope anticipated a future in which the knowledge of God would extend far beyond Israel's borders. Israel's particular election therefore served a purpose with universal implications. God chose one people, but His purposes were never restricted to one people.

This brings the story back to Abraham. When God first called Abraham, He promised not only to bless him but also that through him the families of the earth would be blessed. Israel's calling must always be understood within that larger promise. God chose Abraham. Through Abraham came Isaac. Through Isaac came Jacob. Jacob became Israel. Israel became a people. That people was delivered from Egypt and brought into covenant at Sinai. Through that people came the Scriptures, the prophets, the knowledge of the God of Israel, and, from the Christian and Messianic perspective, the Messiah.

Election and blessing are therefore inseparably connected. Israel was blessed, but Israel was also called to become an instrument through which blessing would extend outward. This is why the expression "chosen people" should never be separated from the description "kingdom of priests." One speaks of Israel's covenant relationship with God; the other speaks of Israel's vocation and responsibility.

The prophets make it equally clear that Israel's special relationship with God did not provide immunity from judgment. Amos records the striking words of God to Israel: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." The statement overturns the idea that election means exemption from accountability. Israel's special relationship with God actually increased its responsibility.

This principle helps us understand why the prophets could speak so severely to Israel. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and the other prophets did not condemn Israel because Israel had become irrelevant to God. They confronted Israel precisely because Israel belonged to God and had been called to covenant faithfulness. They condemned idolatry because Israel had been called to worship the Lord alone. They condemned injustice because Israel had been commanded to practice justice. They condemned oppression because Israel had been commanded to remember its own experience of oppression in Egypt. They condemned covenant unfaithfulness because Israel was a covenant people.

Even divine discipline, therefore, must be understood within the framework of covenant. Israel's failures were real and serious, and Scripture never minimizes them. Yet another question

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emerges from the biblical narrative. If Israel was chosen for a purpose but repeatedly failed to fulfill that purpose, did Israel's failure cancel God's calling?

This question becomes increasingly important as the biblical story unfolds. The Hebrew Scriptures describe severe consequences for Israel's disobedience, including military defeat, destruction, exile, dispersion, and suffering. Yet those same Scriptures repeatedly speak of restoration. The prophets announce judgment, but they also announce return. They speak of scattering, but they also speak of gathering. They describe desolation, but they also anticipate rebuilding. They describe covenant violation while continuing to appeal to God's covenant faithfulness.

This creates one of the great tensions running through Scripture: human unfaithfulness contrasted with divine faithfulness. Israel's failures are never denied, but neither are God's promises casually discarded. Again and again, the biblical narrative returns to the covenant and to the character of the God who made it.

This is why the earlier stages of Israel's story are so important. The call of Abraham, the covenant with Abraham, its continuation through Isaac and Jacob, Jacob's transformation into Israel, the Exodus, and the calling at Sinai are not isolated stories. They form one developing covenantal narrative. What happens later must be understood in the light of what God had already promised.

Israel's election should therefore never be understood as God choosing Israel against the nations. The Bible presents God as choosing Israel from among the nations while simultaneously declaring that the entire earth belongs to Him. This protects us from two opposite errors. The first is turning election into a doctrine of national superiority, as though the other peoples of the earth were insignificant to God. The second is erasing Israel's particular calling on the grounds that God loves all humanity. Scripture holds both truths together. God has universal purposes for humanity, yet He chose to work through a particular people in a particular covenantal history.

There is also another dimension of chosenness that should not be overlooked. Being chosen can carry a burden. Israel's calling required distinction, and distinction could be costly. Covenant faithfulness required Israel to resist practices accepted by surrounding cultures. The prophets often stood against their own kings, religious leaders, and communities because faithfulness to God required them to speak uncomfortable truths. Israel's identity was not simply a badge of honor; it carried obligations that reached into virtually every part of national and personal life.

Within Jewish thought, chosenness has therefore often been understood not merely as privilege but as covenantal responsibility. This provides an important corrective to the accusation that the idea of the chosen people necessarily means a claim of ethnic or national superiority. The biblical emphasis repeatedly returns to responsibility. The crucial question is not merely, "Has God chosen Israel?" but, "What did God choose Israel to do?"

Exodus 19 provides a profound answer. Israel was called to belong to God as His treasured people, to become a kingdom of priests, and to become a holy nation. Deuteronomy 7 provides an equally important explanation of why Israel was chosen. It was not because Israel was

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numerous, powerful, or inherently deserving. Israel was chosen because God loved Israel and because He was faithful to the oath He had sworn to Israel's fathers.

Israel was therefore chosen to live in covenant relationship with God. Israel was chosen to bear witness to the one God. Israel was chosen to receive and preserve divine revelation. Israel was chosen to demonstrate holiness, justice, worship, and covenant obedience. Israel was chosen within the unfolding promise given to Abraham that blessing would ultimately reach the nations. From the Christian and Messianic perspective, Israel would also become the people through whom the Messiah entered the world.

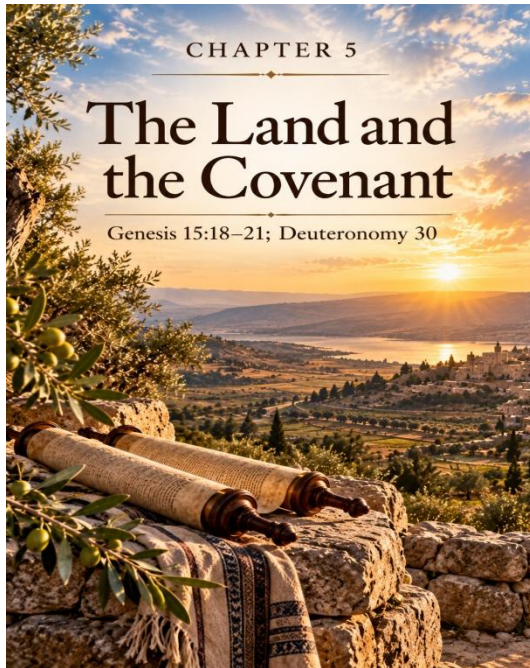
None of this requires the conclusion that Israelites were inherently better than other human beings. Scripture itself prevents such a conclusion. Israel's history demonstrates the same human capacity for faithfulness and unfaithfulness, courage and fear, obedience and rebellion found throughout humanity. The distinction lies not in Israel's inherent superiority but in God's sovereign covenantal calling.

This gives us an essential principle for everything that follows in this book. Biblical election is not merely privilege. Biblical election is purpose, covenant, responsibility, and calling. When God declared at Sinai that Israel would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, He gave Israel not simply an identity but a vocation.

And when Deuteronomy asks why this particular people had been chosen, the answer does not point to Israel's greatness, numbers, strength, achievements, or righteousness. It points back to God: "Because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers."

That statement takes us to the heart of Israel's biblical identity. Israel's story begins with promise. Its identity is shaped by covenant. Its election carries responsibility. Its failures bring consequences, but they also raise one of the most important questions in the biblical story:

What happens to the promises of God when the people He has chosen fail to live according to their calling?



Chapter 5 — The Land and the Covenant

Genesis 15:18–21; Deuteronomy 30

The land of Israel occupies a central place in the biblical story. From the moment God called Abraham, the promise of a particular land was connected with the covenant God established with him and his descendants. The biblical narrative does not present the land merely as a place where Israel happened to settle or as a political territory acquired later in Israel's history. It is introduced as part of the covenant promise itself. To understand the biblical identity of Israel, therefore, we must examine not only the people whom God chose but also the land that God promised.

When God first called Abram in Genesis 12, He commanded him to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's household and travel “unto a land that I will shew thee.” Before Abram knew where he was going, the land was already part of God's purpose. When Abram eventually entered Canaan, God declared, “Unto thy seed will I give this land.” The promise of descendants and the promise of land were therefore connected from the beginning.

This becomes even more explicit in Genesis 15. Abram had already received God's promises, but he remained without the son through whom those promises were to continue. God brought Abram outside and told him to look toward the heavens and count the stars, if he were able to count them. “So shall thy seed be,” God declared. Abram believed God, and his faith was counted to him for righteousness.

Immediately after this promise concerning Abram's descendants, the subject turns to the land. God said, “I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.” Abram then asked how he could know that he would inherit it. God's response was the extraordinary covenant ceremony described in Genesis 15.

Animals were prepared and divided, creating a solemn setting for the establishment of the covenant. As darkness fell, Abram entered a deep sleep. God revealed that Abram's descendants would become strangers in a land that was not theirs, would experience affliction, and would later come out with great possessions. God was speaking beforehand about Israel's future bondage in Egypt and eventual deliverance.

Then something remarkable occurred. A smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the divided pieces. Abram himself is not described as walking between them. The emphasis of the passage is upon God's action and God's promise. Genesis then states:

“Unto thy seed have I given this land.”

The wording is significant. God does not merely say that Abram's descendants might someday possess the land. He incorporates the land into the covenant declaration.

Genesis 15:18–21 then describes the territory associated with the promise, extending “from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates,” followed by a list of peoples inhabiting the region. Whatever questions interpreters may raise concerning the precise geographical extent or historical fulfillment of these boundaries, one point in the text is unmistakable: the covenant with Abraham contains a geographical dimension. It concerns a people, but it also concerns a land.

The same principle appears again in Genesis 17. There God declares that He will establish His covenant with Abraham and his descendants after him as an “everlasting covenant.” Within that same declaration God says, “And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

The language connects three ideas: the covenant, Abraham's descendants, and the land. These are not introduced as unrelated promises. They form part of the same covenantal structure.

The promise is subsequently reaffirmed to Isaac. During a famine, God told Isaac not to go down into Egypt but to remain in the land He would show him. God promised, “Unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries,” and specifically connected this promise with the oath He had sworn to Abraham.

The promise then passes to Jacob. At Bethel, Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. There God identified Himself as “the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac” and declared, “the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed.”

This progression is important. The biblical text does not leave the identity of the covenant line undefined. The covenant moves from Abraham to Isaac and from Isaac to Jacob, whose name becomes Israel. The descendants of Jacob become the children of Israel. Thus, when the biblical narrative subsequently speaks about Israel and the land, it is building upon promises already established in Genesis.

Israel's possession of the land, however, introduced another important dimension: responsibility. The Abrahamic promise of the land and Israel's experience within the land are related, but they are not identical concepts. Once Israel became a nation under the Mosaic covenant, life in the land was connected with obedience to God's commandments.

This distinction becomes especially important in Deuteronomy.

As Israel prepared to enter the land, Moses repeatedly warned the people that covenant disobedience would bring serious consequences. Israel could experience defeat, judgment, and

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ultimately exile. The fact that God had promised the land to the patriarchs did not mean that any generation of Israelites could live without accountability before Him.

Deuteronomy 28 describes both blessing and judgment. Obedience would bring blessing, while persistent rebellion would eventually lead to dispersion among the nations. Israel could be removed from the land.

This raises an important question. If Israel could be exiled from the land, did exile mean that the original covenant promise had been cancelled?

Deuteronomy 30 provides an important biblical answer.

Moses looked beyond Israel's future disobedience and exile to the possibility of restoration. He anticipated a time when Israel would experience the blessings and curses described previously and would find itself scattered among the nations. Yet dispersion was not presented as the final word.

Moses declared that if Israel returned to the LORD and obeyed His voice, God would gather His people again.

“Then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations.”

The passage goes even further. Even if the people were driven “unto the outmost parts of heaven,” God promised to gather them from there.

Then comes the crucial statement:

“And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it.”

Notice the language. The restoration is not described simply as spiritual renewal without geographical significance. God speaks of gathering a dispersed people and returning them to the land possessed by their fathers.

This creates an important biblical pattern:

Land — disobedience — exile — repentance — gathering — restoration.

The prophets later return to this pattern repeatedly.

Jeremiah speaks of Israel being scattered and gathered. Ezekiel describes God taking the children of Israel “from among the heathen” and bringing them “into their own land.” Amos speaks of Israel being planted upon their land. Isaiah repeatedly describes the gathering of Israel's dispersed people. These later prophetic declarations build upon the covenantal framework already established in the Torah.

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The relationship between covenant promise and covenant responsibility therefore requires careful distinction. Scripture can speak both of God's enduring covenant commitments and of Israel's accountability. Divine faithfulness does not eliminate human responsibility, and human failure does not necessarily mean that every divine promise has ceased to exist.

This distinction is especially important when discussing the history of Israel.

Israel experienced exile more than once. The northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria. The kingdom of Judah was later conquered by Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Temple was burned. Yet the Babylonian exile did not mean that God's relationship with Israel had disappeared. A remnant eventually returned, Jerusalem was rebuilt, and the Temple was restored.

Centuries later, Jerusalem and the Second Temple were destroyed by Rome in A.D. 70, and Jewish communities became increasingly dispersed throughout the nations. For many centuries, the Jewish people lived without political sovereignty in the land while nevertheless maintaining a profound religious, historical, and cultural connection with Jerusalem and the land of Israel.

That history makes the biblical relationship between Israel and the land especially significant. The connection did not originate with modern nationalism, the twentieth century, or the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. Whatever conclusions one reaches concerning modern political questions, the biblical connection between the descendants of Israel and the land reaches back thousands of years into the foundational texts of Scripture.

At the same time, biblical theology should not be reduced to a modern political argument. The Bible's covenantal claims and the legal and political questions surrounding a modern state are related subjects for many readers, but they are not identical. Modern Israel exists within a complicated political environment involving Israelis, Palestinians, neighboring states, competing national narratives, questions of security, borders, sovereignty, justice, and international law. Scripture should not be used carelessly to dismiss the dignity, suffering, or legitimate concerns of any people.

Our purpose here is more specific: to understand what the biblical text itself says about the land within God's covenant with Israel.

The biblical evidence establishes that the land is not incidental to the covenant story. God calls Abraham toward a land. He promises the land to Abraham's descendants. He incorporates the land into the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15. He reaffirms the promise to Isaac and Jacob. He brings Israel out of Egypt toward that land. He warns Israel that disobedience can result in exile from it. And even before Israel enters the land, God speaks through Moses about a future gathering and restoration after dispersion.

This raises another theological question: if Israel is exiled because of disobedience, how can the covenant remain enduring?

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The answer lies partly in the character of God. Throughout Scripture, God's dealings with Israel reveal both justice and faithfulness. He disciplines Israel, sometimes severely, yet repeatedly remembers His covenant.

Leviticus 26 provides a striking example. After describing severe judgment and dispersion, God declares that even when Israel is in the land of its enemies, He will not utterly cast them away or destroy them completely so as to break His covenant with them. He then says that He will remember the covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham.

This does not make Israel exempt from judgment. Quite the opposite: much of the Hebrew Bible records God's judgment upon Israel. But judgment and covenant abandonment are not necessarily the same thing.

That distinction becomes essential for later discussions in this book. If every act of Israel's disobedience automatically cancelled God's covenant promises, then large portions of the prophetic writings would become difficult to understand. The prophets often pronounce judgment upon Israel while simultaneously proclaiming future restoration. They can condemn Israel's sin with extraordinary severity and still speak of God's continuing purposes for the nation.

The land therefore becomes one of the great biblical demonstrations of the tension between divine promise and human responsibility.

Israel is commanded to obey.

Israel can be disciplined.

Israel can be removed from the land.

Israel can be scattered among the nations.

Yet God can still remember His covenant and speak of gathering and restoration.

Deuteronomy 30 is particularly important because the promise of restoration is given before Israel has even entered the land. Moses is not improvising a theology after Israel's exile has occurred. He anticipates the entire pattern beforehand. Israel will enter the land, experience blessing, turn away, suffer judgment, become scattered, and yet remain the object of God's covenantal dealings.

This provides an important foundation for understanding the prophets and, later, the New Testament.

When Jeremiah speaks about Israel's future, when Ezekiel describes a scattered people being gathered, when Isaiah speaks of the dispersed of Israel, and when Paul asks in Romans 11, "Hath God cast away his people?" these passages do not appear in isolation. They belong to a covenantal story stretching back to Abraham.

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The question of the land is therefore ultimately connected with a larger question: Can God be trusted to keep His promises?

That question reaches far beyond Israel.

If God's promises depend entirely upon human faithfulness, then every divine promise would stand on uncertain ground because human beings repeatedly fail. But the biblical covenant story presents a God who judges sin without abandoning His own faithfulness.

Israel's history becomes a visible demonstration of this tension. The people fail, yet the covenant story continues. They are scattered, yet Scripture speaks of gathering. They experience judgment, yet the prophets continue to speak of restoration.

For Christians, this should produce humility rather than pride. The biblical discussion of Israel is not an invitation to boast over Israel's failures. Paul explicitly warns Gentile believers against such boasting in Romans 11. The proper response to God's covenant faithfulness is gratitude, reverence, and recognition that all people ultimately depend upon the mercy of God.

For Jewish readers, the covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and the land has remained a central element of Jewish identity across generations. Jerusalem appears continually in Jewish prayer and liturgy, and the hope of return survived centuries of dispersion. Whatever theological differences exist among Jewish communities concerning the modern State of Israel, the historical and biblical attachment to the land is far older than modern political Zionism.

For Messianic and Christian readers who understand the biblical promises concerning Israel as continuing, the modern return of millions of Jewish people to the ancestral land naturally raises significant theological questions. Some interpret modern events as connected with biblical prophecy, while others urge greater caution about identifying particular contemporary events as direct prophetic fulfillment. Those interpretive questions deserve careful treatment in their proper place.

What should not be overlooked, however, is the underlying biblical foundation.

The story begins long before modern Israel.

It begins with Abraham.

It continues with Isaac.

It passes to Jacob, whose name becomes Israel.

It develops through the Exodus, Sinai, Israel's entrance into Canaan, exile, restoration, and the promises of the prophets.

The land is woven throughout that story.

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Genesis 15 establishes the covenant promise. Deuteronomy 30 establishes the pattern of dispersion and return. Together they provide a foundation for understanding why the land continues to occupy such an important place in discussions concerning Israel.

This does not answer every modern political question, nor should it be made to do so. Questions concerning borders, governments, security arrangements, Palestinian rights, Israeli responsibilities, international agreements, and contemporary conflicts require their own careful historical, legal, ethical, and political examination. The final decisions concerning the policies and government of the modern State of Israel belong to its citizens and institutions within its democratic and legal processes.

But before approaching those contemporary questions, anyone seeking to understand Israel from a biblical perspective must recognize a fundamental fact about the scriptural narrative:

Israel's relationship with the land begins with covenant.

The land is not the whole covenant, and possession of land is not the whole purpose for which Israel was chosen. Israel was called to belong to God, to live as a holy people, to bear witness to Him, and ultimately to become part of God's purpose of blessing the nations.

Nevertheless, the land cannot simply be removed from the biblical covenant without removing something Scripture itself repeatedly includes.

God promised Abraham descendants.

God promised blessing.

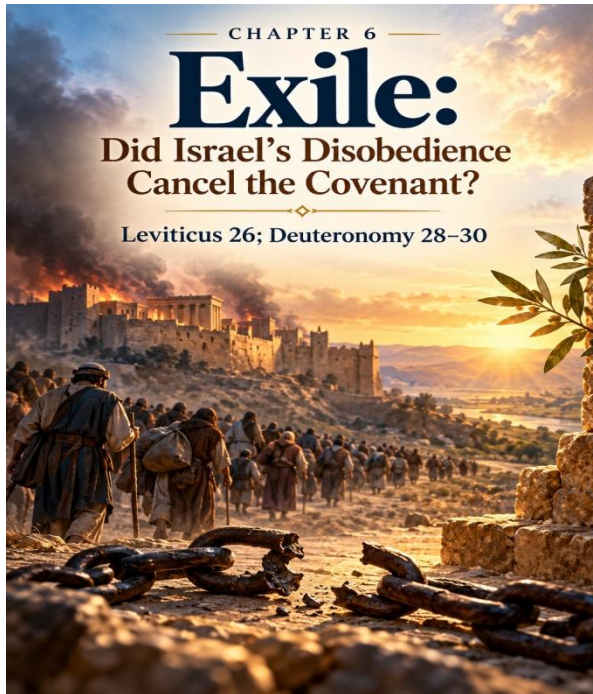
God promised that through Abraham the nations would be blessed.

And God promised a land.

Those promises together form the foundation upon which much of the remaining biblical story is built.

As we continue, an even deeper question emerges. If the land belongs within the covenant story, what happens when Israel repeatedly fails to live according to that covenant? Does Israel's disobedience finally exhaust God's patience and terminate His purposes for the nation, or does Scripture describe something more complex—a relationship involving election, discipline, judgment, mercy, and restoration?

That question will lead us further into the story of Israel and toward one of the central themes of Scripture: the faithfulness of God to His covenant promises.



Chapter 6 — Exile: Did Israel's Disobedience Cancel the Covenant?

Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28–30

One of the most important questions in understanding the biblical relationship between God, Israel, and the land is what happened when Israel disobeyed. The Torah contains extraordinary promises concerning Israel's future, but it also contains equally serious warnings. Israel's possession of the land was never presented as permission to live without accountability. The same God who promised the land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob also commanded their descendants to live in covenant faithfulness. Therefore, when Israel

turned away from God, embraced idolatry, practiced injustice, and rejected His commandments, judgment followed. Eventually that judgment included one of the most devastating consequences imaginable: exile from the land.

This creates an important theological question. If Israel was driven from the land because of disobedience, did that mean the covenant itself had been cancelled? Did exile demonstrate that God had permanently rejected Israel, or was exile a judgment that took place within the covenant rather than the termination of the covenant? This distinction is crucial because much of the later biblical discussion concerning Israel depends upon how this question is answered.

To understand the issue, we must return to the Torah itself. Long before Israel entered the land, Moses warned the people that both blessing and judgment lay before them. The possibility of exile was not an unexpected development that appeared later in Israel's history. It had already been described in the covenant warnings given before Israel established itself in the land.

Leviticus 26 presents this pattern clearly. God promises blessing if Israel walks in His statutes and keeps His commandments. The land will produce abundantly, Israel will dwell securely, peace will characterize the nation, enemies will be defeated, and God will dwell among His people. These blessings reveal that Israel's life in the land was intended to be lived within a covenant relationship. The land was a gift, but Israel's experience of blessing within that land was connected with obedience to the God who had given it.

The chapter then turns from blessing to warning. If Israel refuses to listen to God, judgment will progressively increase. There will be defeat, hardship, agricultural disaster, fear, and national catastrophe. The warnings become increasingly severe until the ultimate judgment is described: Israel will be scattered among the nations. This is a remarkable point because exile is already anticipated in the Torah. Before the Assyrian captivity, before the Babylonian destruction of

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Jerusalem, before the destruction of the Temple, and before generations of Jewish dispersion, Scripture had already warned that persistent covenant rebellion could result in Israel being removed from the land.

Yet Leviticus 26 does not end with exile. After describing Israel scattered among the nations, the chapter speaks of confession, humility, and remembrance. God declares that He will remember His covenant with Jacob, His covenant with Isaac, and His covenant with Abraham, and that He will remember the land. The sequence is significant. Israel may be outside the land. Israel may be suffering the consequences of disobedience. Israel may be experiencing divine judgment. Yet God still speaks of the covenant as His covenant. He does not describe it as a former covenant that once existed but has now disappeared. Instead, He declares that He will remember it.

Even more striking are the words later in the chapter. Speaking specifically about Israel while the people are in the land of their enemies, God declares that He will not cast them away completely or destroy them utterly so as to break His covenant with them. The very chapter that predicts exile therefore also denies that exile necessarily means covenant annihilation. Judgment is real, but covenant remembrance remains.

This distinction helps us understand much of the rest of the biblical story. There is a difference between discipline and rejection, between exile and covenant cancellation, and between losing the enjoyment of covenant blessing and eliminating the covenant promises themselves. Israel's disobedience brought terrible consequences, but the Torah itself leaves room for restoration because the covenant ultimately rests upon the faithfulness of God.

Deuteronomy develops the same theme even more extensively. Deuteronomy 28 contains one of the most sobering passages in Scripture. Moses places before Israel blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The blessings include prosperity, security, agricultural abundance, victory over enemies, and national distinction. The curses reverse these blessings. Defeat replaces victory, scarcity replaces abundance, and fear replaces security. Eventually Israel is warned that persistent rebellion will result in dispersion among the nations.

The language is severe because covenant responsibility is serious. Israel's election did not exempt Israel from judgment. In fact, being chosen brought greater responsibility. Israel had received God's commandments, His revelation, His covenant, and His calling. Therefore, Israel could not claim covenant privilege while ignoring covenant responsibility. This is an important corrective to a common misunderstanding of what it means for Israel to be chosen. Election was never simply a declaration of privilege. It involved vocation, responsibility, holiness, witness, and accountability. As we saw earlier in Exodus 19, Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The prophets would later repeatedly confront Israel precisely because Israel had failed to live consistently with that calling.

But again, the biblical story does not end with judgment. After the severe warnings of Deuteronomy 28, Deuteronomy 30 looks beyond dispersion toward restoration. Moses anticipates a future in which Israel has experienced both blessing and curse and has been scattered among the nations. He then describes Israel returning to the Lord and God responding by gathering His people.

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This is extraordinarily important because restoration is described after the possibility of exile has already been presented. Moses declares that even if Israel's scattered people are at the farthest parts of the heavens, God will gather them from there and bring them back. The language of scattering is answered by the language of gathering, and exile is answered by restoration. The covenant story therefore moves through responsibility, disobedience, judgment, exile, repentance, gathering, and restoration. The existence of exile does not erase the covenant story. Exile becomes part of that story.

This pattern later becomes one of the great themes of the Hebrew prophets. The prophets did not minimize Israel's sin. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and others spoke forcefully against idolatry, corruption, injustice, violence, and spiritual rebellion. They warned that judgment was coming. Jerusalem itself would eventually fall, the Temple would be destroyed, and the people would experience exile.

Those judgments happened. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in the eighth century BC. Later, the kingdom of Judah came under Babylonian domination. Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple burned in 586 BC, and many Judeans were carried into Babylonian exile. To someone witnessing those events, an obvious question might have arisen: Had God's promises failed?

Jeremiah addresses precisely this kind of concern. In Jeremiah 31, after describing restoration and introducing the promise of a new covenant, the prophet appeals to the created order. The regularity of the sun, moon, and stars becomes an illustration of God's commitment to Israel. Jeremiah declares that only if these ordinances depart from before God will the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before Him.

The point is not that Israel's behavior was beyond criticism. Jeremiah himself had spent much of his ministry warning Judah of judgment. The point is that judgment did not mean that God's covenant purposes had vanished. The same prophet who announced Jerusalem's destruction also announced Israel's restoration. Both realities must therefore be taken seriously. If we emphasize covenant promise while ignoring Israel's disobedience, we distort Scripture. If we emphasize Israel's disobedience while ignoring God's covenant faithfulness, we also distort Scripture. Israel sinned and God judged. Israel was exiled, and yet God remembered His covenant. This was not because Israel's disobedience was insignificant, but because God's faithfulness was greater than human failure.

The Abrahamic covenant becomes especially important at this point. In Genesis 15, God had established His covenant with Abraham concerning descendants and land. In Genesis 17, He called it an everlasting covenant. The covenant was then reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob. Centuries later, when Israel's descendants rebelled, God did not suddenly forget the promises made to the patriarchs. Leviticus 26 explicitly connects future restoration with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This shows that the patriarchal covenant continues to function as part of the theological foundation for Israel's future even after national disobedience.

The land itself also remains part of the discussion. Leviticus says that God will remember not only the covenant with the patriarchs but also the land. This is particularly striking. If exile had

permanently cancelled every covenantal connection between Israel and the land, such language would be difficult to explain. Instead, exile is portrayed as a period in which Israel is removed from the land while the covenantal significance of the land remains within God's purposes.

This does not mean that every generation of Israel automatically enjoys possession of the land regardless of conduct. The Torah clearly teaches otherwise. Nor does it mean that biblical covenant claims by themselves resolve every modern political question. Ancient covenant theology and contemporary political arrangements are not identical questions. Modern political disputes involve governments, borders, security, international law, diplomacy, and the rights and welfare of the people living in the region. Those matters require their own careful examination. The concern of this chapter is narrower and more foundational: what does the biblical text itself say about whether Israel's disobedience cancelled God's covenant?

When Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–30 are read together, the answer becomes clearer. Disobedience brings judgment, and judgment can bring exile, but exile does not automatically mean that God has abandoned His covenant. This principle becomes especially significant when Christians consider the relationship between Israel and the Church. Throughout Christian history, some theological traditions have understood Israel's covenantal role as transformed or fulfilled through Christ and the Church, while others maintain a continuing distinct covenantal role for ethnic and national Israel. Whatever position one takes in that larger theological discussion, the Torah establishes an important foundation that must be considered: Israel's unfaithfulness had already been anticipated, and judgment, exile, repentance, and restoration were already part of the covenant narrative.

In other words, Israel's failure did not surprise God. The covenant warnings existed before the failure occurred, and the promises concerning restoration existed before the exile occurred. This becomes especially important when we later arrive at Paul's discussion in Romans 9–11. Paul wrestles directly with Israel's unbelief and with the question of whether the word of God has failed. His discussion rests upon the faithfulness and purposes of God. Romans 11 returns to themes that are already familiar from the Torah: rejection, remnant, covenant, mercy, and restoration.

Paul eventually asks directly whether God has cast away His people, and answers, "God forbid." Yet Paul is writing within a much older biblical framework. Centuries before Romans was written, Leviticus had already declared that even when Israel was living among its enemies, God would not utterly reject His people or break His covenant with them. The continuity between Torah, Prophets, and the New Testament therefore deserves careful attention.

There is also a deeper theological principle at work. If God's covenant faithfulness depended entirely upon flawless human obedience, no covenant relationship could survive for long. Human beings repeatedly fail throughout Scripture. Abraham failed. Jacob failed. Moses failed. David failed. Israel failed. The disciples failed. The history of Scripture is filled with human weakness, yet it is equally filled with divine faithfulness.

This does not make obedience unnecessary. Grace does not transform rebellion into righteousness. God's commandments matter, sin has consequences, and covenant discipline is

real. But human failure does not make God unfaithful to His own word. This is why exile and restoration belong together. Exile reveals the seriousness of God's holiness, while restoration reveals the persistence of His mercy. Exile demonstrates that election does not eliminate accountability, while restoration demonstrates that judgment does not necessarily eliminate promise. Both truths are necessary if we are to understand the biblical account accurately.

The Babylonian exile provides perhaps the clearest historical example. Jerusalem had fallen, the Temple had been destroyed, the Davidic monarchy had collapsed, and many of the people had been displaced. From a purely human perspective, the national story might have appeared to be finished. Yet it was not finished. Persia conquered Babylon, and Cyrus permitted Jewish exiles to return. The Temple was rebuilt, Jerusalem was restored, and Jewish communal life in the land resumed. The restoration was incomplete in many respects, but its very existence demonstrated something fundamental: exile had not meant the disappearance of Israel. The covenant story continued.

Even those who remained scattered throughout the nations continued to understand themselves as belonging to Israel. Jewish identity survived Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and centuries of dispersion. The people remained connected through Scripture, covenant memory, worship, tradition, hope, and an enduring consciousness of Jerusalem and the land. The biblical pattern of exile and return therefore became deeply embedded within Jewish identity and expectation.

The prophets expanded that hope beyond the immediate return from Babylon. Isaiah envisioned comfort and restoration. Jeremiah spoke of gathering. Ezekiel described Israel being gathered from the nations and brought into its own land. These prophetic passages have been interpreted differently within Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly regarding the timing and ultimate nature of their fulfillment. Nevertheless, they share a common biblical vocabulary in which scattering is not necessarily the final word. Judgment can be followed by mercy, dispersion by gathering, and exile by restoration.

This brings us back to the question in the title of this chapter: Did Israel's disobedience cancel the covenant? According to the covenant passages themselves, the answer requires an important distinction. Israel's disobedience could result in the loss of blessing, national catastrophe, and removal from the land. The consequences were neither symbolic nor insignificant. They were devastating. But Scripture does not present those consequences as proof that God had forgotten Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On the contrary, in the very context of exile God declares that He will remember His covenant, remember the patriarchs, remember the land, and not utterly destroy His people or break His covenant with them.

This is one of the most important foundations for understanding the biblical theology of Israel. The covenant does not make Israel immune from judgment, but Israel's disobedience does not make God unfaithful. Those two truths must remain together.

This also changes how we read Israel's history. The Assyrian exile, Babylonian captivity, destruction of Jerusalem, and later periods of dispersion should not simply be read as evidence that God's purposes for Israel had ended. Within the biblical framework, exile itself had been anticipated as covenant judgment. Therefore, the existence of exile cannot by itself prove the

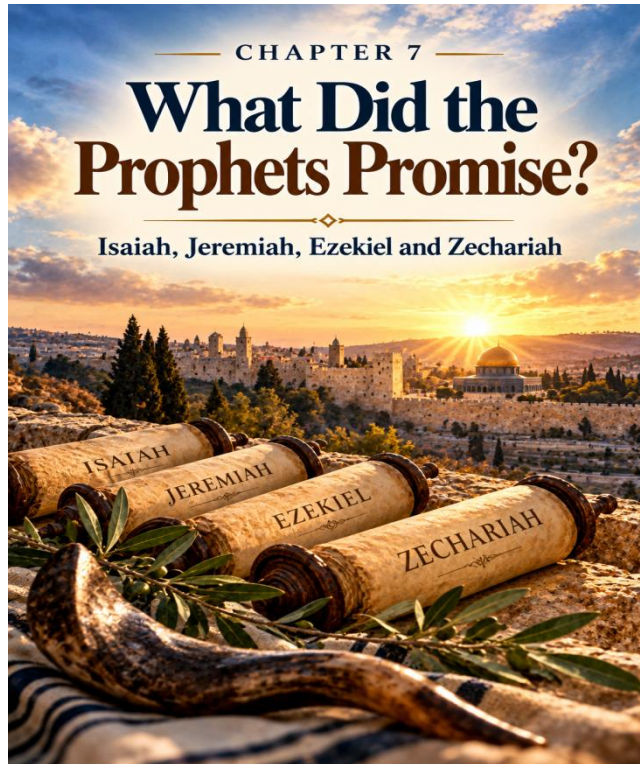
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cancellation of the covenant when the same passages predicting exile also anticipate remembrance and restoration.

The question is not whether Israel deserved judgment. Scripture repeatedly says that Israel did. The deeper question is whether human disobedience causes God to abandon promises that He Himself has declared enduring. The Torah points us toward an answer in which judgment is real, exile is real, and sin has serious consequences, while at the same time the faithfulness of God remains central to the covenant story.

This principle will become increasingly important as we continue through Israel's biblical history. Abraham leads to Isaac, Isaac leads to Jacob, and Jacob becomes Israel. Israel receives covenant responsibilities at Sinai, and the land becomes part of Israel's national calling. Disobedience brings judgment and ultimately exile, yet exile itself does not end the story. It points forward toward repentance, gathering, and restoration. Scripture does not present the story simply as promise followed by disobedience and then cancellation. Instead, it presents a much richer progression in which promise leads to covenant, covenant brings responsibility, disobedience brings judgment, judgment brings exile, and yet covenant remembrance opens the way toward repentance and restoration.

At the center of that story stands not Israel's ability to remain perfectly faithful, but God's faithfulness to His own word. Israel's exile demonstrates the seriousness of disobedience, while Israel's preservation demonstrates something equally important: the God who disciplines His covenant people is still the God who remembers His covenant.



Chapter 7 — What Did the Prophets Promise?

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah

The previous chapter raised one of the central questions in the biblical story of Israel: did Israel's disobedience and exile cancel the covenant? The Torah itself gave us an important answer. Long before Israel was scattered, God warned that disobedience could result in judgment and exile. Yet those same passages also spoke of covenant remembrance, repentance, gathering, and restoration. Exile was therefore not presented as an unexpected failure of God's plan. It was a judgment already anticipated within the covenant itself.

When we move from the Torah into the writings of the prophets, this theme becomes even more prominent. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah ministered during different periods of Israel's history and addressed different circumstances, but a remarkable pattern appears throughout their writings. They spoke honestly and sometimes severely about Israel's sin. They warned of judgment, destruction, exile, and suffering. Yet they also looked beyond judgment and described a future in which God would gather His people, restore them, renew them spiritually, and fulfill His purposes for Israel and the nations.

The prophets therefore force us to hold two truths together. Israel's rebellion was serious enough to bring devastating judgment, but Israel's failure was not powerful enough to make God unfaithful to His promises. The prophets did not deny Israel's sin in order to speak of restoration. On the contrary, they frequently placed judgment and restoration side by side. The God who scattered Israel because of disobedience was also the God who promised to gather Israel because of His faithfulness.

Isaiah provides one of the clearest examples. His prophecy begins with a devastating indictment of Judah. The nation has rebelled against God. Religious activity has continued, but righteousness and justice have been neglected. Isaiah warns that judgment is coming. Jerusalem itself will suffer because of the rebellion of the people. Yet judgment is not the final message of Isaiah.

Again and again, Isaiah looks beyond destruction toward restoration. In Isaiah 11, the prophet describes a future gathering of Israel's dispersed people. He speaks of the Lord recovering the remnant of His people and gathering the outcasts of Israel and the dispersed of Judah. The

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language is important because the same people who have been scattered are the people whom God promises to gather.

Isaiah does not describe God beginning again with an entirely unrelated people. He speaks of the restoration of the people who had experienced judgment. Scattering and gathering belong to the same prophetic story.

Isaiah 40 marks another major turning point. The chapter opens with words of comfort: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” After the warnings of judgment that dominate much of the earlier portion of Isaiah, the tone changes dramatically. Jerusalem is to hear a message of comfort because her warfare will not continue forever. Judgment has a purpose, but judgment does not have the final word.

This theme continues throughout the later chapters of Isaiah. Zion, once portrayed as devastated and abandoned, is promised restoration. In Isaiah 49, Zion laments that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her. God responds with one of Scripture’s most powerful images of divine remembrance. A mother might conceivably forget her nursing child, but God declares that He will not forget Zion. He says that He has engraved her upon the palms of His hands.

The significance of this passage is difficult to miss. Zion feels abandoned because circumstances appear to suggest abandonment. Jerusalem has experienced destruction, and the people have experienced exile. Yet God distinguishes between the experience of judgment and the reality of covenant remembrance. Zion may feel forgotten, but God declares that she is not forgotten.

Isaiah also expands Israel’s restoration into a much larger vision involving the nations. Israel’s restoration is not portrayed merely as a private blessing for Israel. The nations themselves are repeatedly brought into the picture. God’s purposes for Israel ultimately relate to His purposes for the world.

This reaches back to the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. Abraham was blessed so that blessing might extend to the families of the earth. Israel’s calling therefore always contained a universal dimension. The prophets do not abandon that calling. Instead, they envision a future in which Israel’s restoration and the blessing of the nations become interconnected.

Isaiah 2 presents a remarkable picture of this hope. The prophet sees the mountain of the Lord’s house established, and the nations stream toward it. They come seeking instruction from the God of Jacob. The Torah goes forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. The result is not merely Israel’s blessing but international transformation, as nations learn the ways of God and the instruments of warfare are transformed into instruments of cultivation.

Whatever conclusions one reaches concerning the precise manner and timing of such prophetic passages, the direction of Isaiah’s vision is unmistakable. Jerusalem is not forgotten. Israel’s calling has not disappeared. The nations are not excluded. God’s ultimate purpose brings these themes together.

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Jeremiah speaks from an even darker historical setting. He witnessed the final years of the kingdom of Judah and warned repeatedly that Babylonian judgment was coming. His message was deeply unpopular because many people assumed Jerusalem could never fall. The Temple stood in the city, and Judah possessed the covenant traditions of Israel. Yet Jeremiah insisted that covenant privilege could not be used as protection for persistent rebellion.

Jerusalem did fall. The Babylonians destroyed the city and burned the Temple in 586 BC. Many of the people were carried into exile. Jeremiah's warnings had been fulfilled.

If judgment meant that God had permanently rejected Israel, Jeremiah would have been an obvious prophet through whom to announce that conclusion. Instead, some of the strongest promises of Israel's future restoration appear in Jeremiah's writings.

Jeremiah 30 and 31 are especially important. These chapters are sometimes called the Book of Consolation because the tone shifts dramatically toward hope. God promises to bring His people back from captivity. He speaks of restoring Israel and Judah, rebuilding, planting, healing, gathering, and renewing.

Jeremiah 31:10 expresses the pattern with extraordinary clarity: the One who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock. The same God is responsible for both actions. God scattered in judgment, and God promises to gather in mercy.

This verse helps us understand the prophetic meaning of restoration. Gathering is not an admission that the judgment was mistaken. The judgment was justified. Israel had violated the covenant repeatedly. Yet God's judgment did not erase His covenant commitment. The One who scattered remained the One who promised to gather.

Jeremiah then introduces one of the most important promises in the entire Bible: the promise of a new covenant. In Jeremiah 31:31, God declares that the days are coming when He will make a new covenant "with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah."

This passage later becomes enormously important in Christian theology because the New Testament connects the new covenant with Yeshua. Yet before considering its New Testament application, we should notice the original wording carefully. The promise is given in the context of Israel's restoration, and Israel and Judah are explicitly named.

The new covenant addresses a fundamental problem revealed throughout Israel's history. The problem was not that God's law was evil. The problem was the human heart. External commandments alone could not produce internal faithfulness. Therefore, Jeremiah describes a work of God in which His law will be placed within His people and written upon their hearts. God declares that He will be their God and they will be His people.

The promise therefore moves beyond geographical restoration. God promises spiritual renewal.

This is essential to the prophetic vision. The prophets do not merely anticipate people returning to territory. They anticipate transformed hearts, forgiveness, renewed relationship with God,

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righteousness, and spiritual restoration. Physical gathering and spiritual renewal appear together repeatedly in prophetic expectation.

Immediately following the new covenant promise, Jeremiah makes an extraordinary statement concerning Israel's continuing identity. He points to the fixed order of creation: the sun, moon, and stars. God declares that only if these ordinances cease will the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before Him.

The location of this statement is significant. It comes immediately after the promise of the new covenant. Jeremiah does not present the new covenant as evidence that Israel has ceased to matter. Instead, he follows the new covenant promise with an affirmation of Israel's continuing existence before God.

Jeremiah therefore presents judgment, restoration, spiritual renewal, and Israel's continuing identity as interconnected parts of the same prophetic message.

Ezekiel develops these themes with extraordinary imagery. Ezekiel himself was among the exiles in Babylon. He ministered to people who had experienced national catastrophe firsthand. They were no longer living securely in their land. Jerusalem had fallen. The Temple had been destroyed. The political structure of Judah had collapsed.

Into that setting Ezekiel proclaimed both judgment and hope.

One of Ezekiel's most significant restoration passages appears in chapter 36. God speaks of gathering Israel from among the nations and bringing the people into their own land. Yet once again, physical restoration is not the end of the promise. God also speaks of cleansing His people, giving them a new heart, placing a new spirit within them, removing the heart of stone, and giving them a heart of flesh.

The sequence is important because it demonstrates that prophetic restoration is multidimensional. There is gathering, there is return, and there is spiritual transformation.

Ezekiel also makes clear that restoration ultimately reflects the character of God. Israel's history had caused God's name to be profaned among the nations. Therefore, God declares that His actions will vindicate the holiness of His great name. Restoration is connected not merely with Israel's worthiness but with God's reputation and faithfulness.

This principle is extremely important. If Israel's restoration depended solely upon Israel deserving restoration, the prophetic promises would offer little hope. But Ezekiel repeatedly grounds God's future action in God's own character. God acts because His name is holy and because His purposes will not ultimately be defeated by human failure.

Ezekiel 37 then presents perhaps the most dramatic picture of restoration in all the prophetic writings: the valley of dry bones.

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Ezekiel sees a valley filled with bones. They are not merely dead; they are very dry. Humanly speaking, there is no possibility of recovery. God asks Ezekiel whether these bones can live. Ezekiel answers that God alone knows.

The bones begin to come together. Sinews and flesh appear. Eventually breath enters them and they stand as an exceedingly great army.

The vision is then interpreted. The bones represent “the whole house of Israel.” They say that their bones are dried, their hope is lost, and they are cut off. God responds by promising to open their graves, bring them up, and bring them into the land of Israel.

The image communicates something profound. From the human perspective, Israel’s condition appears hopeless. The nation resembles dead, scattered bones. Yet the prophetic message is that God is able to restore what appears beyond restoration.

Ezekiel continues the chapter with another symbolic action. He takes two sticks, one representing Judah and the other representing Joseph or Ephraim, and joins them together. The divided people are pictured becoming one. God promises to gather the children of Israel from among the nations, bring them into their own land, and make them one nation.

Again, the prophetic vision includes both gathering and unity.

Ezekiel then connects this restored people with the Davidic hope. God speaks of “David my servant” being king over them. Since the historical David had lived centuries before Ezekiel, this language generated expectations concerning a future Davidic ruler. Within Jewish interpretation, these passages became associated with messianic expectation. Christian interpretation sees their ultimate fulfillment in Yeshua the Messiah, the Son of David.

This brings another major element into the prophetic picture. The restoration of Israel is increasingly connected with the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah develops this connection even further. His ministry took place after the Babylonian exile, when Jewish people had already begun returning to the land. Jerusalem was being rebuilt and the Temple restored. Yet the circumstances were far removed from the glorious future described by earlier prophets.

This historical setting raises an important question. If the return from Babylon fulfilled every prophetic restoration promise completely, why did prophets such as Zechariah continue speaking about a greater future restoration after the return had already begun?

Zechariah looks beyond the immediate rebuilding of Jerusalem toward a much larger future. Jerusalem occupies a central place in his prophecy, but so do repentance, purification, the nations, and the coming king.

Zechariah 8 describes Jerusalem restored and inhabited. Elderly men and women again sit in the streets, and children play there. The picture is intentionally ordinary and therefore powerful. A

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city once characterized by destruction becomes a place of security, longevity, community, and life.

God then speaks of saving His people from the east and the west and bringing them back to dwell in Jerusalem. He declares that they will be His people and He will be their God in truth and righteousness.

Once again, restoration is both physical and spiritual.

Zechariah also sees Israel's restoration affecting the nations. Peoples from many cities come seeking the Lord. The prophetic vision is not one of Israel isolated from humanity but of Israel occupying a role within God's wider purpose for the nations.

One of Zechariah's best-known messianic passages appears in chapter 9. Jerusalem is told to rejoice because her king is coming, righteous and bringing salvation, humble and riding upon a donkey. Christians immediately recognize the importance of this passage because the New Testament applies it to Yeshua's entry into Jerusalem.

Zechariah 12 introduces another extraordinary passage. The prophet describes Jerusalem becoming the focus of international conflict and then speaks of a future outpouring of "the spirit of grace and of supplications." The inhabitants of Jerusalem look upon the one who has been pierced and mourn.

Jewish and Christian interpretations of this passage differ considerably. Traditional Jewish interpretations have understood the pierced figure in several ways, often within the context of Israel's suffering and future deliverance. Christian interpretation has historically connected the passage with the crucifixion of Yeshua and with future recognition of the Messiah. Whatever interpretive position is taken, the passage clearly connects Jerusalem, divine intervention, mourning, repentance, and spiritual transformation.

Zechariah 14 then presents Jerusalem at the center of an extraordinary eschatological vision involving conflict, divine intervention, and the nations ultimately coming to worship the Lord. Again, Jerusalem has not vanished from the prophetic picture. It remains deeply connected with the prophet's vision of God's future purposes.

When Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are read together, several recurring themes become impossible to ignore. The prophets repeatedly speak of Israel being scattered because of disobedience, but they also repeatedly speak of Israel being gathered. They speak of judgment, but they also speak of restoration. They speak of the land, Jerusalem, and Zion. They speak of spiritual cleansing, transformed hearts, forgiveness, and renewed relationship with God. They speak of a Davidic ruler and messianic hope. They also speak of the nations eventually sharing in the blessing and knowledge of God.

These themes are not isolated predictions scattered randomly throughout the prophetic books. Together they form a coherent pattern of expectation.

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The prophets therefore do not merely ask whether Israel will survive. They envision something much greater. They envision God completing what He began.

This does not eliminate important questions of interpretation. Jewish and Christian readers have understood these prophecies differently for centuries. Christians themselves also disagree about how particular restoration passages should be understood. Some interpret many of them primarily through Christ and the Church. Others see both spiritual fulfillment in Christ and continuing promises concerning national Israel. Still others understand portions of the prophecies as fulfilled historically in the return from Babylon while expecting other elements to receive a future fulfillment.

Those differences should be acknowledged rather than hidden. Yet before choosing among theological systems, we should allow the prophetic texts themselves to establish their vocabulary. That vocabulary repeatedly includes Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem, the land, scattering, gathering, cleansing, covenant, David, the nations, and restoration.

This creates an important interpretive principle. We should be cautious about allowing a later theological framework to erase categories that the prophets themselves repeatedly use. At the same time, we should also allow later biblical revelation to deepen our understanding of those categories. The challenge is not to choose between the Old Testament and the New Testament but to understand how the biblical story develops from one into the other.

This becomes particularly important when we come to Yeshua and the apostles. The New Testament does not appear in isolation. Its writers knew the prophetic Scriptures intimately. When they spoke of the Messiah, the kingdom, the new covenant, the restoration of Israel, Jerusalem, the nations, and the coming of the Lord, they were drawing upon the vocabulary and expectations of Israel's prophets.

Therefore, before asking how the New Testament interprets Israel, we must understand what the prophets had already promised.

They promised that judgment would not have the final word. They promised that scattering would be followed by gathering. They promised that God would remember His people. They promised restoration to the land. They promised spiritual cleansing and transformed hearts. They promised a new covenant. They promised a Davidic ruler. They promised that Jerusalem would again play a significant role in God's purposes. They promised that Israel's restoration would ultimately extend blessing beyond Israel to the nations.

At the heart of all these promises is the faithfulness of God.

Israel's future does not rest upon a claim that Israel never sinned. The prophets make precisely the opposite argument. Israel sinned repeatedly and seriously. The nation experienced judgment because of that sin. Jerusalem was destroyed because of it. The Temple was lost because of it. Exile came because of it.

Yet the prophets continued to speak of restoration.

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That fact deserves serious attention.

If Israel's disobedience had permanently cancelled every covenant promise, the prophetic message after judgment should have been one of replacement and abandonment. Instead, the language is overwhelmingly one of return, renewal, rebuilding, gathering, cleansing, and restoration.

The people who were scattered are gathered. The Jerusalem that was destroyed is restored. The people whose hearts were rebellious are promised new hearts. The nation that experienced covenant judgment is promised covenant renewal.

This does not diminish the seriousness of Israel's sin. It magnifies the faithfulness of Israel's God.

The prophets therefore take us one step further than the Torah. The Torah established that exile did not necessarily mean covenant cancellation. The prophets now fill the horizon with descriptions of what covenant faithfulness will eventually produce. God will not merely preserve a remnant somewhere in history. He intends to bring His purposes toward their appointed conclusion.

And those purposes extend beyond Israel.

Isaiah sees nations coming to Zion. Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant and transformed hearts. Ezekiel sees dead bones living again and a divided people becoming one. Zechariah sees Jerusalem restored, a humble king arriving, repentance taking place, and nations worshipping the Lord.

Different prophets emphasize different details, but together they point toward a future in which the faithfulness of God triumphs over the failure of humanity.

That is perhaps the most important lesson of the prophetic promises.

The story of Israel is ultimately not a testimony to Israel's perfect faithfulness. Scripture makes clear that Israel was not perfectly faithful. Rather, Israel's story becomes a testimony to the faithfulness of the God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and who continued to speak of those promises even after His people had experienced judgment and exile.

The question raised by Chapter 6 was whether disobedience cancelled the covenant. The prophets answer that question not merely with theological statements but with visions of restoration. They look beyond exile and see gathering. They look beyond ruined Jerusalem and see rebuilding. They look beyond hardened hearts and see spiritual renewal. They look beyond division and see unity. They look beyond failed kings and see the hope of a righteous Davidic ruler. They look beyond Israel alone and see the nations coming to know the God of Israel.

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The prophetic message is therefore a message of hope, but it is not shallow optimism. It is hope that passes through judgment. Israel is not restored because sin does not matter. Israel is restored because the God who judges sin also remains faithful to His covenant purposes.

From Genesis through the Torah and now through the prophets, the biblical argument continues to develop. God called Abraham. He established an everlasting covenant. He reaffirmed that covenant through Isaac and Jacob. Jacob became Israel. Israel received a calling and responsibility. The land became part of the covenant story. Disobedience brought judgment and exile. Yet exile did not terminate God's purposes. The prophets looked beyond it and declared that God would gather, cleanse, restore, and renew.

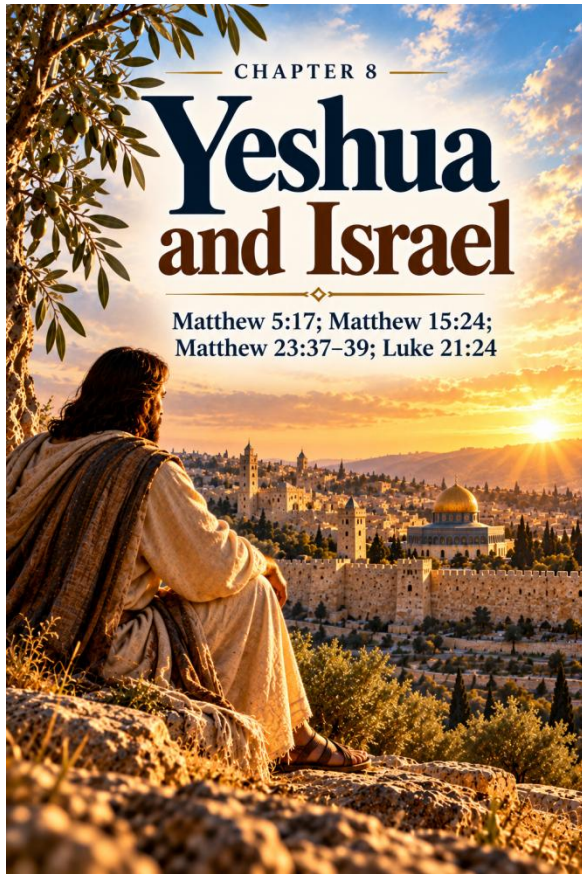
This prepares us for the next great question in the biblical story. If the prophets promised restoration, a new covenant, spiritual renewal, and a coming Davidic king, what happens when Yeshua of Nazareth enters the story and is proclaimed by His followers as Israel's Messiah?

At that point, the question of Israel and the covenant becomes even more profound. We must ask not only what God promised to Israel, but how the coming of the Messiah relates to those promises. Does the Messiah cancel them, transfer them, transform them, confirm them, or bring them toward their intended fulfillment?

To answer that question fairly, we must carry everything we have learned so far with us. The coming of the Messiah cannot be separated from Abraham, the covenant, Israel, the land, exile, restoration, and the promises of the prophets. The New Testament enters a story already centuries in the making.

The prophets have prepared the way.

Now the Messiah enters the story.



Chapter 8 — Yeshua and Israel

Matthew 5:17; Matthew 15:24; Matthew 23:37–39; Luke 21:24

The previous chapters have taken us through the foundations of Israel’s biblical story. God called Abraham and made promises concerning his descendants, the land, and blessing to the nations. The covenant continued through Isaac and Jacob, whose name became Israel. Israel was called to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. The people were given the land but were also warned that disobedience would bring judgment. When that judgment eventually resulted in exile, the covenant was not simply erased. The prophets looked beyond Israel’s scattering and spoke repeatedly of gathering, restoration, spiritual renewal, a new covenant, Jerusalem, and the coming of a Davidic king. By the time we arrive at the Gospel accounts, therefore, the biblical story has already been developing for many

centuries.

Into that story comes Yeshua of Nazareth.

To understand Yeshua’s relationship to Israel, we must first remember something so obvious that it can easily be overlooked: Yeshua was Jewish. He was not a Gentile who entered Israel from outside and established a new religion unrelated to the history of the Jewish people. He was born into Israel’s story. His mother was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. He lived among the Jewish people, worshipped the God of Israel, attended synagogue, went to Jerusalem for the biblical festivals, quoted the Torah and the Prophets, discussed the interpretation of Scripture with Jewish teachers, and spoke constantly about the God whom Israel had known through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the prophets.

The opening words of Matthew deliberately place Yeshua within this history by identifying Him in relation to David and Abraham. This is not incidental. Abraham takes us back to the covenant promises, while David takes us to the promise of a royal and messianic line. Matthew wants his readers to understand Yeshua within the continuing story of Israel.

This background becomes especially important when we read Matthew 5:17. Yeshua says, “Don’t think that I came to destroy the Torah or the Prophets. I didn’t come to destroy, but to fulfill.” In the World Messianic Bible, the word “Torah” is used here rather than simply “Law,” emphasizing the Jewish scriptural setting of Yeshua’s statement.

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These words provide an essential starting point for understanding Yeshua's ministry. He does not introduce Himself as the destroyer of everything that preceded Him. He specifically tells His hearers not to think in those terms. He has not come to destroy the Torah or the Prophets but to fulfill them.

The meaning of "fulfill" deserves careful consideration. Fulfillment does not mean that the earlier Scriptures were meaningless or mistaken. Yeshua presents His mission as bringing the Torah and the Prophets toward their intended purpose. His life, teaching, death, resurrection, and messianic identity must therefore be understood against the background of the Scriptures of Israel.

This means that Christians should be cautious about reading the coming of Yeshua as though God had abandoned the story He had begun with Abraham. Yeshua does not enter Scripture as a rejection of that story. He enters as its Messiah.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua repeatedly engages with the Torah. He speaks about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, justice, love, and relationships. His teaching reaches beyond outward conformity and penetrates to the intentions of the heart. He does not simply ask whether a person has technically avoided murder; He addresses hatred and anger. He does not merely address outward sexual misconduct; He speaks about the desires of the heart. His teaching continually moves from external behavior toward internal righteousness.

This concern for the heart should sound familiar after reading the prophets. Jeremiah had spoken of God's Torah being written upon the heart. Ezekiel had spoken of God giving His people a new heart and a new spirit. Yeshua's teaching therefore appears within a prophetic expectation in which genuine covenant faithfulness involves far more than outward religious observance.

Yeshua also challenged religious traditions when those traditions obscured the purposes of God. His disagreements with certain scribes and Pharisees should not be interpreted as Yeshua rejecting Judaism or the Jewish people. These were disputes taking place within the Jewish world of the first century. Jewish teachers debated one another concerning Scripture, interpretation, purity, Sabbath observance, resurrection, Temple practice, and many other issues. Yeshua participated in that world while also speaking with a unique authority concerning the kingdom of God and His own mission.

Matthew 15 provides another important statement concerning that mission. When a Canaanite woman approaches Yeshua seeking mercy for her daughter, Yeshua initially declares, "I wasn't sent to anyone but the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This statement can sound surprising to Christian readers because the Gospel ultimately goes to the nations. Yet it reveals something essential about the order of Yeshua's earthly ministry. His mission begins within Israel.

The expression "lost sheep" does not mean that Israel has ceased to be Israel. Quite the opposite. Yeshua identifies the people as "the house of Israel." They are lost sheep who need their

shepherd. His response therefore reflects both Israel's spiritual need and Israel's continuing identity.

This shepherd imagery has deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets had frequently described Israel as sheep and Israel's leaders as shepherds. Ezekiel 34, for example, condemns Israel's unfaithful shepherds and promises that God Himself will seek His scattered sheep. The chapter also anticipates the raising up of a Davidic shepherd over them. When Yeshua later speaks of Himself as the good shepherd, that claim therefore belongs within an established prophetic context.

The encounter with the Canaanite woman also reveals that Israel's priority does not mean Gentile exclusion. The woman persists in faith, and Yeshua responds to her request. Her daughter is healed. The episode therefore holds together two truths that will become increasingly important throughout the New Testament: Israel has a particular place in the unfolding covenant story, yet God's mercy extends beyond Israel to the nations.

This is not a contradiction. It is precisely the pattern already established in the promise to Abraham. God called Abraham particularly, but the purpose included blessing universally. Through Abraham all the families of the earth were to be blessed. Israel's election and blessing to the nations were never intended to be opposing ideas.

Yeshua's ministry reflects this same pattern. His earthly mission is centered upon Israel, but the consequences of His messianic work ultimately extend throughout the world.

This helps explain why so much of Yeshua's ministry takes place within the geographical and religious world of Israel. He teaches in synagogues. He travels through Galilee and Judea. He comes to Jerusalem. He discusses Moses and the prophets. He celebrates Israel's festivals. He speaks about the Temple. His disciples address Him using messianic titles drawn from Israel's Scriptures. The crowds ask whether He might be the Son of David. The entire discussion assumes the biblical story that began long before His birth.

Yet Yeshua's relationship with Israel is not merely one of affirmation. Like the prophets before Him, He also confronts sin and warns of judgment.

This becomes especially powerful in Matthew 23.

The chapter contains some of Yeshua's strongest words against certain scribes and Pharisees. He condemns hypocrisy, pride, injustice, and religious appearances that conceal inward corruption. Yet the chapter should not be read as an attack upon Jewish people as a whole. Yeshua Himself is Jewish, His disciples are Jewish, and the prophetic tradition upon which He draws is Jewish. His rebukes resemble the confrontational language of Israel's own prophets, who frequently condemned Israel's leaders and people precisely because they called them back to covenant faithfulness.

The chapter reaches an emotional climax when Yeshua turns His attention toward Jerusalem. He declares, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" He

then describes how often He desired to gather Jerusalem's children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

This is not the language of indifference.

It is the language of grief.

Yeshua does not look upon Jerusalem merely as a theological abstraction. He mourns over the city. His words combine judgment with longing. Jerusalem has resisted the messengers sent to her, and serious consequences are coming, but Yeshua's response is expressed through the imagery of desired gathering and protection.

The imagery is particularly significant in light of the prophets we examined in the previous chapter. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah had all spoken in various ways about Jerusalem, judgment, scattering, gathering, and restoration. Yeshua now stands within that prophetic tradition and warns Jerusalem once again.

He says that the house will be left desolate. Yet even here, His words do not simply end with desolation. Matthew records Yeshua saying that Jerusalem will not see Him again "until" it says, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The word "until" is significant because it points beyond the immediate judgment. Yeshua speaks of desolation, but He also speaks of a future recognition expressed in the language of Psalm 118.

This is important for the larger question of Israel in the biblical story. Yeshua does not deny that judgment is coming. In fact, His warnings are severe. Yet judgment upon Jerusalem should not automatically be interpreted as the cancellation of every promise God previously made to Israel. We encountered precisely this pattern in the Torah and the Prophets. Judgment and covenant faithfulness are not mutually exclusive.

Luke 21 develops the warning further. Yeshua speaks prophetically about Jerusalem facing devastating events. He describes the city surrounded by armies, great distress, people falling by the sword, captivity among the nations, and Jerusalem being trampled by the Gentiles.

Historically, these words naturally call attention to the catastrophic events surrounding the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Roman forces under Titus captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple. The event became one of the great tragedies of Jewish history.

Yet one phrase in Luke 21:24 deserves particular attention. Yeshua says Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

Once again, we encounter the word "until."

The statement describes a period of Gentile domination, but the wording itself suggests that this condition is not simply described as endless. Whatever precise interpretation is given to "the times of the Gentiles," Yeshua's wording establishes a temporal horizon.

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This becomes especially interesting when considered alongside the prophets. Zechariah had spoken about Jerusalem in connection with future events. Isaiah had spoken about Zion and the nations. Jeremiah had promised restoration after judgment. Ezekiel had described gathering after scattering. Yeshua now predicts another period of devastating judgment upon Jerusalem while still speaking in terms that look beyond the immediate catastrophe.

This pattern should by now be familiar.

Israel's sin does not mean that sin is ignored. Jerusalem's special place in biblical history does not make Jerusalem immune from judgment. The existence of covenant promises does not prevent historical consequences for rebellion. The Torah had already established this principle, and the prophets repeatedly reinforced it.

Yeshua does the same.

He loves Jerusalem and warns Jerusalem.

He identifies His mission with Israel and confronts Israel's spiritual condition.

He affirms the Torah and the Prophets and challenges interpretations and traditions that obscure their purpose.

He announces judgment and yet uses language that looks beyond judgment.

These are not contradictions. They belong to the same covenantal pattern we have been following throughout this book.

There is another dimension that must be considered. Yeshua does not merely speak about Israel; He embodies Israel's messianic hope. Matthew repeatedly presents events in Yeshua's life as fulfilling Israel's Scriptures. He is identified with Abraham and David. He comes out of Egypt. He passes through the waters of baptism. He enters the wilderness and faces testing. He teaches from a mountain. His life repeatedly echoes elements of Israel's own story.

This has led many Christian interpreters to describe Yeshua as in some sense embodying or representing Israel. Such an understanding can be valuable, provided it is not used to conclude automatically that Israel therefore ceases to exist or that every promise concerning Israel has been transferred away from the Jewish people.

Representation does not necessarily mean replacement.

The Messiah can represent Israel while still fulfilling promises made to Israel. Indeed, the very title "Messiah" only makes sense within Israel's story. Without Israel, the covenant, David, the prophets, and the expectation of redemption, the concept of Israel's Messiah loses its biblical framework.

Yeshua cannot therefore be properly separated from Israel.

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His identity is rooted in Israel's Scriptures. His messianic titles come from Israel's hope. His apostles emerge from Israel. His teaching draws upon Israel's Torah and Prophets. His death occurs in Jerusalem. His resurrection is proclaimed first among Jewish witnesses. The new covenant associated with His death had originally been promised by Jeremiah to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

At the same time, the significance of Yeshua extends far beyond Israel.

This again fulfills the pattern that began with Abraham. Particular election moves toward universal blessing. The Messiah of Israel becomes good news for the nations.

The Gospel does not require Gentiles to become ethnically Jewish in order to receive the mercy of the God of Israel. This becomes one of the central issues faced by the early followers of Yeshua. As increasing numbers of Gentiles come to faith, the apostles must determine how these believers relate to Israel, the Torah, and the covenant promises.

That question will eventually lead us directly to Paul.

But before moving there, we must recognize what Yeshua Himself does and does not say.

Yeshua never announces that Abraham has become irrelevant. He does not declare that the prophets were mistaken. He does not say that Israel's Scriptures have been destroyed. Instead, He explicitly says that He did not come to destroy the Torah or the Prophets but to fulfill them.

He does not describe His earthly mission as disconnected from Israel. He specifically identifies His mission with "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

He does not look upon Jerusalem with cold rejection. He grieves over Jerusalem and expresses His desire to gather its children.

And when He predicts Jerusalem's coming devastation, He speaks of Gentile domination lasting "until" an appointed period reaches its fulfillment.

Taken together, these passages give us a remarkably balanced picture of Yeshua and Israel.

There is continuity and fulfillment.

There is compassion and confrontation.

There is judgment and hope.

There is Israel and there are the nations.

The mistake would be to emphasize only one side of the picture.

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If we speak only of Israel's covenant privileges and ignore Yeshua's warnings, we fail to take His words seriously. If we speak only of Yeshua's warnings and use them to conclude that God permanently abandoned Israel, we risk ignoring the larger covenant and prophetic framework into which Yeshua deliberately places His ministry.

Yeshua stands in continuity with the prophets in precisely this respect. The prophets loved Israel enough to confront Israel. They announced judgment while also proclaiming restoration. Yeshua likewise warns His people while mourning over Jerusalem.

For Christians, there is an additional reason why this matters. Christianity cannot understand its own Messiah while disconnecting Him from the Jewish people.

Yeshua was not merely born into a Jewish environment that became irrelevant once His ministry began. His Jewish identity belongs to the historical reality of who He was. The titles Messiah, Son of David, King of Israel, and Lamb of God arise from Israel's Scriptures and Israel's expectations. The Gospel itself emerges from this history.

The question therefore should not be whether Christians must choose between Yeshua and Israel. Biblically, that separation is artificial. The Christian confession that Yeshua is the Messiah is itself a claim about the fulfillment of promises given within Israel's biblical story.

This becomes particularly important when considering the history of Christian attitudes toward Jewish people. At various times Christians have spoken as though rejecting Jewish people were somehow consistent with following the Jewish Messiah. The New Testament provides no basis for contempt toward an ethnic people. The disagreements recorded in the Gospels are first-century Jewish religious disputes and must not be transformed into justification for antisemitism.

Yeshua's own tears over Jerusalem should challenge such attitudes.

He confronts, but He also mourns.

He warns, but He also longs to gather.

The image is not one of contempt. It is one of profound grief over people and a city that He loves.

This is why Matthew 23 should never be read only for its words of condemnation. The chapter culminates in lament. The heart of the Messiah is revealed not merely in what He opposes but in what He desires: gathering, protection, recognition, and ultimately restoration.

The four passages considered in this chapter therefore form an important progression. Matthew 5:17 establishes Yeshua's relationship to the Torah and the Prophets: He comes not to destroy but to fulfill. Matthew 15:24 establishes the particular focus of His earthly mission upon the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Matthew 23:37–39 reveals both His judgment upon Jerusalem and His deep longing for its people. Luke 21:24 looks toward Jerusalem's coming suffering under Gentile domination while using language that points toward an appointed limit.

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Together these passages make it difficult to portray Yeshua as ending Israel's biblical story.

Instead, He enters that story at its decisive moment.

Everything we have studied so far converges upon Him: Abraham's promise, Israel's calling, the Torah, David's throne, the prophetic expectation, the new covenant, the hope of restoration, and the blessing of the nations.

Yet Yeshua's coming also creates a new and difficult question. Many within Israel accepted Him, beginning with His own Jewish disciples and the earliest community of believers. Many others did not. Meanwhile, the message about Yeshua began moving rapidly beyond Israel into the Gentile world.

What, then, happens to Israel?

Does the growth of a predominantly Gentile Church mean that Israel has been replaced? Does faith in the Jewish Messiah erase the distinction between Israel and the nations? Have the covenant promises been transferred to another people, or can Gentiles share in Israel's spiritual blessings without eliminating Israel's identity?

Those questions lead directly to one of the most important passages in the entire discussion: Romans 9–11.

Paul, himself a Jew and an apostle of Yeshua, will confront the issue directly. He will ask whether the word of God has failed. He will speak of election, Israel, Gentiles, branches, an olive tree, blindness, mercy, covenant, and restoration. Most importantly, he will ask the question that has followed us from the chapters on exile and the prophets: Paul's answer will shape the next stage of our study.

But before we leave this chapter, one truth should remain firmly in view. Yeshua did not arrive to erase Israel's story. He arrived within that story, spoke from its Scriptures, fulfilled its messianic hope, warned its people, wept over its city, and opened the blessing promised through Abraham to the nations.

To understand Yeshua, therefore, we must understand Israel.

And to understand Israel fully, we must now listen carefully to what Paul says about Israel after the coming of the Messiah.



Chapter 9 — Did the Church Replace Israel?

The question posed by the title of this chapter is one of the most important and controversial questions in the Christian discussion concerning Israel. Did the coming of Yeshua and the establishment of the Church mean that Israel's distinctive place in God's covenant purposes came to an end? Did the Church become the new Israel in such a way that the promises once made to the Jewish people now belong exclusively to the Church? Or can the Church participate fully in the spiritual blessings promised through Israel's Messiah while God still maintains purposes for the people of Israel? These questions cannot be answered responsibly with a slogan. They require us to consider the entire biblical story that we have followed to this point.

God called Abraham and made promises concerning descendants, land, and blessing to the nations. He reaffirmed those promises to

Isaac and Jacob. Jacob was given the name Israel, and his descendants became the people of Israel. At Sinai, Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The people were warned that disobedience would bring judgment, including exile from the land, yet the Torah itself declared that even in exile God would remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The prophets carried this story forward. Isaiah spoke of Israel's gathering and Zion's restoration. Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Ezekiel described scattered Israel being gathered, cleansed, given a new heart and a new spirit, and restored. Zechariah looked toward Jerusalem, the coming king, repentance, and the nations ultimately acknowledging the Lord. Then Yeshua entered the story.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Yeshua did not announce that He had come to destroy the Torah and the Prophets. He declared that He had come to fulfill them. He described His earthly mission in relation to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He lamented over Jerusalem rather than treating the city with indifference. He warned that Jerusalem would experience terrible judgment and would be trampled by the Gentiles, yet He described that condition with the word "until."

The biblical story has therefore brought us to a critical point. If the covenant began with Israel, if the prophets promised Israel restoration, and if Yeshua came as Israel's Messiah, what happens

when the Gospel begins to spread throughout the Gentile world and the community of believers becomes increasingly Gentile? Does the inclusion of the nations mean the exclusion of Israel? This is the question behind what is commonly called Replacement Theology.

The term itself requires careful definition. Christians have used different terminology and have held several distinct theological positions concerning Israel and the Church. “Replacement Theology” is often used to describe the belief that because Israel rejected Yeshua as Messiah, Israel forfeited its distinctive covenantal position and the Church became the replacement for Israel in God’s redemptive purposes. Under a strong version of this view, promises originally addressed to Israel are understood as now belonging spiritually to the Church, while Israel as an ethnic or national people no longer possesses a distinctive future within God’s covenant purposes.

Not every Christian theologian who understands the Church as the continuation or fulfillment of Israel would describe his or her theology as replacement theology. Many prefer terms such as fulfillment theology, supersessionism, or covenant theology, and there are substantial differences among these positions. Some believe the Church fulfills Israel’s calling without suggesting that Jewish people have been rejected by God. Others maintain that the Church and Israel should be distinguished more sharply and that biblical promises to national Israel remain specifically applicable to Israel. Still others attempt to hold together aspects of both continuity and distinction. These differences matter because it would be unfair to describe every Christian who sees continuity between Israel and the Church as believing that God simply abandoned the Jewish people.

The central question for this book, however, is not primarily what theological label we choose. The central question is what Scripture allows us to conclude about whether God has finished with Israel. To consider that question, we must first understand what happened when Gentiles entered the community of believers in Yeshua.

The earliest followers of Yeshua were Jewish. Yeshua was Jewish, His apostles were Jewish, and the events of Pentecost in Acts 2 took place in Jerusalem within a Jewish setting. Peter, John, James, Paul, and the other major figures of the earliest Messianic movement emerged from the Jewish people. The Church therefore did not begin as a Gentile institution replacing a Jewish institution. It began within Israel.

This historical fact is important because centuries of predominantly Gentile Christianity can make it easy to forget the Jewish character of the earliest community of believers. The first debates were not initially about whether Jews could believe in Yeshua. The first believers already were Jews. One of the great questions confronting the early community was what should happen when Gentiles began believing in Israel’s Messiah.

The book of Acts records this transition. The Gospel spreads from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and eventually outward toward the nations. Gentiles begin receiving the message concerning Yeshua. This creates profound theological questions. The early believers had to determine whether Gentiles needed to become Jews, whether circumcision was necessary, what

relationship Gentile believers should have to the Torah, and how Jews and Gentiles could worship the same Messiah while coming from different covenantal and cultural backgrounds.

Acts 15 records one of the earliest major discussions of this issue. Some believers argued that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and commanded to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to consider the matter. The resulting decision was enormously important. Gentiles were not required to become ethnically Jewish in order to belong to the community of Messiah. This decision opened the way for the Gospel to spread throughout the Gentile world without requiring the nations first to become part of Israel ethnically.

Yet Gentiles being welcomed did not require Israel to be declared nonexistent. The inclusion of Gentiles did not require the elimination of Jews. This distinction is essential to the biblical discussion.

The promise to Abraham had always contained both a particular and a universal dimension. God called one man, Abraham, and promised to create from him a particular people, yet through Abraham blessing would extend to all the families of the earth. Genesis therefore establishes a pattern in which particular election leads toward universal blessing. God's choice of Abraham was not intended to prevent the nations from being blessed. It was the means through which that blessing would ultimately reach them.

The same pattern appears in Israel's calling. Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The prophets later envisioned nations coming to Zion, learning the ways of God, and sharing in the knowledge of the Lord. Therefore, the entrance of Gentiles into the people of Messiah should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that Israel's calling had failed. It can instead be understood within the larger biblical purpose in which the nations were always intended to receive blessing through what God had begun with Abraham.

The remarkable development in the New Testament is not simply that Gentiles receive blessing, because that had been promised from Genesis onward. The remarkable development is the extent to which Gentiles are brought near to the covenant blessings through Israel's Messiah.

Paul expresses this powerfully in his letter to the Ephesians. Writing to Gentile believers, he reminds them of what their situation had once been. They had been separated from Messiah, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world. Through Messiah, however, they had been brought near. Paul does not describe these Gentiles as having replaced those to whom the covenants were originally given. He describes people who were once far away as having been brought near. There is an important difference between replacement and inclusion. If someone who was once outside is brought inside, that does not necessarily mean that those who were already connected with the story have ceased to matter.

Galatians also introduces important language concerning Abraham. Paul argues that those who belong to Messiah participate in the blessing promised through Abraham. He writes that in Messiah there is neither Jew nor Greek with respect to standing in Him, and he connects those who belong to Messiah with Abraham's seed and the promise. Some Christians have understood

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such passages to mean that ethnic distinctions have completely disappeared within God's purposes, yet this conclusion requires caution.

Paul's statement that there is neither Jew nor Greek does not mean that Jewish and Gentile people cease to exist ethnically. Paul himself continues to identify people as Jews and Gentiles after they become believers. His point concerns their standing in Messiah. Neither Jewish ancestry nor Gentile ancestry gives one believer a superior status before God. Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity.

This distinction becomes extremely important in the discussion concerning Israel and the Church. The New Testament strongly emphasizes the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Messiah. There is one way of salvation. Scripture does not present separate means of redemption in which Jewish people are saved one way and Gentiles another. Both depend upon the mercy and grace of God. Spiritual equality, however, does not automatically prove that every distinction within God's historical purposes has disappeared.

The question therefore remains whether Jewish and Gentile believers can become one in Messiah without the Jewish people ceasing to possess their historical and covenantal identity. This is precisely where the discussion becomes more difficult.

Throughout much of Christian history, the Church became overwhelmingly Gentile. As generations passed, the Jewish origins of Christianity became increasingly distant from the everyday experience of most Christians. Jerusalem was no longer the geographical center of the Christian world. Greek and Latin became dominant languages of Christian theology, and Gentile cultures increasingly shaped Christian institutions and practices. Over time, many Christians began reading the biblical story primarily from the perspective of the Gentile Church.

This historical development could subtly change the question being asked. Instead of asking how Gentiles had been brought into blessings that originated within Israel's covenant story, Christians could begin assuming that the Church had become the center of the story and that Israel belonged mainly to the past. The Hebrew Scriptures could then be read primarily as preparation for Christianity. Israel's history became a source of spiritual lessons, while Jerusalem and Zion were increasingly interpreted as symbols of spiritual realities associated with the Church. The promises remained important, but the people originally addressed by many of those promises could gradually disappear from the interpretation.

This is where the question of replacement becomes particularly serious. If God makes a promise to Abraham, confirms it to Isaac, reaffirms it to Jacob, describes Jacob's descendants as Israel, warns those descendants of exile, promises to gather them after exile, and then repeatedly speaks through the prophets of their restoration, we must ask where Scripture tells us that those promises no longer possess any significance for the people originally identified.

That question cannot be answered merely by pointing to Israel's disobedience because the earlier chapters have already demonstrated that disobedience and exile were anticipated within the covenant story itself. Leviticus 26 specifically places Israel in the land of its enemies and

nevertheless declares that God will remember His covenant. Deuteronomy anticipates scattering and then speaks of gathering.

Nor can the question be answered simply by pointing to the coming of Yeshua because Yeshua said that He came not to destroy the Torah and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Nor can it be answered merely by pointing to Gentile inclusion because Gentile blessing had been part of the Abrahamic promise from the beginning.

If the New Testament teaches that God permanently rejected Israel and transferred Israel's covenant identity to the Church, we should expect the New Testament to address the matter clearly. This is especially true because the question was not theoretical for the apostles. By the middle of the first century, many Jewish people had not accepted Yeshua as Messiah while increasing numbers of Gentiles were accepting Him. The very historical situation capable of producing the replacement question was developing before the apostles themselves.

Paul understood this problem personally. He was Jewish. He believed Yeshua was Israel's Messiah. He became the great apostle to the Gentiles. He witnessed Gentiles entering the community of faith in large numbers, while also experiencing intense opposition from some of his fellow Jews. If anyone was positioned to explain whether Israel had been rejected and replaced, it was Paul.

Before examining Paul's answer in detail, however, we should recognize the theological tension he faced. On one side stood the promises of God. Paul knew the Scriptures. He knew the covenant with Abraham, the promises to Isaac and Jacob, the writings of Moses, and the words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets. He knew that God had made specific promises concerning Israel. On the other side stood a painful historical reality: many within Israel had not accepted Yeshua as Messiah. How could both realities be true? If Yeshua truly was Israel's Messiah, why had so much of Israel not recognized Him? Had Israel's unbelief caused God's promises to fail? Had the Church now taken Israel's place? Had Gentile believers inherited Israel's blessings because Israel had forfeited them, or was something more complicated taking place within God's purposes?

These questions are not modern inventions. They stand near the center of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Before turning to Romans 9–11, however, another distinction must be made. Saying that the Church did not simply replace Israel does not mean that the coming of Yeshua changed nothing. The New Testament clearly presents Yeshua as central to the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes. Through Him forgiveness is proclaimed. Through Him Jewish and Gentile believers are reconciled to God. Through Him the nations participate in the blessing promised through Abraham. Through Him the new covenant reaches its messianic fulfillment.

The question is therefore not whether Yeshua changes the covenantal landscape. The question is what kind of change His coming produces. We must ask whether fulfillment necessarily means cancellation, whether expansion requires replacement, whether inclusion of the nations requires

exclusion of Israel, and whether the creation of one redeemed community in Messiah requires the conclusion that God's particular promises concerning Israel have ceased.

These distinctions are vital because Christians can easily move from a biblical truth to a conclusion that the truth itself does not necessarily require. It is biblically true that Gentiles share in Abrahamic blessing, but it does not automatically follow that Abraham's physical descendants therefore possess no continuing significance. It is biblically true that Jewish and Gentile believers are one in Messiah, but it does not automatically follow that Jew and Gentile have become meaningless historical categories. It is biblically true that the Church receives extraordinary promises and blessings through Messiah, but it does not automatically follow that every promise originally made specifically to Israel has therefore been withdrawn from Israel. Each conclusion must be demonstrated from Scripture rather than assumed.

There is also a pastoral and historical reason why this question matters. Theology influences the way people see other people. If Christians come to believe that the Jewish people are merely the rejected remains of a covenant that God has abandoned, that belief can influence Christian attitudes toward Jews. This does not mean that every Christian who held a supersessionist theology became antisemitic. Such a claim would be historically inaccurate and unfair. Christians holding various theological views have both participated in and opposed anti-Jewish prejudice at different times.

Nevertheless, theological ideas can have consequences. If Israel is understood exclusively as rejected, cursed, displaced, and spiritually obsolete, contempt for Jewish people can more easily be given a theological justification. That historical question will be examined much more carefully later in this book, when we consider the development of Christian anti-Jewish teaching, restrictions, expulsions, forced conversions, and Christian responses during the Holocaust. We will also need to distinguish carefully between theological anti-Judaism, racial antisemitism, political nationalism, and other historical forces rather than suggesting that Christianity alone explains the long history of hatred toward Jews.

For the moment, however, history cannot determine biblical interpretation. Even if a doctrine has been misused terribly, that misuse alone does not prove that the doctrine is false. Conversely, a doctrine producing compassionate attitudes does not automatically prove that it is biblically correct. Scripture itself must remain central to the argument.

Scripture now brings us to Paul. Romans 9–11 is one of the most sustained discussions of Israel anywhere in the New Testament. Paul does not approach Israel casually. His words are intensely personal. He speaks of great sorrow and continual grief concerning his own people. He discusses Israel's privileges, election, unbelief, righteousness, Gentile inclusion, a believing remnant, Israel's stumbling, the olive tree, broken branches, wild branches, hardening, mercy, covenant, and Israel's future.

These three chapters cannot responsibly be reduced to a single verse. Nor should Romans 11 be isolated from Romans 9 and 10, or Romans 9 emphasized while the conclusions of Romans 11 are neglected. Paul develops an argument across all three chapters, and the argument must be allowed to unfold.

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Before entering that discussion, we can identify the central problem Paul must address. Has Israel's unbelief caused the word of God to fail? If Israel's unbelief means that God's promises have simply disappeared, the theological consequences are enormous. Promises made by God would have been defeated by human unbelief. If, however, the word of God has not failed, then Paul must explain how Israel's present unbelief, the salvation of Gentiles, and God's covenant promises fit together.

Paul begins Romans 9 by confronting precisely this problem. He acknowledges Israel's extraordinary privileges. To Israel belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Torah, the service of God, and the promises. From Israel came the patriarchs, and from Israel, according to the flesh, came the Messiah. These statements are remarkable because Paul writes them after the coming, death, and resurrection of Yeshua. Israel's story has not become irrelevant to him.

At the same time, Paul does not argue that physical descent alone guarantees individual salvation. Romans 9 introduces difficult questions concerning election and divine sovereignty. Romans 10 emphasizes the necessity of faith and addresses Israel's unbelief. Romans 11 then asks what all of this means for Israel as a people. This is where the replacement question becomes unavoidable.

Paul asks, "I say then, Hath God cast away his people?" If Israel as Israel had simply been rejected and replaced, this would be the natural place for Paul to say so. Instead, his response is emphatic: "God forbid."

Those words, however, are only the beginning of his argument. Paul goes on to speak of a remnant. He distinguishes stumbling from irreversible destruction. He explains how Israel's stumbling has resulted in blessing reaching the Gentiles. He warns Gentile believers against arrogance. He uses the image of an olive tree in which wild branches are grafted among natural branches. He warns the wild branches not to boast against the natural branches. He speaks of natural branches being grafted in again. He describes a mystery concerning Israel's partial hardening, and he eventually speaks of Israel in relation to election, covenant, mercy, and the continuing nature of God's calling.

These subjects deserve much more than a brief treatment, which is why the following chapters will examine them progressively. The next chapter will consider Paul's argument throughout Romans 9, 10, and 11. The chapter after that will concentrate specifically on the olive tree and Paul's warning to Gentile believers not to boast against the branches. We will then examine one of the most debated statements in this entire discussion, Paul's declaration that "all Israel shall be saved," together with his statement concerning the gifts and calling of God.

Only after allowing Paul's argument to develop fully will we turn more directly to the historical consequences of Christian interpretations concerning Israel.

For now, the question remains before us. Did the Church replace Israel? The evidence examined so far should at least prevent us from answering too quickly. God's covenant with Abraham, the promises to Isaac and Jacob, Israel's election, the warnings of exile, the promises of restoration,

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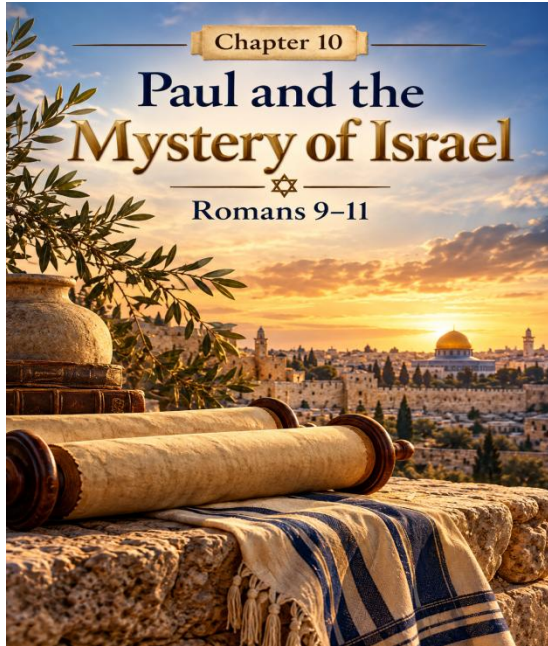
the words of the prophets, Jeremiah's new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, Yeshua's Jewish identity, His declaration that He came to fulfill rather than destroy the Torah and the Prophets, His mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, His lament over Jerusalem, and the extraordinary inclusion of the Gentiles through Israel's Messiah must all be taken seriously.

Perhaps the biblical picture is larger than a simple choice between Israel and the Church. The blessing of the Church does not necessarily require the rejection of Israel. Gentile inclusion does not necessarily require Jewish exclusion, and fulfillment does not necessarily mean replacement. The decisive question is not whether Gentiles have received spiritual blessings associated with Israel's covenant story. The New Testament clearly teaches that they have. The deeper question is whether Gentiles receiving those blessings means that God has therefore abandoned the people through whom those blessings came.

That is precisely the question Paul is about to address.

The next chapter takes us into Romans 9, 10, and 11, where Paul confronts the mystery of Israel more directly than perhaps anywhere else in the New Testament. There we will encounter his grief over Israel's unbelief, his teaching concerning election, his proclamation of salvation through faith, his explanation of the remnant, the entrance of the Gentiles, and the continuing purposes of God. At the center of the discussion stands the question that has echoed through centuries of Christian theology: "Hath God cast away his people?"

Paul's answer is unmistakable: "God forbid." The task before us now is to understand why.



Chapter 10 — Paul and the Mystery of Israel

Romans 9–11

Few passages in the New Testament have generated more discussion about Israel, the Jewish people, the Church, election, unbelief, and the faithfulness of God than Romans chapters 9 through 11. These three chapters belong together as one sustained argument. Paul is not interrupting his letter to the Romans with an unrelated discussion about his fellow Jews. He is confronting a question that arises naturally from everything he has already written about the gospel and the promises of God. If Israel was chosen by God, if the covenants and promises were given to Israel, and if the Messiah Himself

came through Israel, what are believers to conclude when so many Jewish people have not accepted Yeshua as Messiah? Has Israel's unbelief caused God's promises to fail? Has the calling of Israel been cancelled? Has God rejected the people whom He chose?

Paul's answer reaches its clearest expression in Romans 11:1: “Hath God cast away his people? God forbid.” Those words provide one of the controlling principles for understanding everything Paul says in Romans 9–11. Israel's unbelief is real. Israel's stumbling is real. God's judgment against unbelief is real. Yet none of these realities means that God has abandoned the people whom He foreknew. Paul therefore leads his readers through a profound explanation of election, human responsibility, the remnant, Gentile inclusion, Israel's stumbling, Gentile humility, Israel's future, and finally what he calls a “mystery.”

Romans 9–11 is therefore not merely a discussion about Israel. At its deepest level, it is a discussion about the character and faithfulness of God. Can God be trusted to remain faithful to His word even when human beings are unfaithful? If His covenant promises appear to be contradicted by history, should those promises be reinterpreted, transferred to someone else, or abandoned? Paul answers by showing that God's purposes are deeper than what can be seen at any particular moment in history. Israel's present condition does not constitute the final chapter of Israel's story.

Paul begins Romans 9 not with an abstract theological argument but with grief. He writes, “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.” His discussion of Israel begins with tears. This is important because Paul does not speak about Jewish unbelief with contempt, triumphalism, or detachment. He speaks as a Jew grieving for his own people. He even says that he could wish himself accursed from Messiah for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh. Whatever conclusions Christians draw from Romans 9–11, they should never

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produce arrogance or contempt toward the Jewish people. Paul himself demonstrates precisely the opposite spirit.

Paul then identifies the people about whom he is speaking: “Who are Israelites.” He is speaking about his own people, his “kinsmen according to the flesh.” He immediately lists the extraordinary privileges associated with Israel: “to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises.” He continues by referring to the patriarchs and finally to Messiah Himself, who came according to the flesh from Israel.

The significance of Paul's language should not be overlooked. He does not speak of Israel as though its entire biblical significance belongs only to the past. The adoption belonged to Israel. The glory was revealed among Israel. The covenants were made with Israel. The Torah was given to Israel. The temple service belonged to Israel. The promises were entrusted to Israel. The patriarchs were Israel's fathers. From Israel came the prophets and the apostles, and from Israel, according to the flesh, came Messiah.

Christian faith therefore cannot be separated from Israel without being separated from its own biblical foundations. The Scriptures of the Church are overwhelmingly the Scriptures of Israel. The God worshipped by Christians is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Messiah confessed by Christians was born into the Jewish people. His mother was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. His apostles were Jewish. The earliest community of believers in Yeshua was Jewish. Gentile believers did not enter a story that began with them. They entered a story that God had already been unfolding through Israel for generations.

Yet Paul's sorrow raises an unavoidable question. If all these promises belonged to Israel, how could so many Israelites fail to recognize Yeshua? Had the word of God failed? Paul answers immediately: “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect.” The problem, Paul insists, is not that God's promises have failed. Instead, he begins explaining the principle of divine election within Israel's own history. He writes, “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.”

Paul then looks back to Abraham's family. Abraham had more than one son, but the covenantal line proceeded through Isaac. Paul recalls the words, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” Isaac likewise had two sons, Jacob and Esau, yet the covenantal line continued through Jacob. God's election therefore operated within Abraham's physical descendants. Physical descent was important, but physical descent alone did not determine participation in every aspect of God's covenantal purpose.

Paul's argument does not require Israel to cease being Israel. Rather, it demonstrates that God's sovereign purposes have always operated within Israel according to His calling. Abraham did not appoint himself. Isaac did not establish himself as the covenantal son. Jacob did not earn the covenant through superior righteousness. The initiative belonged to God.

Paul develops this further through Jacob and Esau. Before the children had done either good or evil, God's purpose according to election stood, “not of works, but of him that calleth.” Election therefore originates in God's sovereign purpose rather than human achievement. This same

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principle appears throughout the biblical story. God chose Abraham from among the nations. He chose Isaac as the covenantal heir. He chose Jacob, whose name became Israel. He chose Israel not because Israel was larger, stronger, or more righteous than the surrounding nations, but because of His love and His oath to the fathers.

Paul anticipates the objection that naturally follows: “Is there unrighteousness with God?” His answer is emphatic: “**God forbid.**” He appeals to God’s declaration to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Mercy is not something human beings can demand as a debt. Mercy proceeds from the gracious character of God.

Paul then introduces Pharaoh. Scripture describes Pharaoh as hardening his own heart while also describing God as hardening Pharaoh. Human responsibility and divine sovereignty therefore appear side by side. Paul uses this example to demonstrate that God remains sovereign even when human beings resist Him. This becomes especially important when Paul later discusses Israel’s hardening. Yet Israel’s hardening must ultimately be understood within the specific covenantal promises God has made concerning Israel.

Paul next uses the imagery of the potter and the clay. The creature cannot place the Creator in the dock and demand that God justify His sovereignty according to human expectations. Yet Paul’s argument is not intended to portray God as arbitrary or capricious. Instead, it prepares the reader to recognize that God’s plan of redemption is larger than human expectations and that He is accomplishing purposes that neither Jew nor Gentile could have anticipated.

Paul then introduces something extraordinary. God’s redemptive purpose now includes calling people not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles. He quotes Hosea: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.” The gospel is moving among the nations. Gentiles who were once outside the covenantal life of Israel are being brought near to the God of Israel through Messiah.

At the same time, Paul quotes Isaiah concerning Israel: “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved.” The concept of the remnant becomes essential to Paul’s argument. Israel’s unbelief is not total. Throughout Israel’s history there has always been a faithful remnant. During periods of national apostasy, God preserved a remnant. During periods of judgment, God preserved a remnant. During exile, God preserved a remnant. The existence of widespread unbelief therefore never meant that God’s purposes for Israel had disappeared.

At the conclusion of Romans 9, Paul confronts a remarkable reversal. Gentiles who had not pursued righteousness through Torah attained righteousness through faith, while Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not attain it. Paul explains that Israel stumbled because righteousness was sought as though it could be obtained by works rather than by faith. He applies the words of Isaiah to Messiah: “Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.”

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Yet stumbling is not the same as permanent rejection. That distinction becomes essential when Romans 9 is read together with Romans 10 and 11. Paul never permits his readers to stop at Israel's stumbling and conclude that Israel's story has ended.

Romans 10 begins with another expression of Paul's heart: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." Once again Paul's theology produces prayer rather than contempt. He acknowledges Israel's zeal for God but says that it is "not according to knowledge." Israel has not recognized the righteousness of God revealed through Messiah and has sought righteousness by another means.

Paul then declares, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." Messiah is the culmination and goal toward which God's redemptive purposes point. Paul emphasizes that righteousness cannot ultimately be secured through human achievement. It is received through faith.

Drawing from Deuteronomy, Paul explains that one does not need to ascend into heaven to bring Messiah down or descend into the deep to bring Him up. "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart." He then gives one of the best-known summaries of the gospel: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Yeshua, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

This promise is universal in its invitation. Paul writes, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." Equality in salvation, however, does not require the erasure of Israel's historical identity or covenantal calling. Paul can affirm simultaneously that Jew and Gentile are saved through faith in Messiah and that Israel retains a distinctive place within God's unfolding purposes. Romans 11 will make that distinction particularly important.

Paul continues, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." But calling requires hearing. Hearing requires preaching. Preaching requires messengers. Thus Paul writes, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" Nevertheless, not everyone who hears believes. Paul quotes Isaiah: "Lord, who hath believed our report?" He therefore concludes, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Paul then asks whether Israel has heard. His answer is yes. Israel's unbelief cannot simply be explained as though Israel never received God's revelation. Something deeper is occurring, and Paul will explain it in Romans 11 as part of the mystery of Israel.

Romans 11 brings Paul's argument to its decisive question: "I say then, Hath God cast away his people?" Paul could hardly have stated the issue more directly, and his answer could hardly be stronger: "God forbid."

Paul immediately offers himself as evidence: "For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul did not cease being an Israelite when he believed in Yeshua.

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Faith in Messiah did not erase his Jewish identity. Indeed, Paul uses his continuing identity as an Israelite as evidence that God has not rejected His people.

He then states explicitly, “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew.” This statement must be allowed its full force. The same people Paul has been discussing throughout Romans 9 and 10 remain the subject. They are his kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites. They are the people associated with the covenants, the promises, the patriarchs, and the Messiah according to the flesh.

Paul then returns to the days of Elijah. Elijah believed that Israel had completely abandoned God and that he alone remained faithful. Yet God revealed that He had preserved seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Paul applies this principle to his own generation: “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.” The remnant demonstrates that God's purposes continue even during widespread unbelief.

Paul then introduces another distinction: “Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded.” Israel's hardening is real, but Paul will soon describe that hardening as partial. This distinction is crucial because a partial hardening cannot legitimately be interpreted as total rejection.

Paul then asks another critical question: “Have they stumbled that they should fall?” Again his answer is emphatic: “God forbid.” Israel has stumbled, but Paul refuses to describe that stumbling as an irreversible fall. Instead, something unexpected has occurred through Israel's stumbling: “through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.”

The gospel has gone to the nations. Gentiles throughout the world now worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because of Israel's Messiah. The Scriptures of Israel have become sacred Scripture among the nations. The Psalms of David are prayed and sung in countless languages. The prophets of Israel are studied across continents. The God of Israel is worshipped by people whose ancestors once worshipped other gods. This extraordinary Gentile inclusion is one of the great developments of redemptive history.

Yet Paul does not allow Gentile believers to interpret this blessing as evidence that they have replaced Israel. Instead, he asks, “Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?” Paul is looking beyond Israel's present condition. If Israel's stumbling has resulted in blessing for the nations, what might Israel's fullness mean?

Paul magnifies his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles, but even his Gentile ministry has Israel in view. He hopes that through his work among the nations he might “provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.” He then writes, “For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” Paul's vision therefore moves from rejection toward receiving, from stumbling toward restoration, and from present unbelief toward a future work of God.

At this point Paul introduces the olive tree, one of the most important biblical images for understanding the relationship between Israel and believing Gentiles. The olive tree will receive fuller treatment in the next chapter, but one central truth must already be recognized: the Gentiles do not replace the tree. They are grafted into it. Paul therefore addresses Gentile believers directly with the warning, “Boast not against the branches.”

This warning has enormous historical and theological significance. Gentile believers have received spiritual blessing through Israel's Messiah, Israel's Scriptures, Israel's covenants, and Israel's apostolic witness. Yet Paul recognized the danger that Gentile believers might become arrogant toward Jewish people. He therefore reminds them, **“thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.”**

Paul anticipates the objection, “The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.” His answer is sobering: “Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear.” Gentile inclusion is not grounds for superiority. If anything, it should produce humility and gratitude.

Paul continues, “For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.” The proper Gentile response to Israel's unbelief is therefore not arrogance but humility, gratitude, reverence, and hope. The warning is especially significant because throughout later Christian history there would be times when Gentile Christians would speak about Jewish people with precisely the kind of arrogance Paul had warned against.

Paul then says something remarkable about the broken natural branches: “And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again.” The word “again” is important. Paul does not describe Jewish restoration as the introduction of strangers into something foreign to them. He describes natural branches being grafted again into their own olive tree.

He strengthens this point by arguing from the lesser to the greater. If wild olive branches, representing Gentiles, were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, “how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” Paul's expectation is therefore not one of replacement but of restoration.

Paul now introduces what he calls a mystery: “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits.” The warning is directed particularly toward Gentile believers. Ignorance concerning God's purposes for Israel can produce spiritual pride. Paul does not want Gentile believers interpreting Israel's present unbelief as evidence of their own superiority.

He explains the mystery: “Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” Every part of this statement matters. Israel's blindness is “in part.” It is therefore not total. The word “until” also introduces a temporal dimension. Israel's present condition is not presented as the final state of affairs. Something is happening among the Gentiles during this period, and Paul connects that development with God's continuing purposes for Israel.

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God is gathering people from the nations. Gentiles are coming to faith in Israel's Messiah. They are being brought into the spiritual blessings flowing from God's covenantal work through Israel. What appears on the surface to be Israel's failure is being used within God's mysterious wisdom to bring blessing to the nations.

Paul then makes one of the most debated declarations in the entire New Testament: “And so all Israel shall be saved.” This statement deserves fuller treatment in its own chapter, but within Paul's present argument one point should already be clear. Paul has not suddenly abandoned Israel as his subject. The Israel that has experienced partial hardening is the Israel about whose salvation he now speaks.

Paul supports his statement from the prophets: “There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” The use of the name Jacob is significant. It reaches back to the patriarch whose name God changed to Israel. Paul roots his expectation concerning Israel's future in the prophetic promises contained in Israel's own Scriptures.

He continues, “For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” Israel's future is therefore connected not merely with ethnicity, national existence, territory, or political restoration. Ultimately, Paul's concern is spiritual redemption and reconciliation with God.

Paul then expresses one of the great paradoxes of Romans 11: “As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' **sakes.**” Israel can simultaneously stand in unbelief concerning the gospel and remain beloved in relation to election. The reason Paul gives is significant: “for the fathers' sakes.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remain relevant to Paul's theology of Israel.

He then provides the theological foundation beneath everything he has been saying: “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.” God's calling is not something He casually abandons. Human unbelief is serious, but human unbelief does not transform God into an unfaithful covenant partner.

This does not mean that every Jewish person is automatically saved because of ancestry. Paul has already made clear that salvation is through faith and that unbelief has serious consequences. Yet neither does Jewish unbelief mean that God's calling of Israel has been cancelled. Both truths must be held together. Israel needs redemption. Israel remains beloved because of the fathers. Israel has stumbled, but Israel has not stumbled beyond recovery. Some natural branches have been broken off, but God is able to graft them in again. A remnant exists according to grace. A partial hardening has occurred. The fullness of the Gentiles is coming in. God's gifts and calling remain irrevocable.

Paul then places both Jews and Gentiles under the mercy of God. Gentiles were once disobedient but have obtained mercy. Israel is presently in disobedience, yet Paul looks toward mercy for Israel as well. He writes, “For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.” The story therefore does not end with Gentile superiority. It ends with divine mercy.

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This is one of the deepest lessons of Romans 9–11. Neither Jew nor Gentile has grounds for boasting. The Gentile cannot look at Israel and claim spiritual superiority. The Jewish person cannot claim righteousness before God merely because of physical ancestry. Everyone stands in need of God's mercy. The gospel humbles everyone.

Having contemplated the mystery of God's dealings with Israel and the nations, Paul reaches the limits of human explanation and breaks into worship: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” This is how Romans 9–11 ends. It does not end with Gentiles celebrating Israel's failure. It does not end with Israel disappearing from God's purposes. It ends with Paul overwhelmed by the wisdom and faithfulness of God.

Paul continues, “For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?” Human beings do not advise God concerning how redemption should unfold. God's plan is larger than any generation can fully see. What appears to one generation as rejection may be part of a story whose conclusion has not yet been revealed.

Paul finally declares, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Romans 9–11 therefore presents Israel not as an embarrassing remnant of an earlier biblical age but as part of the unfolding mystery of God's redemptive purposes.

Israel's election did not guarantee that every Israelite would believe. Israel's unbelief did not nullify God's faithfulness. Israel's stumbling opened an extraordinary door of blessing to the Gentiles. Gentile inclusion did not authorize Gentile arrogance. The breaking off of natural branches did not mean that those branches could never be restored. Israel's hardening was neither total nor presented as the final word. The covenantal calling rooted in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remained significant because “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”

The great questions raised throughout these chapters can therefore be answered from Paul's own words. Has God's word failed? No. Has God cast away His people? **“God forbid.”** Has Israel stumbled? Yes. Has Israel stumbled in order that it should fall beyond recovery? Again Paul answers, **“God forbid.”** Have Gentiles been brought into the blessings associated with Israel's Messiah? Yes. Does that give Gentile believers reason to boast over the natural branches? No. Paul commands them instead, “Boast not against the branches.”

The mystery Paul reveals is not that Israel has disappeared. The mystery is that God is working through Israel's present stumbling while simultaneously bringing salvation to the nations, and that this Gentile inclusion itself forms part of a larger purpose that ultimately turns attention once again toward Israel.

For nearly two thousand years, the Church has had to decide how seriously it will take Paul's warning, “Boast not against the branches.” Tragically, Christian history contains many periods in which that warning was ignored. Jewish people were sometimes treated not as the people through whom the Scriptures, covenants, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and Messiah came, but as a rejected people whose suffering was interpreted as evidence that God had abandoned them.

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Such attitudes should be examined carefully in the light of Paul's explicit warning against Gentile arrogance.

Romans 9–11 leaves little room for such triumphalism. Paul's response to Jewish unbelief was sorrow. His response to Gentile salvation was gratitude. His instruction to Gentile believers was humility. His description of Israel's present condition was partial hardening. His expectation concerning the natural branches included the possibility of being grafted in again. His declaration concerning God's calling was that it remains irrevocable. His final response to the entire mystery was worship.

These chapters therefore challenge both Jewish presumption and Gentile pride. They place salvation within the mercy of God while simultaneously defending God's faithfulness to His covenantal purposes. They remind believers that God's faithfulness is not measured by a single moment in history. God's purposes stretch across generations.

The God who called Abraham has not forgotten Abraham. The God who confirmed His covenant to Isaac has not forgotten Isaac. The God who changed Jacob's name to Israel has not forgotten Jacob. The God who preserved Israel through Egypt, exile, dispersion, persecution, and centuries of history has not lost sight of the people whom He foreknew. The God who preserved a remnant in Elijah's generation preserved a remnant in Paul's generation, and Paul's argument points toward purposes that extend beyond his own generation.

The God who has brought multitudes of Gentiles into the blessings flowing from Israel's Messiah has not thereby exhausted His purposes for Israel. Gentile salvation is not evidence that Israel's story has ended. In Paul's argument, Gentile salvation itself becomes part of the mystery of Israel.

The story is therefore not finished.

That is why Romans 9–11 must be approached with humility. We are dealing with the faithfulness of God, the mystery of election, the tragedy of unbelief, the miracle of Gentile inclusion, the preservation of a remnant, and the hope of restoration. These truths should not produce arrogance but gratitude, reverence, prayer, and hope.

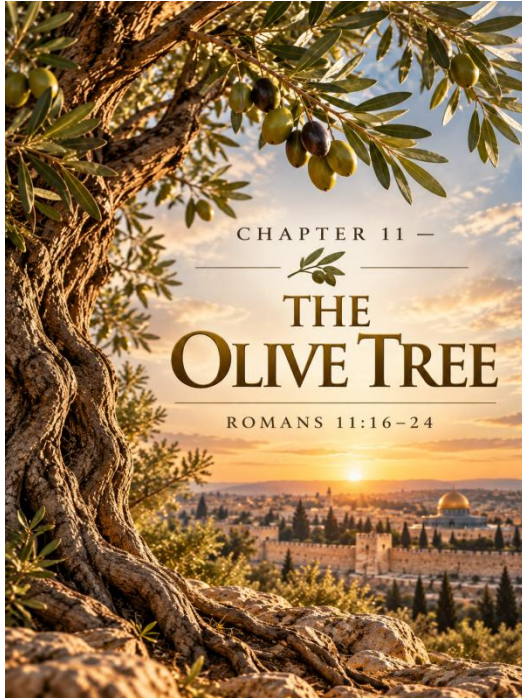
Paul begins this great discussion with sorrow for Israel and ends it with worship of God. Between those two points he gives the Church one of its most important lessons concerning the Jewish people. Israel's unbelief must never become an excuse for Christian contempt. Gentile inclusion must never become a foundation for Gentile superiority. The broken branches must never be mocked by the branches that were grafted in.

Instead, the Gentile believer should remember Paul's words: “thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.”

The next chapter will examine this extraordinary image in greater depth: the olive tree, the root, the natural branches, the broken branches, the wild olive branches, the meaning of being grafted in, and the promise that natural branches can be grafted in again. At the center of that discussion

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stands one of Paul's most solemn warnings to Gentile believers, a warning that echoes across the centuries and remains as relevant today as when it was first written: "Boast not against the branches."



Chapter 11 — The Olive Tree

Romans 11:16–24

Among all the images Paul uses in his letters, few are as important for understanding the relationship between Israel and Gentile believers as the olive tree of Romans 11. The picture is simple enough to understand at first glance, yet its implications are profound. There is a cultivated olive tree. There is a root supporting that tree. There are natural branches. Some of those branches have been broken off. There are branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted in among the remaining natural branches. Paul then speaks of the possibility that the broken natural branches may be grafted into their own olive tree again. Through this image, Paul explains both the extraordinary privilege given to Gentile believers and the humility with which that privilege must be

received.

The olive tree does not suddenly appear as an unrelated illustration. Paul has already raised the great question of Romans 11: “Hath God cast away his people?” His answer is unmistakable: “God forbid.” He has reminded his readers that he himself is an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham and of the tribe of Benjamin. He has spoken of a remnant according to the election of grace. He has explained that Israel has stumbled but has not stumbled in order to fall beyond recovery. He has also explained that through Israel’s stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles. It is within this discussion about Israel and the Gentiles that Paul introduces the olive tree.

He begins in Romans 11:16: “For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.” Before Paul speaks about broken branches or wild branches, he speaks about the root. This is essential because everything that follows depends upon understanding that the branches do not exist independently. They derive their life from something that existed before them. The root precedes the branches, supports the branches, and provides the nourishment upon which the branches depend.

What, then, is the root? Paul does not provide a single statement declaring, “The root is this.” Interpreters have therefore understood the root in several closely related ways, including Abraham, the patriarchs, the covenantal promises, or more broadly the covenantal foundation established by God through Israel. These ideas are not far removed from one another. Later in the same chapter Paul declares that Israel remains beloved “for the fathers’ sakes,” and he says that “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.” The root therefore naturally points us back toward the patriarchal and covenantal foundation established by God through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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The story represented by the olive tree began long before Gentiles were grafted into it. God called Abraham from among the nations and promised that through him blessing would reach all the families of the earth. God confirmed His covenant through Isaac and then through Jacob. Jacob's name became Israel. From Israel came the covenants, the Torah, the prophets, the promises, the Scriptures, and ultimately Messiah. The root therefore represents a covenantal history into which Gentile believers have been graciously brought. Gentiles do not create this history, and they do not replace its foundation. They receive nourishment from it.

This explains Paul's later statement to the Gentile believer: "thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." The direction of dependence matters. The root does not depend upon the grafted branches for its identity. The grafted branches depend upon the root for their nourishment. Gentile believers therefore cannot properly understand their faith while ignoring the covenantal story of Israel from which that faith emerged.

Christian faith did not begin in Rome, Athens, London, Berlin, Toronto, or New York. It began within the world of Israel. Yeshua was born into Israel. His mother was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. The Scriptures they proclaimed were Israel's Scriptures. The God they worshipped was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The hope they proclaimed was rooted in promises given through Israel's prophets. When Gentiles believed their message, they were not entering a story that began with them. They were being brought into a story that God had already been unfolding for generations.

Paul next turns from the root to the branches. He writes, "And if some of the branches be broken off." The word "some" is significant. Paul does not say that every natural branch has been broken off. He has already spoken of a remnant according to grace, and Paul himself belongs to that remnant. The tree therefore has not been stripped of every natural branch.

The natural branches represent Israelites. They belong naturally to the tree because the covenantal history represented by the tree is their own history. Abraham is their father. Isaac and Jacob are their patriarchs. The covenants were given within their history. The prophets arose among them. The Scriptures were entrusted to them. Messiah came from them according to the flesh. Paul can therefore later describe the cultivated olive tree as "their own olive tree."

Some of these natural branches, however, have been broken off. Paul explains why in verse 20: "because of unbelief they were broken off." This qualification is important. The branches are not broken off because God suddenly despises Israel. They are not broken off because Gentiles are inherently superior. They are not broken off because Jewish identity has become meaningless. Paul identifies the issue directly: unbelief.

This reinforces something Paul has emphasized throughout Romans. Physical descent alone does not produce saving faith. Membership in Israel's historical covenantal community does not remove the necessity of trusting God. The same Paul who defends God's continuing purposes for Israel also speaks seriously about Jewish unbelief. His theology permits neither extreme. Israel's election cannot be used to deny the seriousness of unbelief, but Israel's unbelief cannot be used to deny the faithfulness of God.

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Paul then turns his attention directly toward Gentile believers: “and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them.” This is one of the most important descriptions of Gentile inclusion in the New Testament. The Gentile believer is pictured not as a second tree planted beside Israel's tree and certainly not as a new tree replacing the old one. The Gentile believer is a branch from a wild olive tree that has been grafted into an already existing cultivated olive tree.

The distinction between the natural branch and the wild branch remains visible throughout Paul's metaphor. Gentiles do not become natural branches by pretending that their history is identical to Israel's history. Paul knows the difference between Israel and the nations. His theology of unity does not require him to erase distinction. Instead, people from the nations are graciously grafted into blessings that originated outside themselves.

This is why the language of grafting is so powerful. A grafted branch receives life from a tree into which it did not originally grow. It becomes genuinely connected to that tree and genuinely participates in its life, but it cannot claim to have created the tree. It cannot claim that the tree began when it was grafted in. It cannot claim that the root now depends upon it. Its very existence as a living branch depends upon what it receives from the root.

Paul describes the Gentile as being grafted in “among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree.” The words “among them” deserve careful attention. The Gentile branches are not grafted into an empty tree after every Jewish branch has been removed. They are grafted in among the natural branches that remain. The earliest community of followers of Yeshua was Jewish. Gentile believers were subsequently added to a community whose covenantal foundations were already present.

The Gentile therefore becomes a participant in the “root and fatness of the olive tree.” This is participation, not replacement. The blessings promised through Abraham are reaching the nations exactly as God had promised when He said, “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” Gentile inclusion is therefore not evidence that God's purposes through Abraham have failed. It is evidence that God's promise through Abraham is reaching its intended recipients among the nations.

Consider extending Paul's picture for a moment as an illustration. Imagine that the natural branches of the cultivated olive tree produce green olives. Then imagine that a branch taken from a wild olive tree is grafted into that same tree, but the grafted branch produces olives of a different color—perhaps red. The red olives do not mean that the grafted branch has failed to become part of the tree. The branch is genuinely attached to the tree. It receives its life from the same trunk, draws nourishment from the same root, and shares in the richness of the same olive tree. Yet it continues to bear fruit according to what it is.

Paul does not actually speak of green and red olives in Romans 11, so the colors should be understood as an illustration rather than as part of Paul's original metaphor. Nevertheless, the picture helps us visualize an important principle already present in his words. Grafting does not require the grafted branch to become identical to the natural branches. The wild branch has genuinely become part of the cultivated tree, but Paul still identifies it as coming from a wild olive tree. Its inclusion is real without its origin or distinction being erased.

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In our illustration, therefore, green olives and red olives grow on different branches, but both branches receive their nourishment from the same root. The red olives do not need to become green olives in order to prove that their branch genuinely belongs to the tree. Neither does the appearance of red olives require the green olives to disappear. The difference in the fruit does not create two trees. There remains one olive tree, one sustaining root, and branches sharing in the life and richness of that tree.

This provides a helpful picture of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers. Gentile believers do not need to become Jewish in order to participate genuinely in the blessings of the olive tree. Likewise, Jewish believers do not need to cease being Jewish because Gentiles have been grafted in. The natural branch remains natural, and the grafted branch remains grafted, yet both draw nourishment from the same root. Unity does not require uniformity, and participation does not require the erasure of identity.

The illustration can also be viewed from the other direction. The presence of red olives does not cause the green olives to lose their identity. The arrival of grafted branches does not transform the natural branches into something else, nor does it require the natural branches to disappear. Gentile inclusion does not require Jewish erasure. Different branches can share the same root without becoming identical branches.

The picture therefore is not one of two separate trees. Neither is it a picture in which one branch destroys and replaces another. It is a picture of shared nourishment. There is one tree and one sustaining root. There are natural branches and grafted branches. In our illustration, there may be green olives and red olives, but both receive life from the same root.

This makes Paul's next warning especially powerful: "Boast not against the branches." These words deserve to be taken with utmost seriousness. Paul is speaking to Gentile believers about their attitude toward Jewish people. He understands that theological privilege can become theological pride. Gentiles might look at Jewish unbelief and conclude that God has rejected Israel in order to choose them instead. Paul confronts that attitude directly.

Imagine the absurdity within our illustration of the grafted branch looking toward the natural branches and saying, "Because I now receive nourishment from this root, this tree belongs to me and no longer to you." The grafted branch did not plant the tree. It did not create the root. It did not sustain itself. Everything it now possesses comes because it has been graciously joined to something that existed before it.

Paul therefore writes, "But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." The Gentile believer has nothing about which to boast. Everything has been received by grace. The Scriptures have been received. The promises have been received. Messiah has been received. Salvation has been received. Participation in the richness of the olive tree has been received. The wild branch has been grafted into a tree it did not plant.

In our illustration, the red olives exist on the cultivated tree because their branch has been grafted into that tree and receives nourishment from its root. The grafted branch therefore has every reason for gratitude but no reason for arrogance. It cannot say to the natural branches, "I have

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become you.” Neither can it say, “Because I have been included, you are no longer necessary.” Both conclusions misunderstand the nature of grafting.

The same is true spiritually. Gentile believers have been brought into blessings they did not originate. They worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They read the Scriptures that came through Israel. They believe in Israel's Messiah. They received the gospel through witnesses who were themselves Jewish. They participate in promises whose history began long before the gospel spread throughout the Gentile world.

Yet Gentile believers remain Gentiles. Their inclusion does not require them to assume Jewish ethnicity or pretend that their history is identical to Israel's history. They have been grafted in as Gentiles and now genuinely “partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree.” Their continuing distinction does not make their inclusion incomplete.

Likewise, Jewish believers do not lose their Jewish identity because Gentile believers have been added. The natural branch does not become less natural because wild branches have been grafted into the tree. A Jewish believer in Yeshua does not need to pretend that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the covenants, the feasts, the prophets, and the history of the Jewish people no longer form part of his or her heritage.

This is one of the beauties of Paul's olive tree. God's purposes can create unity without demanding sameness. Gentiles can be brought near without becoming Jews. Jewish believers can embrace Yeshua without ceasing to belong to the Jewish people. The branches may have different histories and identities, but they are sustained by the same root.

Paul anticipates another argument from the Gentile believer: “Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.” On the surface there is an element of truth in the observation. Some natural branches were broken off, and Gentiles were grafted in. But Paul recognizes the dangerous conclusion that might be drawn from this fact. The Gentile might reason that because some Jewish branches were broken off and Gentile branches were added, this proves that Gentiles have become more favored, more important, or spiritually superior to Israel.

Paul immediately responds, “Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith.” The difference is not ethnic superiority. It is faith and unbelief. The Jewish branch does not fall because it is Jewish. The Gentile branch does not stand because it is Gentile. The issue is faith.

Paul therefore commands, “Be not highminded, but fear.” This is the exact opposite of religious triumphalism. Gentile inclusion should produce humility rather than arrogance. The believer should look at the broken branches and recognize the seriousness of unbelief rather than use them as an opportunity for boasting.

Paul strengthens the warning: “For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.” Grace must never be transformed into entitlement. The fact that Gentiles have been grafted into the tree does not give them permission to become proud. If natural branches

experienced the consequences of unbelief, wild branches have no reason to imagine themselves inherently superior.

Paul then directs his readers toward both aspects of God's character: "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God." Biblical theology must make room for both. God's goodness is seen in His mercy, grace, patience, and willingness to graft wild branches into the cultivated tree. His severity is seen in His judgment upon unbelief. To emphasize goodness while ignoring judgment distorts God's character, but to emphasize judgment while ignoring mercy does the same.

Paul applies this directly: "on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness." The Gentile believer stands only because of grace received through faith. There is therefore no foundation for contempt toward those who have stumbled.

The argument then takes a remarkable turn. Paul has spoken of natural branches being broken off, but broken off does not mean incapable of restoration. He writes, "And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in." The same branches that were broken off can be restored.

Paul then gives the reason: "for God is able to graffed them in again."

The word "again" is central to the metaphor. Paul does not describe Jewish restoration as the introduction of strangers into something foreign to them. He describes natural branches being grafted back into the tree from which they came. Their restoration is therefore described as a return.

This is why any theology that permanently closes the door on Israel must wrestle seriously with Paul's words. Paul does not say that the broken natural branches have ceased forever to have any relationship to the tree. He specifically looks toward the possibility of their restoration.

The basis of this hope is not human optimism. Paul does not say that Israel will restore itself. He says, "God is able to graffed them in again." The hope rests upon God's power and faithfulness.

The same God who called Abraham is able to restore Abraham's descendants. The same God who preserved Israel through centuries of difficulty is able to overcome unbelief. The same God who grafted wild Gentile branches into Israel's covenantal blessings is able to graft the natural branches into their own olive tree again.

Paul develops his argument further: "For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert graffed contrary to nature into a good olive tree." The Gentile believer is reminded again of the extraordinary nature of what has happened. Gentiles who were once outside Israel's covenantal history have been brought into its blessings.

Paul continues, "how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be graffed into their own olive tree?" The expression "their own olive tree" deserves particular attention. Paul still

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describes the tree in relation to Israel. Gentile participation has not transformed the olive tree into something disconnected from Israel.

The Gentiles have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree; the natural branches are described as belonging to “their own olive tree.” This distinction is fundamental to Paul's picture.

If the Gentile believer imagines that God uprooted Israel's olive tree and planted an entirely new Gentile tree, Paul's metaphor becomes difficult to explain. Paul instead presents continuity. There is one cultivated olive tree. Some natural branches remain. Some natural branches have been broken off. Wild branches have been grafted in among the remaining branches. Broken natural branches can be grafted back into their own tree.

The tree remains.

The root remains.

The natural branches remain identifiable.

The grafted branches remain identifiable.

The shared nourishment remains.

And the possibility of restoration remains.

Our green-and-red-olive illustration helps make this especially clear. The grafted branch does not need to produce green olives in order to belong to the tree. It can continue producing its distinctive red fruit while drawing its life from the same root. But neither does the appearance of the red fruit mean that the original green fruit has become obsolete. Both can exist upon the same tree.

The difference in the fruit does not create two trees.

This is why the olive tree provides such a strong challenge to replacement theology when replacement is understood to mean that the Church has simply taken Israel's place and that Israel no longer has any distinctive significance within God's purposes. Paul's image is not one of a new tree replacing an old tree. It is an image of Gentile participation within an existing tree.

At the same time, Paul's metaphor must not be pushed beyond what he actually says. Gentile believers genuinely belong to the tree. They are not second-class participants. They partake of the root and richness of the olive tree. Through Messiah they receive genuine spiritual blessings. Paul's purpose is not to diminish Gentile believers but to prevent their inclusion from becoming a basis for pride.

The olive tree therefore teaches both inclusion and distinction. Gentiles are genuinely grafted in, yet Paul continues to describe them as wild branches. Jewish believers are genuinely united with

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Gentile believers in Messiah, yet Paul continues to distinguish the natural branches. Unity does not require the destruction of identity.

This balance is important. Throughout history, Christians have sometimes assumed that unity in Messiah requires Jewish believers to abandon every expression of Jewish identity. Yet Paul's imagery moves in another direction. A natural branch does not become less natural because it is attached to its own tree. Jewish faith in Yeshua does not require the Jewish believer to pretend that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the covenants, the feasts, the prophets, and the history of the Jewish people are no longer part of his or her heritage.

Likewise, Gentile believers do not need to become ethnically Jewish in order to participate in the blessings of the olive tree. They are included as Gentiles through faith. Their inclusion demonstrates the breadth of God's promise to Abraham that blessing would extend to the nations.

The olive tree therefore presents a remarkable picture: one root, one tree, shared nourishment, genuine inclusion, and continuing distinction. The grafted branch truly belongs, but it does not become the natural branch. The natural branch retains its identity, but it cannot boast merely in its natural position. Both depend completely upon the goodness and mercy of God.

Yet Paul's warning is directed particularly toward the wild branches because the temptation he identifies is Gentile arrogance toward Israel. History demonstrates how necessary that warning was.

As the gospel expanded throughout the Gentile world, the demographic character of the believing community changed dramatically. What began as a Jewish movement centered in Jerusalem eventually became overwhelmingly Gentile. Over time, many Christians increasingly viewed the Jewish people primarily through the lens of unbelief. In some Christian traditions and periods, the idea developed that Israel's rejection of Yeshua meant that God had permanently rejected Israel and transferred Israel's covenantal identity entirely to the Church.

Whatever theological formulations developed later, Paul's warning remains remarkably direct: "Boast not against the branches."

The history of Christian attitudes toward Jews makes those words particularly sobering. There were periods when Jewish people were excluded, humiliated, forced from communities, accused collectively of crimes, subjected to discriminatory laws, pressured to convert, and sometimes killed in societies that identified themselves as Christian. The relationship between Christian theology and these historical events is complex and should not be reduced to a single cause. Nevertheless, contempt for Jewish people is difficult to reconcile with Paul's explicit instruction to Gentile believers not to boast against the branches.

Paul does not instruct Gentile believers to despise Israel because of unbelief. He tells them to fear.

He does not tell them that they have replaced the root. He tells them that the root supports them.

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He does not tell them that the natural branches can never return. He tells them that God is able to graft them in again.

He does not describe the tree as naturally belonging to the Gentiles. He describes Israel's restoration as natural branches being grafted into "their own olive tree."

These statements should profoundly shape Christian attitudes toward the Jewish people.

The proper response to Israel's unbelief is not antisemitism, contempt, mockery, or triumphalism. Paul's own response was sorrow, prayer, gospel witness, humility, and hope.

The olive tree also reminds Gentile believers of a debt of gratitude that can easily be forgotten. When Christians open Genesis, they read the history of Israel's patriarchs. When they read the Psalms, they pray and sing words produced largely within Israel. When they read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Twelve, they listen to Israel's prophets. When they read the Gospels, they encounter a Jewish Messiah teaching among the Jewish people in the land of Israel. When they read the earliest chapters of Acts, they encounter Jewish apostles proclaiming Israel's Messiah from Jerusalem.

Even Paul's mission to the Gentiles arose from within this Jewish and covenantal context. Gentile Christianity did not invent the Messiah. It received the good news of Israel's Messiah through Jewish witnesses.

Paul's words therefore confront every generation of Gentile believers with an important question: Will those who have been grafted in remember the root from which they receive nourishment?

If they forget the root, pride becomes possible. If they remember the root, gratitude becomes unavoidable.

Our imagined olive tree makes the question visible. The red olives on the grafted branch have life because the branch draws nourishment from the same root that nourishes the green olives on the natural branches. The colors remain different, but the source of life is shared. The red olives cannot boast against the green olives, because the grafted branch depends upon the same root that sustained the tree before the graft ever occurred.

The olive tree also provides a powerful picture of the faithfulness of God. Some branches have been broken off, but the tree has not been destroyed. The root remains holy. The covenantal story continues. Gentiles are being grafted in, and the broken natural branches remain within the horizon of God's restorative power.

Paul therefore refuses to allow the present condition of Israel to define Israel's ultimate future. The broken branch is not necessarily a permanently discarded branch. "God is able to graft them in again."

This truth prepares the reader for the mystery Paul reveals immediately afterward in Romans 11:25. Israel has experienced a blindness "in part." The phrase itself tells us that the blindness is

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neither complete nor presented as the final word. There has always been a remnant, and Paul is about to connect Israel's partial hardening with the fullness of the Gentiles and the remarkable declaration, "And so all Israel shall be saved."

The olive tree therefore stands between two great truths. Behind it stands the faithfulness of God to the patriarchs and His covenantal purposes. Ahead of it stands Paul's mystery concerning Israel's future. In the middle stand Gentile believers, grafted by grace into blessings they did not create and warned never to become arrogant toward the natural branches.

The image is therefore not merely theological. It is deeply practical. It asks the Gentile believer how he or she views the Jewish people. Do we view them with contempt because many do not believe in Yeshua, or with the sorrow Paul expressed? Do we view their unbelief as evidence that God has finished with them, or do we remember that "God is able to graff them in again"? Do we look at the historical growth of the Gentile Church as evidence of Gentile superiority, or do we remember Paul's words, "thou bearest not the root, but the root thee"? Do we boast against the branches, or do we stand in humility and gratitude?

Paul leaves little doubt about the proper response: "Be not highminded, but fear."

The olive tree teaches Gentile believers where they have come from. It teaches Jewish believers that unbelief need not be the final word. It teaches the Church that God's faithfulness cannot be measured only by present appearances. Above all, it teaches that grace provides no foundation for boasting.

The wild branch stands because it has been grafted in. The natural branch can be restored because God is able to graft it in again. Both depend upon God. Both receive nourishment from what God has established. The inclusion of one does not require the destruction of the other.

The olive tree belongs to a story that began before the Church became predominantly Gentile and extends beyond Israel's present unbelief. Its roots reach back through the covenants, the patriarchs, and the promises of God. Its branches extend outward among the nations. Its broken branches remain objects not of contempt but of hope.

Paul's warning therefore deserves to be heard again by every generation of Christians: "Boast not against the branches."

Those words should stand as a guard against Christian arrogance toward the Jewish people. They should remind Gentile believers that they entered a story they did not begin, received Scriptures they did not produce, worship the God first revealed through Israel's covenantal history, and confess a Messiah who came from Israel according to the flesh.

The wild branches have indeed been grafted in, and that is cause for profound gratitude. But the natural branches have not thereby become meaningless. Paul looks beyond their present brokenness toward the possibility of restoration because the God who permitted them to be broken off because of unbelief is also "able to graff them in again."

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The olive tree therefore tells a story of election and unbelief, judgment and mercy, continuity and inclusion, distinction and unity, warning and hope. It reminds us that God's purposes cannot be reduced to the condition of one generation. What appears broken may yet be restored. What appears distant may yet be brought near. What appears impossible to human beings remains possible with God.

Perhaps our imagined olive tree provides a fitting picture with which to close. We see one ancient and deeply rooted tree. On its natural branches grow green olives. Among those branches another branch has been grafted in, and from it grow red olives. The colors are different. The branches have different origins. Yet beneath the surface there are not two roots. There is one sustaining root feeding the whole tree.

The red olive does not need to become green in order to belong.

The green olive does not need to disappear in order for the red olive to belong.

The grafted branch does not replace the natural branch.

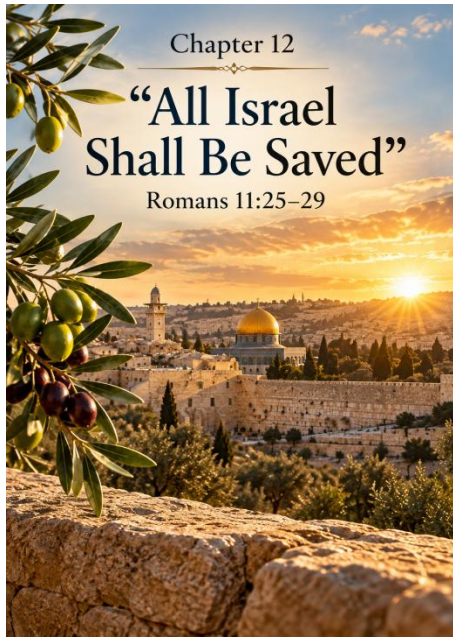
The natural branch does not sustain the grafted branch.

The root sustains them both.

That is the heart of the illustration. One tree. One root. Shared nourishment. Distinct branches. No reason for boasting.

The final emphasis must therefore remain where Paul places it: not upon the superiority of Israel, not upon the superiority of the Gentiles, and not upon the superiority of the Church, but upon the faithfulness, goodness, severity, mercy, and power of God. The Gentile believer stands by faith. The natural branches can be grafted in again. The root continues to bear the branches. And God remains faithful.

This brings us directly to the mystery Paul reveals in the verses that follow. If Israel's blindness is only "in part," what does Paul mean when he says that this condition continues "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in"? And what are we to understand by his extraordinary declaration, "And so all Israel shall be saved"?



Chapter 12 — “All Israel Shall Be Saved”

Romans 11:25–29

Few statements in Paul’s writings have generated more discussion than the words found near the conclusion of Romans 11: “And so all Israel shall be saved.” These words come at the climax of Paul’s extended discussion concerning Israel, the Gentiles, election, unbelief, mercy, and the faithfulness of God. They cannot properly be understood as an isolated sentence. Paul has spent three chapters developing an argument, and Romans 11:25–29 brings much of that argument to its theological climax. The question running beneath Romans 9–11 is whether Israel’s

widespread rejection of Yeshua means that God’s promises concerning Israel have failed. Paul’s answer throughout these chapters is emphatic: they have not.

Romans 11 begins with perhaps the clearest possible statement of Paul’s position: “Hath God cast away his people? God forbid.” Paul immediately identifies himself as evidence: “For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” Israel’s unbelief is real, but unbelief does not mean that God has abandoned Israel. There is a remnant according to grace, and Paul goes on to explain that even Israel’s stumbling has become part of a larger divine purpose through which salvation has come to the Gentiles. Yet Gentile salvation is not presented as the end of Israel’s story.

That point is essential when we reach Romans 11:25. Paul writes that he does not want Gentile believers to be ignorant of a “mystery.” The reason he gives is revealing: “lest ye should be wise in your own conceits.” Paul is concerned not merely with theology but with the attitude that theology produces. If Gentile believers misunderstand what God is doing with Israel, they may begin to think too highly of themselves and wrongly conclude that Israel’s unbelief has elevated the Gentile church into Israel’s former place.

Paul has already warned against precisely this attitude through the image of the olive tree. Some of the natural branches were broken off because of unbelief, while branches from a wild olive tree were grafted in among them. Yet the wild branches do not support the root; the root supports them. Gentile believers therefore have no basis for boasting against the natural branches. They stand by faith and are instructed to fear rather than become arrogant. The God who grafted wild branches into the cultivated olive tree remains able to graft the natural branches into their own olive tree again.

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It is immediately after this warning that Paul introduces the mystery: “that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” Every part of that statement deserves attention.

First, the blindness is “in part.” Paul does not say that every Jewish person has been blinded. He himself is Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. The earliest believers in Yeshua were Jewish. Paul has already spoken of a remnant according to the election of grace. Whatever this blindness means, therefore, it cannot mean the complete rejection of the Jewish people.

Neither does Paul describe Israel’s condition as necessarily permanent. He uses the word “until.” There is movement in Paul’s argument. Israel’s present condition exists within the unfolding purposes of God. The phrase “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” points beyond the present situation toward something yet to be completed. Paul sees history moving toward a divine purpose involving both Israel and the nations.

This is consistent with the argument he has already made earlier in the chapter. Israel has stumbled, but Paul asks, “Have they stumbled that they should fall?” Again his response is, “God forbid.” Through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, but Paul immediately looks beyond that development. If Israel’s fall has resulted in riches for the world, he asks, “how much more their fulness?” Later he makes the same argument in even stronger terms: if Israel’s casting away has meant the reconciling of the world, “what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?”

Paul therefore does not see the entrance of the Gentiles as proof that Israel’s calling has ended. He sees Gentile salvation and Israel’s future within one interconnected divine purpose. The nations are not brought into God’s blessings so that Israel can be forgotten. Rather, God’s dealings with Israel have opened blessing to the nations, while His purposes for Israel continue.

Then comes Paul’s remarkable declaration: “And so all Israel shall be saved.”

What does Paul mean by “all Israel”? This question has been debated for centuries. Some interpreters understand “Israel” here as referring to the total people of God, consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles. Others understand it as referring to the believing remnant of Jewish people throughout history. Still others, and particularly many interpreters who emphasize the continuing distinction between Israel and the Gentiles throughout Romans 11, understand Paul to be speaking of a future turning of Israel to God.

The immediate context deserves particular weight. Throughout Romans 11 Paul repeatedly distinguishes Israel from the Gentiles. Israel has stumbled; salvation has come to the Gentiles. Gentile believers are compared with wild olive branches, while Israelites are compared with natural branches. A partial blindness has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. Within that flow of thought, it is difficult to make “Israel” suddenly mean something

entirely different from what it has meant throughout the argument without a clear indication from Paul.

Paul then supports his declaration from Israel's Scriptures: "There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins." His use of "Jacob" reinforces the connection with the covenant people. Paul is not speaking abstractly about humanity. He reaches back into the prophetic promises concerning Zion, Jacob, covenant, forgiveness, and restoration.

This does not mean that Paul teaches two different ways of salvation—one for Jews and another for Gentiles. Throughout Romans, salvation is grounded in the mercy of God and received through faith. Paul does not present Jewish ancestry as an independent means of salvation. His anguish at the beginning of Romans 9 and his desire in Romans 10 that Israel might be saved would make little sense if ethnic identity alone guaranteed salvation. Whatever "all Israel shall be saved" means, it must remain consistent with Paul's proclamation of salvation through God's redemptive work.

The extraordinary element of Romans 11 is therefore not the creation of a separate path to salvation for Israel. It is Paul's confidence that Israel's present unbelief is not the final chapter of Israel's story.

This distinction is crucial. Paul can acknowledge Israel's unbelief without concluding that Israel has ceased to matter in the purposes of God. He can proclaim salvation to the Gentiles without redefining Gentiles as ethnic Israel. He can describe branches being broken off without declaring the entire tree destroyed. He can warn the grafted-in branches without removing them from the tree. And he can speak of Israel as presently opposed to the gospel while simultaneously describing them as beloved because of God's covenantal purposes.

That tension appears explicitly in Romans 11:28: "As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes."

Paul holds both statements together. Concerning the gospel, there is opposition. Concerning election, there remains belovedness connected with "the fathers." The reference to the fathers naturally directs the reader back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the very covenantal history from which Israel emerged. Paul does not erase that history because of Israel's present unbelief.

Then comes one of the most significant statements in the entire discussion: "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

In other words, God does not casually revoke what He has purposed. His covenantal faithfulness is rooted in His own character. Human unfaithfulness has consequences, as Israel's history repeatedly demonstrates, but human failure does not transform God into an unfaithful God.

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This takes us back to the beginning of Israel's story. God called Abraham and promised to make of him a great nation. He confirmed His covenant with Abraham and described it as an everlasting covenant. He continued that covenant through Isaac rather than Ishmael, and then through Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. From Jacob came the twelve tribes. God brought Israel out of Egypt, established Israel as a covenant nation, disciplined Israel for disobedience, scattered the people among the nations, and repeatedly promised restoration.

If those promises could simply be erased by Israel's failures, an uncomfortable question would arise for every believer: what confidence could anyone place in the promises of God?

Paul's argument in Romans 11 therefore concerns much more than Israel. It concerns the character of God.

This may be one reason Paul reacts so strongly to the possibility of Gentile boasting. When Gentile Christians boast against Jewish people, they misunderstand the very mercy by which they themselves have been brought near. The wild branch has no reason to ridicule the natural branch. It did not plant the tree. It did not create the root. It does not support the root. It lives because it has been graciously grafted into blessings that originated in God's covenantal purposes.

Paul's teaching should therefore produce humility.

The church did not begin with the Gentile nations and then graciously make room for Jewish believers. The biblical story moves in the opposite direction. The patriarchs were Jewish ancestors. The prophets came from Israel. The Scriptures came through Israel. Yeshua was born into Israel. The apostles were Jewish. The gospel went first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Gentile believers were brought into blessings whose historical roots preceded them.

This does not make Jewish people spiritually superior to Gentiles. Nor does it make Gentiles secondary citizens in the household of faith. Paul's point is not superiority but grace. Both Jew and Gentile stand in need of the mercy of God.

Romans 11 ultimately moves toward mercy. Paul explains that God has permitted disobedience in such a way that His mercy might be displayed. The chapter therefore ends not with human achievement but with worship: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Paul has reached the limits of human explanation. God's purposes are greater than the categories by which human beings often attempt to contain them.

There is also an important warning here for Christian theology. Whenever an interpretation of Scripture produces arrogance toward Jewish people, Christians should compare that interpretation carefully with Paul's explicit warning: "Boast not against the branches." Whatever disagreements Christians and Jews may have concerning Yeshua, the gospel, or the interpretation

of Scripture, contempt toward the Jewish people is incompatible with the posture Paul demands from Gentile believers.

Church history demonstrates how important that warning was—and how tragically it was sometimes ignored. When the Jewish people came to be viewed merely as a rejected people, theological contempt could become social contempt, and social contempt could contribute to persecution. The history of Christian antisemitism cannot be reduced to one doctrine or one biblical interpretation, but distorted ideas concerning Israel sometimes helped create an environment in which hostility toward Jews could be rationalized.

Romans 11 points in another direction.

Paul tells Gentile believers to remember the root. Remember grace. Remember that they were grafted in. Remember that natural branches can be grafted in again. Remember that Israel's blindness is partial. Remember that God's purposes have not reached their conclusion. Remember the patriarchs. Remember the election. Remember the covenant. Remember that "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

And above all, do not boast.

The statement "all Israel shall be saved" therefore stands as a declaration of hope within Paul's larger defense of the faithfulness of God. Paul looks beyond Israel's present condition and sees a mystery unfolding in history. The salvation of the Gentiles has not cancelled Israel's story. Israel's unbelief has not exhausted God's mercy. The broken natural branches are not beyond the power of the Gardener to restore.

The same God who called Abraham remains faithful. The same God who preserved Israel through Egypt, exile, dispersion, persecution, and generations of suffering has not forgotten His promises. Paul does not explain every detail of how the mystery will unfold, and Christians should be cautious about claiming certainty where Paul himself leaves questions unanswered. But he does give us the theological boundary within which the discussion must take place: "Hath God cast away his people? God forbid."

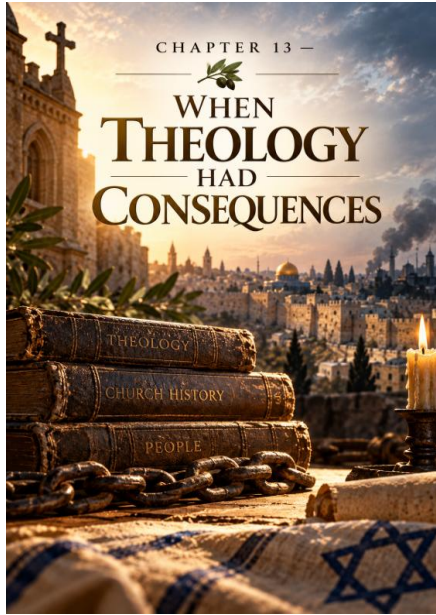
Romans 11:25–29 therefore brings us back to the central question of this book. Can God be trusted to keep His promises?

Paul's answer is found not only in a theological proposition but in the continuing story of Israel. God's faithfulness is greater than human unbelief. His mercy is deeper than human failure. His covenantal purposes cannot simply be discarded because circumstances appear to contradict them.

The final word concerning Israel is not rejection. It is mercy.

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And Paul leaves Gentile believers standing before that mystery not in pride, but in humility, gratitude, expectation, and worship.



Chapter 13 — When Theology Had Consequences

The previous chapters have concentrated primarily upon Scripture. We have followed God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We have considered Israel's calling, the promises of God, Paul's anguish over his own people, the remnant according to grace, the mystery of Israel, and the image of the olive tree. Paul warned Gentile believers with remarkable clarity, “Boast not against the branches.” He reminded them, “thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.”

We must now leave biblical interpretation temporarily and enter history, because theology does not remain confined to books, sermons, councils, or classrooms.

What people believe about another group of human beings can eventually influence how they speak about them, how they portray them, how laws treat them, and sometimes how societies permit them to be treated. Ideas have consequences.

The history of Christian relations with the Jewish people is long and complicated. It contains periods of cooperation, protection, friendship, intellectual exchange, and courageous Christian opposition to antisemitism. It also contains periods of hostility, discrimination, forced conversion, expulsion, violence, and silence. It would be historically inaccurate to suggest that every act of antisemitism arose from Christian theology. Political rivalry, economic resentment, nationalism, racial ideology, conspiracy theories, social instability, and many other forces played major roles at different times. Yet it would be equally mistaken to pretend that theology never mattered.

As Christianity became increasingly Gentile, the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people changed. The earliest followers of Yeshua were Jews. The apostles were Jews. The first believers worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and understood themselves within Israel's biblical story. The disputes recorded in the New Testament frequently occurred within a Jewish context. Over the following centuries, however, the demographic center of Christianity shifted increasingly toward the Gentile world. The Church spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, and the separation between Judaism and Christianity became deeper. The historical circumstances were complicated, particularly after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and following the Bar Kokhba revolt of AD 132–135. Judaism and Christianity increasingly developed as distinct religious communities.

As that separation widened, some Christians began interpreting Jewish unbelief in Yeshua as evidence that God had rejected the Jewish people. Biblical passages concerning judgment were

sometimes emphasized while passages concerning God's continuing faithfulness to Israel were minimized or interpreted differently. The destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish people could then be presented as evidence that Israel had lost its former covenantal position. The Church increasingly came to see itself as the true or spiritual Israel. There are different forms of what is now commonly called replacement theology or supersessionism, and it is important not to treat every form as identical. Some Christian theologians who held supersessionist views did not advocate hostility toward Jews. Nevertheless, when the idea that the Church had inherited Israel's spiritual blessings was combined with the belief that the Jewish people existed primarily as an example of divine rejection, a dangerous theological environment could develop.

The question is not merely whether Christians believed that the Church participated in Israel's promises. Paul himself teaches that Gentiles have been grafted into the richness of the olive tree. The more serious question is whether Gentile inclusion came to be understood as Jewish exclusion. Paul had anticipated precisely this danger when he wrote, "Boast not against the branches." The wild branches were never told that they had uprooted the tree. They were told that they had been grafted into it. They were never told that the natural branches had become objects of contempt. They were warned, "Be not highminded, but fear." They were never told that the broken branches were incapable of restoration. Paul declared, "God is able to graff them in again." Yet the relationship between Christians and Jews would not always reflect that humility.

Already in the writings of some early Christian thinkers, increasingly severe language about Jews and Judaism appeared. These writings must be read within their historical context. Ancient religious controversy often employed rhetoric far harsher than would be acceptable today, and Christian authors were also engaged in internal theological disputes and efforts to distinguish Christianity from Judaism. Nevertheless, words matter, particularly when one community becomes politically and socially dominant while another becomes a vulnerable minority.

One of the most frequently discussed examples is John Chrysostom, the fourth-century preacher and bishop of Constantinople. In a series of sermons commonly known as *Adversus Judaeos*, or *Against the Jews*, Chrysostom used extraordinarily harsh rhetoric against Jewish religious life. His immediate concern included Christians who attended synagogues, observed Jewish festivals, or otherwise participated in Jewish practices. His purpose was therefore partly to prevent members of his Christian congregation from identifying with Judaism. Yet the language he employed contributed to a tradition of Christian anti-Jewish polemic that later generations could read apart from its original setting. This illustrates an important principle: a theological argument spoken in one historical context can survive long after that context disappears. Words can be inherited by generations that use them for purposes the original speaker may never have imagined.

As Christianity became institutionally powerful within the Roman world, theological separation increasingly interacted with political authority. Jews were sometimes tolerated and protected, but they were also subjected to restrictions. Over the centuries their legal position varied considerably according to place, ruler, and period. There was no single, uninterrupted Christian policy toward Jews throughout medieval Europe. Nevertheless, discriminatory patterns became deeply embedded in many societies. Restrictions were sometimes placed upon Jewish occupations, residence, public religious expression, and participation in civic life. In some places Jews were required to live in designated quarters. At various times they were required to wear identifying clothing or badges. They could be excluded from guilds or professions, and their security could depend upon the protection of rulers whose policies might change suddenly.

The result was a profound contradiction. Christianity worshipped a Jewish Messiah, read a Bible written largely by Jews, revered the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, and proclaimed apostles who were Jews, while Jewish communities living among Christians could simultaneously be treated as outsiders. Christians could read Moses while Jewish neighbors were restricted. They could sing the Psalms of David while Jewish communities were marginalized. They could preach from Isaiah while sometimes speaking contemptuously about Isaiah's descendants. They could worship Yeshua of Nazareth while forgetting that Yeshua Himself was Jewish.

The problem was not simply theological disagreement. Jews and Christians genuinely disagree about fundamental theological questions, especially concerning the identity of Yeshua. Disagreement itself does not require hatred. The danger arises when theological disagreement becomes a justification for contempt or when people cease seeing those with whom they disagree as neighbors bearing the image of God.

During the medieval period, several accusations against Jews became particularly destructive. One was the blood libel, the false accusation that Jews murdered Christian children for ritual purposes. Another was the accusation that Jews desecrated the consecrated host used in Christian worship. These allegations were false, yet they sometimes produced mob violence, trials, executions, and attacks upon entire Jewish communities. During periods of plague and social catastrophe, Jews could also become convenient scapegoats. During the Black Death of the fourteenth century, for example, Jews were falsely accused in various places of poisoning wells and causing the disease. Jewish communities were massacred in several European cities. Fear demanded an explanation, society looked for someone to blame, and an already marginalized minority became an easy target.

The Crusading era provides another painful example. The Crusades were complex military and religious movements involving political, territorial, economic, and spiritual motivations. Their history cannot be reduced simply to antisemitism. Yet during the First Crusade in 1096, crusading groups attacked Jewish communities in parts of the Rhineland. Jews in cities such as Speyer, Worms, and Mainz became victims of violence. There is a terrible contradiction in men claiming to travel east in the name of the Christian faith while attacking Jewish communities

living near their own homes. Paul had written, “Boast not against the branches.” History demonstrates what can happen when that warning is forgotten.

Expulsions became another recurring feature of Jewish life in medieval Europe. Jews were expelled from England in 1290. France experienced multiple expulsions and readmissions. In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella ordered practicing Jews to leave Spain unless they converted to Christianity. Many Jews departed; others converted, some sincerely and others under enormous pressure. The Spanish experience also demonstrates how religious prejudice could evolve. Converts from Judaism, often called conversos, could themselves become objects of suspicion. Questions increasingly arose not simply about what a person believed but about ancestry. Once prejudice attaches itself to ancestry, conversion may no longer provide an escape. A person can change religious belief but cannot change grandparents.

The Reformation brought enormous theological changes to Europe, but it did not eliminate Christian hostility toward Jews. Martin Luther provides one of the most sobering examples. Early in his career Luther expressed hope that treating Jews more kindly might encourage them to consider Christianity. Later, frustrated by the failure of widespread Jewish conversion, his language became vicious. In his 1543 work *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther advocated harsh measures against Jewish communities, including actions against synagogues, homes, religious writings, and rabbis. These writings represent one of the darkest aspects of Luther's legacy. Christians who appreciate his role in the Reformation should not therefore feel compelled to defend everything he wrote. Historical honesty requires acknowledging both contributions and failures.

Again we encounter the power of theological language. Words written in one century can remain available to another. Centuries later, antisemites in Germany could draw selectively upon Luther's anti-Jewish writings. This does not mean that Luther caused modern racial antisemitism or the Holocaust. Such a claim would oversimplify centuries of political, racial, nationalist, pseudo-scientific, and ideological developments. Nazi antisemitism was not simply medieval Christian anti-Judaism continued unchanged. It incorporated modern racial theories that defined Jewishness biologically and could remain hostile even toward Jews who had converted to Christianity. Yet the existence of centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teaching helped create cultural patterns in which negative stereotypes about Jews were already familiar. Modern racial antisemitism could exploit older prejudices even while transforming them into something different.

By the nineteenth century, antisemitism increasingly adopted racial, nationalist, and pseudo-scientific forms. Jews were no longer attacked only because of what they believed. They could be portrayed as an alien race, a secret political force, an economic conspiracy, or a corrupting influence upon national life. This change was significant. Under religious anti-Judaism, at least theoretically, baptism could change a person's religious status. Under racial antisemitism,

baptism changed nothing. A person with Jewish ancestry could still be classified as Jewish regardless of personal faith.

The distinction would become devastating under National Socialism. When Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement rose to power in Germany, antisemitism became part of state ideology. The Nazis did not merely disagree with Judaism as a religion. They constructed a racial worldview in which Jews were defined biologically and portrayed as an existential enemy. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 demonstrated this transformation with chilling clarity. Jewish identity was increasingly defined according to ancestry rather than personal religious belief. Rights could be removed because of grandparents. Marriage and intimate relations between Jews and those classified as German or related blood were prohibited. Jewish citizens were progressively pushed outside the protection of normal civic life.

The road from prejudice to genocide was not instantaneous. It developed progressively as words and stereotypes gave way to exclusion and legal discrimination, which in turn were followed by confiscation, segregation, deportation, and ultimately systematic mass murder. The Holocaust was the deliberate murder of approximately six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Men, women, children, infants, elderly people, religious Jews, secular Jews, wealthy Jews, poor Jews, patriotic Jews, converts to Christianity, and people who may have known almost nothing about Judaism were caught within a racial system that defined them by ancestry.

A question inevitably confronts Christianity when we look at this history: Where was the Church? There is no single answer because there was no single Christian response. Some Christians resisted Nazism. Some hid Jews. Some provided false documents, food, shelter, or escape routes. Some spoke publicly against aspects of Nazi ideology and paid with imprisonment or death. Individual priests, pastors, religious communities, and ordinary Christians demonstrated extraordinary courage. Others accommodated themselves to the regime. Some supported aspects of it. Some accepted antisemitic assumptions. Some remained silent. Others may have opposed the persecution privately but feared the consequences of public resistance. Church institutions themselves responded differently according to country, denomination, leadership, and historical moment. Any serious account must preserve these distinctions rather than reducing millions of Christians and numerous churches to a single response.

Nevertheless, the silence remains one of the great moral questions of modern Christian history. How could societies shaped for centuries by Christianity permit their Jewish neighbors to be progressively isolated? How could people hear antisemitic language without recognizing where contempt might lead? How could Christians read Romans 11 and fail to hear Paul's warning, "Boast not against the branches"?

The Holocaust cannot simply be described as the inevitable result of Christian replacement theology. History is far more complicated than that. Nazi racial ideology contained elements

profoundly hostile to Christianity itself, and the Holocaust arose from a particular convergence of racial antisemitism, dictatorship, war, bureaucracy, nationalism, conspiracy thinking, dehumanization, and genocidal ideology. But neither can Christian history be completely separated from the cultural environment that preceded it. Centuries of negative teaching about Jews could make certain stereotypes seem familiar. If generations had been taught that Jews were rejected, cursed, spiritually blind, collectively guilty, or somehow uniquely opposed to God, modern antisemites did not begin with a blank page. The vocabulary changed, the theology changed, and the political circumstances changed, but contempt could build upon older foundations.

This is why theology matters. A theological idea may appear harmless when it exists only in a book, but ideas rarely remain only in books. Theology influences preaching, preaching can influence attitudes, attitudes can become customs, customs can influence institutions, and institutions can influence laws. When laws begin identifying one group as inferior, dangerous, or unwanted, ideas have moved from the realm of theory into the lives of real human beings.

No responsible historian should draw a perfectly straight line from one theological doctrine to Auschwitz. History does not work that way. But neither should Christians refuse to ask whether some theological traditions made contempt easier. Paul's warning in Romans 11 therefore takes on extraordinary historical weight. He was not merely settling an abstract theological dispute. He was establishing an attitude Gentile believers were commanded to maintain toward Israel: "Boast not against the branches."

We cannot know what Christian history might have looked like if that command had remained continually before the Church. We cannot know what might have happened if every generation of Gentile believers had been reminded, "thou bearest not the root, but the root thee," or if Christians had looked at Jewish unbelief and responded as Paul did, with sorrow and prayer rather than contempt. We cannot rewrite history by imagining that the broken natural branches had always been viewed not as evidence of Jewish inferiority but as people about whom Paul said, "God is able to graff them in again." History cannot tell us what might have happened, but it can teach us what did happen.

After the Holocaust, many Christian churches began serious reassessment of their teachings concerning Jews and Judaism. One of the most significant developments within Roman Catholicism came with the Second Vatican Council and its 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The document rejected the idea that responsibility for the death of Yeshua could be indiscriminately charged against all Jews then living or against Jews of later generations, and it condemned antisemitism. Protestant churches and other Christian bodies also undertook their own reassessments, though these developed differently across denominations and countries. Christian-Jewish dialogue expanded. Scholars reconsidered the Jewish context of the New Testament. Greater attention was given to the Jewish identity of Yeshua and the apostles, and Romans 9–11 received renewed attention in many theological discussions.

These developments do not erase history. They demonstrate that theology can be reconsidered. If theology can contribute to contempt, theology can also challenge contempt. If Scripture has been used to create distance, Scripture can be read more carefully. If Christians have forgotten the Jewish roots of their faith, those roots can be remembered. If Paul's warning has been neglected, it can be heard again.

This does not require Christians to abandon their convictions about Yeshua. Paul certainly did not abandon his convictions. He proclaimed Yeshua as Messiah while simultaneously declaring his deep love for his Jewish brethren. He desired their salvation while defending God's continuing faithfulness to Israel. He acknowledged Jewish unbelief while forbidding Gentile arrogance. Paul demonstrates that conviction and love are not enemies. One can disagree profoundly without despising another person. One can proclaim one's faith without humiliating another. One can believe that Yeshua is Messiah while rejecting antisemitism completely. Indeed, if Paul is our guide, belief in Messiah should produce humility rather than superiority.

The history we have examined should therefore not become another weapon. Christians should not use the failures of earlier Christians merely to congratulate themselves for being more enlightened. That would reproduce the very pride Paul warns against. The purpose of remembering history is not self-righteousness. It is vigilance. Every generation is tempted to believe that it would have behaved differently from those who came before. History warns us not to be so confident. The people who participated in systems of discrimination did not always begin by imagining where those systems would end. Prejudice can become normal gradually. Language can change gradually. Social exclusion can become acceptable gradually. People can become accustomed to things that would once have shocked them.

That is why the first theological step matters. How we speak about those with whom we disagree matters. How we describe another people matters. Whether we reduce an entire people to their unbelief matters. Whether we interpret their suffering as something to celebrate matters. Whether we imagine that our reception of grace makes us superior matters. Paul answers the temptation toward such arrogance with the simple command, "Boast not against the branches."

The olive tree of Romans 11 therefore belongs not only in a theology book; it belongs beside the history books. The grafted branch must remember how it came to be part of the tree. It was not grafted in because it was naturally superior. It was grafted in by grace. It did not create the root. It receives nourishment from the root. It therefore has no grounds for boasting. The natural branches that have been broken off are not objects of contempt, because Paul reminds us that "God is able to graff them in again."

This is where biblical theology and history meet. Theology becomes dangerous when it teaches us that another human being is beneath our compassion. It becomes dangerous when election is transformed into superiority, when disagreement becomes contempt, when another people's

suffering becomes evidence used to celebrate our own position, and when the recipients of grace forget that they themselves live entirely by grace.

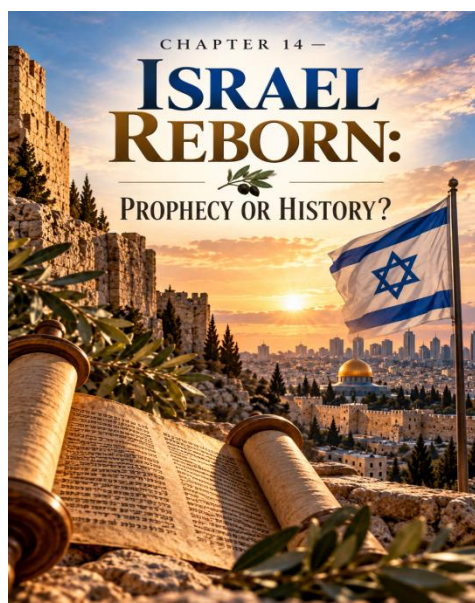
The history of Christian-Jewish relations should therefore drive Gentile believers back to Romans 11 with greater humility. Paul's words are no longer merely theoretical. History has demonstrated why they matter. "Be not highminded, but fear."

The Church cannot change the centuries that have passed. It cannot undo expulsions, forced conversions, humiliations, pogroms, discriminatory laws, or the silence of those who failed to speak when Jewish neighbors were persecuted. History cannot be rewritten simply because later generations regret it. But history can be remembered, lessons can be learned, old assumptions can be examined, the Jewish identity of Yeshua can be remembered, the covenantal story of Israel can be studied again, and the warning of Paul can be taken seriously. Christians today can determine that Jewish people will not encounter in them the contempt that marked some chapters of Christian history.

The lesson of history is therefore not simply to look backward and ask what earlier generations did. The more difficult question is what Christians will do now. When antisemitism appears, will we recognize it? When Jewish people are threatened, will Christians speak? When conspiracy theories about Jews circulate, will we challenge them? When Scripture is used to justify contempt, will we return to Scripture itself? When theological differences arise, will we remember that disagreement never gives us permission to hate? When we are tempted to think that our place in God's purposes makes us superior to someone else, will we remember the olive tree?

There is one root. There are natural branches and grafted branches. There is shared nourishment. There is grace rather than superiority. Above all, there remains the command that history has made impossible to ignore: "Boast not against the branches."

Theology has consequences. History has shown us that with painful clarity. The question facing the Church today is not whether theology will have consequences. It always does. The question is what kind of consequences our theology will produce.



Chapter 14 — Israel Reborn: Prophecy or History?

For nearly two thousand years, the Jewish people lived largely scattered among the nations. Jewish communities could be found throughout Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and eventually the Americas and other parts of the world. They spoke different languages, developed different customs, and lived under different governments, yet they retained a remarkable consciousness of themselves as a people. Jerusalem remained embedded in Jewish prayer, worship, memory, and hope. The words “Next year in Jerusalem,” repeated from generation to generation, expressed something that

centuries of dispersion had not erased: the continuing connection of the Jewish people with the land of their ancestors.

Beginning especially in the nineteenth century and accelerating during the twentieth, increasing numbers of Jewish people returned to the land. Their reasons were varied. Some came because of religious conviction and a longing for Zion. Some were motivated by the emerging Zionist movement and the desire for Jewish national self-determination. Others fled persecution, pogroms, antisemitism, or political upheaval. They came from different nations, spoke different languages, and represented very different expressions of Jewish life, but they shared an identity that had survived centuries of dispersion.

The Holocaust gave the question of Jewish survival and a Jewish homeland an almost unimaginable urgency. Six million Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Entire communities that had existed for centuries disappeared. Survivors emerged from concentration camps, forests, hiding places, and displaced-persons camps to discover that families, homes, communities, and former lives had often vanished. For many Jewish survivors, returning to the societies in which their families had been persecuted or murdered was either impossible or unthinkable.

Then, on May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the modern State of Israel. After centuries without an independent Jewish state, Jewish sovereignty had again been established in the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people. Yet 1948 was not simply the creation of another government. It became a focal point for an enormous movement of Jewish people from many parts of the world.

Jews came from Europe, including survivors of the Holocaust. They came from Jewish communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa. They came from Iraq, Yemen,

Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere. In later decades, substantial numbers arrived from the Soviet Union and its successor states, while dramatic operations brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Other Jews came from North and South America, South Africa, Australia, France, Britain, Canada, and many other countries.

These returning communities were anything but culturally uniform. Some spoke Yiddish, others Arabic, Persian, Russian, Romanian, Polish, Hungarian, French, Ladino, Amharic, English, or numerous other languages. Some were deeply religious, while others were secular. Their music, foods, traditions, political ideas, customs, and expressions of Judaism could differ considerably. Yet beneath those differences remained a common Jewish identity and a historical consciousness stretching back into the biblical world.

For Christians familiar with the Hebrew prophets, these events naturally raised an enormous question: Were they witnessing the fulfillment of biblical prophecy?

The question cannot simply be dismissed, because the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly speak of Israel's dispersion and restoration. Isaiah speaks of God assembling “the outcasts of Israel” and gathering “the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (Isaiah 11:12). Jeremiah declares, “He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock” (Jeremiah 31:10). Ezekiel records God's promise, “I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered” (Ezekiel 11:17), and later, “For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land” (Ezekiel 36:24).

A recurring pattern therefore appears throughout the prophetic writings: dispersion, preservation, gathering, and restoration. Because of this, many Christians have looked at the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the return of Jewish communities from around the world and concluded that they are witnessing at least some aspect of the prophetic restoration described in Scripture.

Other Christians interpret these passages differently. Some emphasize their historical fulfillment in Israel's return from the Babylonian exile. Others understand certain restoration passages spiritually, eschatologically, or as promises whose complete fulfillment still lies in the future. These differences deserve careful consideration. We should be cautious about attaching a biblical verse automatically to every modern political event. The authority belongs to Scripture; our interpretation of contemporary history remains subject to examination.

Nevertheless, several historical facts are difficult to ignore. The Jewish people survived centuries of dispersion. They remained identifiable as a people. They maintained a remarkable connection with Jerusalem and the land of Israel. After centuries of living among the nations, large numbers returned to that land. A Jewish state was established there, and Hebrew, an ancient biblical language preserved for centuries especially in religious and literary use, became the everyday language of a modern society.

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Christians may disagree about the precise prophetic significance of these developments, but that disagreement should lead us to an important distinction. There are two questions that Christians sometimes combine when they should be considered separately. The first question is, What does the Bible promise concerning Israel? The second question is, How should Christians evaluate the actions and policies of the modern State of Israel?

These are not the same question.

The first is fundamentally a biblical and theological question. It asks what God promised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. It asks what Scripture means when it speaks about covenant, election, the land, exile, restoration, the remnant, and the future of Israel. It asks how the prophets should be understood and how Paul's teaching in Romans 9–11 relates to the continuing identity and purposes of Israel.

The second question is political and moral. It asks how Christians should evaluate the decisions of Israeli prime ministers, cabinets, political parties, courts, military leaders, and the Knesset. It involves specific questions concerning security, war, borders, settlements, Palestinians, terrorism, hostages, military operations, judicial reform, religious freedom, minority rights, and numerous other matters upon which Israelis themselves frequently disagree.

Confusing these two questions produces serious problems. Some Christians reason that if God's covenant with Israel continues, then every action taken by the modern Israeli government must somehow have God's approval. Others make the opposite mistake. They disagree strongly with an Israeli government or policy and conclude that this disagreement demonstrates that Israel can no longer have any continuing biblical significance. Neither conclusion necessarily follows.

The biblical question concerns the faithfulness, covenant, promises, and purposes of God. The political question concerns decisions made by human beings. Those categories must remain distinct.

The Bible itself provides the framework for making this distinction. Ancient Israel was God's covenant people, yet Israel's kings were not politically or morally infallible. Saul disobeyed God. David committed grievous sins. Solomon departed from God's commands. Ahab acted wickedly. Manasseh led Judah into terrible corruption. The prophets repeatedly confronted kings, priests, judges, political leaders, and the nation itself.

Yet the failures of Israel's leaders did not cause the prophets to conclude that Israel had ceased to be Israel. In fact, the prophets could condemn Israel precisely because Israel stood in covenant relationship with God. Amos expressed this strikingly when God said concerning Israel, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). Covenant did not mean immunity from moral judgment. Covenant created responsibility.

The same distinction is necessary when Christians consider the modern State of Israel. To believe that God has continuing purposes for Israel does not require believing that every decision of an Israeli government is correct. Israel is governed by human beings. Its politicians disagree with one another. Its citizens disagree with their politicians and with each other. Governments change. Coalitions rise and fall. Policies are adopted, challenged, amended, and sometimes reversed.

The State of Israel must therefore not be confused with whichever government happens to administer it at a particular moment. Governments are temporary. The people are not.

Canadians do not cease to be Canadians when governments change in Ottawa, nor is every Canadian personally responsible for every policy adopted by the Canadian government. The same distinction should be applied to Israelis.

Israeli society itself contains considerable diversity. There are religious and secular Jews, Jews from European backgrounds, Jews whose families came from Middle Eastern and North African countries, Ethiopian Jews, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, Arab citizens of Israel, Druze, Christians, Muslims, and other communities. Political disagreement within Israel can be intense. Israelis themselves debate the actions of their government, demonstrate for and against government policies, vote for competing political parties, challenge government decisions through the courts, and argue passionately about the direction of their country.

Christians therefore do not need to choose between unquestioning approval of Israel and rejection of Israel. A Christian may believe that God's covenant promises concerning Israel remain valid while disagreeing with a particular Israeli government decision. A Christian may support Israel's right to exist and the right of Israelis to live in security while also expressing concern for Palestinians and their welfare. A Christian may oppose antisemitism while examining Israeli policies critically. None of these positions is inherently contradictory.

There is also an important difference between criticizing the policies of a government and condemning an entire people. Israeli government decisions may legitimately be examined and debated, just as the policies of any government may be examined and debated. Such criticism, by itself, is not necessarily antisemitic. At the same time, political criticism can cross a line when responsibility for the actions of a government is transferred collectively to Jewish people everywhere, when Jews outside Israel are treated as responsible for decisions made in Jerusalem, or when traditional antisemitic stereotypes and hostility are introduced into political arguments.

The opposite error must also be avoided. Christians who strongly support Israel should not treat every decision of the modern state as though it carries biblical authorization. The Bible does not instruct believers to give unconditional political approval to any modern government. Supporting the Jewish people's security does not require agreeing with every Israeli politician. Recognizing

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Israel's historical and biblical significance does not require believing that every territorial, military, judicial, or political decision represents the direct fulfillment of prophecy.

Indeed, the Hebrew prophets demonstrate that love for Israel and criticism of Israel are not necessarily opposites. Isaiah loved Israel. Jeremiah loved Israel. Ezekiel loved Israel. Yet none hesitated to speak when Israel was wrong. Their criticism did not arise from hatred of Israel but from their understanding of God's righteousness and Israel's covenant responsibilities. Biblical love is therefore not the same as blind approval.

This gives Christians an important principle when approaching modern Israel: biblical covenant is not the same thing as political endorsement. God's faithfulness to His promises should not be made dependent upon the behavior of a particular government. If God's covenant depended upon the political or moral perfection of Israel's leaders, that covenant would have disappeared thousands of years ago.

This brings us again to the events of 1948. Historically, something extraordinary occurred. A modern Jewish state was established in the land associated for thousands of years with Jewish history and biblical Israel. Jewish communities from widely separated regions subsequently gathered there in enormous numbers. People whose ancestors had lived for centuries in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Ethiopia, Russia, and elsewhere suddenly found themselves becoming citizens of the same country.

For a Christian reading Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets, it is understandable that such developments would attract attention. The language of gathering is too prominent in the prophetic writings simply to ignore. Yet careful interpretation requires humility. Christians can recognize striking parallels between biblical restoration language and modern Jewish history without claiming that we understand every detail of God's prophetic timetable.

Perhaps, therefore, we should not force an artificial choice between prophecy and history. The establishment of Israel in 1948 is unquestionably history. The theological question is whether God has also been working through that history.

Scripture repeatedly shows that divine providence can operate through ordinary historical and political events. Kings make decisions. Armies move. Empires rise and fall. People migrate. Governments change. Yet biblical writers sometimes look behind those events and recognize the purposes of God. Cyrus of Persia provides a striking example. He was a political ruler making decisions within the context of an empire, yet Isaiah could describe him as an instrument within God's purposes concerning Israel.

History and providence are therefore not mutually exclusive.

Christians can observe the extraordinary preservation and return of the Jewish people without claiming that every modern event has an obvious prophetic explanation. We can recognize the

remarkable relationship between biblical restoration language and modern Jewish history without declaring that every action of the modern State of Israel is prophetically mandated. Most importantly, we can distinguish between believing that God has not abandoned Israel and believing that Israel's government can never be wrong.

Those are entirely different statements.

The central question throughout these chapters has never been, “Is the modern State of Israel always right?” Scripture does not ask us to answer that question in the affirmative. The deeper question is the one Paul himself asked concerning Israel: “Hath God cast away his people?” His answer could hardly have been stronger: “God forbid.”

That answer does not settle every contemporary political dispute involving Israel. It was never intended to do so. It does, however, establish an important theological foundation. Political disagreements must not be allowed to determine what Scripture says about the faithfulness of God.

The modern State of Israel should therefore neither be idealized nor demonized. It should be examined as a real nation populated and governed by real human beings who are capable of courage and failure, wisdom and error, justice and injustice. Its policies should be considered on their particular facts and consequences rather than assumed to be either right or wrong simply because they are Israeli policies.

At the same time, Christians reading the biblical story cannot easily ignore what has happened to the Jewish people. A people scattered across continents survived. Jewish identity remained recognizable through centuries of exile. An ancient language returned to daily national life. Jewish communities from vastly different parts of the world gathered in the same land. A Jewish state appeared once again in the land where Abraham had walked, where Jacob became Israel, where David established Jerusalem as his capital, and where the prophets spoke repeatedly of Israel's dispersion and restoration.

Whether one understands these events as direct fulfillment of prophecy, partial fulfillment, providential preparation for something still future, or an extraordinary historical development, they deserve careful theological consideration. But one principle should remain clear throughout that discussion: God's faithfulness must never be confused with human perfection.

If God's continuing purposes for Israel are established by Scripture, those purposes do not depend upon our approval of every decision made in Jerusalem. They depend upon the character and promises of God.

That brings us back to the great question running through the biblical story. God made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He preserved Israel through exile. The prophets spoke repeatedly of dispersion and gathering. Paul declared that God had not cast away His people. Now, after

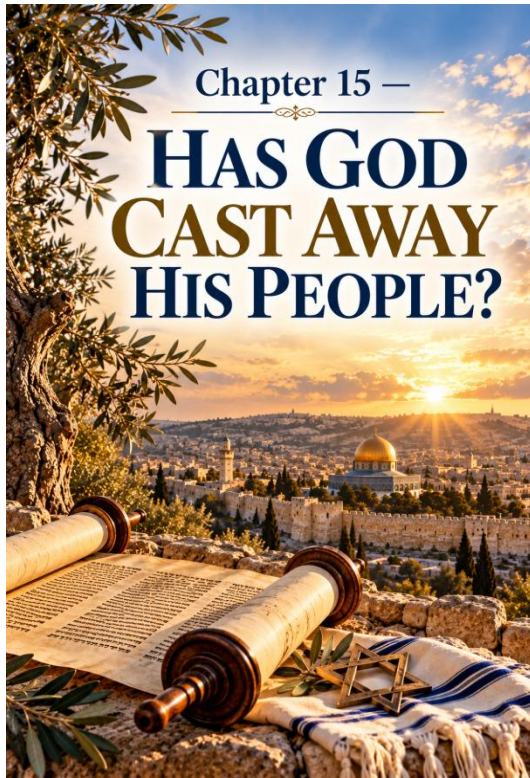
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centuries of dispersion, the Jewish people have again established a national home in the land of their ancestors.

For Christians, therefore, the existence of modern Israel presents a question that cannot be answered merely by politics. It brings us face to face with the larger biblical question of covenant and divine faithfulness.

And if God remains faithful to promises made thousands of years ago, then the story of Israel ultimately tells us something far greater than the story of one nation.

It tells us something about the faithfulness of God Himself.



Chapter 15 — Has God Cast Away His People?

We have now traveled a long road through Scripture and history. We began with Abraham, long before there was a nation called Israel. We followed the covenant through Isaac and Jacob.

We watched Jacob receive the name Israel and his descendants become a people.

We examined Israel's election, the promises concerning the land, the tragedy of disobedience, the reality of exile, and the prophetic hope of restoration.

We listened to the prophets speak of a scattered people who would one day be gathered.

We considered the words of Yeshua concerning Jerusalem.

We followed Paul's argument through Romans 9, 10, and 11. We stood before the olive tree and considered its natural branches, its broken branches, its wild branches, and the possibility of the natural branches being grafted in again.

We then moved beyond the pages of Scripture into Christian history and finally into the remarkable events surrounding the establishment of the modern State of Israel.

After considering all this evidence, we return to the question that has been waiting for us from the beginning. Paul asked it almost two thousand years ago:

“Hath God cast away his people?” His answer was immediate and emphatic: **“God forbid.”**

That question lies at the heart of this book because the answer reaches far beyond Israel. It touches the character of God Himself. If God made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, what became of those promises? If He chose Israel for a purpose, does Israel's failure eliminate that purpose? If the prophets spoke of exile followed by restoration, were those promises exhausted in ancient history? If Paul warned Gentile believers not to boast against the natural branches, does that warning still have meaning? Ultimately, can the God who makes a covenant be trusted to remain faithful to what He has promised?

To answer those questions, we must return to where the story began. God called Abraham and declared that He would make of him a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and make him a blessing. God further promised, “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” The covenant began with

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God's initiative. Abraham did not devise the plan or approach God with a proposal. God called Abraham. God made the promises. God established the covenant.

Those promises involved descendants, land, blessing, and a purpose extending far beyond Abraham himself. Through Abraham, blessing would eventually reach the nations. Yet the covenant did not end with Abraham. God reaffirmed it to Isaac. When famine came upon the land, God told Isaac, "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee." The promises given to Abraham were carried forward through his son.

Then the covenant passed to Jacob. At Bethel, Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, and God identified Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac. He repeated the promises concerning the land, Jacob's descendants, and blessing to the nations. Later Jacob received another name: Israel. From that moment forward, Israel became more than the name of one man. His descendants became the children of Israel, the tribes of Israel, and eventually the nation of Israel.

That matters because biblical Israel is not an undefined spiritual concept. Israel has an identifiable historical origin. Abraham was followed by Isaac, Isaac by Jacob, and Jacob's descendants became Israel. The identity was established long before the later theological debates that would arise concerning the meaning of Israel.

God then called Israel into a unique covenant relationship. At Sinai He declared, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." He continued, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Israel's election was never merely about privilege. It involved calling, responsibility, and purpose. Israel was chosen to bear witness to the one true God, to receive and preserve His revelation, and ultimately to become the people through whom Messiah would come.

Yet election did not mean perfection. Israel repeatedly failed. The biblical record makes no attempt to conceal those failures. Israel complained in the wilderness. The nation turned to idols. Kings disobeyed God. Priests became corrupt. Injustice spread. Prophets were ignored and sometimes persecuted. Eventually judgment came. The northern kingdom fell to Assyria. Judah was conquered by Babylon. Jerusalem was devastated. The Temple was destroyed. Many of the people were carried into exile.

At that moment someone might have asked the very question Paul would later ask: Has God finished with Israel?

The prophets answered no.

Remarkably, the same prophets who announced judgment also announced restoration. Jeremiah spoke of Israel's scattering but also declared, "He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock." Ezekiel declared, "For I will take you from among the

heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land.” Isaiah spoke of God assembling the outcasts of Israel and gathering the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Judgment was real. Exile was real. Disobedience had consequences. But judgment did not mean abandonment. This pattern becomes essential for understanding the biblical story. Israel could experience divine discipline without ceasing to be Israel. God's correction of His people did not necessarily mean the cancellation of His purposes for His people.

This distinction carries us forward to the New Testament. Yeshua's earthly ministry took place within the world of Israel. He was born Jewish. His mother was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. He worshipped in synagogues. He celebrated the biblical feasts. He taught from Israel's Scriptures. He went to Jerusalem. The Gospel did not suddenly appear disconnected from everything that had preceded it. Yeshua entered a story that had begun centuries earlier with Abraham.

When Yeshua looked upon Jerusalem, He did not speak as though the city's story had ended. He lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee.” Those were words of judgment, but they were also words of grief. Then He said something remarkable: “Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

The word “till” matters. Judgment was coming upon Jerusalem, but Yeshua's words also looked beyond judgment. They anticipated something still future. Later He spoke of Jerusalem being trodden down by the Gentiles “until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” Again we encounter a word pointing beyond the immediate crisis: until. Jerusalem's suffering would not necessarily be the final chapter.

Then we come to Paul. Few passages are more important to this discussion than Romans 9–11. Paul understood that the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles raised an enormous theological question. Many Jewish people had not accepted Yeshua as Messiah, while Gentiles were entering the community of believers in great numbers. What did this mean for Israel? Had God's promises failed?

Paul begins Romans 9 by expressing profound grief for his fellow Jews: “I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.” He identifies them as Israelites and speaks of the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the patriarchs, and ultimately Messiah's human descent from Israel. Paul does not speak of Israel with contempt. He speaks with sorrow, affection, and a profound consciousness of everything God had entrusted to Israel.

After wrestling with Israel's unbelief through Romans 9 and 10, Paul reaches Romans 11 and asks the question around which this final chapter has been constructed: “I say then, Hath God

cast away his people?” If Israel's role in God's purposes had simply ended, this would have been the perfect opportunity for Paul to say so. He could have said that Israel's purpose had been completed. He could have said that ethnic Israel no longer possessed any distinctive significance. He could have declared that God's covenant relationship with Israel had ended.

Instead, Paul's response is immediate: “God forbid.”

Paul then points to himself: “For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” Paul had not ceased to be an Israelite because he believed in Yeshua. Then he states the principle even more directly: “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew.”

That statement deserves to be read slowly. God hath not cast away his people.

Paul then introduces the concept of the remnant. Israel's unbelief was neither total nor final. There remained Jewish believers in Yeshua, just as in Elijah's time God had preserved a remnant within Israel. But Paul does not stop there. He asks another question: “Have they stumbled that they should fall?” Again he responds, “God forbid.”

Israel had stumbled. Paul does not deny it. Some branches had been broken off because of unbelief. But stumbling was not the same as permanent rejection. That distinction brings Paul to one of the most important images in the entire discussion: the olive tree.

Paul describes a cultivated olive tree with natural branches. Some natural branches have been broken off, and branches from a wild olive tree have been grafted in among them. The Gentile believer has therefore entered something that already existed. The Gentile did not plant the tree. The Gentile did not create the root. The Gentile did not establish the covenant. The wild branch was grafted into a cultivated tree and began to partake of the richness of its root.

This is why Paul's warning is so important: “Boast not against the branches.” The warning is directed toward Gentile believers. Paul understood that Gentile inclusion could produce Gentile arrogance. The wild branches might eventually begin to imagine that the tree now belonged exclusively to them. They might look upon the broken natural branches with contempt. Paul anticipated that danger and warned against it: “But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.”

The Church did not give Israel its Scriptures. Israel gave the Church the Scriptures. The Church did not give the world the patriarchs. The patriarchs came from Israel. The Church did not produce the prophets of Israel. The Church received their writings. The Gentile Church did not give Israel the Messiah. Messiah came to the nations through Israel. The wild branches do not support the root. The root supports them.

As we considered earlier, we might extend Paul's picture for a moment as an illustration. Imagine that the natural branches of the cultivated olive tree produce green olives. Then imagine that a wild branch is grafted into that same tree and produces olives of another color, perhaps red. The

red olives do not mean that the branch has failed to become part of the tree. The branch is genuinely attached to the tree. It receives life from the same trunk, draws nourishment from the same root, and shares in the richness of the same olive tree. Yet it continues to bear fruit according to what it is.

So it is with Gentile believers. Inclusion does not require erasure. Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to share in the blessings that flow from the root. At the same time, Jewish identity does not need to disappear in order for Gentiles to belong. The grafted branch belongs to the tree, but it does not become the natural branch. Unity does not require sameness.

Paul then goes even further. He warns Gentile believers not to become proud because some natural branches have been broken off. “Be not highminded, but fear.” Then comes a statement of enormous importance: “And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in.” The broken branches have not become foreign branches. They remain natural branches. Paul says that God is able to graft them in again.

That single word carries enormous theological significance: again. Something remains between the natural branches and their own olive tree. Paul does not describe their return as the grafting of strangers into something foreign to them. He describes it as restoration.

Paul then brings his argument toward its climax by speaking of a mystery: “Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” Notice Paul's language carefully. The blindness is “in part,” and it lasts “until.” Neither expression naturally communicates permanent abandonment.

Paul then declares, “And so all Israel shall be saved.” Christians have debated the precise meaning and timing of this statement for centuries, and those debates should be approached with humility. Yet whatever interpretive position one adopts, Paul's argument does not move toward contempt for Israel or the disappearance of Israel. It moves toward hope.

Paul then provides one of the great reasons for that hope: “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.” God's faithfulness rests ultimately not upon Israel's perfection but upon God's character.

That brings us back to Abraham. It brings us back to Isaac and Jacob. It brings us back to the covenant. It brings us back to the prophets, Jerusalem, Yeshua, Romans 9–11, and the olive tree. And it brings us once again to Paul's question: “Hath God cast away his people?”

When the entire biblical argument is placed before us, Paul's own answer stands at its center: “God forbid.”

But if that is our theological conclusion, it cannot remain merely an argument printed on the pages of a book. It must affect how Christians think about and relate to Jewish people.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

For centuries, some Christians spoke about Jews as though they were a rejected people. Jewish suffering was sometimes interpreted as evidence of divine abandonment. Christian teaching at times portrayed Jews collectively as enemies of God. In different periods of history, theological contempt became intertwined with social exclusion, discrimination, forced conversion, persecution, and violence.

The history examined earlier in this book should make Christians extremely cautious about where contemptuous theology can lead. Paul did not tell Gentile Christians to boast against the branches. He told them precisely the opposite: “Boast not against the branches.”

Those words should still challenge the Church.

How can Christians boast against the people from whom came the patriarchs, the prophets, the Scriptures, the apostles, and Yeshua Himself? How can followers of a Jewish Messiah regard the Jewish people with contempt? How can Gentile Christians read Romans 11 and approach Jewish people with spiritual arrogance?

The appropriate response is not sentimental idealization. Jewish people, like every other people, are human beings with different beliefs, personalities, political views, traditions, convictions, and ways of life. Nor should Christians assume personal guilt for historical events they did not commit. The response Paul calls for is something more biblical and constructive: humility.

That humility should produce respect. It should produce gratitude. It should produce a willingness to listen. It should produce a determination to oppose antisemitism wherever it appears. Above all, it should produce a refusal to use Christian theology as a weapon against the Jewish people.

Christians can disagree with Judaism theologically while treating Jewish people with dignity. Christians can believe that Yeshua is Messiah without approaching Jewish people with coercion or contempt. Christians can discuss difficult theological questions without caricaturing Jewish belief. Christians can also disagree with particular policies of the modern State of Israel without transferring responsibility for those policies to Jewish people collectively.

Likewise, recognizing God's continuing purposes for Israel does not require believing that the modern State of Israel is politically infallible. Biblical covenant and political endorsement are not the same thing. Ancient Israel's kings could be wrong while Israel remained Israel. The prophets could condemn Israel's actions while still believing God's covenant promises. In the same way, Christians may evaluate the policies of the modern State of Israel according to evidence, justice, morality, and truth without concluding that political disagreement has somehow cancelled God's covenant.

Governments change. Political parties change. Prime ministers change. Policies change. Borders and political circumstances have changed repeatedly throughout history. But the theological

question addressed in this book is deeper than contemporary politics. It concerns whether God keeps His word.

That is why the title of this book is Israel and the Faithfulness of God.

Ultimately, this book is not merely about Israel. It is about God. Israel becomes the great biblical case through which we confront a much larger question: When God makes a promise, does He keep it?

If God's promises to Abraham can simply disappear because generations later Abraham's descendants proved unfaithful, what does that tell us about covenant? If God's election can be cancelled simply by human failure, where does that leave any of us? If grace finally depends upon human perfection, who can stand?

Paul understood that the deeper issue was mercy and the faithfulness of God. That is why Romans 11 does not end with human pride. It ends in worship. After wrestling with Israel, Gentiles, election, unbelief, mercy, judgment, and restoration, Paul reaches the limits of human understanding and declares, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" He continues, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

That may be the most appropriate place for us to end as well. We do not understand every detail of God's purposes. We do not know precisely how every prophecy will unfold. We should be cautious about claiming that every contemporary event represents the direct fulfillment of a particular biblical verse. Yet we can know something about the character of the One who made the promises.

He is faithful.

Israel's story demonstrates that judgment does not necessarily mean abandonment. Exile does not mean that God has forgotten. Human failure does not necessarily cancel divine purpose. The inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God does not require the disappearance of Israel.

The wild branches have been grafted in. They should rejoice in the richness of the tree. But they should never boast. They should remember the root from which they receive nourishment. They should remember that they did not create the covenant into which they have been brought. And they should remember Paul's warning: "Boast not against the branches."

For the Church today, perhaps those words should produce a different posture toward the Jewish people: not superiority, but humility; not contempt, but respect; not indifference toward antisemitism, but a willingness to stand against it; not an attempt to erase Jewish identity, but an acknowledgment of the people through whom God brought the Scriptures, the prophets, the apostles, and Messiah into the world.

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

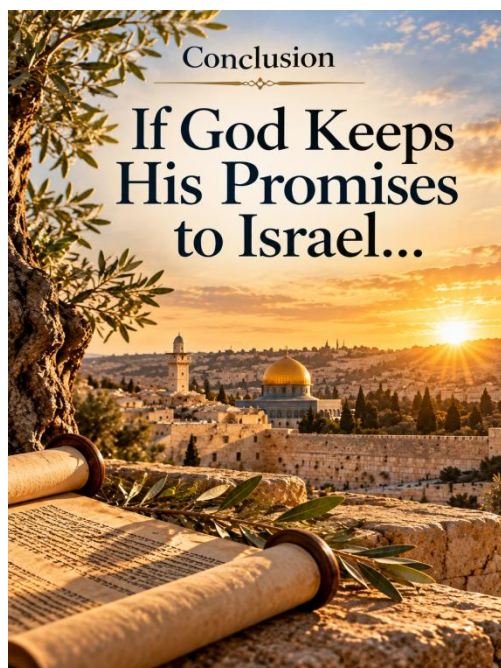
Nearly two thousand years ago Paul asked, “Hath God cast away his people?” After Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; after Sinai and the covenant; after exile and restoration; after Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; after Yeshua's words concerning Jerusalem; after Romans 9, 10, and 11; after the remnant, the olive tree, the natural branches, and the promise that God is able to graft them in again, Paul's answer still stands:

“God forbid.”

Perhaps, then, the final question is no longer whether God has remained faithful to Israel. Perhaps the question for Gentile Christians is whether those who have been grafted into the olive tree will respond to that faithfulness with the humility Paul required.

We did not plant the tree. We did not create the root. We were invited to share in its richness. Therefore, let us never boast against the branches. Let us remember the covenant. Let us remember the warning. Let us remember the mercy by which we ourselves stand.

And above all, let us remember that the God who called Abraham is still the God whose character Scripture declares from generation to generation.



Conclusion — If God Keeps His Promises to Israel...

We began this book with a question about Israel, but we end with a question about God:

Does God keep His promises?

That question has followed us from the call of Abraham through the covenant, from Isaac to Jacob, from Egypt to Sinai, from the land to exile, from the prophets to Jerusalem, from Yeshua to Paul, and from the natural branches of the olive tree to the wild branches grafted in among them. Again and again, we have encountered human failure, divine judgment, unexpected mercy, and promises that at times seemed almost impossible to

fulfill.

Israel's story has never been the story of a perfect people. Abraham had moments of weakness. Jacob struggled with God. Israel rebelled in the wilderness. The nation repeatedly turned away from God's commandments. Kings failed. Priests became corrupt. Prophets were rejected. Jerusalem fell. The Temple was destroyed, and the people were scattered. If God's promises depended upon human faithfulness, Israel's story might have ended long ago. Yet it did not, because one of the great themes running through Scripture is that human beings may fail while God remains faithful to His character and purposes.

When God called Abraham, He made promises that reached far beyond Abraham's lifetime. He promised descendants, blessing, and a land, and He declared that through Abraham blessing would reach the families of the earth. Those promises were reaffirmed to Isaac and then to Jacob. Jacob became Israel, and from his descendants came the nation through whom God would reveal His Word and ultimately bring Messiah into the world. Israel's election did not guarantee an easy history. In many ways, it brought greater responsibility. The prophets repeatedly warned that covenant privilege did not remove accountability. Israel could be judged. Israel could be disciplined. Israel could be driven from the land, and eventually Israel was.

Yet throughout the prophetic writings, judgment was repeatedly accompanied by another message: restoration. The God who scattered spoke of gathering. The God who judged spoke of mercy. The God who permitted exile spoke of return. Jeremiah declared that the One who scattered Israel would gather Israel. Ezekiel spoke of God gathering His people from among the nations and bringing them into their own land. Isaiah looked toward the gathering of the outcasts of Israel and the dispersed of Judah. The prophets did not pretend that Israel had been faithful. Their hope rested upon the faithfulness of God.

That distinction is crucial. The central question has never been whether Israel deserved God's faithfulness. The central question is whether God remains faithful to His Word. When we come to the New Testament, the question becomes even more urgent. Many Jewish people did not recognize Yeshua as Messiah, while increasing numbers of Gentiles entered the community of believers. The situation could easily have produced the conclusion that Israel's role had ended and that God had transferred His purposes entirely to another people.

Paul confronted that conclusion directly when he asked, "Hath God cast away his people?" His answer was unmistakable: "God forbid." Paul did not deny Israel's unbelief or minimize its seriousness. He spoke of branches that had been broken off, yet he also warned Gentile believers against drawing the wrong conclusion from what they were witnessing. His command was direct: "Boast not against the branches."

That warning may be among the most important words Gentile Christians can hear when thinking about Israel. The wild branch had been grafted into the cultivated olive tree and had received something extraordinary. It now shared in the richness of the root, but participation was never intended to become superiority. The grafted branch had not planted the tree. It had not created the root. It had not produced the patriarchs. It had not given the world the prophets. It had not preserved the Scriptures through the centuries. It had not brought Messiah into the world. It had been grafted in. Paul therefore reminds Gentile believers, "Thou bearest not the root, but the root thee."

That statement should produce gratitude rather than arrogance. Gentile believers have been brought near to something they did not originate. They have become participants in blessings that reach back through Israel's story to the promises given to Abraham. The appropriate response is therefore not boasting but thanksgiving, humility, and worship.

Paul's olive tree also leaves room for hope. The natural branches that were broken off have not ceased to be natural branches. Paul declares that God is able to graft them in again. He speaks of Israel's blindness as being "in part" and continuing "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." Then he makes the extraordinary declaration that "all Israel shall be saved." Christians have long debated the precise meaning and timing of these words, but Paul's argument clearly does not end with Israel disappearing from God's purposes. Instead, Paul directs our attention toward the character of God when he declares, "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

That statement brings the entire argument of this book into focus. God's faithfulness is not dependent upon human perfection. If it were, there would be no hope for Israel. But there would also be no hope for the Church, and there would be no hope for any of us. This is where Israel's story speaks to every believer, not because Gentile believers become Israel or because the distinctions between Israel and the nations disappear, but because the same question stands behind every promise of God: Can He be trusted?

Israel and the Faithfulness of God

When God promises forgiveness, can He be trusted? When He promises mercy and salvation, can He be trusted? When He promises resurrection and the return of Yeshua, can He be trusted? When He promises that death will not have the final word and that righteousness will ultimately triumph, can He be trusted? Our confidence in those promises rests upon the same foundation as Israel's hope: the character of God.

This is why the question of Israel is not merely a secondary theological curiosity. It touches the reliability of God's Word. If God could permanently abandon the people to whom He made covenant promises, Christians would have reason to ask difficult questions about every other promise He has made. But if God remains faithful even when human beings are unfaithful, then Israel's story becomes a remarkable testimony to the steadfastness of God.

Israel's survival itself invites reflection. Empires that once dominated the ancient world disappeared. Assyria passed away. Babylon fell. Persia gave way to other powers. Greece and Rome rose and declined. Kingdoms, dynasties, and civilizations came and went, yet the Jewish people remained. They survived conquest, exile, dispersion, persecution, expulsions, forced conversions, pogroms, and the Holocaust. Jewish communities lived for centuries scattered across continents, often separated by language and culture, yet Jewish identity endured. Then, in the modern period, Jewish people returned in large numbers to the land connected with their biblical history, and in 1948 the modern State of Israel was established.

Christians may disagree about precisely how these events relate to biblical prophecy. We should resist the temptation to identify every political development with a prophetic verse or to assume that every decision of a modern government carries divine approval. The modern State of Israel is governed by human beings and should be evaluated as such. Its governments can make wise decisions and unwise decisions. Its leaders can be right or wrong. Christians may agree with some Israeli policies and disagree with others. Biblical covenant must never be confused with unconditional political endorsement.

Political disagreements, however, should not determine our theology of God's faithfulness, nor should they determine how Christians treat Jewish people. Jewish people are not identical with the government of Israel. Jews living in Canada, the United States, Britain, France, Argentina, Australia, or anywhere else are not personally responsible for decisions made by politicians in Jerusalem. Holding Jewish people collectively responsible for the actions of a government is unjust, just as it would be unjust to hold every citizen of another country personally responsible for every decision made by that country's government.

Christians should understand this distinction clearly, particularly because Christian history gives us reason to take it seriously. There were periods when Christians spoke of Jews as though they were rejected by God. Theology sometimes provided language that encouraged contempt, and that contempt could move from sermons and theological writings into social discrimination and, at times, persecution. History has shown where contempt can lead. Paul gave the Church a

warning long before much of that history unfolded when he wrote, “Boast not against the branches.” Those words should still be heard as a warning and an invitation to humility.

Christians do not need to agree with Judaism in order to respect Jewish people. We do not need to abandon the conviction that Yeshua is Messiah, nor do we need to avoid difficult theological questions. But disagreement does not require contempt, conviction does not require arrogance, and faithfulness to our beliefs does not require hostility toward those who do not share them. Christians can speak honestly while listening respectfully. We can stand against antisemitism wherever it appears. We can refuse to treat Jewish people merely as symbols in theological arguments and instead encounter them as human beings, as neighbors, friends, colleagues, and people whose history deserves to be heard.

We should also remember something the Church should never have forgotten. Yeshua was Jewish. His mother was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. The prophets belonged to Israel. The Scriptures upon which the New Testament stands came through Israel, and the earliest followers of Yeshua were Jews. Christianity cannot tell its own story without telling Israel's story. The roots go deep, and Gentile Christians have been grafted into a tree they did not plant.

That reality should change the posture with which Christians approach the Jewish people. It should replace superiority with humility, boasting with gratitude, and contempt with respect and love. It should also move Christians away from indifference when antisemitism appears and toward the courage to confront it. If Paul's warning means anything, it means that those who have been grafted into the olive tree have no biblical basis for boasting against its natural branches.

The title of this book is Israel and the Faithfulness of God because, in the end, Israel points us toward something greater than Israel. Israel points us toward the God who makes promises, the God who remembers covenant, the God who judges but does not forget mercy, the God whose purposes extend across generations, and the God whose faithfulness is not exhausted by human failure.

Paul reaches the end of his discussion of Israel in Romans 11 and discovers that theological argument eventually gives way to worship. After wrestling with election, unbelief, mercy, Gentiles, Israel, and the purposes of God, he declares, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” There are mysteries here. There are questions we cannot fully answer. There are prophecies whose complete fulfillment we may not yet understand, and there are events in history whose significance may become fully clear only when viewed from the perspective of God's completed purposes. Humility therefore remains necessary.

Yet humility does not mean that we can say nothing. We can say that God called Abraham and reaffirmed His covenant to Isaac and Jacob. We can say that Jacob became Israel and that God chose Israel and gave the nation a purpose. We can say that Israel sinned and experienced

judgment. We can say that the prophets nevertheless spoke of restoration. We can say that Yeshua spoke of Jerusalem in language that looked beyond judgment. We can say that Paul asked whether God had cast away His people, and we can say that Paul's answer was "God forbid."

Perhaps that is where this book should finally leave us, not staring merely at Israel, but looking through Israel's story toward the character of God. If God keeps His promises to Israel after centuries of rebellion, exile, suffering, dispersion, and unbelief, then His faithfulness is not fragile. If God remembers a covenant across generations, then the passing of time does not erase His promises. If human failure cannot finally defeat His purposes, then our hope rests upon something stronger than ourselves. If God remains faithful even when circumstances appear to suggest otherwise, then faith can continue even when fulfillment has not yet been seen.

If God has not forgotten Israel, then Israel's continuing story tells the Church something it must never forget: God has not forgotten His promises. The final word does not belong to exile, persecution, human failure, unbelief, or the rise and fall of governments and empires. The final word belongs to the One who made the covenant, and He is faithful.

If God keeps His promises to Israel, then we have reason to take seriously every promise He has made. Our confidence does not rest upon the faithfulness of human beings, whether Israel, the Church, or ourselves. It rests upon the faithfulness of the One who made the promises.

And that, ultimately, is the message of Israel's story. God is faithful not because His people have always been faithful to Him, but because faithfulness belongs to His very character.