

## Lesson 5

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF ISRAEL TO THE CHURCH

The relationship of Israel to the church may be the thorniest problem in the whole subject of prophecy. The issue is whether the church is a unique body totally distinct from Israel of the Old Testament with its own promises or does the church inherit the promises of God given to Israel, forming the “New Israel” or “Spiritual Israel.”

Dispensationalists believe that the Christian church of this present dispensation constitutes a unique group of believers, separate and distinct from believers of past and future dispensations. According to a dispensationalist, the church is viewed as a parenthesis in God’s dealing with Israel. God has made certain promises to Israel, and they must be fulfilled to Israel but cannot be fulfilled in the church. Therefore, God’s prophetic clock has stopped on the Day of Pentecost when the church was formed and will not begin again until the church is raptured just before the tribulation period. The church, instead of inheriting the promises of ancient Israel, has an entirely new and distinct set of promises of its own. Israel’s promises must be fulfilled literally to real, ethnic, national Israel in the millennium. Dispensationalists base their position on a literal interpretation of scripture.

Amils, postmils and historic premils all see the church as “Spiritual Israel” or “New Israel” and believe the church fulfills the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament. The church is “Israel” in a new and expanded form, now open to Jew and Gentile alike apart from racial distinction whatever, demanding only faith in Christ. historic premils see the church, although coming into existence as the body of Christ on the Day of Pentecost, as the continuation and maturation of the remnant of Israel.

### GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The Bible does distinguish national, physical, ethnic Israel from the church (1 Cor. 10:32).

The Bible does distinguish unbelieving Gentiles from the church (1 Cor. 10:32)

The Bible makes a distinction between believing Israelites and non-believing Israelites (Rom. 9:1-6). Promises were made to all Israelites but only those who truly believed the promises made up believing Israel in the Old Testament.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS (JEWS) BECOME PART OF THE CHURCH

#### Hebrews 11:39-40

Dispensationalism. The “better things” refers basically to the truths of the church of which the Old Testament Israelites had no part.

Amils and Historic Premils. The things New Testament believers experience as members of the church are “better things” but it is through these “better things that Old Testament saints (Israelites) are “made perfect.” The Old Testament saints could not be made “complete” or “whole” without the New Testament saints. Both Old Testament and New Testament saints are now in the body of Christ, the church, and await Christ’s second coming. These verses tell us that Old Testament believers were included in the “better things” for New Testament believers, and there is a basic oneness of Old Testament and New Testament believers.

#### Revelation 21:9-14

Dispensationalists. The “bride, the wife of the Lamb” is the church made up of only believers from Pentecost to the rapture, which will be in the New Jerusalem (heavenly city). However, the redeemed of all ages will also be in the New Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22-23). The city, the New Jerusalem, takes her chief characterization from the bride, the church, who dwells there.

Amils and Historic Premils. The city (New Jerusalem) is clearly identified as “the bride, the Lamb’s wife, which obviously refers to the inhabitants of this city. The inhabitants include Old Testament saints as represented by the names of the Twelve Tribes of Israel on the gates, and the New Testament saints as represented by the names of the Twelve Apostles on the foundation. It becomes obvious that both Old Testament and New Testament saints make up “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” In the New Testament, the church is pictured as the “bride of Christ” (Eph. 5:27). In Revelation 19:7 the church is also depicted as the wife of Christ. In the Old Testament, Israel is called the “bride of God” (Isa. 62:5). It seems logical to believe that Old Testament saints and New Testament saints make up the “bride of Christ,” the church.

Historic premils believe that Old Testament saints were made part of the church on the Day of Pentecost whereby both dead and living, believing Jews were made part of the Body of Christ, the church, forming the “bride of Christ.”

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS BECOME SPIRITUAL ISRAEL**

The New Testament actually does not so much speak of Old Testament saints being admitted to the church, but the Gentile believers of the New Testament age being admitted to Israel.

#### Ephesians 2:11-22

Dispensationalists. Gentiles who receive Christ in the church age partake of the salvation (spiritual) aspects of the covenants given to Israel (Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, New Covenants). However, in the forming of the church, the Jews who believe in the church age are cut off from their distinctive national program and introduced into a different order, the church. Thus Jews, who become Christians, forfeit their status as Israelites and therefore lose claim to the totality of the ancient Jewish promises, having received in their place a totally new set of “church promises.”

Amils and Historic Premils. Gentiles before conversion to Christ are separate from (without) Christ, aliens (excluded) from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers (non-residents, not a citizen) to the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, Davidic, Palestinian, New Covenants).

Through His death, Christ abolished the Law, which separated Jews from Gentiles; therefore in Christ God has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles into one body. Therefore, Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens to the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants, but are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household. The “saints” must refer to Jewish saints (believers in the Old Testament). The total household of God (Old Testament and New Testament saints) is built upon the New Testament Apostles and the Old Testament prophets, and Christ is the chief cornerstone, which unites them into one building in the Lord. Therefore, believing Gentiles, members of the church, have been admitted as citizens to the commonwealth of Israel, from which they had previously been aliens, and thus share in the covenants made by God with Israel in the Old Testament (Rom. 9:1-5). Believing Gentiles, therefore, become spiritual Israelites, forming the New Israel. Obviously, the Apostles (all Jews) saw themselves as the inheritors of the promise to Israel because they were true Israel.

#### Romans 11:1-6; 16-24

Dispensationalists. The olive tree represents the place of blessing and does not represent Israel. The natural branches represent natural, national Israel who is out of the place of blessing because of unbelief and the wild branches represent Gentiles who believe and are in the place of blessing.

Amils and Historic Premils. The whole context of Romans 11 is about Israel. The Apostle Paul states that just because the majority of Israelites were in unbelief in no way indicated that God had cast off Israel and nullified His promises to the nation and His covenants with them. The promises of God to Israel were intended only for believing Israelites not for the physical Jews as a whole, “for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Therefore, believing Jews in Paul’s day constituted the “remnant” (Rom. 11: 1-6) and these Jews were in the church. Jewish believers (including Paul himself)

constituted a part of God’s continuing program for Israel and the Jewish believers are part of the Christian church, the body of Christ.

Paul then used the illustration of the olive tree. The olive tree is Israel (Jer. 11:16; Hosea 14:6). The “root” of the tree represents Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant. The trunk (not mentioned in context) would be the covenanted people (believing Israelites). The natural branches represent physical Israelites who were under the covenant in the Old Testament. Some of these Israelites were true believers and some were not. Some of these natural branches were broken off from the covenant because of their unbelief. Others of the natural physical Jews stayed in the covenant because they believed - they were never taken out of Israel’s covenants, the place of spiritual blessing. The wild branches represent Gentiles who believe in Christ and become a part of the covenant and the blessings to Israel. These believing Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree (Israel). Gentile Christians, therefore, have been admitted to the ancient commonwealth of Israel as replacements for believing Jews and they now share with the remaining Jews the benefits of the promises to Israel.

It should be carefully noted that the believing Jews, represented by the good natural branches, did not move. They were not transferred to a new tree. It was the Gentile Christians who became part of the already existing good olive tree (Israel) and who share with the already present natural branches (Jews). No believing Israelite is cut off from any promise. Rather, it is the unbelieving Israelite who is cut off. The logical conclusion is that believing Gentiles become spiritual Jews and partake of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Historic premils, postmils and some amils believe that Romans 11:25-26 does teach a yet future turning of natural Jews in mass to Christ at the Second advent. The great majority of physical Jews today are hardened to the gospel but one day “all Israel shall be saved”; that is, a yet future generation of Jews will turn to Christ in mass. Historic premils believe these believing Jews will go into the millennium (Jer. 32:37-40; 33:14-16; Zech. 12:10; 13:9).

#### Matthew 21:33-45

Dispensationalists. Most dispensationalists think that in Matthew 21:43 the word “nation” does not refer to the church but to another future generation of Israelites, a Jewish remnant which survives the tribulation and enters the millennium. A few see the “nation” as the church but do not see the giving of the kingdom to the church as a permanent transaction, for God will again give the kingdom to Israel sometime after the rapture of the church.

Amils and Historic Premils. In this parable, the vineyard is Israel (Isa. 5:1,2); its owner is God; the vine growers or tenant farmers are the religious leaders of Israel; the servants who are sent to gather the fruit are the prophets; and the son of the owner is Jesus the Messiah.

The explanation of the words “and will rent out the vineyard to other vine growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper season” is given by Christ as the taking away of the kingdom of God from the Jewish leaders then in control of the nation, and giving of this kingdom to “a nation producing fruit of it” (Matt. 21:43). The “nation” referred to here is the church (Rom. 10:19; 1 Pet. 2:9). Therefore, the kingdom of God in the Old Testament, as it was incorporated in Israel, was removed and given to the church. In place of the old arrangement, God would take the vineyard (still representing the Israelites who accepted Jesus as Messiah) and put it under new management with the Twelve Apostles as the new husbandmen. This new community was to be known as the Christian church (Lk. 12:32; Matt. 19:28).

The Christian church incorporating the believing Israelites as its nucleus is to replace the nation of Israel as the people of God.

#### Philippians 3:3

Dispensationalists. Very little is said about this verse in dispensational circles. Kenneth Wuest says that the “we” is an editorial “we” and Paul is speaking of himself only in this statement. Paul, therefore, is simply contrasting believing and unbelieving Israel “after the flesh.”

Amils and Historic Premils. The Epistle to the Philippians was written primarily to Gentiles who had believed in Christ. They are called “the true circumcision” identifying them as spiritual Jews. In the

Old Testament circumcision of a Jewish male was a “sign” of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:7-14) and was the distinguishing physical mark of a Jew (Exo. 12:44). Israelites became popularly known as “the circumcision” (Acts 10:45; 11:2-3; Rom. 3:30; Eph. 2:11; Col. 4:10-11).

It is beyond question that the term “the circumcision” was a technical designation for the Jews. Yet, in a spiritual sense, Jews and Gentiles make up the spiritual circumcision or spiritual Israel because they have believed in Messiah (Philip. 3:1-3).

The term “the circumcision” is applied to the church; therefore, the church must be the new people of God, carrying on the life of the old people.

#### James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1

Dispensationalists. The term “the dispersion” refers to Jewish Christians in the church.

Amils and Historic Premils. The term “the dispersion” is another technical term in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) used to denote the Jews who were dispensed by God among the Gentile nations (Deut. 28:25; 30:4; Jer. 41:17). This term is also found in the New Testament and refers to Jews (John 7:35). In both James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1, this term is obviously identified with the church. Again technical Jewish terminology is referred to the church. Obviously, the Jewish commonwealth has taken on a new and expanded form.

The church is spiritual Israel dispersed all over this world and far from their heavenly home. In both James and First Peter, the readers may be mainly Jewish but some Gentiles were certainly included and these epistles were written to the whole church (both Jews and Gentiles who believed).

#### 1 Peter 2:9-10

Dispensationalists. The words “for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God” could be translated “a people of God,” making the church distinct from Israel of the Old Testament.

Amils and Historic Premils. The Apostle Peter is definitely referring to the church. The terms “chosen race” (Isa. 43:20ff, Deut. 10:15), “a royal priesthood” (Isa. 61:6; 66:21), “a holy nation” (Exo. 19:6; Deut. 7:6) and “a people for God’s own possession” (Isa. 42:16) all refer to Israel in the Old Testament. The church, especially Gentiles who believe, was not a people, but now the church (both Jew and Gentile) is in its very essence the people of God. The absence of the definite article “the” can stress quality or essence. Furthermore, the people of God in the Old Testament were the Jews but in the New Testament the people of God are the church (Hos. 1:10; 2:23). The most cherished and particular titles of Israel in the Old Testament are given to the church. Therefore, the church is Spiritual Israel.

#### Galatians 6:15-16

Dispensationalists. According to most dispensationalists, this is the only verse in the Bible, which might identify Israel and the church. The Israel of God is physical Jews in the church who trust in Christ. They translate the “and” (*kai*) as a connective *kai*: “and.” Therefore, a distinction is made between “those who will walk by this rule” (Gentile Christians or the church as a whole) and the Israel of God (Jewish Christians in the church).

Amils and Historic Premils. It is grammatically possible to take the “and” *kai* and translate it “even.” This would be the explicative use of *kai*. Therefore, “those who walk by this rule” are “the Israel of God (both Jew and Gentile). It would be permissible to equate “the Israel of God” with the church in light of the other passages in the New Testament that do so (Rom. 2: 28-29).

Gentiles do not become physical Jews, but Gentiles who trust in Christ become spiritual Jews and have a continuity with God’s people in the Old Testament.