



The church and Israel

Blueprint for a Biblical view

1. Jesus and Israel

When we look at what the New Testament says about Israel, the Jewish people, and the attitude of the Christian church towards them, then the first thing we must say is: Jesus is a Jew, a descendant of David (Luke 2:4), born under the law (Galatians 4:4), who came to proclaim the kingdom of heaven to the children of Israel (Matthew 10:5; see also Matthew 15:16).¹ This is not to say that Jesus came exclusively for his own, the Jewish people. During his earthly sojourn we see him opening the way to other places and other peoples. We think of the country of the Gerasenes (Luke 8:26ff), the land of the Samaritans (John 4), and the way people from surrounding regions flocked to him (Matthew 4:24).

It is clear, though, that the main focus of his work was directed to all of Israel, and whatever happened to those who were not Israelites falls within the scope of the history of Israel. At the same time, Jesus makes it clear that he is the Saviour of the whole world (John 8:12), and that – in the future – many will come from east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11). In this, Jesus draws on the prophecies of the Old Testament; and this is consistent with expectations of the future that prevailed among the people of Israel.

Jesus himself emphasizes that in all of this, faith in him is decisive, for Jews as well as for the nations (John 12:20-36). Everything stands or falls with him. It already becomes clear during his lifetime on earth that a division would arise within the one Jewish people (see Matthew 10:14,15; 11:21-24). The parable of the wicked tenants explicitly tells us that the kingdom of heaven will be taken from some, and given to others, to a people that will give him the fruits owed to him (Matthew 21:33-46).²

2. The Book of Acts

When we read the book of Acts, we see how this command of Jesus to the apostles is worked out. In Acts 2, Peter speaks to the Jewish people.³ He addresses them as '*men of Israel*' (Acts 2:36), and reminds them of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:39; see also Joel 3). In Acts 8, the church is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria; Philip, too, travels about in Samaria, proclaiming the Christ there (Acts 8:5). The Samaritans' acceptance of Christ is seen by the apostles in Jerusalem as a significant development, and in the coming of Peter and John to Samaria this transition is formally acknowledged (Acts 8:14-17).

After Acts 8, the next significant 'breakthrough' is the baptism of Cornelius and his household, as described in Acts 10 and 11. It becomes clear to the church in Jerusalem that God is now giving the Gentiles the opportunity to turn to him (Acts 11:18). A division of labour is agreed upon: Paul is to go to the Gentiles, while Peter, John and James will go to 'the circumcised' (Galatians 2:9).

It is remarkable that Paul, who after all is the 'apostle to the Gentiles', consistently goes to the Jews and their synagogues first, and only after that to the Gentiles. In doing so, he appears to seek out his compatriots, choosing to first bring the gospel to them; only afterwards do the Gentiles come into the picture.

What drives this practice? Is it Christ's command from Acts 1, which has become a general practice, or does Paul see this sequence as little more than a personal search for his compatriots, joined to him by a bond of blood? Taking into account what Paul says about the gospel as '*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek*' (Romans 1:16; see also 2:9-11), the conclusion is warranted that Paul sees this order as one of principle. The Gospel is from the Jews for the Jews (Acts 13:32-33),⁴ and then also for the Gentiles.

3. Jews and Gentiles

When we survey the book of Acts, we note that there is a shift in the direction of the Gentiles. Where at first this shift was individual and incidental, starting with Cornelius, the Gentiles as a group come into the picture. In fact, Paul even becomes 'the apostle to the Gentiles'. This transition does not imply that from now on the gospel is proclaimed *only* to the Gentiles. Gentile nations do not take the place of the Jewish people. This becomes clear from Paul's approach to his task (Romans 1:16; 2:9-11). Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians form two distinct groups, who as a matter of principle are regarded as equal.

This principle of equality becomes clear in Ephesians 2:11-21: while the Gentiles (those who were uncircumcised) were at one time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, they now, in Christ, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He has made the two worlds one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. Paul speaks of one structure, of which Jesus Christ Himself is the cornerstone. Paul also uses the image of one man (one body), referring to the one church of Christ (2:15,16). In this one church Jews and Gentiles must unite, each recognizing the other's rightful place. While there may have been equality in principle between Jewish and Gentile Christians, does this mean that in practice the two groups lived together as one? The New Testament sheds little light on this. In Acts 15 we read of a difference of opinion in Antioch about circumcision, specifically about the need for Gentiles to be circumcised (ch 15:1). This dispute is laid before the church in Jerusalem. Here, one part of the assembly appears to believe that Gentile believers ought to be circumcised, and observe the laws of Moses. The outcome of the discussion at this assembly makes it clear that Gentile believers ought not to be brought under the yoke of the law, but should submit to the yoke of the God of Israel.⁵ Specifically: the law of Moses is not to be imposed on the Gentiles; however, it has not been abolished as a rule for godliness *within Israel*. In other words: Gentile Christians do not need to become Jews; conversely, Christians from among the Jews need not give up their Jewishness. The church at Antioch is able to live with this response (ch 15:31). There is no record, however, of how the distinct groups of Jewish and Gentile Christians henceforth lived together⁶.

4. Paul's attitude to Jewish people

God makes no distinction between Jews and other nations (Romans 10:12). He is the God of the Gentiles also. This does not set aside the fact that the Jewish people do occupy a special place. The gospel reached the nations from Jerusalem. Gentile Christians may not lose sight of the special place of the Jewish people. Having an eye for God's people of old becomes evident in the collection for Jerusalem that Paul organizes (2Corinthians 8,9),⁷ and in his continuing prayer for the salvation of the Jewish people (Romans 10:1).

This continuing attention for the Jewish people, which Paul continues to have and wishes to pass on to the churches, implies that there is one people of God, consisting of Jews and Gentiles. Both groups must have an eye for each other, must accept each other, may not disregard each other. We see here an extension of the people of God. The test for this being received as one of God's people is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and faith in him. Anyone from the Gentiles who accepts Jesus as the Messiah is grafted into the one people of God. Anyone from the Jews who rejects Jesus as the Messiah does not belong to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15,16).⁸

It is especially this last point that must be clearly understood. Paul sometimes speaks very sharply about his compatriots (see Galatians 3:10; 1Thessalonians 2:15,16), but only about those who

pride themselves on their Jewishness, on their observance of the laws of Moses, and in so doing reject the Messiah Jesus Christ.

On the contrary, Paul is filled with compassion towards the Jewish people (his kinsmen according to the flesh). To the Jews he even became a Jew, in order to win Jews (1Corinthians 9:20). One of the best-known and most deeply touching passages of Paul about his own people is found in Romans 9-11. Here we see clearly that Paul has not forgotten his own people, and God has not forgotten them either!

Taking into account that Romans 9-11 explicitly speaks of the place of Israel as the people of God, and of the attitude Gentile Christians are to take towards the Jewish people, this passage is still of fundamental importance in any reflection on the relationship between the church and Israel.

5. Romans 9 – 11

Paul's heart goes out to those of his own people. His brothers and sisters, those with whom Paul has a common ancestry, are privileged: God has bound himself to them; they are God's children. From their race is Christ (Romans 9:1-3). This descent, however, does not mean that all Jews are children of God (ch 9:5), only those who have given ear to the gospel (ch 10: 16,17).

Here, Paul speaks of Israel in two ways: Israel according to the flesh, and Israel in a spiritual sense (ch 9:8). These two are not congruent! This implies, in other words, that there is a (large) part of Israel that has hardened itself, that has not heeded the gospel of Christ. They have not believed; and it is just this faith in Jesus that is crucial, for Gentiles as well as for Jews (ch 9:30-33; ch 10:11,12; ch 11:7,8). Is there hope, then, for Israel? And if so, how and when is their conversion to be expected? God has not rejected His people (ch 11:1,2); a small remnant is left that God has elected in his grace (ch 11:6). This small part, this remnant, makes it impossible to speak of 'replacement', as if the people of Israel would have been replaced by one (or many) Gentile people(s). God remains faithful to his chosen people. And it is just this faithfulness that gives Paul reason for hope; to have a special hope, even, for the conversion of the Jews. Gentiles, who enter ahead of the Jewish people, are intended to provoke jealousy among them (ch 11:11). After all, it would be too much to bear, for those who have the rights of firstborn, that Gentiles (*goyim*) acknowledge the message of the Jew Jesus as the Word of God, and let him become their Redeemer!

On the other hand, Gentiles may not exalt themselves above Jews. Paul shows that clearly in what he says about the tree and its branches (ch 11:15-24). It is thanks to the fall of the Jews that the gospel has gone to the Gentiles (ch 11:11). That alone should make the Gentiles humble. There is one more thing: where God has not spared the natural branches (some of the people of Israel), he will also not spare the wild ones (the Gentiles), if unbelief and pride should take the place of faith (ch 11:20,21).

At the same time Paul, in this figure of speech, expresses the hope that the natural branches might once again be grafted into the stem. God has the power to do that; more than that, it is a perfectly natural thing for natural branches to be grafted back into their own tree (ch 11:24; note the 'how much more').

Does Romans 11 have anything to say about the future of Israel? What can we expect? In other words: does this 'provoking to jealousy' have any effect? It is important to note that Paul here speaks of a divine mystery (ch 11:24). This expression tells us that what is happening here is beyond our comprehension. A part of Israel has hardened itself, in order that a fullness of Gentiles might come in (ch 11:25). And in this way all Israel will be saved (ch 11:26). In other words, the hardening of one part has the salvation of the other part as its consequence. And yet, this means that 'all Israel' will be saved. God will not let his people go; on the contrary, he remains faithful to his people and his promises. The expression 'all Israel' is an expression of fullness (in the language of Paul: a whole tree, full of branches). There is one important point in the interpretation of this passage: what does 'all Israel' (ch 11:26) mean? Various interpretations are possible. In the light of this passage, the most likely one is this: 'all Israel' is the faithful remnant of the Jewish

people. In this view, the part represents the whole, regardless of the number that are saved. The quantity itself is not what Paul here has in mind.

We need to be cautious at this point, for the text does not allow a compelling choice. The figure of speech that Paul uses here (the one tree) might point to faithful Israel together with the Gentiles who have come to faith. In that case, the emphasis would lie on the unity of believers.

At the same time, we should note that in other places Paul never uses the word 'Israel' to denote the whole of God's people, inclusive of believing Gentiles. Of course, it is always possible that here he does use it to mean God's people, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, but that seems less likely.

Whether there is still to be a large-scale conversion among Jews remains an open question. The conversion of the whole Jewish people does not seem likely, but why should the conversion of many not be possible? The prophecy of Jeremiah (which Paul quotes in ch 11:26) gives reason for hope. It is much more important that here the (Gentile) church is addressed: do not forget where you came from (do not be proud), and do not forget your calling (to make Jews jealous).

It is especially the image of the one tree with its many branches that impresses on us the bond of unity that exists (must exist) among the one people of God, among Jewish and Gentile Christians. Between the church today and our Jewish ancestors in the faith. There needs to be a continuing awareness that our faith is anchored in the Old Testament, and that the Christ came from the people of the Jews. This awareness must drive us to an attitude of sorrow when we cannot share with the (unbelieving) Jews our joy in Christ, to prayer that they may turn to Christ, and to thoughtful reflection on the question of how we may make Israel jealous of the salvation in Christ. As wild branches, we may not forget the natural (Israelite) branches.

6. The Book of Revelation and millennialism

Are there other parts of the New Testament that tell us anything about the place and the future of Israel? Here, our eye falls especially on the book of Revelation.

Revelation 7 speaks about the 144,000 who have been sealed, from each of the tribes of Israel. This number, however, does not refer to the Jews, or to Jewish Christians, but to the full number of all believers from all nations. True, they are described as being 'from every tribe of the sons of Israel' (ch 7:4), but this refers to the people of God, a continuation of the Israel of old. The whole gathering of the redeemed is portrayed here as the tribes of Israel.

The 144,000 spoken of in Revelation 14 are the same as those described in chapter 7. This tells us that the full number of God's elect forms the new Israel of God. Neither of these passages in Revelation contains any indications that a special place is reserved for the natural people of Israel.

Some expositors identify the woman of Revelation 12 as being the people of Israel. After all, the son that is born to her, Jesus Christ the

Messiah, is descended from Israel. The 'period in the wilderness' is then understood to be the diaspora of the people of Israel after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the definition of this period (1260 days) is regarded as a veiled foreshadowing of the wholesale religious conversion of Israel.

Chapter 12, however, deals with the persecution that threatens the whole Christian church. No occasion is provided here for the reader to zoom in on the position of Israel (as one special group) or on a statement concerning its future. Besides, it is doubtful whether the attractive and positive portrayal of the woman in this chapter is likely to fit with the nation of Israel, which for the greater part had rejected the Messiah, and was often partly responsible for the persecution of the Christian church.

Revelation 20 faces us with the question whether the Messiah's reign is to take place on earth, and just what we might expect this thousand-year reign to be like. This is an important question,

because the adherents of millennialism envisage an important role for Israel in the period that precedes Christ's final return.

What is generally known as 'millennialism' is in fact a variety of related but different streams of thought. Here, we will not explore all kinds of details that distinguish 'premillennialism', 'postmillennialism' and 'dispensationalism'. What is important is that all the various forms of millennialism assert that a thousand-year kingdom will dawn (Revelation 20:2) when Christ returns and begins his reign. During this period, Satan will be bound.

This reign of Christ is often believed to coincide with the 'taking up of the church' into heaven (1Thessalonians 4:16). And the thousand years of Revelation 20 is then connected with what Paul says: 'all Israel will be saved' (Romans 11:26). In this way, Israel will become a blessing for the whole world. Christ will be enthroned in Jerusalem, and he will reign from there; this is also when the third temple is to be built. Millennialists, most notably those of the dispensationalist stream, assert that the present-day church is an intermediate and transient form; when all is said and done, it is Israel that God is most concerned about. The millennium, then, is an intermediate period; the second coming of Christ, preceded by the end-time judgments, is still to follow.

The manner in which we read Revelation 20 is quite important. Millennialists read chapters 19 and 20 chronologically. There is much to be said, however, for the view that Revelation describes the time of the end in a number of different representations, which may be portrayed successively, but actually take place simultaneously. In addition, the events described in Revelation 20 do not really lead us to think of an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. Rather, it makes us think of a vision of heaven. It describes thrones, with souls seated on them (v. 4), and this does not seem to describe an earthly setting.

There are still more arguments that could be raised against the view that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years, and that during this period 'all Israel will be saved'. The greatest objection to this view, however, is that it sets up a contrast between (believing) Israel and the church of Christ. This is a distortion of what the Bible says. The New Testament particularly emphasises the unity of the people of God, where there is neither Jew nor Greek.

In conclusion, Revelation 21 describes the new Jerusalem. Does this chapter give us reason to believe that a special place or central position is reserved for the Jewish people in God's glorious kingdom? From the beginning, it is clear in this chapter that the new Jerusalem

fills the whole earth, that its gates are open to God's children from all nations (vs. 24,26), and that the people of God does not consist of the members of one (ethnic) people, but of members from a multitude of nations.

The fact that this city is called Jerusalem points back to the Old Testament; in doing so, it becomes clear that God is now bringing to fulfilment his purpose from the beginning, namely that he makes his home among his people.

The fact that the names of the twelve sons of Israel are written on the gates of the city (v.12) indicates that what God is now realizing in this eternal city was always his intention. At the same time, Gentile believers also enter this city, built as it is on the foundation of the twelve apostles (v.14), and in this manner they are incorporated, by faith, into the Israel of God.

Revelation 21, too, gives us no reason to conclude that there is to be a central position for the people of Israel in the kingdom of God, nor for Jewish believers either. Together with Gentiles who have come to faith, they will form the one worldwide church of God. This worldwide church will mean the completion of Israel. It is through what the Gentiles bring in that the Israel of God will come to its final completion.

The Book of Revelation, too, leads us to conclude that Israel, like all other nations, shares in the salvation of Christ, and can only be saved through him. What Scripture tells us about Christ's return and the events preceding it gives us no reason to confer on Israel 'according to the flesh' any kind of special position.

At the same time, the book of Revelation reminds us in a number of places that salvation is from the Jews. Gentile believers must realize that they are being ingrafted into the Israel of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Israel of faith.

At the very moment that Revelation 21 speaks about, the Israel of God will be complete, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, all of whom expect their salvation from Christ alone.

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Notes

1 For a broader discussion of this aspect see J. van Bruggen, *Het evangelie van Gods zoon, Persoon en leer van Jezus volgens de vier evangeliën*, p161ff.

2 This text is often used as an argument in support of the 'replacement theory'. That, however, is not the point of the parable. See J. van Bruggen, *Matteüs, Het evangelie volgens Petrus*, p386ff.

3 In his address, Peter includes numerous Jews who live in dispersion among the Gentiles (Acts 2:9-11).

4 See J. van Bruggen, *Paulus, Pionier voor de Messias van Israël*, p231.

5 Van Bruggen, *Paulus, Pionier voor de Messias van Israël*, p60.

6 It does not appear that this matter played a significant role in the church of Jerusalem, since there were no (or very few) Gentile Christians there.

7 In Romans 15:27 Paul even goes so far as to say that Gentile believers owe a special debt to the saints in Jerusalem.

8 Galatians 6:15,16: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation".