

Boast Not Against the Branches: A Word to the Christians Now Turning From Israel

There is a new sound in evangelical rooms, and those of us who have spent our lives among the people of the Book have learned to recognize it. It is not the old hostility of the liberal mainline, which traded the God of Abraham for the spirit of the age a generation ago. It is something stranger and, to me, more sorrowful: the sound of Israel's own friends beginning to drift. It comes from the polished young host with a microphone and a grievance, who has discovered that "Zionism" is a colonial sin. It comes from the earnest student catechized by her feed into a gospel of grievance she has mistaken for justice. It comes from the populist who folds Israel into a foreign entanglement he means to be rid of, and asks, with a shrug that imagines itself hard-headed, what any of it has to do with America. The voices differ. The motion is the same. The hand that was once open toward Jerusalem is beginning to close.

I want to speak to those who feel the pull of that motion, not as an opponent but as a brother, and to say as plainly as I can: what you are being offered is not a deeper faith. It is an older error, and it is wearing new clothes.

The error is as old as the Church's temptation to imagine that it has replaced Israel – that the promises made to Abraham and his seed were quietly transferred to us, leaving the Jewish people a spent vessel, a closed chapter, a people whose story God has finished telling. It has gone by various names; theologians call it supersessionism, and the plainer word is replacement. In every age it returns in the costume of that

age. In the patristic centuries it dressed as philosophy. In the medieval centuries it dressed as piety, and shed blood. In our own time it has learned to speak the fashionable dialect of decolonization and grievance, and it has learned to call itself, of all things, the cause of the oppressed. But strip away the vocabulary and the thing beneath is the same: the conviction that the Jew has had his day, that the land is not his, that his continuance is at best an embarrassment and at worst a crime.

I do not say that every Christian who has grown uneasy about Israel has consciously embraced this. Most have not. They have simply breathed it in. But that is precisely the danger, for a heresy one breathes is harder to resist than one that argues, and a man may absorb in a hundred videos what he would have refused in a single sermon.

So let me bring the matter back to where it must be settled, which is not the cable panel or the comment thread but the text. And the text could hardly be plainer.

When the Apostle Paul set himself to the question of Israel and the Church – the very question now being re-litigated by men who have forgotten it was ever asked – he did not leave us to guess. He reached for an image, the olive tree, and he turned it deliberately against the Gentile believer's pride. The natural branches, he says, were broken off in part, and you, the wild branch, were grafted in. Very well. But then comes the warning, and it is addressed to us, not to them: "Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." Read it slowly, because it is the hinge of everything. The Christian who despises Israel imagines himself the tree and Israel a fallen leaf. Paul tells him he is a branch – a grafted, borrowed, late-arriving branch – and that the root which carries him is the covenant God made with the fathers of Israel. To saw at that branch is not boldness. It is a man cutting at the limb he is standing on, and calling the fall enlightenment.



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And lest anyone suppose the covenant lapsed, that the promises were provisional and have now expired, Paul closes the door in the same chapter: "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." God does not give and then snatch back. He does not call a people and then un-call them when their reputation grows inconvenient on campus. The election of Israel is not a lease that the nations may declare forfeit; it is a gift, and the Giver does not change His mind.

Behind Paul stands the older word, the one God spoke to Abram before there was a Church to misread it: "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." Here is the principle the whole of Scripture confirms: that the nations and the men who set themselves against this people do not prosper for it in the end, and that those who stand with them are, in some mystery we do not fully see, standing where blessing flows. This is not magic and it is not a slogan. It is a covenant, and a covenant is a serious thing to step out of.

But the Scripture I would set most urgently before the wavering Christian is not Romans and not Genesis. It is a small and terrible prophecy that the Church scarcely reads – the prophecy of Obadiah against Edom.

Edom was Esau, Jacob's brother. Not a stranger, not a distant enemy, but kin, blood of the same Isaac. And when the day of Jacob's calamity came, when foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, Edom did not, at first, lift the sword. Edom did something the prophet treats as worse. Edom stood by. Edom watched. Edom, the brother, "stood on the other side," and looked on the day of his brother's destruction, and felt the stirring of a quiet satisfaction, and at the last cut off the fugitives who tried to escape. Hear the indictment, for it is aimed straight at the heart of the bystander: "Thou

shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction." Edom's sin was not chiefly that he attacked. It was that he watched his brother bleed and did not move – and let his heart be glad.

I can think of no word more exactly fitted to this moment. For we have just lived through a day of Jacob's calamity. We have seen, in our own time, the gates broken and the innocent slaughtered and the captives carried off; and we have seen something I did not expect to see in my lifetime – Christians who in that hour found their sympathy migrating, who began to look on the day of their brother and to ask, with a coolness that fancied itself sophistication, whether perhaps he had it coming. To every believer tempted toward that coolness I say only this: that is the posture of Edom, and Edom is under judgment for it. You are being invited, in the borrowed language of justice, to commit the sin of the brother who watched.

And there is a strand I must name plainly, for it does not arrive dressed as the campus left at all but as its apparent opposite. It is the voice on the populist right that has grown weary of the world and its wars, that wants the nation to look to itself, and that asks why the affairs of a small country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean should command the concern of believers an ocean away. I have sympathy for the weariness; I do not have sympathy for where it leads. For the question "what has this to do with us?" is not, on a Christian's lips, a neutral one. It is very nearly Cain's question, and it has never once been a safe thing to ask about a brother. Concern for Israel was never a foreign-policy preference to be set down when the national mood turns inward. It was a matter of covenant, and covenants do not bend to the news cycle.

Now I must be fair, because honesty is owed even in a plea.

There is an objection that deserves an answer. To stand with Israel, someone will say, surely cannot mean to bless every act of every Israeli government, to surrender all judgment and become a flatterer. And that is true. It is entirely true. The covenant that secures Israel's place and her people hands no government a blank cheque, and a man may love Israel and still grieve over this policy or that, as the prophets themselves loved her and rebuked her in the same breath. Real friendship is not flattery. But let us be clear-eyed about what is actually happening among us, for the present defection is not the careful, grieved critique of a faithful friend. It is a turning of the heart – the withdrawal of the very blessing Genesis speaks of, often with the oldest libel against the Jew smuggled in beneath a freshly laundered word. There is a great difference between a brother who corrects and a brother who walks away, and a greater difference still between either of those and a brother who, in the hour of wounding, joins the accusers.

Why are the young so vulnerable to it? The answer is not mysterious, and it is not flattering to those of us who taught them. They are biblically illiterate as no Christian generation before them has been, and a man who has never read Romans 11 has no defense against the catechism of the feed. They have been formed, hour upon hour, by a medium whose liturgy is grievance and whose only categories are the oppressor and the oppressed – into which Israel has been filed as the villain by people who have never opened Obadiah. You cannot answer a formation with a fact. You answer it with a deeper formation. The remedy for a generation disciplined by the algorithm is discipleship – patient, scriptural, unhurried – and that is a labor the Church has been too lazy to undertake and is now paying for.

So here is my word to the Christian who feels the pull, and I will not dress it up. You are not asked, by the God of Abraham, to be Israel's cheerleader, or her apologist, or the

silent endorser of her every act. You are asked to be her brother. And a brother does not vanish in the hour of wounding. A brother does not stand on the other side and watch. A brother does not let the fashionable accusation become his own and call it growth.

The root still bears the branch. The gifts and calling are still without repentance. The promise to Abraham still stands. And the day of Jacob's calamity still asks each of us the question it once asked Edom. Do not become the brother who watched. Boast not against the branches. Stand.

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