The Church Is Not Spiritual Israel

There is no caste system or class system in Jesus. In Him, Jew and Gentile are one just as male and female are one. As Paul wrote in terms of our salvation, “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,’” (Rom. 10:12–13). He also said that, in Jesus, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua. And if you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed—heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29, TLV).

In Jesus we are one Body, one family, equally loved by the Father, whether we are Jews or Gentiles. Jesus shed the same blood for each of us, and there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, be that sinner Jewish or Gentile. The Word is very clear on this.

It’s also true that many of the promises given to Israel in the Old Testament are spiritually applied to all believers in the New Testament (see, for example, 2 Cor. 6:16-18, quoting passages from Leviticus, Ezekiel, Isaiah and elsewhere). And it is true that many of the descriptions applied to Israel in the Old Testament are applied to all believers in the New Testament as well, such as sons and daughters of God, chosen and elect and royal priesthood.

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But just as men don’t become women or women become men when they come to faith, in the same way Gentiles don’t become Jews nor do Jews become Gentiles when they come to faith.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them” (1 Cor. 7:18–20).

As for the term “spiritual Israel,” it doesn’t anywhere occur in the Bible, and it is misleading and incorrect to refer the term to the Church as a whole. As for the concept of a “spiritual Israel,” rightly used, it would refer to the remnant of Jewish believers within the nation.

This is what Paul wrote about in Romans 9:6 when he taught that “not all Israel is Israel.” He was referring to the Israel within Israel, the spiritual remnant within the nation. As he taught in Romans 11:1-5, although the Jewish people as a nation rejected the Messiah, God did not utterly forsake them. Instead, “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5), including Jewish believers like Paul himself, part of the Israel within Israel, the “spiritual Israel” if you want to use the term.

And so, although many of God’s promises to Israel can be applied to the Church as a whole today, the Church does not become Israel.

Looking at the New Testament evidence, this is really quite clear. As I noted in Our Hands Are Stained with Blood, out of the 77 times that the words “Israel” and “Israelite” occur in the Greek New Testament, there are only two verses in which “Israel” could possibly refer to the Church as a whole: Galatians 6:16, where Paul speaks of the “Israel of God,” and

Revelation 7:4, where John speaks of the 144,000 sealed from the 12 tribes of Israel.

As for the two verses open to dispute, in Galatians 6:16, the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, NET, NRSV and TLV (among others) all imply the same thing: "The Israel of God" does not refer to Gentile believers. It refers either to believing Jews or to the Jewish nation as a whole, since the divine promises remain theirs (see Rom. 9:1-5). And why would Paul call Gentile Christian the "Israel of God" when he has spent the whole book telling them that in order to be saved, they do not have to become Jews and get circumcised and observe the Law?

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As for the description of the 144,000 sealed in Revelation 7:4, it most probably describes the final harvest of Jews worldwide. Elsewhere in the book of Revelation "Israel" means "Israel" (Rev. 2:14) and "the 12 tribes of Israel" mean "the 12 tribes of Israel," as distinguished from "the 12 apostles" (Rev. 21:12-14).

Getting back to Romans 9-11, Paul's primary, focused treatment of Israel in the New Testament, after he explained that not all Israel was Israel in v. 6, speaking, as we noted, of the remnant of believers within the nation, he then used the words "Israel" or "Israelite" 10 more times, in each case, speaking of the nation as a whole.

- 9:27: "Isaiah cries out concerning *Israel*: 'Though the number of *Israelites* be like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved.'"
- 9:31: "But *Israel*, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it."
- 10:16: "But not all the *Israelites* accepted the good news…."

- 10:19-21: “Again I ask: Did *Israel* not understand?… concerning Israel He says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.’”
- 11:1-2: (Paul, speaking of himself): “I am an *Israelite* myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin,” referring here simply to physical descent.
- 11:7: “What then? What *Israel* sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.”
- 11:11: “Again I ask: Did they [speaking of the Israelites as a whole] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make *Israel* envious.” Here Paul explicitly states that Gentile Christians are called by God to make Israel spiritually envious. He does *not* call them “spiritual Israel.”
- 11:25: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: *Israel* has experienced a hardening in part until the full number [or, fullness] of [the] Gentiles has come in.”

This, then, culminates in Romans 11:26-27, where Paul writes, “And so all Israel will be saved. as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion,· He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”

The context makes explicit that the “all Israel” spoken of here refers to the Jewish people, not Gentile Christians. As noted by New Testament scholar Leon Morris (one of a host of non-dispensationalist scholars and commentators and Church leaders who could be quoted here over the centuries), “. . . what seems decisive is the fact that ‘Israel’ in verse 25 plainly means the nation (it is physical Israel, not spiritual Israel, that is hardened in part), and it is not easy to understand why in the next line it should have a different

meaning.” Of course.

As Charles Hodge wrote regarding Romans 11:28-29, verses that state emphatically that God will keep His promises to the Jewish people as a whole, “Paul now grounds the last part of v. 28: the Jews, despite their rejection of the gospel, remain God’s beloved ‘because [Gk. *gar*] the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.’ The ‘call’ of God clearly refers to the election according to which the Jews are beloved. . . . Israel still has a place in God’s plan because God is faithful. In this way Paul marks the movement of his argument. He began with a defense of God’s word and constancy against a Jewish assumption of assured access to God’s grace (9:6b–29); he ends with a defense of Israel’s continuing privileges on the basis of God’s word against a Gentile assumption of superiority.”

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What Hodge is saying is that the issue is the faithfulness of God, not the faithfulness of Israel. It is a matter of grace and promise, not a matter of works, And so, despite Israel’s disobedience over the millennia, disobedience which has caused much suffering and exile and loss, God’s promises remain true.

This does not mean that Christians are obligated to support every decision that the State of Israel makes today, nor does it mean that Christians should be anti-Palestinian. God forbid.

I believe that the Lord is just as grieved over the death of a Palestinian baby as He is grieved over the death of an Israeli baby, and we should be as well. And saying that the Church is not spiritual Israel does not mean that there is salvation for Jewish people outside of Jesus-Yeshua. Without His blood, all of us are lost.

But this is not just a matter of semantics, since many Christian leaders through the ages, right until today, who

have taught that the Church is spiritual Israel mean that God is finished with Israel as a whole.

To this Paul, along with the entirety of the Scriptures, would say, “Perish the thought!” (In Greek, *me genoito*, as in Rom. 11:1, 11.) God will keep His promises to the nation of Israel.

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