

3 Biblical Meanings of the Word 'Israel'

As Christians, how are we to relate to Israel? How do we connect with her?

In Romans 11:17-24, Paul likens this vital, organic connection to being grafted into the Olive Tree of God's covenant family. For a complete understanding of this teaching, we have to first understand that the biblical term "Israel" has three primary layers of meaning:

1. The Jewish people – "Israel" (Prince with God) first appears as the name bestowed by God to Jacob after his famous wrestling match with a divine messenger in Genesis 22. At this foundational stage "Israel" is simply the name given to the great patriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel and later to their offspring. By covenant, God thus forever identifies Himself as "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... the God of Israel." So, "Israel" is the physical descendants of these patriarchs, who later become known as the Jewish people.

2. The nation of Israel and the land of Israel – Some 400 years later, the population of the tribes of Israel had greatly multiplied, and together they were ready to become a nation. At Sinai, the people received the Torah/Law containing the basic elements that will define their culture, laws, and society. After entering the Promised Land, there is another covenant which establishes the nation as an eternal, Messianic kingdom under David and his descendants (2 Sam. 7). This nation/kingdom has Jerusalem—the City of David—as its eternal capital.

3. Israel, the saved remnant – This is where things get a little tricky. In the NT, and especially in the theology of Paul, we learn that in every generation there is a spiritual

subset of the wider Israel—a saved remnant in which the fullness of God’s promises to Israel are realized. On the outside, this group of Jewish people looks like everyone else and speaks the same language; but on the inside, their hearts are born again, “circumcised” and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Even when it appears—as has been the case throughout most of history—that the majority of Jewish people are not faithfully responding to God’s graceful revelation for that generation, God’s Word of promise to the whole nation is still true because of the holy remnant. (Rom 11:16) This is just as true in Elijah’s day, Paul’s day, and our day—because “not all Israel is Israel.” (Rom 9:6; 11:1-7) What’s more, under the New Covenant even believing Gentiles can be “grafted in” to this covenantal olive tree of faith in the saving grace of the God of Israel. (Rom 9:24; 11:17) So, Israel is the remnant people of faith in Jesus—first to the Jew and also to the non-Jew, together as “One New Man” (Eph. 2:15).

In summary, one and two refer to Israel as physical realities, while three refers to Israel in a more mysterious, spiritual way. All three are biblically valid expressions of what the Bible means by “Israel,” and we may find ourselves connecting to one or the other at different times. But Romans (especially 11:11-26) and Ephesians (2:11–3:6) teach that the “fullness” of the revelation of God’s plan for Jew and Gentile (Israel and the nations) depends on us rightly discerning His priorities of “grafting” in the Olive Tree.

Paul’s letters teach us that under the New Covenant the fullness of the mystery of God’s intention for “Israel” is found in Christ (Messiah), and by aligning the relations between Jew and Gentile according to all His covenants with Israel: people, nation and remnant!

(In part two of this series, we will look at what these relations may look like practically.) {eoal}

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