

# The Centrality of Israel In the Bible and In Theology

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this paper is that in order to do biblical or systematic theology properly, it is necessary to recognize the centrality of Israel as the people of God from the call of Abraham to the *eschaton*.<sup>1</sup> By "Israel" I mean the physical

<sup>1</sup> This notion of the centrality of Israel does not compete with the thesis of Walter Kaiser in his book, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978). There and elsewhere Kaiser argues that the single, unifying theme of the Bible is the "Promise" which God developed progressively through the various covenants and blocks of revelation. I am in general agreement with this scheme. Thus, this paper does not argue that

descendants of Jacob, "the children of Israel," forming "the people of God" and constituted a nation at Mt. Sinai. Therefore, Israel, though during various periods of history without national sovereignty in its own land, represents a definable ethnic, religious and national group that has maintained its identity from the time of Jacob to the present time and, as argued here, will continue to do so into the eternal state, intermarriages with goyim (Gentiles) notwithstanding.

Israel is central to the Bible and theology in at least two ways:

- First, national Israel was, is, and always will be the locus of the people of God, a nation among nations chosen to be God's special possession.
- Second, national Israel was, is, and always will be the center of God's redemptive plan to bring salvation to the world and the agency through which it is accomplished.

This paper further argues that the failure to recognize the centrality of Israel lies at the root of several major theological errors, both in Reformed or covenant theology and in dispensationalism. However, space does not allow the case to be argued here *in extenso*. This paper is more in the nature of an introduction to what in a full-length book could constitute a "theology of Israel."

The presentation to follow is in two parts: (a) the case for the centrality of Israel and (2) the implications of the centrality of Israel. The paper closes with some comments on Messianic Judaism.

## The Case for the Centrality of Israel

### THE IDENTITY OF ISRAEL

#### Israel in the OT

The term "Israel" in the OT first appears as the name given to Jacob by God at Peniel<sup>2</sup> and means either *he who strives with God* or *God strives*. It was used as a personal name of Jacob during his life<sup>3</sup> and after his death.<sup>4</sup> It then came to be applied to his physical descendants in general.<sup>5</sup> However, once applied to them, the term "Israel" assumed two important connotations: a national aspect as the "nation of Israel" and a religious aspect as "the people of God."

Concerning the national aspect, the term "Israel" came to be applied to the nation that the physical descendants of Jacob formed at Mt. Sinai.<sup>6</sup> When the kingdom split after Solomon's death, "Israel" was generally applied to the northern kingdom,

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"Israel" rather than the "Promise" is the theme of the Bible but rather for the centrality of Israel in the developing Promise as the people of God, past, present, and future.

2 Gen. 32:28.

3 E.g., Gen. 35:21.

4 E.g., Exod. 32:13.

5 E.g., Exod. 1:7.

6 Exod. 19:5; Deut. 4:34. The first use in a national sense is probably Gen. 49:7 (G. A. Lee, "Israel," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982], II:907).

while "Judah" was used for the southern kingdom.<sup>7</sup> However, occasionally "Israel" was also used for the southern kingdom,<sup>8</sup> especially after the fall of Samaria.<sup>9</sup> Despite these narrower uses, however, "as a designation for all Israelites, 'Israel' was used throughout the biblical period."<sup>10</sup> Thus OT usage "demonstrates a consistent application of the term *Israel* to Jacob and his descendants which evolved into the nation of Israel."<sup>11</sup>

Concerning the religious aspect, OT usage confirms that this nation of Israel constituted the "people of God." Although the phrase, "people of God" per se does not often occur, "the concept is presupposed in the phrases 'my people,' 'his people,' or 'thy people' (depending on the speaker), which are found roughly two hundred times each in Scripture."<sup>12</sup> Israel was formally called the people of God when he brought them out of Egypt: "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians."<sup>13</sup> The OT further states that Israel was chosen by God to be his special people above all the nations upon the earth, to be holy and to keep his commandments.<sup>14</sup> All of this was based on the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>15</sup>

## Israel in the NT

The term "Israel" in the NT, except for a few disputed passages, means national Israel as in the OT.<sup>16</sup> The two passages most often cited to indicate a new use of the term "Israel" are Rom. 9:6 and Gal. 6:16. However, "Israel" in these verses can also be interpreted in its usual OT/NT sense. Detailed arguments to support this interpretation are beyond the scope of this paper. The following comments must suffice.

In Rom. 9:6, Paul states, "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel." Here he simply distinguishes the nation as a whole from the believing remnant within

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7 See 1 Kgs. 12:16-24.

8 E.g., Isa. 5:7; 8:18.

9 E.g., Mic. 3:1; Jer. 10:1; Ezek. 3:1; 4:3; 8:11; 11:5; 13:2; et al.

10 G. A. Lee, "Israel," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition, II:908.

11 Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), p. 242.

12 A. R. Tippett, "People of God," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), III:760.

13 Exod. 6:7.

14 Deut. 7:6-11; 14:2; 27:9; 28:9. "You will be my people" was part of the "tripartite formula" that "became the great hallmark of all biblical theology in both testaments" that pointed to his covenants of promise. The full formula is: "I will be your god, you shall be my people, and I will dwell among you." See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Centre of Old Testament Theology: The Promise," *Themelios*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1974, pp. 4-5.

15 Deut. 29:12-13.

16 "The NT continues the usages found in the OT and intertestamental periods" (G. A. Lee, "Israel," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition, II:908).

national Israel.<sup>17</sup> Similarly in Gal. 6:16, he writes, "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God." Here Paul identifies those Jews who, unlike the Judaizers that had troubled the Galatians, agree with his statement in the preceding verse that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything" with regard to salvation.<sup>18</sup> Thus in both cases, Paul refers to a subgroup within national Israel.

Therefore, nowhere in the NT do the writers use the term "Israel" in any sense other than its OT usage as the physical descendants of Jacob, referring either to part or all of national Israel.

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17 "We are not told here that Gentiles Christians are the true Israel. The distinction at R. 9:6 does not go beyond what is presupposed in Jn. 1:47, and it corresponds to the distinction...at R. 2:28f., which does not imply that Paul is calling Gentiles the true Jews" (Walter Gutbrod, *Ἰσραὴλ*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965], III:387). John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 volumes, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p.9, agrees: "...the thought is that there is an 'Israel' within ethnic Israel. This kind of distinction occurs earlier in this epistle in connection with the term Jew and circumcision (2:28, 29)...The Israel distinguished from the Israel of natural descent is the *true Israel*. They are indeed 'of Israel' but not coextensive with the latter." Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pp. 138-39, points out that Paul's distinction is also found in the OT: "[The statement in Rom. 9:6] simply distinguishes the nation as a whole from the believing element *within the nation* [emphasis original]. This kind of distinction within the nation was often made in the Old Testament and thus would be familiar to Jews reading such a statement as Romans 9:6. The servant of the Lord in the Old Testament is sometimes called 'blind' and 'deaf' (Isa. 42:19) and sometimes the term obviously refers to the righteous remnant within Israel (Isa. 44:1; 51:1, 7). In the Romans passage Paul is reminding his readers that being an Israelite by natural birth does not assure one of the life and favor promised the believing Israelite who approached God by faith." Jeremiah distinguishes between those who are circumcised only in the flesh and those who are also circumcised in the heart (Jer. 4:4; cf. Deut. 10:15-16). Faith has always been the requirement for personal participation in the blessings of the covenants made with national Israel. Finally, in Rom. 11:5, Paul again refers to the contemporary believing "remnant" within physical Israel and in 11:28-29 points out that although the unbelieving part of physical Israel is an enemy of the gospel, it is still "beloved" because of the covenants made with national Israel as a whole. Therefore, in Rom. 9:6, Paul uses the term "Israel" in the sense defined in this paper.

18 To interpret this verse correctly first requires recognition of the grammatical issue involved: how to take καὶ. (a) It could be a simple connective joining two distinct groups, "all who follow this rule" and "the Israel of God." (b) It could be used in an explicative sense in which the phrase "Israel of God" is added for the purpose of further defining or explaining "all who follow this rule." This is the sense in which the NIV takes καὶ: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God." This is also the sense in which καὶ must be taken to make Paul here call the church, the NT body of believers, Jew and Gentile, the Israel of God. (c) Finally, it could be taken in an emphatic sense, adding an especially important part ("the Israel of God") of the whole ("all who follow this rule"): "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, especially to the Israel of God." All three uses of καὶ are well recognized in the NT; see e.g., William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A

## THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL IN THE OT

The first goal of this paper is to establish the centrality of the nation of Israel, both as his chosen people and second as the central agent in the redemptive program of God.

Throughout the OT, Israel, the physical descendants of Jacob, eventually constituted a nation, form the people of God, are the recipients of his revelation, and are the focus of the content of that revelation. Moreover, the core of this revelation consists of the formal covenants God made with Israel. The Abrahamic covenant<sup>19</sup> was made with each of the three progenitors of national Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and promised the establishment of national Israel; the Sinaitic,<sup>20</sup> Davidic,<sup>21</sup> and new<sup>22</sup> covenants were made directly with national Israel. William LaSor writes,

We stand in the stream of God's activity through the centuries whereby he was able to make known his will, his love, his redeeming purpose. He did all this by calling into his service a people who was to receive this revelation of himself, to profit from it, and to transmit it to future generations...If we want to know what God has been doing all these centuries, if we want to know what he is doing today, we must understand what Israel is. For it is through Israel--and, I believe, only through Israel--that God makes known what he has been doing and what he plans to do with this world.<sup>23</sup>

From these four covenants, the centrality of Israel in both senses as defined in this paper is evident. Israel, God's chosen people, were not only the specially loved nation which he established, within which he personally dwelt, and through which he communicated his revelation, but national Israel was also the center of God's redemptive plan to bring salvation to the world and the agency through which it would be accomplished.

### The Abrahamic Covenant

The contents of the Abrahamic covenant, an everlasting covenant,<sup>24</sup> can be conveniently summarized under the headings of an *heir*, an *inheritance*, and a *heritage*.<sup>25</sup>

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*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). pp. 392-93. The interpretation of Gal. 6:16 in this paper takes  $\kappa\alpha\iota$  in the third sense. For a detailed defense of this interpretation based on Paul's overall argument in Galatians, see Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, p. 245-48.

19 Gen. 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:4-5, 18-21; 17:1-8, 19; 21:12; 22:15-18; 26:1-5, 24; 28:1-4, 12-15.

20 Exod. 19:5-8; 24:3-8.

21 2 Sam. 7:12-16; 1 Chron. 17:11-15.

22 Jer. 31:31-40.

23 William Sanford LaSor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 30.

24 Gen. 17:19.

25 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Centre of Old Testament Theology: The Promise," p. 4.

- An **Heir**: the "seed" of Abraham, first narrowed to Isaac<sup>26</sup> and then to Jacob;<sup>27</sup> Abraham's seed will be as the dust of the earth<sup>28</sup> and as the stars of the heaven.<sup>29</sup>
- An **Inheritance**: the land of Canaan; the land is promised to the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for an everlasting possession.<sup>30</sup>
- A **Heritage**: the "gospel" for the nations; through the seed of Abraham, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.<sup>31</sup>

God promised Abraham in a general sense that his "seed" would become a great and blessed nation to whom God would give the land of Canaan. The central role to be played by Israel in the redemptive plan of God is seen specifically in the third part of the Abrahamic covenant: "In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." The nation of Israel, the "seed" of Jacob, clearly predicted to be as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the dust of the earth, forms the agency through which the nations will be blessed.<sup>32</sup>

## The Sinaitic Covenant

Each new covenant made by God builds on the previous covenants, first creating organic links by repeating and amplifying certain strains and also by adding new revelation and new aspects. The Sinaitic covenant is explicitly based on the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>33</sup> Many theological aspects of the Sinaitic covenant could be discussed. Clearly it formally establishes Israel as a nation, a "peculiar treasure unto me above all people."<sup>34</sup> It also adds detail to the central role that Israel is to play in the redemptive program of God: the newly-constituted nation is called a "kingdom of priests."<sup>35</sup> The Hebrew allows for four possible senses,<sup>36</sup> but however the phrase is taken, it clearly indicates that Israel as a nation has a priestly function.

Israel's election was not an end, but rather a means to an end. Israel was chosen in order that the world--the gentile world that knew not the true God--might have light, might be made to see, might have understanding of the great redemptive love of God.<sup>37</sup>

In the exodus, God had redeemed his people, the nation of Israel. Now Israel's role was to be the priestly member of the nations of the world. There are many levels on

26 Gen. 21:12; cf. Rom. 9:7.

27 Gen. 28:1-4, 12-15.

28 Gen. 13:16; 28:14.

29 Gen. 22:17; 26:4.

30 Gen. 13:15; 17:8.

31 Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14 (see also Gal. 3:8).

32 Gal. 3:16 is discussed in detail later in this paper (footnote 87).

33 Exod. 2:24; 3:6; 6:8; 23:20-33.

34 Exod. 19:5.

35 Exod. 19:6.

36 (1) "Kings, i.e., priests"; (2) "royal priesthood"; (3) "priestly kingdom"; and (4) "kings [and] priests." See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Exodus in The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), II:417.

37 William Sanford LaSor, *Israel: A Biblical View*, p. 18.

which this priestly mission was to function.

- First, Israel represented the true and living God before the nations.
- Second, Israel was to serve as a model to the nations in order to bring them to God:

The biblical teaching of the nation of Israel as a society in which God is to be glorified and his laws observed suggests that the role of Israel is somehow to serve as an agent of this societal salvation by modeling it to all nations. This has been the Jewish understanding of their nation's role in human history.<sup>38</sup>

Rabbi J. H. Hertz makes the same point. Commenting on the phrase "kingdom of priests," he writes:

Or, 'a priestly kingdom'; a kingdom whose citizens are all priests (cf. Isa. LXI, 6), living wholly in God's service and ever enjoying the right of access to Him. As it is the duty of the priest to bring man nearer to God, so Israel has been called to play the part of a priest to other nations; i.e. to bring them closer to God and Righteousness. This spiritual Kingdom constitutes the highest mission of Israel.<sup>39</sup>

However, it is obvious from Israel's history in the OT that it did not and has not yet accomplished this mission. Hence, there is one more level in OT revelation in which Israel is to function in its priestly role.

- Third, according to the OT prophets, through her fall and glorious restoration, salvation will flow to the Gentiles on a national level. The nations will come to Israel and Jerusalem to learn the ways of God:<sup>40</sup>

In the last days the mountain of Yahweh's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup>

This is what Yahweh Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat Yahweh and seek Yahweh Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek Yahweh Almighty and to entreat him." This is what Yahweh Almighty says:

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38 Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, p. 227.

39 J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1981, originally published 1937), pp. 291-92.

40 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 106: "It is taught in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, and nowhere more clearly than in Isaiah 40-55, that when Israel grasps the true knowledge of God, it will be her privilege to share that knowledge with other nations."

41 Mic. 4:1-2; cf. Matt. 8:11.

"In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"<sup>42</sup>

So again, the Sinaitic covenant likewise underscores the central role national Israel plays, both as God's chosen people and as the agent through which God brings salvation to the world.

## The Davidic Covenant

The contents of the Davidic covenant can also be conveniently summarized under three headings: a *house*, a *kingdom*, and a *throne*.<sup>43</sup>

- A **house** (or **dynasty**): David's line or posterity will be established forever; it will continue forever.
- A **kingdom**: David's kingdom will be established forever; the kingdom contains both the aspects of reign and realm.
- A **throne**: David's throne will be established forever; the kings who will sit on David's throne will be from his line.<sup>44</sup>

First, in David's response to the covenant God makes with him, he not only explicitly views the covenant as a further development of the Sinaitic covenant, he also understands it to emphasize once again Israel's central place among the nations:

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42 Zech. 8:20-23.

43 2 Sam. 7:16.

44 The question might be raised: If the house, kingdom, and throne of David were to continue forever, how can the gap be explained that began with the Babylonian captivity? There has never been a true king or sovereign kingdom of Israel since that day. How did Jeremiah view this problem? He had predicted the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon (e.g., 22:1-9; 25:1-11) and the destruction of the temple (7:1-16; 26:1-7), yet he reiterated the aspects of the Davidic covenant in very strong terms: David would never lack a man to sit on the throne of Israel, and neither will the priests and Levites ever lack a man to offer sacrifices: " 'In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: Yahweh Our Righteousness.' For this is what Yahweh says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices' " ( Jer. 33:15-18; cf. 23:5-8). Jeremiah evidently saw no problem in the gap he knew would be coming and believed it "was only a temporary disaster." As the reference to the "Righteous Branch" indicates, he considered a Messianic fulfillment to adequately meet the requirements of the Davidic covenant (see J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980], p. 602). Indeed the Messiah was the successor to David, and the NT states that this covenant is fulfilled by Jesus receiving the throne of David on which he would reign forever (Luke 1:32-33).

And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have established your people Israel as your very own forever, and you, Yahweh, have become their God. And now, Yahweh Elohim, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised, so that your name will be great forever. Then men will say, 'Yahweh Almighty is God over Israel!' And the house of your servant David will be established before you.<sup>45</sup>

Second, David seems clearly to believe that this covenant about his dynasty, kingdom, and throne lasting forever further explains the manner in which Israel would be the central agent in God's redemptive plan for the world:

And this [latest covenant] is the charter for all mankind, O Lord God!"<sup>46</sup>

The ancient promise to Abraham that through his seed, Israel, all the nations of the earth would be blessed was to be brought about not only by the general priestly role assigned to the nation of Israel at Sinai, but also by the direct agency of David's dynasty, kingdom, and throne.<sup>47</sup>

## The New Covenant

The new covenant, predicted in Jeremiah 31, is the capstone in the argument confirming the centrality of Israel. The key points of this covenant are summarized as follows.

- It was explicitly made with the "house of Israel" and with the "house of Judah."

"The time is coming," declares Yahweh, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."<sup>48</sup>

- God will put his law within them and write it in their hearts; they will be his people and he will be their God; they will all know him, from the least to the greatest, and God will forgive and remember their sin no more.

"It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares Yahweh. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares Yahweh. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know Yahweh,' because they will all know me, from the

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45 2 Sam. 7:23-26.

46 2 Sam. 7:19.

47 The word translated "charter" here is *torah*. On this view, David is saying that the three-fold promise God made to him forms the veritable "law" or "charter" according to which salvation would flow to all mankind. For this interpretation of 2 Sam. 7:19, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity," in John H. Skilton, *The Law and the Prophets* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 298-318.

48 Jer. 31:31.

least of them to the greatest," declares Yahweh. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."<sup>49</sup>

- Because of all this that God will do for Israel, they will never cease to be a nation before him.

This is what Yahweh says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—Yahweh Almighty is his name: "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares Yahweh, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." This is what Yahweh says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares Yahweh.<sup>50</sup>

- Israel will live in peace forever in the land.

"The days are coming," declares Yahweh, "when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to Yahweh. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished."<sup>51</sup>

Although not made explicit until the NT, the blood that ratified this covenant made with Israel is the basis on which God provides salvation, to Israel and to all the nations.<sup>52</sup> From that atonement, salvation flows to the whole world.

### **Conditional or Unconditional: When Calvinists Become Arminians**

Much discussion is given in the theological literature to the question of the conditional or unconditional nature of Israel's covenants, especially in regard to the promise of the land. Two points must be made.

First, these are covenants in which God obligated himself and no other party. They are unilateral covenants and depend solely on God's faithfulness for fulfillment. Second, indeed there are conditional statements given in connection with the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and Davidic covenants.<sup>53</sup> However, these statements point to the fact that participation in various blessings from the covenants by particular individuals or generations is conditional on faith and obedience.<sup>54</sup> However, no element of these covenants, including the land, will ever be in jeopardy due to human disobedience.

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49 Jer. 31:31-34.

50 Jer. 31:35-37.

51 Jer. 31:38-40.

52 Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20.

53 Abrahamic: Gen. 12:1; 17:1, 9-14; 22:16; 26:5; Sinaitic: Exod. 19:6; Davidic: 2 Sam. 7:14-15; Ps. 89:30-33; 132:11-12.

54 The case is argued by J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 98-99, and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1987), pp. 50-51, 151-53, and *Toward and Old Testament Theology*, pp. 92-94, 110-13, 156-57.

Yet we read the following from Allis, a well-known Calvinist:

Israel did come into possession of the land promised to the patriarchs. She possessed it, but not "for ever." Her possession of the land was forfeited by disobedience.<sup>55</sup>

Here we see that what God unilaterally promised as an everlasting possession of national Israel in the covenants with Abraham and David was presumably lost due to human choice. This is the very quintessence of Arminianism. Fortunately, these same Calvinists do not apply this logic when discussing the security of our salvation. The inconsistency, however, is blatant:

It must be noted that any interpretation which suggests that the promises to the nation of Israel have been assigned to the church because of the failure of that nation raises the question of the security involved in all of God's elective purposes. According to Munck, Paul recognizes this connection in his epistle to the Romans; and thus, after affirming the security of the elect in Christ in chapter 8, he is forced to deal in chapters 9-11 with the future of Israel in the light of their apparent fall. Munck rightly argues, "If God has not fulfilled his promises made to Israel, then what basis has the Jewish-Gentile church for believing that the promises will be fulfilled for them?" If God's original election of Israel was as a "nation," and that appears to be the teaching of the OT, then a theology affirming the fulfillment of that elective purpose in the nation of Israel seems most supportive of our own election as this people in the church.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the gross Arminianism displayed by Calvinists who wish to maintain an untenable eschatological system, the land by covenant is an everlasting possession of Israel as part of her national election. Disobedience cannot nullify God's promise of the land to Israel. This is clear in the prophets, especially in Jeremiah 31, the central new covenant passage.

First, the prophets state that despite all the sin that Israel has committed and the punishment God will bring on them, he will never abandon them completely but will fulfill his covenant with them.

Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done.<sup>57</sup>

Second, the way in which God will fulfill his covenant with Israel is made most explicit in the prophets, and demonstrates the sovereignty of God emphasized in

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55 Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 58.

56 Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, p. 259; quotation from Johannes Munck, *Christ & Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 35.

57 Jer. 31:37. See also: Jer. 30:11: "'Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished"; Amos 9:8: "'Surely the eyes of the Sovereign LORD are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth— yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob,' declares the LORD." Cf. Jer. 4:27; 5:10, 18; 46:28.

Calvinism: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."<sup>58</sup>  
Similarly:

The people of Israel and Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; indeed, the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke me with what their hands have made, declares Yahweh. From the day it was built until now, this city has so aroused my anger and wrath that I must remove it from my sight...You are saying about this city, "By the sword, famine and plague it will be handed over to the king of Babylon"; but this is what Yahweh, the God of Israel, says: I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul. "This is what Yahweh says: As I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them."<sup>59</sup>

Here we have clear, unadulterated Calvinism. Israel, God's elect nation, will possess the land forever because that is God's covenant with them, and he will sovereignly make it happen by giving Israel a heart to follow him, as promised them in the new covenant. This is likewise clear in Paul's didactic passage of Romans 11, as argued later in this paper.

## **THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL IN THE NT**

The general centrality of Israel among the nations is also recognized in the NT. John states that he baptized in order that the Messiah should be made manifest to Israel.<sup>60</sup> Jesus states that he "was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>61</sup> Paul writes,

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.<sup>62</sup>

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ...<sup>63</sup>

As far as the gospel is concerned, they [unbelieving Israel] are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account

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58 Jer. 31:33.

59 Jer. 32:30-42; cf. Ezek. 36:24-28; 37:20-28.

60 John 1:31.

61 Matt. 15:24.

62 Rom. 3:1-2.

63 Rom. 9:3-5.

of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.<sup>64</sup>

First, it was to Israel that God's revelation came. Second, the covenants belonged to Israel. Third, even in unbelief, Israel, by theocratic election,<sup>65</sup> remains the people of God and is loved by God--Israel, the physical seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people with whom God entered into an everlasting covenant relationship.

Now consider the NT witness to the central agency of Israel in God's plan of redemption. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "salvation was of the Jews."<sup>66</sup> However, it is Paul who explains in Romans 11 the details of how and why salvation spread to the Gentiles in the apostolic era. Israel again plays the central role, but in a curious way.

First, Paul argues that God has not cast away his people Israel since there is obviously a believing "remnant according to the election of grace."<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that the majority of Israel are temporarily in unbelief.<sup>68</sup> How does this fit into God's redemptive plan?

Again I ask, Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all. Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.<sup>69</sup>

The point Paul makes is that in this partial and temporary fall of Israel in the NT, it was God's purpose to bring salvation to the Gentiles. The prophets had made it clear that Israel was to be instrumental in bringing the knowledge of God and salvation to the Gentiles on a national level. In this interadvent period, we see salvation sent to the Gentiles on an individual level, a somewhat unexpected initial phase to the blessing promised in the prophets. However, the point is that even in her unbelief, Israel remains the link between salvation and the Gentiles.

Paul immediately follows this point by picking up the prophetic vision that even greater blessings will flow to the Gentiles on a national level through Israel's restoration.<sup>70</sup> In both cases, Israel plays the central role in the blessing of the

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64 Rom. 11:28-29.

65 The election in Rom. 11:28 is different from the election in 11:5-7. The former is *theocratic election*, the act of God in taking national Israel as his chosen people, a nation among nations; the latter is *individual election* to faith and salvation. See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:101.

66 John 4:22.

67 Rom. 11:1-5.

68 Rom. 11:7, 25.

69 Rom. 11:11. God's tactic here of provoking Israel to jealousy by using Gentiles should not have been unknown to Israel, as Paul argues in chapter 10. In 10:19 he quotes Deut. 32:21 from the Song of Moses: "I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation." The quoted verse appears in a context in which Moses criticizes Israel for unfaithfulness, a situation analogous to Israel's condition in Paul's day.

70 Rom. 11:12, 15, 24. To quote Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:79, "Thus there awaits the Gentiles, in their distinctive identity as such, gospel blessing far surpassing anything experienced during the period of Israel's apostasy, and this unprecedented enrichment will be occasioned by the conversion of Israel on a scale commensurate with that of their earlier disobedience." Again, II:95-96, "By the fulness of the Gentiles Israel is restored (vs. 25); by the restoration of Israel the Gentiles are incomparably enriched (vss. 12, 15)... 'The fulness of the Gentiles' denotes unprecedented

Gentiles.

Also in both cases, the salvation of the Gentiles is based on the ancient word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that "in your seed will all the nations of earth be blessed." In Gal. 3:8, Paul cites this promise from Gen. 12:3:

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed in you."

Here Paul clearly claims that the gospel he preached to the Gentiles was "foreseen" by the Scriptures in that part of the Abrahamic covenant where God announced that the nations would be blessed through Abraham, and more specifically through his seed. Paul saw his ministry to the Gentiles as fulfilling this promise. Thus, both the gospel and the salvation of the Gentiles is based on the centrality of Israel in God's redemptive plan.

## **THE NT PERSPECTIVE ON GENTILE BELIEVERS**

If Israel is God's chosen nation among nations and central to his redemptive program, the question of the status of Gentile believers immediately arises. The first point to observe in establishing the NT perspective on these believers in Jesus is that about three-quarters of the Bible is the OT, and about 95% of that is the history of this people called Israel.<sup>71</sup> This fact in itself should certainly predispose the current, predominantly Gentile church against viewing itself as in some way central in the overall plan of redemptive history. We are not. Our blessings and our salvation flow only from a covenant made with Israel and in which Israel is the key player.

However, the NT forces one to go beyond this observation. There are four key teaching passages on this subject: Acts 15, Romans 11, Ephesians 2, and Galatians 3.

### **The Jerusalem Council: Acts 15**

The church at Antioch was Paul's headquarters for all three of his missionary journeys. It had a large Gentile constituency. A problem arose after he had returned from the first missionary journey. "Certain men came down from Judea" and began teaching the Gentile believers that circumcision was necessary for salvation. It comes out later that they were not sent by James and the elders of the church at Jerusalem; possibly they were "believing Pharisees who had recently joined the Christian movement."<sup>72</sup>

It was in fact the case during the OT era that if a Gentile came to believe in the God of Israel and wished to unite with the people of God and have full covenant rights, such a convert had to be circumcised and submit to the legal requirements

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\_\_\_\_\_ blessing for them but does not exclude even greater blessing to follow. It is to this subsequent blessing that the restoration of Israel contributes."

71 See William Sanford La Sor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 30.

72 R. H. Mounce, "Apostolic Council," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), I:201.

of the law of Moses.<sup>73</sup> He was essentially absorbed into Israel and lost his Gentile identity. Of course, it was never the case that salvation was gained by circumcision or keeping the law; this was Paul's argument in Romans 3 and 4. In the OT, a Gentile of faith, like a believing Jew, with his faith already imputed as righteousness by God, would simply submit to the law of Moses as the way of life for a redeemed individual.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, that circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law was required for salvation did represent mainline Jewish thinking during the NT era.<sup>75</sup> No doubt this is why these men from the Jerusalem church, generally called *Judaizers*, came to Antioch and argued the way they did.

The Jerusalem council convened to discuss this issue. No mention is made at the council as to whether circumcision and the law were requirements for salvation; apparently, the Judaizers backed down on this part of their argument. However, the issue still remained as to whether saved Gentiles should become circumcised and keep the law as a way of life, as was the pattern in the OT.

The key argument was given by Peter, based on his experience with Cornelius in Acts 10. God in that event had already settled this question:

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them [Cornelius and his household] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.<sup>76</sup>

If a Gentile in the OT converted to Judaism, he lost his Gentile identity, and in a sense, there was no longer a distinction between him and a native Israelite. However, this is not at all what Peter meant when he stated that God "made no distinction between us and them." Peter argued that now a Gentile could be saved and **remain a Gentile**, without submitting to Judaism. There was no distinction in the sense that now both Jew and Gentile are saved by faith **as Jew and Gentile**. Now God no longer required a believing Gentile to be absorbed into Israel and lose his identity as a Gentile. This was a new pattern that God began in the apostolic era. By revelation, Paul was convinced of this new pattern, that God was accepting Gentiles as Gentiles. That is why he insisted so vehemently that believing Gentiles did not need to be circumcised.

James then gave the concluding argument that this new pattern was actually in harmony with the prophetic promise. He cites Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that the OT did indeed envision a time when Gentiles would be saved as Gentiles. He believed that what was now taking place among the Gentiles was at least the beginning of the fulfillment of this and other such prophecies. In the Messianic Kingdom, this

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73 See Gen. 17:9-14; Exod. 12:48-49, Num. 9:14, and T. R. Schreiner, "Proselyte," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), III:1005-1009.

74 This was the pattern, of course, on a national level for Israel. God redeemed the nation from slavery in Egypt and then gave them the law, not only moral but also civil and ceremonial, as a way for a redeemed people, separated unto God, to live. See Exod. 15:11-13; 19:3-6; also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Leviticus 18:5 and Paul: Do This and You Shall Live (Eternally?)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 14(1971):19-28.

75 See the extended footnote on Acts 15:10 in F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 294.

76 Acts 15:8-9.

fulfillment would expand to a national level.<sup>77</sup>

The decision of the council is what is most important for the theme of this paper. Believing Gentiles were required neither to be circumcised nor to live under the law of Moses.<sup>78</sup> In addition to abstaining from idolatry and fornication, to which Paul would have no objection, the council simply asked the Gentile believers to abstain from certain practices especially offensive to Jews, both believers and unbelievers.<sup>79</sup>

## The Olive Tree: Romans 11

The question raised by the unbelief of national, ethnic Israel is the central issue addressed by Paul in Romans 11.<sup>80</sup> However, in the process of answering that question, Paul also explains the present and future blessing of Gentiles. He uses the metaphor of an olive tree in verses 17-24 with the following particulars:<sup>81</sup>

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77 There are a host of technical problems associated with the quotation of Amos 9:11-12 by James in Acts 15:15-17. He quotes from the LXX, and it has several deviations from the MT. I submit, however, that these problems do not affect the general conclusion given above. It is also true that the prophets, including Amos, envision salvation flowing to the Gentiles on a national level. On the premillennial scheme, discussed later in this paper under "Dispensationalism: Israel and the Church," with footnote 120, these predictions will be fulfilled after the second advent during the reign of Christ from Jerusalem. However, during this interadvent period, James clearly sees salvation extended to individual Gentiles as the beginning of the ultimate fulfillment.

78 Acts 15:10, 19-20, 24, 28-29; 21:25.

79 There are serious textual variants in Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 429-34: "The three verses contain many problems concerning text and exegesis: (1) Are Gentiles commanded to abstain from four things (food offered to idols, blood, strangled meat, and unchastity) or from three (omitting either strangled meat or unchastity); and (2) are the three or four prohibitions entirely ceremonial, or entirely ethical, or a combination of both kind?" Metzger and the UBS editorial committee prefer the Alexandrian text, which has the fourfold list. However, this reading does not imply that James is placing believing Gentiles under certain ceremonial parts of the law. "...we interpret the Decree as relating to those gentile practices that were abhorrent to the Jew and would seriously impair the table fellowship in the local congregation (R. H. Mounce, "Apostolic Council," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition, I:202-3). Also: "...respect for Jewish aversion to meat containing blood and taken from strangled animals is as intelligible as not serving pork at a modern conference of Jews and Christians" (F. V. Filson, "Council of Jerusalem," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1962], I:711. Mounce concludes: "The Jewish wing [of believers], with its ceremonial practices, agreed that God was accepting Gentiles on the basis of faith alone, and the gentile wing willingly altered their cultural pattern so as not to be offensive to their Jewish brethren and thus undermine the possibility of genuine harmony within the Church."

80 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:65. It is also worth noting that Murray argues throughout his entire commentary on chapter 11 that the term "Israel" in every instance is used for ethnic Israel.

81 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:85, agrees: "The figure of the olive tree

- The "cultivated olive tree" represents ethnic, national Israel.
- The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are the "root" of this olive tree; almost equivalently, the "root" might refer to the patriarchal covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- The "wild olive tree" represents the Gentile nations.

The clear implication of this metaphor is that all salvation blessings flow from the patriarchs, and the covenant God made with them, to national Israel and then through Israel to the Gentiles. During this interadvent period, many "natural branches," unbelieving Jews, have been broken off, while many "wild branches," believing Gentiles, have been grafted in among the remaining natural branches, believing Jews. This ingrafting is why we Gentiles are presently receiving blessings even though the covenants and promises always have, still do, and always will belong to Israel; after all, it is "their own olive tree."<sup>82</sup> Again, Israel is the center of God's redemptive program and the agency through which salvation flows to the world.

Note that Paul's teaching here does not imply that Gentiles lose their identity as Gentiles as proselytes did in the OT when they converted to Judaism and identified with the nation of Israel. In the picture Paul creates here, the Gentiles, though grafted into the Israelite olive tree, remain identifiable and distinguishably Gentiles ("wild").

## The State of Israel: Ephesians 2

In this passage, Paul first describes Gentiles before their salvation:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)--remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.<sup>83</sup>

Here is his description of Gentiles after their salvation:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.<sup>84</sup>

There are two Greek words that link these passages in a significant way. First, in verse 12, the word *πολιτεία* is used, meaning *commonwealth* or *state*.<sup>85</sup> The article

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to describe Israel is in accord with the Old Testament usage (cf. Jer. 11:16, 17); Hos. 14:6)...Israel with its rootage in the patriarchs [vss. 17-18] is viewed as the cultivated olive tree (cf. vs. 24) and the Gentiles as the wild olive."

82 Rom. 11:24.

83 Eph. 2:11-12.

84 Eph. 2:19.

85 William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 692. Note that *πολιτεία* can also mean *citizenship*, Arndt and

is also used: "having been alienated from the state of Israel" and thus strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and being without God.

Second, in verse 19, the word συμπολιται is used. It is translated *fellow citizens*, and is a combination of the word, πολιτης, with the prefix συμ, which carries the idea of *joint, fellow, or together with*. πολιτης in verse 19 and πολιτεια in verse 12 are cognate words, the latter meaning "commonwealth" or "state," the former "citizen," but both involve the concept of nation or state. The implication is clearly that the Gentiles who were once excluded from the state (πολιτειας) of Israel are now fellow citizens (συμπολιται) of Israel along with ethnic Jews. That is how we Gentiles now enjoy the blessings of salvation. Without becoming citizens of Israel, we would still be strangers to the covenants and without hope. Again Israel is seen as the agency through which these blessings flow to the world.

### The Seed of Abraham: Galatians 3

As already argued, in the NT Gentiles do not lose their identity as Gentiles when they become citizens of Israel or, to use the metaphor, when they become grafted into the Jewish olive tree. However, what blessings do believing Gentiles gain in the NT? Not all of them. Paul teaches that the Gentiles become partakers in Israel's spiritual blessings<sup>86</sup> and thus become part of Israel in a spiritual sense only. For example, their blessings would exclude the land, which was promised to Israel as an everlasting possession.

How is it that believing Gentiles are entitled to these spiritual blessings? The answer is this: we are united to Christ, who is the "seed of Abraham" in a corporate and climactic sense.<sup>87</sup> The argument is as follows. While it is true that

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Gingrich prefer *commonwealth* or *state* for Eph. 2:12. However, which of these two possibilities is chosen makes little difference to the conclusion drawn in this paper. Using "citizenship," the implication of vv. 12 and 19 would be this: the Gentiles who were once excluded from citizenship in Israel are now fellow citizens of Israel along with ethnic Jews.

86 Rom. 15:27; cf. Eph. 1:3.

87 To understand the use of "seed" in Scripture, and particularly in Gal. 3:15-29, the concept of *corporate solidarity* must be invoked. Grammatically, "seed" is a collective noun in Hebrew, Greek, and English. Thus in the singular it can rightfully be applied to an entity that represents a corporate solidarity, and this the Scripture writers have done in both the OT and NT. "Seed" refers to Abraham's descendants as a unit and therefore has both a singular and plural aspect. The "seed" or "corporation," identified by a grammatically singular collective noun, can be viewed from a plural standpoint to define all of Abraham's descendants (e.g., Gen. 13:15-16; 15:5), taking into account, of course, God's limiting the seed by election (cf. Rom. 11:28) to Jacob (Gen. 21:12; 28:1-4; 12-15; Rom. 9:7-13). On the other hand, the "seed" or "corporation" can just as legitimately be viewed from a singular standpoint to refer to a contemporary representative in whom the plurality is incorporated, such as Isaac personally (cf. Gen. 15:3), or to the climactic representative, Jesus, as Paul emphasizes in Gal. 3:16. We have here a complex but *single* meaning of the term "seed" in Gen. 13:15, which Paul quotes. It is to this single, complex meaning to which he draws attention by noting the use of a grammatically singular collective noun in Gal. 3:16. Paul wants to focus on the climactic representative of the "seed," even though Gen. 13:15 describes the "seed" to be as numerous "as the dust of the earth." This analysis of Paul's exegesis in Gal. 3:16 is brilliantly made by Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975, originally published in

believing Gentiles are not and cannot become part of the physical "seed of Abraham" (= ethnic Israel), it is nevertheless true that we are reckoned as members of the "seed of Abraham" in a spiritual sense, by virtue of being *in Christ* through faith. We therefore are heirs to the spiritual blessings in Israel's covenants of promise (salvation, the Holy Spirit, et al.).<sup>88</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF GENTILE CHRISTIAN CONCEIT

In his discussion of the olive tree in Romans 11, Paul warns believing Gentiles, the "wild branches" grafted in, no less than three times against taking a boastful, conceited attitude toward unbelieving Israel, the "natural branches" broken off:

- Do not boast over those branches [that were broken off]...<sup>89</sup>
- Do not be arrogant...<sup>90</sup>
- I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited...<sup>91</sup>

However, as the church became largely Gentile, this is precisely what happened.

It is quite easy in our own stage in history for believing Gentiles to fall prey to this temptation. Numerically speaking, we are in the majority within the believing community. More specifically, institutional and denominational Christianity today is Gentile-dominated in its leadership, constituency, and style of worship--and has been throughout most of Christian history. How easy, then, for the believing Gentile community to identify itself as "the church" and view itself as the center and culmination of God's redemptive plan. But this is precisely what Paul warns against in Romans 11. The central thesis of that great chapter is that Israel, even in unbelief, was, is, and always will be the center of God's love and program in salvation history. The Gentiles are "*wild branches*," supported by the "root and fatness of the olive tree": Israel's patriarchs and Israel's covenants of promise.<sup>92</sup>

The conceit of which Paul speaks reached its climax in replacement theology and amillennialism, which see no future for national Israel in general, or its land, and no significance for Jewish people in particular, apart from individual incorporation into "the church," the imagined centerpiece of God's activity as he brings redemptive history to a close. William Hendriksen, for example, criticizes "those who, contrary to all New Testament teaching...maintain that the Jews are still God's specially favored people."<sup>93</sup>

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1905), p. 206, n. 1. In Gal. 3:16, Paul does not depart from the original meaning of the OT text.

88 Gal. 3:14, 29.

89 V. 18.

90 V. 20.

91 V. 25.

92 V. 17.

93 William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 32. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), pp. 698-700, sees a future conversion of Israel, but he denies that it will include or be preceded by a national restoration to their Old Testament land. Of course, he wrote on the wrong side of 1948.

How did this arrogant attitude come about? In the book of Acts, the total believing community saw itself in its proper relationship to Israel, as can be seen from Romans 11 and Ephesians 2. The middle wall of partition had been broken down by bringing Gentiles, as Gentiles, into the state of Israel, but by the same token, Jewish believers still maintained their Jewish heritage, both culturally and religiously, and this properly so, as argued later in this paper. However, very shortly after the apostolic era, the largely Gentile church became conceited and began to view itself as the center and grand culmination of God's redemptive program. The results of this attitude were twofold.

## The Loss of the Promises to Israel

The first result of this conceit is that the church reinterpreted the OT prophecies about restored Israel's glorious future in the land and applied them to the church. Lactantius writes,

Now that the Jews were disinherited, because they rejected Christ, and that we, who are of the Gentiles, were adopted into their place, is proved by the Scriptures.<sup>94</sup>

Tertullian explains how this was done:

As for the restoration of Judea, however, which even the Jews themselves, induced by the names of places and countries, hope for just as it is described [i.e., in the literal sense], it would be tedious to state at length how the figurative interpretation is spiritually applied to Christ and His church, and to the character and fruits thereof.<sup>95</sup>

This approach culminated in the works of Augustine (A. D. 354-430), sometimes called the "father of amillennialism." In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine summarizes and adopts the rules of interpretation developed somewhat earlier by Tichonius (ca. 370-390). In applying the fourth rule, Augustine writes,

And thus the spiritual Israel is made up, not of one nation, but of all the nations which were promised to the fathers in their seed, that is, in Christ. This spiritual Israel, therefore, is distinguished from the carnal Israel which is of one nation, by newness of grace, not by nobility of descent, in feeling, not in race; but the prophet, in his depth of meaning, while speaking of the carnal Israel, passes on, without indicating the transition, to speak of the spiritual, and although now speaking of the later, seems to be still speaking of the former...And therefore we ought to take this saying, "And I will bring you into your own land," and what he says shortly afterwards, as if repeating himself, "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers," not literally, as if they referred to Israel after the flesh, but spiritually, as referring to the spiritual Israel. For the Church, without spot or wrinkle, gathered out of all nations, and destined to reign forever with Christ, is itself the land of the blessed, the land of the

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94 Lactantius (A. D. 260-330), *The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, Chapter XLVIII, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). p. 242.

95 Tertullian (A. D. 145-220), *The Five Books Against Marcion*, Book III, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). p. 342.

living.<sup>96</sup>

These views are not restricted to the early centuries of the church. The idea that the church has become the heir of Israel's promises still represents the mainstream thinking of amillennialism. Here is a modern writer:

Christ reinterpreted the concept [of the "people of God"] in the light of His own ministry and mission to the world, and the Church became heir to the promises of Israel. Directly and indirectly the NT claims the transfer of the role of "people of God," with its responsibilities and promises, to the Church.<sup>97</sup>

## **The Loss of the Cultural and Religious Heritage of Israel**

The second result of this conceit is what might be called "gentilizing" of Jewish believers, the haughty counterpart to arrogant efforts at judaizing Gentile believers in the book of Acts. How strong this attitude became can be seen by its inclusion in canons of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in A. D. 787:

But if any of them [Jews], out of a sincere heart and in faith, is converted and makes profession with his whole heart, setting at naught their customs and observances, and so that others may be convinced and converted, such an one is to be received and baptized, and his children likewise; and let them be taught to take care to hold aloof from the ordinances of the Hebrews. But if they will not do this, let them in no wise be received.<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, Jews, largely due to Christian non-participation in the two Jewish revolts against Rome,<sup>99</sup> ceased considering Christianity even a deviant sect of Judaism. They came to view it as a completely separate, pagan religion. Thus, as Menahem Benhayim observes,

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96 *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine* in Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, *St. Augustines City of God and Christian Doctrine*, Book 3, chapter 34, paragraphs 48, 49 (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). p. 571.

97 A. R. Tippett, "People of God," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition, III:761.

98 Canon VIII, The Seventh Ecumenical Council: The Second Council of Nice, A.D. 787, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). p. 561. See also the earlier statement by Ignatius (A.D. 30-107): "It is absurd to speak of Jesus Christ with the tongue, and to cherish in the mind a Judaism which has now come to an end. For where there is Christianity, there cannot be Judaism" in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). p. 63.

99 The first was in A. D. 66-70, which resulted in the destruction of the Second Temple under Titus. Based on Jesus' warning in Luke 21:20, Christians fled the city in 66 and relocated in Pella. The second revolt under the leadership of Bar Cochba began in 132 and was finally put down by Julius Severus in 135. This time Jerusalem was totally destroyed: every wall was pulled down, and the entire area was plowed under. The emperor Hadrian built a new city he called Aelia Capitolina where Jerusalem had been. He also erected a temple to Jupiter on the site of the Second Temple and a temple to Venus on the site of Golgotha.

...with the passage of time, one of histories strangest conspiracies developed. The later synagogue and the triumphant church combined to suppress any possibility for continued Jewish life within the context of Christian faith. The synagogue totally banished the Hebrew Christian, declaring him outcast and dead to Israel; the church assured him that he was no longer a Jew and even forbade him to practice anything that might remind him of his Jewish identity.<sup>100</sup>

## The Antidote for this Conceit

Therefore, despite Paul's warning in Romans 11, the believing Gentile community has now become wise in its own conceits, while the unbelieving Jewish community now views Christianity as a Gentile religion.<sup>101</sup> How far all this is from the teaching and attitude represented in the NT, especially Romans 11! Israel was, is, and always will be the center of God's redemptive program.

However, the antidote to this conceit is also in Romans 11, once artificial grids are lifted from the text that have been imposed upon it by theological systems in which this conceit has become enshrined as doctrine. Here is how Paul counteracts it: instead of being wise in our own conceits,

- Our theology must acknowledge that the blindness of Israel is only partial and only until the full number of Gentiles are saved during this interadvent period.<sup>102</sup>

Both elements are clearly expressed [in v. 25]: the hardening of Israel is partial not total, temporary not final, 'in part' indicating the former, 'until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in' the latter...The partial hardening of Israel will have a terminus.<sup>103</sup>

- Our theology must acknowledge the coming end to this blindness and a re-ingrafting of the natural branches back into their own olive tree.<sup>104</sup>

The restoration of Israel was implied in verse 24 but not categorically stated. Now [in v. 25] we have express assurance.<sup>105</sup>

- Our theology must acknowledge that this is an eschatological restoration of Israel both numerically and nationally as the culmination of God's redemptive work in history:

And so all Israel shall be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn ungodliness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."<sup>106</sup>

Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to evade the clear teaching of Paul in

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<sup>100</sup> Menahem Benhayim, "The Remnant in Israel Today," *Christianity Today*, January 21, 1983, p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> And not without reason, considering most of the formal theologies and practices within Christianity.

<sup>102</sup> Rom. 11:25.

<sup>103</sup> Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:92-93.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Rom. 11:24.

<sup>105</sup> Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:93.

<sup>106</sup> Rom. 11:26-27.

this passage.<sup>107</sup> However, it hardly takes a rocket scientist to grasp his meaning; only the conceit of arrogant theological systems would prevent it. Consider:

- There are 11 occurrences of the word "Israel" in Romans 9-11. Rom. 11:26 contains the eleventh. In all the previous uses, including the preceding verse, it means ethnic Israel.
- Moreover, verses 25 and 26 are inextricably linked:

Verse 26 is in close sequence with verse 25. The main thesis of verse 25 is that the hardening of Israel is to terminate and that Israel is to be restored. This is but another way of affirming what had been called Israel's "fulness" in verse 12, the "receiving" in verse 15, and the grafting in again in verses 23-24. To regard the climactic statement, "all Israel shall be saved", as having reference to anything else than this precise datum would be exegetical violence.<sup>108</sup>

- As evidence that "all Israel will be saved," Paul quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: A Deliverer will come and take away the sin of national Israel, because this is God's covenant with them.<sup>109</sup>

There should be no question that Paul regards these Old Testament passages as applicable to the restoration of Israel...We cannot dissociate this covenantal assurance from the proposition in support of which the text is adduced or from that which follows in verse 28. Thus the effect is that the future restoration of Israel is certified by nothing less than the certainty belonging to covenantal institution.<sup>110</sup>

- However, verse 26 is not only exegetically linked with verse 25 but also with verse 28. The "all Israel" that will be saved is currently the "enemy" of the gospel but yet "as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs."

"Beloved" thus means that God has not suspended or rescinded his relation to Israel as his chosen people in terms of the covenants made with the fathers. Unfaithful as Israel have been and broken off for that reason, yet God still sustains his peculiar relation of love to them, a relation that will be

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107 For example, Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 144-145, argues (1) that "all Israel will be saved" does not refer to an eschatological restoration but to the salvation of all the elect within Israel through the interadvent period and (2) that verse 26 does not say "and then" implying the Greek word τότε or επειτα, but ουτος, "and so." Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:97, gives an extensive argument against point (1); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, pp. 55-57, gives an excellent answer to both points. The "and so," although it cannot be translated, "and then," nevertheless is sequential: blindness has fallen on Israel *until* the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so in this way, *by the lifting of that blindness at the point when the full number of Gentiles has come in*, all Israel will at that point be saved.

108 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:97.

109 Rom. 11:26-27 quoting Isa. 59:20-21 and either Isa. 27:9 or more likely Jer. 31:34.

110 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:99-100.

demonstrated and vindicated in the restoration (vss. 12, 15, 26).<sup>111</sup>

- Why are they loved on account of the patriarchs even while in unbelief? Because "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."<sup>112</sup> God made a covenant with national Israel, and he will "take away their sins" as a nation and fulfill this covenant, which is restoration to the land and blessing therein forever, as the new covenant itself makes clear,<sup>113</sup> and as the prophets state again and again.

"The gifts and the calling of God" have reference to those mentioned in 9:4, 5 as the privileges and prerogatives of Israel. That these "are not repented of" [literation translation] is expressly to the effect that the adoption, the covenants, and the promises in their application to Israel have not been abrogated. The appeal is to the faithfulness of God (cf. 3:3). The veracity of God insures the continuance of that relationship which the covenants with the fathers instituted, another index of the certitude belonging to covenantal confirmation.<sup>114</sup>

Therefore, contrary to the conceit of "replacement theology" and amillennialism, with Israel the covenants were made, to Israel the land was given, and upon Israel all will be fulfilled.<sup>115</sup>

There are countless prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Israel and the land of promise which have not been fulfilled in the Christian church, and, in my opinion, can never be fulfilled in the church. They can be fulfilled only in Israel.<sup>116</sup>

## **The Implications of the Centrality of Israel**

### **VARIOUS THEOLOGICAL ISSUES**

This paper argues that unless the centrality of Israel is maintained, a right understanding of the Bible and a right theology cannot be attained. What, then, are some of the implications of this centrality?

#### **The Millennial Issue**

As noted already, amillennialism represents the very conceit that Paul warns believing Gentiles against in Romans 11. By contrast, the centrality of Israel in both the redemptive and eschatological program of God is clear in the OT prophets and points to an entirely different view of the millennium. Moreover, a natural reading of the prophets according to grammatical-historical hermeneutics is quite consistent with Paul's discussion in Romans 11. Consider, for example, the sequence of events described in Joel 3 and Zechariah 14. The same sequence of events is portrayed in Revelation 19-21.

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111 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:101.

112 Rom. 11:29.

113 Jer. 31:38-40; 32:37-42.

114 Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:101.

115 It is most illuminating that in Hoekema's discussion of Rom. 11:25-26, he *never* cites John Murray, one of the most respected of Reformed theologians.

116 William Sanford La Sor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 81-82.

<b>Background:</b> <b>The land was given to Israel as an everlasting possession.<sup>117</sup></b>		
<b>Event</b>	<b>Joel 3</b>	<b>Zechariah 14</b>
The prophets envision a full restoration of national Israel to the land God gave them as an everlasting possession.	3:1 <sup>118</sup>	
The nations will come against this restored Israel and attack it.	3:2-3, 9-15	14:1-2
Yahweh will fight for Israel and defeat these nations.	3:16-17	14:3-8
Then begins the reign of Yahweh from Jerusalem over the whole earth.	3:18-21	14:9-11
As a result, the Gentile nations are converted on a national basis.		14:16

This sequence has a name in theology: it is called *premillennialism*.

### **Dispensationalism: Israel and the Church**

The centrality of Israel also provides a corrective to that aspect of dispensationalism that sees two programs and two peoples of God.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, at least since Abraham, there is but one people of God in both the OT and NT: Abraham,

<sup>117</sup> Gen. 17:7-8: "I will give to you and to your seed after you...all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that the Hebrew word, *`olam*, here does indeed mean "everlasting," as it generally does. Suffice it to say that such a case can be successfully argued; see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, pp. 49-50. However, modern amillenarians generally take a different approach to evade the natural interpretation of Gen. 17:7-8. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 211, claims that "the Bible indicates that the land of Canaan was indeed a type of the everlasting inheritance of the people of God on the new earth...In New Testament times the land which is to be inherited by the people of God is expanded to include the entire earth" . However, even Hoekema himself admits that the phrases "the land" or "the land of Canaan" for the OT recipients of God's revelation "was the land God had given to his people as their dwelling place and their possession." By the application of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, it could mean nothing else.

<sup>118</sup> See also Jer. 24:4-7; 30:1-3, 10; 31:38-40; 32:36-44; 33:1-8, 25-26; Ezek. 34:11-14, 25-31; 36:21-38; 37:20-28.

<sup>119</sup> This is one of the key features of dispensationalism; see, e.g., Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 44-47.

Isaac, and Jacob together with their "seed," Israel, represented by the olive tree in Romans 11. Thus also the covenant community since Jacob has been, is, and always will be Israel. As Paul stated in both Romans 11 and Ephesians 2, Gentiles as individuals have now been spiritually brought into Israel, expanding the people of God, and into the sphere of Israel's spiritual blessings of salvation,<sup>120</sup> but no new group or entity was born in the NT.<sup>121</sup> The "church,"<sup>122</sup> then, is not a second group with its own program, as dispensationalists argue. The covenant community always has been the visible manifestation of this "church" (though of course not all members of the visible covenant community are personally saved). Since the time of Jacob, and into the *eschaton*, the center of this covenant community in the eye of God is Israel, the "apple of his eye"<sup>123</sup>--even now, despite the "blinding" of many of Israel's "natural branches" (Jews).

## Covenant Theology: Circumcision and Baptism

To the extent that covenant theology<sup>124</sup> embraces amillennialism, it falls under the criticism already given in this paper. However, there are certain serious problems that infect all versions of covenant theology, even the premillennial variety.

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which perhaps represent the best expression of covenant theology, view baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, or more specifically, its current administration under the new covenant. As such, according to this view, baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant.<sup>125</sup> However, in the past whenever a sign has been given for a covenant, its designation as such and its identity with the covenant of which it is a sign have been clearly stated in a didactic passage. The rainbow was explicitly called the sign of the Noahic covenant;<sup>126</sup> circumcision was explicitly called the sign of the Abrahamic covenant;<sup>127</sup> and the sabbath was explicitly called a sign of the Sinaitic covenant.<sup>128</sup> Not only does no such passage exist for baptism, baptism is never called a sign or a seal of anything, and circumcision is never abrogated in

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120 The prophets foretold an additional expansion of the people of God to include redeemed Gentile nations. Zech. 2:11: "Many nations will be joined to Yahweh in that day and will become my people." See also Ps. 47:9; Isa. 19:24-25.

121 As pointed out earlier in this paper, Gentiles being grafted into the Jewish olive tree does not imply that Gentiles lose their identity as Gentiles. They do not become Jews. In particular, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles and between Israel and the Gentile nations remains intact. All the covenantal blessings, both spiritual and physical, promised to national Israel will be fulfilled, including the everlasting possession of the land promised to them as a nation. As a result of ingrafting Gentiles into the Jewish olive tree, as in Rom. 11, and being made fellow citizens of Israel, as in Eph. 2, Gentiles receive Israel's spiritual blessings of salvation as promised in the Abrahamic covenant.

122 Greek, ἐκκλησία.

123 Zech. 2:8: "He who touches you [Israel] touches the apple of his eye."

124 Covenant theology is so called, not because of an emphasis on the covenants of Scripture, but because it sees history subsumed under two covenants, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, neither of which are ever mentioned in Scripture.

125 See Confession, chapter VII, sections V and VI; chapter XXVIII, section I.

126 Genesis 9.

127 Genesis 17.

128 Exod. 31:12-18; Deut. 5:1-21, esp. vv. 2, 3, 15; Ezek. 20:10-12.

the NT.

The centrality of Israel sheds light on the debate over circumcision and baptism. Gen. 17:1-14 establishes the "everlasting" nature of several things:

- The covenant God made with Abraham (v. 7)
- The seed of Abraham--Israel (v. 7)
- The land as a possession of Israel (v. 8)
- Circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 9-14)

The Sinaitic, Davidic, and new covenants were all continuations and amplifications of the Abrahamic covenant, but no sign ever replaced circumcision. The sign of circumcision continued even after a new sign was given for the Sinaitic covenant, namely the Sabbath. The sabbath did not replace circumcision, and both signs were to be practiced for "an everlasting covenant."<sup>129</sup> No signs were ever specified for the Davidic or new covenants.

I therefore argue that circumcision was, is, and always will be the sign of the Abrahamic covenant; it is an everlasting sign for an everlasting covenant. Israelites, believing or unbelieving, should still receive this sign in the flesh, even today--for "my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant."<sup>130</sup> This fact is clearly confirmed in the NT. The same Paul who stood up at the Jerusalem council to argue that Gentiles should not be circumcised,<sup>131</sup> who refused to circumcise Titus,<sup>132</sup> and who later publicly withstood Peter to his face,<sup>133</sup> nevertheless acceded to James' request that he take a vow involving a blood sacrifice **for the express purpose** of demonstrating to Jewish believers that he never taught they should not circumcise their children.<sup>134</sup> Circumcision was not only continued during the apostolic era among believing Jews as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, but Paul himself confirms the rightness of this continuation by his action here. So much for baptism replacing circumcision.

By contrast, on the issue of circumcision for Gentile believers, Paul made his position equally clear: they were not to be circumcised. Moreover, the same James who requested Paul to take a vow and offer a sacrifice to confirm his (Paul's) view of circumcision among Jewish believers, also agreed to this distinction with regard to Gentile believers: Paul and the other Jewish believers are "living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision [that they need not be circumcised]."<sup>135</sup>

But there is more to say about Gentile believers and circumcision. Those Gentiles who have been grafted into Israel do in fact receive circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. However, consistent with our status as part of the spiritual seed of Abraham, by virtue of our union with Christ, we receive circumcision spiritually by virtue of that same union. This is Paul's point in the much-touted gem in the Reformed argument, Col. 2:11-12: we have indeed been circumcised, but it was done spiritually, "without hands," as part of our union with Christ.<sup>136</sup> Baptism, also mentioned in Col. 2:11-12, was simply the initiatory

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129 Gen. 17:13; Exod. 31:16.

130 Gen. 17:9, 13.

131 Acts 15.

132 Gal. 2:3.

133 Gal. 2:11-14.

134 Acts 21:17-26.

135 Acts 21:24-25; the decision is found in Acts 15:19-29.

136 Therefore, we Gentile believers are even called "the circumcision" by Paul in

rite by which we publicly identified with Christ and our spiritual union with him; it has never replaced circumcision for anyone, and the NT never says that it did.

## The Sabbath

Israel had circumcision as the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, when brought out of Egypt and constituted a nation, Israel was given another sign, the sabbath, a sign of the national covenant God made with Israel at Sinai.<sup>137</sup> The sabbath was to be perpetual, as is clearly stated in Exod. 31:16-17, and this perpetuity obtains even after the inauguration of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 at Calvary. If the making of a "new" covenant with Israel at Sinai<sup>138</sup> did not invalidate the use of the sign of circumcision after Sinai, then neither did the inauguration of the new covenant at Calvary invalidate the continuation of the sign of the sabbath. Moreover, Jesus implies that the sabbath will still be observed during the time immediately preceding his second advent.<sup>139</sup>

In view of the national restoration of Israel, such continued observance is not difficult to explain. According to Isaiah, even in the new heavens and new earth, the sabbath will be observed.<sup>140</sup> One should expect nothing different: the sabbath was the sign of the national covenant between God and Israel, and Jeremiah declares that Israel will never cease to be a nation before God.<sup>141</sup> Even before 1948, Israel was a nation before God, scattered among the other nations yes, but a nation nevertheless. And it is this nation that God promised to bring back to its land.<sup>142</sup> The postexilic restoration was only partial, for there was still a diaspora during the NT era. The restoration of 1948 goes further in that Israel is now a sovereign state in its God-given land, but the restoration is still partial. There has never yet been a complete restoration from the scattering by Babylon. Nevertheless, the prophets envision such a restoration, and it will be permanent: Israel will have peace from the nations and never again be removed from the land.<sup>143</sup> So naturally, Israel should and will continue to keep the sabbath, the sign of its covenant as a

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Phil. 3:3.

137 Exod. 31:12-18; Deut. 5:1-21, esp. vv. 2, 3, 15; Ezek. 20:10-12.

138 Cf. Deut. 5:2-3.

139 Matt. 24:20.

140 Isa. 66:22-23.

141 Jer. 31:35-37.

142 E.g., Jer. 24:4-7; 30:1-3, 10; 31:38-40; 32:36-44; 33:1-8, 25-26; Ezek. 34:11-14, 25-31; 36:21-38; 37:20-28.

143 E.g., Jer. 30:10; 31:40; 32:37; Ezek. 37:25; Joel 3:17; Amos 9:14-15.

nation, "throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant."<sup>144</sup>

In what relationship do Gentile believers stand to this sign? It is not obligatory for Gentile believers to keep the sabbath. The Jerusalem council was convened to determine what, if anything, from Jewish law and heritage was obligatory for Gentile believers,<sup>145</sup> and the sabbath was not listed in the letter produced by this council.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, Paul, in writing to predominantly Gentile churches, specifically states that the sabbath was not obligatory.<sup>147</sup> At the same time, these texts in Acts and Paul's epistles are cast in such a way as to allow for and even anticipate Jewish believers to keep the sabbath. Does this mean, though, that they should stay within the synagogue today where virtually everyone else would be an unbeliever? Not necessarily, as the discussion of Messianic Judaism later in this paper illustrates.

However, more needs to be said before concluding this section. Paul calls the sabbath a "shadow" in Col. 2:16-17. Now a shadow in Scripture points forward. To what does the sabbath point? There is a whole theology of "rest" developed in the

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144 Exod. 31:16. Illustrating the old preacher's joke, "Pound pulpit, point weak," the Westminster Confession, chapter XXI, section VII, contains a breathtakingly magisterial statement: "He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week." The only problem with this "change" is that the NT writers neglected to mention it. There is no "change" mentioned in the NT because there was no change: it was the "seventh day" that was hallowed in Exod. 31:12-17 as a "sign" to be observed "throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant," not just some abstract principle of resting on one day out of seven. Moreover, it continued to be a sign of the Sinaitic covenant for Jewish believers in the NT: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20). Another interesting point should be made: this supposed "change" of the sabbath from the seventh day to the first day of the week is of relatively recent discovery! According to Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), pp. 202-203, "The fathers did not regard the Christian Sunday as a continuation of, but as a substitute for, the Jewish Sabbath, and based it not so much on the fourth commandment, and the primitive rest of God in creation, to which the commandment expressly refers, as upon the resurrection of Christ and the apostolic tradition. There was a disposition to disparage the Jewish law in the zeal to prove the independent originality of Christians institutions." Again on p. 205 he writes, "The ante-Nicene church clearly distinguished the Christian Sunday from the Jewish Sabbath, and put it on independent Christian ground....She regarded Sunday as a sacred day, as the Day of the Lord, as the weekly commemoration of his resurrection and the pentecostal effusion of the Spirit...The observance of the Sabbath among Jewish Christians gradually ceased."

145 Acts 15:1, 10.

146 Acts. 15:22-29.

147 Rom. 14:5, Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-17, the latter text explicitly mentioning "sabbaths." Reformed theologians perform interesting dances around these texts. See, e.g., Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II:257-259.

OT.<sup>148</sup> Moses identifies this "rest" with the inheritance of the land,<sup>149</sup> Joshua continues this idea,<sup>150</sup> and it appears again in the Davidic covenant.<sup>151</sup> Finally, quoting Ps. 95:6-11, the writer of Hebrews concludes that "there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God."<sup>152</sup> This reference in Hebrews ties together the two Hebrew words for "rest."<sup>153</sup> The rest into which God entered after six days of creation is that to which God's people are restored at the climactic culmination of his promise and program. It includes the land for the nation of Israel, but it includes as well all the spiritual blessings of the covenants of promise. Israel was redeemed out of bondage and sanctified as God's chosen people when he brought them out of Egypt and into their inheritance, their rest, the land of Canaan. Therefore, the sabbath, the observance of rest on the seventh day of the week, corresponding to the seventh day of the creation week, was established as the sign of the national covenant that God, then and there, made with Israel as he brought it into its rest. Thus the sabbath is a "shadow" and points to the full and final realization of all that God has for his people (both natural and wild branches), of which the rest under Joshua and the rest under David were down payments. This is the argument in Hebrews 4 where Gentiles are also connected with the sabbath.

## MESSIANIC JUDAISM

The concept of the centrality of Israel in the Bible and in theology is directly related to the movement known as Messianic Judaism. Daniel C. Juster summarizes the essence of this movement under five points:<sup>154</sup>

1. Messianic Jews are evangelical followers of the Old and New Testaments. They believe that salvation is by grace through faith in the final atonement

148 E.g., Exod. 33:14 and Deut. 3:20. See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 130(April-June 1973):135-50.

149 Deut. 12:9-10.

150 Josh 21:43-45.

151 2 Sam. 7:1, 11.

152 Heb. 4:9.

153 The first word, שָׁבַת, "Sabbath," is from the verbal root שָׁבַת, *shābat*, which means *to cease, desist, or rest* (BDB, p. 991; translated "he rested" in Gen. 2:2). The second word, מְנוּחָה, "rest" or "resting place," is from the verbal root נָוַח, *nūach*, which means *to rest, to settle down* (BDB, p. 628). מְנוּחָה is translated "rest" in Deut. 12:9 and Ps. 95:11. In the quote of Ps. 95:11 in Heb. 4:3, the Greek καταπαυσις, meaning *rest or place of rest* (Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 416), is used to translate it. However, in the concluding verse of 4:9, the Greek has σαββατισμος, which is an unusual transliteration of the Hebrew word שָׁבַת, thus tying together the two concepts. Note that σαββατισμος is used only in Heb. 4:9 and might have been coined by the author (James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, originally published in 1930]. p. 567); the usual transliteration of the Hebrew שָׁבַת is σαββατον.

154 In *The Evangelical Beacon*, October 14, 1975, pp. 10-11.

provided by the death of Christ.

2. Messianic Jews believe that the Church has historically, unwittingly, and legalistically tried to turn Jews into Gentiles in presenting the gospel to them. They see this as the ancient Judaizing heresy in reverse, which they call "Gentilizing." The confusion of cultural expressions with normative truths of Scripture has distorted the truth of the gospel. Jewish people are forced to swallow a Gentile-coated pill. Messianic Jews, therefore, seek to present the good news in a language and cultural style more consistent with Jewish styles of life.
3. Messianic Jews do not believe they are superior to other Christians. However, they do believe that they are called to a particular expression of this one faith in order to destroy the illusion that "Jesus is for Gentiles." They therefore prefer Jewish terminology to traditional Church terminology, such as *congregation* for *church*, *Yeshua* for *Jesus*, *Messiah* for *Christ*, *Tenach* for *Old Testament*, and *Messianic Jew* for *Christian*.
4. Messianic Jews believe that they can follow Yeshua in a style of life that is recognizably Jewish. Since God intended the feasts or festivals of Israel to be fulfilled in Yeshua, Messianic Jews, in order to better understand his redemptive work, keep alive biblical Jewish practices as a way of pointing to him. They practice Passover and Yom Kippur with an eye to their fulfillment in Yeshua as a part of their identity as Jews. Other practices that enrich life or maintain this identity are also often adopted, if consistent with biblical teaching.
5. Messianic Jews often find greater ability to fulfill these tasks in distinctive Messianic Jewish congregations, which have a Jewish flavor of worship while being Messiocentric. These congregations do not re-erect the wall of partition<sup>155</sup> but are expressions of faith that attract Gentile believers who also enjoy this style of worship. Full membership is open to all believers.

Messianic Judaism can be defended on the basis of several incidents in the book of Acts. For example, as noted earlier, Paul himself, after the confrontation with Peter in Galatians 2, remains loyal to the practices of Judaism.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, immediately after the Jerusalem council, the same Paul who refused to circumcise Titus<sup>157</sup> did circumcise Timothy, who was part Jewish.<sup>158</sup>

However, I suggest that the real, theological foundation for Messianic Judaism, and the actions of Paul mentioned above, is the biblical concept of the centrality of Israel. To see the connection, several topics must be examined.

## **Passover and the Lord's Supper**

Has not the Lord's Supper replaced Passover? Is this not what Jesus did "on the night that he was betrayed"? Two points should be noted in response.

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155 Cf. Eph. 2:14.

156 Acts 21:15-26: Paul agreed to take a vow and offer a blood sacrifice in order to show all Jewish believers that he was "living in obedience to the law."

157 Gal. 2:3.

158 Acts 16:3.

First, Passover was to be an everlasting ordinance. As long as Israel endured, it was to be observed: "You shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever."<sup>159</sup>

Second, Passover was never abolished by Jesus. The "Lord's Supper" was in fact **the Passover**. Jesus appointed the third cup of the Passover seder, the cup of redemption or atonement, as a symbol of the blood of the new covenant that he was soon to shed in the inauguration thereof. Indeed, the blood of the Paschal lamb always had been a latent symbol of the blood of Jesus. Moreover, the implication of Luke 22:14-16 is often overlooked: Jesus himself is going to eat **the Passover** with his disciples when he returns and establishes his kingdom on earth and his capital in Jerusalem.

Therefore, there is no Scriptural warrant against Jews, including believing Jews, continuing to eat the Passover during this interadvent period, and, in fact, the centrality and perpetuity of Israel imply the propriety of doing so.

What, then, of Gentile believers? Paul received direct revelation that **two parts of the Passover seder** singled out by Jesus are to be observed by Gentile believers.<sup>160</sup> This has always been done since the days of the Apostles. Jewish believers should keep the entire feast: it properly is a memorial to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and the bread and the third cup also symbolize the atonement made at Calvary. The symbolism of the lamb and its blood pointed, even in the OT, to the atoning sacrifice of the Messiah. That is what Jesus emphasized in his "Last Passover." Thus the symbolism of the Passover and the symbolism of the partial ceremony observed by Gentile believers are quite the same. With the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, lambs can no longer be slain as part of the Passover. However, in view of the discussion on sacrifices later in this paper, this fact does not disturb any of these conclusions.

## The Feasts of Israel

The question here is less complicated. Leviticus 23 establishes the perpetual nature of Israel's feasts,<sup>161</sup> and the argument is the same: as long as there is an Israel, the feasts are to be observed. Moreover, do not believing Jews share the same heritage that gave birth to these feasts and to which they point? How curious indeed it would be if only unbelieving Jews obeyed the Scriptures in observing these feasts!

## The Levitical Sacrifices

This issue raises the critical test. Has not the sacrifice of Jesus abolished the Levitical sacrifices? Also, are not the feasts, including Passover, inextricably linked with these sacrifices and therefore likewise no longer to be observed? Certainly all sacrifices abruptly ceased in A.D. 70 when the Second Temple was destroyed, but it is important to remember that the the sacrifices had also ceased during the Babylonian exile after Solomon's temple had been destroyed. The question remains, then, whether the sacrifices have been forever abolished in the plan of

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159 Exod. 12:14, 24.

160 1 Cor. 11:23-34.

161 Lev. 23:14, 21, 31, 41: "a statute forever throughout all your generations."

God. To this question, many scholars rightly answer no.<sup>162</sup>

First, several central features of the Levitical sacrificial system are declared in the Mosaic legislation to be "forever":

- The Aaronic priesthood<sup>163</sup>
- The status and service of the Levites<sup>164</sup>
- The sacrifices themselves<sup>165</sup>

The texts that state the perpetuity of these features, together with the centrality and perpetuity of Israel, form the same argument given several times already: as long as there are generations of Israel, these elements of her worship will remain, though temporarily halted during periods with no temple.

Second, the prophets also mention the sacrifices, and this in eschatological passages. Of course, the *crux interpretum*, Ezekiel 40-48--nine solid chapters filled with such a vast amount of specific minutiae, that any figurative or spiritual interpretation would be both unparalleled in any other literature of any kind and utterly impossible.<sup>166</sup> The details in Ezekiel, however, represent a slight revision of the Levitical protocols. This fact, together with the observation that the temple described corresponds to no temple in Israel's history, establishes the eschatological nature of Ezekiel 40-48.<sup>167</sup> And in these chapters, one reads of a temple, blood sacrifices, and the feast days.

However, there are passages in other prophets that mention such things as well, all in eschatological contexts. Isaiah mentions the altar and sanctuary,<sup>168</sup> and Jeremiah refers to priests, Levites, and their services.<sup>169</sup> Isaiah even states that in the

162 See, e.g., Clive A. Thompson, "The Necessity of Blood Sacrifices in Ezekiel's Temple," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 123 (July-Sept. 1966):237-48; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pp. 309-15; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), pp. 249-51; and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), pp. 512-531.

163 Exod. 29:9; Num. 18:8; 25:13.

164 Num. 18:23.

165 Lev. 3:17; 6:18; 7:34, 36; etc.

166 Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified*, translated by G. H. Lang (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), p. 155: "Ezekiel in his prophecy of the Messianic salvation pictures a future service of offerings with so many detailed appointments (e.g., 45:23, 24; 46:4-15), and a future temple with so many detailed accounts and measures (40:6-15; 41:1-4; 43:13-17), that it seems scarcely possible to understand these as only figurative and spiritual."

167 O. Palmer Robertson, like others before him, has argued that because the builders of the Second Temple did not follow Ezekiel's plan, therefore Ezekiel never intended his vision to be taken literally (*The Christ of the Prophets* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004], p. 314). However, as Alva J. McClain points out, what the builders of the Second Temple did could also imply that they understood that the fulfillment would be in the future age of the Messianic Kingdom (*The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 249).

168 Isa. 60:7, 13.

169 Jer. 33:18-22.

"new heavens and new earth," God will take some from among the Gentiles to serve as priests and Levites.<sup>170</sup>

But now the question must be faced: how can all this possibly be? Does not the book of Hebrews, in view of the sacrifice at Calvary, make the renewal of the sacrifices impossible? Also, are not such "ceremonial" aspects of the law mere "shadows"<sup>171</sup> to pass away with the full establishment of the new covenant?<sup>172</sup> Two points should caution us against too quickly answering this last question in the affirmative.

First, as already argued, the Sabbath will be observed even into the new heavens and the new earth, yet it was also called a "shadow." Simply because something in the Old Testament points forward to something eschatological does not imply that it will cease when the thing to which it points comes about.

Second, a most important prophetic passage is part of the very section in Jeremiah that develops the new covenant, Jeremiah 30-33. Within the specific context of the time when the "Branch of Righteousness...shall execute justice and righteousness in the land," in the days when "Judah shall be saved and Jerusalem shall dwell safely," Jeremiah refers to priests, Levites, burnt offerings, and cereal offerings.<sup>173</sup> All of this occurs within the broader context of the establishment of the new covenant. Therefore, Jeremiah apparently saw no difficulty with sacrifices under the new covenant.

In fact, according to this passage, one would have to question the integrity of Yahweh himself to suggest that the priests and Levites have forever ceased to function:

This is what Yahweh says: "If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore."<sup>174</sup>

Now to address the NT data: the writer of Hebrews, in view of the sacrifice of Jesus, concludes that "where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (περι αμαρτιας).<sup>175</sup> But this is simply saying that no sacrifices will be offered in order to deal with the sin problem; it does not insist that there can be no symbolic service that points as a memorial back to Calvary. According to no less an OT scholar than Gleason L. Archer, this is how the eschatological sacrifices are to be interpreted.<sup>176</sup> If the many and varied sacrifices of Leviticus point forward to the many different aspects of the atonement secured by Jesus on the cross, why can they not serve equally well as a memorial to point back to Calvary?

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170 Isa. 66:21-22.

171 See Heb. 8:5; 10:1.

172 See Heb. 8:13; 10:9.

173 Jer. 33:15-26.

174 Vv. 20-22.

175 Heb. 10:18.

176 Gleason L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 373-76.

If the above conclusions are correct, there is no problem with Jewish believers observing Passover and the other feasts as a continuation of their identity with Israel as the "remnant according to the election of grace."<sup>177</sup> Since the sacrifices are to be revived, there is no incongruity in observing these feasts, as does the rest of Israel, during the temporary absence of the sacrifices.

## Assessment of Messianic Judaism

We perhaps see in Messianic Judaism a healthy and practical revival of the NT perspective on Israel and its religion, Judaism. In the spectrum of world religions, Christianity in a real sense should be considered a subgroup within Judaism--the believing segment, as far as Yeshua HaMashiach is concerned, but a segment nevertheless.<sup>178</sup> Judaism, as broadly defined as the religion of Israel, was never to pass away. To say as much would be to say that the covenants of promise have failed.

This perspective, far too long absent within the believing Gentile community, places Jewish evangelism in a much different light. It was certainly a fundamental teaching of Jesus and his Apostles that there is no salvation apart from him.<sup>179</sup> Therefore, Jews as well as Gentiles, need to come to God through his Son in repentance and faith and be saved on the basis of the substitutionary atonement Jesus made at Calvary. However, one of the great tragedies of history is that this gospel was often presented to the Jew in such a way that he was called upon to renounce his people, his God-given feasts, his customs, his heritage, even Judaism in general. A Jew, in essence, was called upon to become a Gentile. In apostolic times, this was not part of the message to Israel. Believing Jews remained Jews--they remained within their people, their culture, and the OT law. Circumcision was observed; the great holy days were observed. Should it be any different today? In view of the principles in this paper, coming to a belief in Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior does not mean leaving Judaism, the religion of Israel.<sup>180</sup> The message to Israel is not, "Convert and become Gentiles," but rather, "Return, O Israel, to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Messianic Judaism, or we might substitute "believing Judaism," points, at least implicitly, to a renewal of the NT concept of the centrality of Israel. It also underscores a phrase that is hardly ever included when the popular verse in which it occurs is cited. Hopefully, Messianic Judaism will bring again this NT emphasis in evangelism:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first**, and also to the Greek.

Romans 1:16

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177 Rom. 11:5.

178 Cf. Acts 24:5; 28:22.

179 John 14:6; Acts 4:12.

180 Judaism in this context refers to the religion of Israel defined in the Old Testament. Naturally, when a Jew accepts Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel, he abandons the denial of this identification in Rabbinic Judaism.