

A Gospel for the Twenty-First Century

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The Gospel for Israel

From the earliest decades of the spread of the Gospel, a question began to be asked among the Christian communities springing up all over the Roman Empire. Why did the Jews, the people of the Messiah, reject their Messiah? They were, after all, the people of promise. They were the heirs of the divine covenant. They were the very ones who anticipated and longed for the coming of the Messiah. **John 1:10-12** remarks on this amazing paradox:

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, *but his own did not receive him.*”

In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul sought to answer this question, for the issue obviously was important to his Roman readers, who included both Jewish and Gentile believers. In **Romans 9:1-5**, Paul writes:

“I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit – 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...”

Why was Paul is such great anguish for the state of “my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel”? It was because they, as a people, had rejected the Gospel! How could this be? How is it possible for those who were the heirs of “the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises,” and from whom was “traced the human ancestry of Christ,” to end up rejecting the very one they had been expecting?

The Gospel for the World

The Gospel for the Church

▶ The Gospel for Israel ◀

The Gospel for Youth

The Gospel for the End Times

The Jerusalem Factor

When Paul wrote to the Romans, only two decades had passed since the Gospel had first been proclaimed, but during this brief period, a massive demographic shift had taken place within the Church. At the start, the Church had been completely Jewish. There was not one Gentile among the believers (the first believing Gentile was Cornelius, who doesn't appear in the account of **Acts** until **chapter 9**).

How did the Church shift from being a purely Jewish phenomenon to becoming a largely Gentile one? To understand this demographic shift, we need to look at what happened in the first ten years of Church history.

On the Day of Pentecost, immediately following the ascension of Christ, 3000 “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (**Acts 2:5**) embraced Jesus as their Messiah. A few weeks later, the number of believers had grown to 5000 (**Acts 4:4**), for “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (**Acts 2:47**). In fact, the nature of the early growth of the Church in Jerusalem could be summed up by **Acts 6:7**:

“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

At first glance, one could be forgiven for thinking that it was just a matter of time before the whole of Jerusalem embraced Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, at its peak, the number of disciples in Jerusalem is estimated to have been over one hundred thousand!

So what happened? Simply put, two events exposed two underlying problems that would lead to the ultimate rejection of Jesus by the people of Jerusalem.

The judgment of Ananias and Sapphira

Read Acts 5:1-16

Up until **Acts 5**, Jerusalemites had been flooding into the Church, and the quality of church life is described in **Acts 4:32-33**:

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.”

But not all coming into the Church were sincere. Ananias and Sapphira were just the tip of a submerged iceberg, and God stepped in swiftly to deal with this hidden duplicity. Note the result of this act of judgment in **Acts 5:11**:

“Great fear seized *the whole church* and *all who heard about these events*.”

In **Acts 5:13-14**, we see a spiritual tension beginning to emerge in Jerusalem:

“No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”

What unusual verses. **Verse 13** and **verse 14** appear to contradict one another. On the one hand “no one else dared join them” and on the other hand “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”

The NIV translates **Acts 5:13** as “no one else dared join them,” but this is an interpretation of the original Greek, which is better translated by the NKJV as “none of the rest dared join them.” Who was this group that “dared [not] join them”? It could hardly have been the common people of Jerusalem, for that very verse goes on to contrast “none of the rest dared join them” with the ordinary citizens of Jerusalem who “esteemed [the disciples] highly” (NKJV).

The most likely explanation, based on the context and grammar, is that “the rest” refers to the rest of the wealthy class in Jerusalem, of which Ananias and Sapphira were a part. In other words, although the poorer classes held the Church in high regard and “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number,” the wealthy class suddenly became fearful and “dared not join” the Church.

This event was a major turning point in the demographic composition of the Church. Although the Church was still growing, there was now an important section of the Jerusalem population who were at best resistant, and at worst antagonistic, to the Church.

The martyrdom of Stephen

Another event, occurring probably a few months after the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, was the arrest of Stephen. In his speech, Stephen exposed a raw nerve, the same raw nerve that had caused the crucifixion of Jesus. In **Acts 6:13-14**, members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem (Hellenistic Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cicilia and Asia Minor) brought false witnesses that gave this testimony before the Sanhedrin:

“This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

The *New King James Version* makes it even clearer. “This man,” said Stephen’s accusers, “does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law...” The charge brought against Stephen was almost identical to the one brought against Jesus (note **Mark 14:57-58**). Just as they twisted Jesus’ words, so they now twisted Stephen’s words. But as with Jesus, their charge had a core truth. Stephen was indeed speaking “against this holy place and against the law,” a fact that is born out by Stephen’s own defence. As F F Bruce observes:

“...[Stephen] was gifted with an exceptionally keen insight into the implications of the gospel for the status of Judaism in the purpose of God. If the gospel was true, then...[the] old order and the new were incompatible. The apostles might continue to live as observant and respected Jews, attending the temple services in Jerusalem; but Stephen saw that the gospel meant the setting aside of the temple order as a way of approach to God. As he ex-

pounded his thesis in the Hellenistic synagogue which he attended, with eloquence and persuasive charm, he aroused fierce opposition on the part of those Jews who venerated the temple order...The chief priests had attempted in vain to pin the charge of speaking against the temple on Jesus himself; the case of Stephen gave promise of greater success. Moreover, if Stephen could be convicted on this charge, they knew that they would have the people of Jerusalem on their side.”¹

Read Acts 7:48-53

Stephen pulled no punches. He accused the religious leadership of being “stiff-necked” (note **Isaiah 48:4**) and having “uncircumcised hearts and ears” (note **Jeremiah 9:25-26**). Not only that, he lumped them together with their idolatrous ancestors, who had “killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One,” and then accused the Sanhedrin of betraying and murdering the Messiah. Like Jesus before him, Stephen turned his own trial on its head, putting his accusers on trial. “Stephen’s defence thus becomes an attack, delivered in the true prophetic vein.”²

The resulting martyrdom of Stephen was a turning point in the history of the Jerusalem Church in two ways:

- The persecution that followed Stephen’s martyrdom scattered many of the Jerusalem believers. There had been persecution against the Church prior to this, but from this time forward, the Church in Jerusalem largely became an underground movement.
- The Church was now no longer viewed by Jerusalemites simply as a messianic movement within Judaism, but as a sect that rejected the law and predicted the destruction of the Temple. The first accusation was not totally true, for although the Hellenistic believers were apparently preaching that the Sinai Covenant had been superceded by the New Covenant in Christ, the Hebraic believers were still “zealous for the law” (**Acts 21:20**; see also **Acts 15:5**). The second accusation, however, had more foundation, for Jesus himself had clearly predicted the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, and the early believers anticipated this coming event.

And so there was a subtle but clear shift in perception among the people of Jerusalem. Although the Hebraic believers, for the most part, sought to overturn this perception, the Church at Antioch and the resulting Gentile Mission continued to underscore the growing perception that the “people of the Way” were a Jewish sect that rejected the Torah and the Temple rituals.

We see this perception clearly in **Acts 28:21-22**, when the Jews of Rome greeted the chained Paul with these words:

“We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, *for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.*”

The “people everywhere” were Jews and the reason they were “talking against this sect” was that the Christians were accused of seeking to overturn the laws of Moses and the rituals of the Temple. We see this clearly in the following passages:

Read Acts 18:12-13

Read Acts 21:27-29

Read Acts 24:1-9

Read Acts 25:8

By the time Paul reached Rome, the Church had already shifted from a majority Jewish base to a majority Gentile base. Let’s now look a little closer at the dynamic that caused this, for although the Temple and its rituals are now long gone, this dynamic still exists today in the Jewish community.

The Stumbling Block

In **Romans 9:30-33**, Paul gets to the heart of the reason the Jews had largely rejected Jesus as Messiah:

“What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone.’ As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’”

The Jews, said Paul, had tripped over a “stumbling block” that had been predicted back in the days before the Babylonian exile (**Isaiah 8:14**). This stumbling block has four elements:

The offense of the Cross

In **1 Corinthians 1:23**, Paul clearly identifies this point of stumbling:

“...but we preach *Christ crucified*: a stumbling block to Jews...”

This is the original stumbling block for first century Jews, and remains a major stumbling block for twenty-first century Jews today. As F F Bruce explains it:

“To Jews the crucifixion of Jesus was a formidable obstacle to believing him to be the appointed Messiah; how could the Messiah, on whom the blessing of God rested in a unique degree, have died the death of which the curse of God was expressly pronounced. It was written plainly in the law: ‘a hanged man is accursed by God’ (**Deuteronomy 21:23**). That Jesus came under the description ‘a hanged man’ was undeniable; but it was blasphemous to suggest that one who so clearly was ‘accursed by God’ could be Israel’s Messiah.”³

It is for this reason that Paul described the Gospel as having at its core “the offence of the cross” (**Galatians 5:11**). For the modern orthodox Jew, the issue of

the crucifixion remains an intractable problem. Yet there have been signs over the past century of a slow thawing of Jewish attitude toward Jesus himself. While most still deny his messiahship, many Jews are beginning to reclaim Jesus as a rabbi in the best of Jewish tradition.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Rabbi Stephen Wise, the Zionist leader and founder of the Jewish Institute of Religion, made this profound statement:

“Neither Christian protest nor Jewish lamentation can annul the fact that Jesus was a Jew, an Hebrew of the Hebrews. Surely it is not wholly unfit that Jesus be reclaimed by those who have never unitedly nor organizedly denied him, though oft denied by his followers; that Jesus should not be so much *appropriated* by us as *assigned* to the place in Jewish life and Jewish history which is rightfully his own. Jesus was not only *a Jew* but he was *the Jew*, the Jew of Jews...In that day when history shall be written in the light of truth, the people of Israel will be known not as Christ-killers, but as Christ-bearers; not as God-slayers, but as the God-bringers to the world.”⁴

The observance of the Torah

For religious Jews, this is a major issue. As a Jew, Paul taught that “Christ is *the end of the law* so that there may be righteousness for *everyone* (Jew and Gentile) who believes” (**Romans 10:4**). Today, many Jewish believers (who generally call themselves “Messianic Jews”) struggle over the issue of whether the Sinai Covenant, embodied in the Torah, is still to be observed. Some insist, as do most Gentile Christians, that the Law of Moses has indeed been superceded by the New Covenant instituted through Christ. Others point to the teachings of Jesus himself who said in **Matthew 5:17-18**:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

This issue* is not an easy one for the modern Jew, for neither was it an easy issue for the first century Jew. Yet the New Testament, which reveals the New Covenant for both Jew and Gentile, shows that the Sinai Covenant has been completely superceded by the New Covenant.

Having said that, Paul, while reaching out to his fellow Jews, kept the Old Covenant Law – not for his sake, but for theirs. In **1 Corinthians 9:19-22**, he wrote:

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

* The issue comes down to what Jesus meant when he said he would “fulfill” the Torah, and exactly what time he was referring to when he spoke of the time when “everything is accomplished.” The teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus fulfilled the Law through his own death upon the cross, and that this was the time when “everything [was] accomplished” according to the plan of God. Even the Greek word translated “end” in **Romans 10:4** has the meaning of “what completes a thing, or renders it perfect,” acting as “the boundary, or termination of something, such as the end of life, the result of prophecy, etc.” It also means “the design or object which is had in view, the principal purpose for which it was undertaken,” as in **1 Timothy 1:5**, which states: “Now the end (or goal) of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned” (KJV).

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

Because Timothy was a half-Jew, he circumcised him "because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (**Acts 16:3**). In Cenchream, Paul "had his hair cut off...because of a vow he had taken" (**Acts 18:18**). The vow he had taken was a Nazarite vow (**Numbers 6:1-21**), which involved allowing his hair to grow uncut. At the end of this Nazarite period, Paul had cut his hair, according to the instructions of the Torah.

Likewise, when Paul returned to Jerusalem, in **Acts 21:18-26**, this incident took place:

"The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: 'You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.' The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them."

Although Paul did teach that Christ was the end of the Sinai Covenant, he apparently didn't "teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs." Indeed, Paul taught in **1 Corinthians 7:17-24**:

"Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him...Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to."

As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes:

“There is no fundamental inconsistency between Paul’s willingness as a Jew to observe the Law and his inflexible insistence that Gentile believers should not be brought under the Law, since they stood under grace. As a new creature in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision could have any vital importance to Paul (**Galatians 6:15**). The evangelist considered such religious practices a matter of indifference, for the world had been crucified to him and he to the world (**Galatians 6:14**). He himself said that if a man was converted as a Jew, he was to remain a Jew (**1 Corinthians 7:18**), for circumcision in itself means nothing. Jewish Christians might keep the Law as Jews, not as Christians. But when efforts were made to impose the Law on Gentile Christians as a basis of salvation, Paul objected and insisted upon complete freedom from the Law. Undoubtedly if Jewish believers had desired to give up the practice of the Law, Paul would not have resisted them. Paul’s position of letting expediency determine principle in certain areas is so delicate a matter that many have not understood him and have accused him unnecessarily of radical inconsistency.”⁵

Although the believing Jew is technically free from the Law through the Cross of Christ, in matters of Jewish custom it is entirely acceptable for a Jew to take a page from Paul’s book in the matters of religious observance.

The scandal of faith

This issue lies at the core of the stumbling block, since it has to do with the means of entrance into the kingdom of God. The Gospel declares that the way is open to all, through faith, without the need of circumcision or observance of the Law.

As Paul explained in **Romans 9:32**, the Jews stumbled over the “stumbling stone” “[b]ecause they pursued [righteousness] not by faith but as if it were by works.”

The need for faith in Jesus is fundamental to the New Covenant God made with Israel. As Paul points out in **Romans 4:13-16**:

“It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but *through the righteousness that comes by faith*. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless...Therefore, *the promise comes by faith*, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but *also to those who are of the faith of Abraham*.”

The problem of Christian history

There have been almost twenty centuries since the message of the Gospel first fell on Jewish ears, and during those twenty centuries Jews have been consistently persecuted by so-called Christians. This weight of history is a major barrier for the Jew to come to Christ. Even the word “Christ” (the Greek word corresponding to the Hebrew *mashiach* – Messiah) is a stumbling block. Many Jews do not view Jesus Christ (“Yeshua ha’Mashiach” in Hebrew) as a Jew but rather as an icon of Christian persecution.

In the thirteenth century, the revered Jewish rabbi Maimonides voiced the Jewish perception of Jesus and the ensuing centuries of Christian persecution:

“Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be the Messiah and was executed by the court was also spoken of in Daniel’s prophecies [**Daniel 11:14**], ‘The renegades among your people shall exalt themselves in an attempt to fulfill the vision, but they shall stumble.’ Can there be a greater stumbling block than [Christianity]? All the prophets spoke of Messiah as the redeemer of Israel and their savior, who would gather their dispersed ones and strengthen their [observance of] the mitzvos. In contrast [the founder of Christianity] caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humiliated, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to err and serve a god other than the Lord. Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for [to paraphrase **Isaiah 55:8**] His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. [Ultimately,] all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite [Mohammed] who arose after him will only serve to pave the way for the coming of Messiah and for the improvement of the entire world, [motivating the nations] to serve God together, as it is written [**Zephaniah 3:9**], ‘I will make the peoples pure of speech so that they will all call upon the Name of God and serve Him with one purpose.’”

Our witness must bear in mind this dark history and how it has shaped the Jewish psyche. F F Bruce writes:

“Christian witness to the Jewish world remains a duty to this day, but it is a much more delicate responsibility in the [twenty-first century] than it was in the first. The Christian witnesses who commended the gospel to the Jews of the New Testament days did so with clean hands. Christians today must recognize with humility and repentance that nothing could have been less calculated to commend the gospel to the Jews than the attitude adopted towards them, generation after generation, by people who profess themselves to be Christians. There is substance in the charge of a well-known rabbi: ‘Christendom has hidden the face of Christ from us.’ Before they undertake gospel witness to the Jewish people, Christians must win back the right to do so.”⁶

The issue of Jewish identity

Down through the centuries of Christian persecution, tremendous pressure was brought to bear on Jews to convert to Christianity. But unlike in the first century, for a modern Jew to convert to Christianity technically means a loss of his Jewish identity. In centuries past, many Jews suffered martyrdom, quoting the *Sh'ma* proclamation of **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** in their dying breath, rather than recant their Jewish faith. It is therefore not easy for a Jew today to embrace faith in Yeshua ha'Mashiach without a sense of betraying his Jewish heritage. It is for this reason that most Jewish believers today do not even call themselves “Christians,” but rather “Messianic Jews.”

These five factors – the offense of the cross, the observance of the Torah, the scandal of faith, the problem of Christian history and the issue of Jewish identity, – constitute the “stumbling block” set in front of the average Jew today.

Israel’s Rejection of the Gospel

Israel’s rejection of the Gospel is described by Paul in three ways:

A hardening

In **Romans 11:7**, Paul explained that those first-century Jews who refused the Gospel message were “hardened.” The original Greek word translated “hardened” literally means “to be petrified or calloused.”⁷ As **ES109-26** explains:

“To be ‘calloused’ is an expression used to describe the hard skin that occasionally forms over an area of the body, causing loss of sensitivity. Even today we use this term to describe the condition of some people’s hearts. If we say someone is ‘callous,’ we mean he is unfeeling, unsympathetic and indifferent to other people’s pain. It happens if a man deliberately hardens his own heart in situations – after a while he becomes insensitive in those areas. Similarly, we call some men “hardened criminals,” for they have lost all sense of moral feeling in their crime. So, just as a callus can grow on a hand, so it can also, says Paul, grow on the heart. And this is what had happened to many Jews. They had become insensitive to God’s appeal.”⁸

This, says Paul, described the condition of the Jews of his day. They were so self-satisfied, so secure in their confidence of being God’s “chosen people,” that this became their very downfall. They had become “hardened” against the Gospel.

But this was not the first time this had happened to Israel. In **Isaiah 6:9-10**, before the first destruction of Jerusalem, we find God giving Isaiah these instructions:

“...Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

What was it that made the people of Israel calloused and unhearing the first time? It was the message that Isaiah preached. In the same way, before the second destruction of Jerusalem, Paul said that the same thing had happened. The Gospel message had been preached to Israel, but the heart of the people had become calloused.

A stupor

In **Romans 11:8**, Paul explains the condition of the unbelieving Jews with these words:

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.”

Paul is quoting loosely from **Isaiah 29:9-10**, where the Lord had told the people of Isaiah’s day:

“Be stunned and amazed, blind yourselves and be sightless; be drunk, but not from wine, stagger, but not from beer. The Lord has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); he has covered your heads (the seers).”

The unbelieving condition of Israel is thus likened to a drunken stupor. The Greek word translated “stupor” (NIV) or “slumber” (KJV) literally means “any emotion, or any influence whatever, that shall benumb the faculties, and make them insensible. Hence, it here means simply insensibility.”⁹

But there will come a time, Paul says, when the stupor will pass. At that time, the prophecy of **Isaiah 51:21-22** will come true:

“Therefore hear this, you afflicted one, made drunk, but not with wine. This is what your Sovereign Lord says, your God, who defends his people: ‘See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.’”

A blindness

And, says Paul in **Romans 11:10**, because of their unbelief and persecution of the Church, the curse of **Psalms 69:22-23** had come upon first-century Israel:

“May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.”

Jesus called the religious leaders of his day “blind guides” (**Matthew 23:16-26**), and in **Luke 6:39-40** gave this commentary:

“Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?”

Jesus knew ahead of time that much of Israel wouldn’t respond to his message. In **John 9:39-41**, we find this declaration:

“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, ‘What? Are we blind too?’ Jesus said, ‘If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.’”

The questions raised by Israel’s rejection of the Gospel were not easy to answer. But in **Romans 9-11**, Paul establishes a biblical vantage point, showing that:

- **This was not the first time that Israel had rejected God’s revelation.** Paul makes it abundantly clear “from the Old Testament narrative that Israel had shown itself ‘a disobedient and contrary people’ long before the coming of Christ (**Isaiah 65:2**, quoted in **Romans 10:21**); in their refusal of Christ they were not adopting a totally unprecedented attitude to the revelation of God.”¹⁰
- **God has always chosen a remnant to further his purposes.** Paul also proves “from the Old Testament narrative that God had always fol-

lowed the plan of selecting some for the furtherance of his purpose, and passing over others...[T]hroughout Israel's history there had always been a believing remnant, and so it was now."¹¹ This was a "remnant chosen by grace" (**Romans 11:5**).

The Return of Israel

But what of Israel's future? Is there any hope of salvation for Israel as a nation? In **Romans 11:11-12**, Paul expresses the hope of Israel's recovery.

"Again I ask: Did [Israel] 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. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, *how much greater riches will their fullness bring!*"

Read Romans 11:25-27

And so, in answer to his own question, Paul predicts the final return of Israel to the Messiah. He declares:

Israel's hardening is only for a time

Just as Israel's temporary stumbling had been foretold, so also had their ultimate restoration, and Paul quotes **Isaiah 59:20-21** and **Isaiah 27:9** to prove his point (**Romans 11:26-27**). Just as the Old Testament prophets had seen ahead and prophesied of the great response of the Gentiles to the Gospel, so Paul looks ahead and prophesies of a great turning to Christ by Israel in the last days.

For there to be a mass turning of Jews to Christ, there must first be a softening of the heart. Only God can do this. For just as the first-century Jews "were hardened," even so God will soften the hearts of Jews in the last days.

Until the full number of Gentiles has come in

In **Matthew 24:14**, Jesus prophesied:

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

The word "nations" in the original Greek is *ethnos*, meaning "(non-Jewish) ethnic groups." Thus even before his crucifixion, Jesus had told his disciples that the Gospel would be preached among the Gentiles, and that "the end" would be fixed to the success of this Gentile Mission. But what did this mean for the Jews?

In **Luke 21:20-24**, we find Jesus directing his attention to the future of the Jewish nation:

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written...There will

be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles *until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*”

The Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah all pointed to a two-fold ministry. In **Isaiah 49:6**, the Father says to his Son:

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you *a light for the Gentiles*, that you may *bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*”

This dual ministry is also reflected in the prayer that the prophet Simeon said over the infant Jesus in **Luke 2:30-32**:

“...my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

But Jesus makes it clear in **Luke 21:20-24** that before he brought glory to Israel, there would first be “the times of the Gentiles.” In other words, his ministry of being a “light for the Gentiles” would precede his ministry of being “a light...for glory to your people Israel.” Jerusalem would be destroyed, and a time of punishment would be visited on Israel “in fulfillment of all that has been written.”

But there will come a time when the full complement of Gentiles – all those who would respond in faith to the Gospel message – has been gathered in. At that time, Jesus says, the “times of the Gentiles” will be complete, and then there will come a massive turning of Jews to faith in Jesus, their Messiah. At that time, Jesus’ ministry of bringing “glory to your people Israel” will be fulfilled.

So all Israel will be saved

In the same way that the “full number of the Gentiles” does not mean *all* Gentiles, so “all Israel” is an expression which does not mean “every Jew without a single exception,” but rather “Israel as a whole.” The salvation of Israel will not be as a nation but as multitudes of individuals within that nation turning in personal faith to Jesus. Yet so great will be the numbers turning to the Lord that it will indeed be a “national” revival! And so Paul’s words will be fulfilled:

“All Israel will be saved.”

The Nature of Israel’s Return

When Israel returns to her Messiah, it will be like welcoming a long lost brother back to the family (although, in contrast to the parable of **Luke 15:11-32**, it was the *older* brother who departed from the family). What will this return be like?

The return of Israel will be shaped by the nature of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel declares:

The Church is both Jew and Gentile

The Church is not Gentile. Many Christians think that there are *two* entities in God's plan – Israel (the Jews) and the Church (the Gentiles) – and that these will forever be distinct in the purposes of God. But this is a major misunderstanding of the covenantal promises, as they relate to natural Israel, and a major distortion of the Gospel itself.

Scripture tells us that the Church is not Gentile, but rather is made up of *Jew and Gentile*. Paul explains this in **Ephesians 2:14-18**:

“For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them [Jew and Gentile] to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away [the Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [the Jews]. For through him we both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

This “new man” is what in **Ephesians 1:22-23** he calls the body of Christ, “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” And this “body” is the Church, where there is no redemptive distinction between Jew and Gentile! This is why Paul was able to say in **Galatians 3:28-29**:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

And again, in **Colossians 3:9-11**, Paul declares:

“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here *there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*”

What does this mean for Israel's return? It means that the Jews will not turn to the Messiah as a nation separate from and parallel to the Church. By the term “Church” we are not meaning a man-made institution, but rather the “company of God's redeemed people, both Jew and Gentile.” By its very definition, the Church is simply the “called out ones” – all who have entered into the New Covenant instituted by Christ. The Jew has a special place in this community, of course. But ultimately all the redeemed – both Jew and Gentile – are the living Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Israel's return to the fold doesn't mean that Israel supercedes the Church in God's plan, as if the Church was an “afterthought” when Israel failed to respond to the Gospel. We must always remember that the Church has been in the mind of God from before the creation of the world (**Ephesians 1:4-6**). It was because his love for *the Church* – both Jew and Gentile – that Jesus gave himself up to die upon the

Cross (**Ephesians 5:25-27**). It is Jew and Gentile *together* that make up the Bride of Christ.

The Jew has a special identity

But just because God has created one new man (the Body of Christ) out of Jew and Gentile does not mean that the Jew loses his Jewish identity when he embraces the Messiah. Paul often refers to a covenantal priority within his letters:

- **Romans 1:16** – “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*”
- **Romans 2:9-11** – “There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: *first for the Jew, then for the Gentile*; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: *first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.* For God does not show favoritism.”

What does this “special identity” entail? It includes:

Special promises

The Jew remains the heir of the earthly promises that God gave to Abraham. The promise of a land of their own, for example, is a specific part of their inheritance from Abraham* (**Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17**). And this promise is underscored in **Amos 9:13-15**:

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when...I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,’ says the Lord your God.”

And in **Jeremiah 31:35-37**, the Lord is very specific about his preservation of Israel as a nation:

“This is what the Lord 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 – the Lord Almighty is his name: ‘Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,’ declares the Lord, ‘will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.’ This is what the LORD 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 the Lord.”

Even though the Gentiles are included, through Christ, as heirs of the covenant God made with Abraham (**Romans 4:11-12, 16; Galatians 3:7-9, 14, 28-29**), the Gentiles are not heirs of the earthly promises given to Israel. These promises are specifically addressed to the natural descendants of Abraham through Isaac (note **Genesis 21:12**).

* God will fulfill his promise to Abraham not for Israel’s sake (because of their own righteousness), but for Abraham’s sake – because of *his* righteousness, credited to him by God because of his faith (note **Exodus 6:8; 32:13; 33:1; Leviticus 26:42; Numbers 32:11; Deuteronomy 8:1; 9:25-27; 30:19-20; 2 Kings 13:23**).

Special call

Every ethnic group has a special call upon them, and Israel is no exception. In fact, when God separated them to be a people of his own, he declared in **Exodus 19:5-6**:

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The nation of Israel was separated from the world so that they might minister to the world on behalf of the Lord, and so that they might usher in the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In **1 Peter 2:9-10**;, Peter declares to the Christian believers:

“But *you* are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The Church – Jew and Gentile – has now has taken on this mantle of being a “kingdom of priests” to the nations, but within the Church, the Jews now find the greatest fulfillment of the special call which originated when God had separated them from Egypt. As the special ethnic group that they are, the fulfillment of their call will spur them to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” and will result in great glory to the Lord.

The Regrafting of Israel

As the people of the Abrahamic Covenant, the Jews were the immediate beneficiaries of the New Covenant, instituted in Christ. The fact that the Gentiles entered into this covenant by faith could only happen because Christ first made this covenant with “the house of Israel.” **Jeremiah 31:31-34** prophesies this:

“‘The time is coming’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 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 the Lord. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘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 the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’”

Did you notice who this New Covenant was made with? Israel! But that is not the end of the story. In **Ephesians 3:4-6**, Paul elaborates on God’s plan:

“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This

mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs *together with Israel*, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

This is the wonder of the Gospel – what Paul calls “the mystery of Christ.” The Gentiles are now “heirs together with Israel”! Both Jew and Gentile are now “members together of one body.” We are “sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” As Paul explains in **Ephesians 2:19-22**:

“Consequently, you [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Read Romans 11:13-25

Paul is here speaking to the Gentile component of the Church. He says, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited.” And so he uses the illustration of an olive tree to explain how the Church – Jew and Gentile – are now “sharers together” in the purpose of God.

Let's run through the facts, as Paul presents them:

- **Fact #1 – Jesus is the olive tree:** This is an important fact for us to understand. Just as in **John 15:1**, Jesus declared himself to be the “true vine,” so he is the olive tree that has been planted by God.
- **Fact #2 – The Jews are the natural olive branches:** They originally grew from the trunk of the olive tree and God had always purposed for them to bear fruit.
- **Fact #3 – The Gentiles are branches from a “wild” olive tree, grafted into Christ:** As the Gospel extended to the Gentile world, non-Jewish believers were grafted into the covenantal promises of Abraham through faith in Christ.
- **Fact #4 – The Jews were pruned from the olive tree:** Because of unbelief, the natural branches were mostly stripped from the olive tree, just as Jesus predicted they would be (see **John 15:2,6**).
- **Fact #5 – Because the Jews were the original branches, God can just as easily graft them back in:** This is what God will do in the last days. But he will only graft the original branches back into the olive tree as the Jews express individual faith in their Messiah, since their Messiah is the trunk of the olive tree.

Results of Israel's Return

But what will it be like when Israel returns to her Messiah? In short, it will be glorious. In fact, it will be so glorious that Paul equates its glory to that of the last day resurrection, which it may well usher in (**Romans 11:15**).

Over the last twenty centuries, the Gentiles have experienced the undeserved grace of God, extended to them because of the sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross. They have reaped the benefits of the New Covenant, simply because they entered into Christ through faith. But we have been missing a part of us. A yawning hole has been left by Israel's loss, an emptiness that can only be filled by the return of the Jews to their Messiah. Without them, we are not complete. The Bride of Christ is not the Jews. Neither is the Bride of Christ the Gentiles. The Bride is the Church, made up of both Jew and Gentile. And so, since the second coming of Christ is the return of the Bridegroom for his Bride, then Christ will not return until the full complement of both Jew and Gentile has been gathered in.

To get the full picture of what will happen in the great day of Israel's return, let's look again at **Romans 11:12,15**. Paul compares the wonderful blessing that came to the world of the Gentiles in his day to what it will be like in the last days when the Jews will receive the Gospel.

“But if [Israel's] transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!...For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

If it means riches now, Paul is saying, how much greater riches then! If it means reconciliation to God now, it will be nothing short of resurrection life then! The whole world will be blessed abundantly on the day of Israel's return! It will then be a complete circle – Israel first blessing the Gentiles – then the Gentiles, in turn, blessing Israel – and, once again, Israel blessing the Gentiles! And God's purpose in it all is revealed in **Romans 11:32**: “...so that [God] may have mercy on them all” – both Jew and Gentile!

The Gospel for the Jews

In **Romans 1:16-17**, we find the defining description of the Gospel:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

What is the Gospel for the Jews? It is exactly the same Gospel that is for the Gentiles: “the power of God for salvation for *everyone* who believes: *first* for the Jew...” And this salvation is founded upon “a righteousness from God...a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.”

The turning of Israel back to her Messiah will be solely on the basis of the Gospel. It will be a rediscovery by the Jew that this Gospel is indeed “first for the Jew.”

The good news for the Jew is that, despite a long period of separation, God has not divorced Israel. For **Isaiah 54:5-9** declares to Israel:

“For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit – a wife who married young, only to be rejected,’ says your God. ‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord your Redeemer.”

¹ F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), pp.24-25.

² F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), p.27.

³ F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), pp.18-19.

⁴ Stephen S Wise, “The Life and Teaching of Jesus the Jew, *The Outlook*, June 7, 1913.

⁵ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Acts 21:26, (Electronic Database: Moody Press, 1962).

⁶ F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), p.31.

⁷ *Strong’s Greek Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

⁸ The Online Bible College, [ES109-26](#), “A Study in the Book of Romans,” [Romans 11:1-24](#).

⁹ *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

¹⁰ F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), p.29.

¹¹ F F Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Leister, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), p.29.

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