

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH EXAMINED

Elliott Johnson

Introduction

Charles Ryrie has proposed that one *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the church. “All other views bring the church into Israel’s fulfilled prophecies except dispensationalism.”¹ This may seem confusing to some because both Israel’s future and the church’s identity have a share in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant and of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Does each one’s share in this fulfillment make the distinction illegitimate? I want to propose that Paul’s use of the Old Testament will clarify the answer. The Old Testament passages are included in Romans 11:16-26 concerning Israel’s future and in Galatians 3:1-29 concerning the church’s identity. Our conclusion will be that the distinction is valid because Israel’s future comes *through* Jesus her Messiah and the church’s identity rests *in* Jesus Christ her Lord.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The promises progressively revealed to Abraham (Gen. 12:1d-3, 7; 13:14-17) are incorporated into the covenant (Gen. 15:8-18) when ratified. While Abraham had in part taken hold of the promised inheritance (12:4-14:24), he hadn’t yet believed that God would provide him with an heir (15:2). When God clarified that an heir would be born from his own body, Abram believed God and God counted that faith to be righteousness (15:6).

But having traveled through an occupied land, he didn’t know how he would inherit the land (15:8). So God assured Abram by a promissory covenant (15:9-21). The promise which [previously] had been “I *give* all the land to you and to your descendants forever” (13:15), now became “I *have given* this land (to your descendants)” (15:18). The prophetic perfect verb form (15:18) viewed the gift of the inheritance as an accomplished fact.

Some twenty-five years later, God repeated the promise of a covenant but introduced a different word: from 15:18, cut (*krth*) the covenant to 17:2, give (*ntn*) the covenant. In 15:18 the covenant was ratified (cut), but in 17:2 it would be inaugurated or established (given) when Abram would “walk before Me and be blameless” (17:1). Then circumcision was introduced. It would be a way the father would communicate the existence of the covenant with the next generation. For now, Abram was to keep “My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you” (17:10). According to what God had spoken, Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah (21:1-3) and he was circumcised (21:4). The covenant was then inaugurated.

The terms of the covenant arrangement (22:16-18) were repeated after God tested Abraham (22:1-14). The test examined whether Abraham feared God (22:12), would obey God (22:18), and love Him more than his only son whom God had given (22:12). Abraham’s response was immediate (22:5). He then gave expression to his *faith* that God would somehow provide the sacrifice. Isaac would return (22:5, 8). Abraham demonstrated that *faith* when he

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 147.

raised the knife to plunge it into Isaac (22:9, 10). But God stopped him short of having to provide the sacrifice. God *provided* according to promise (22:11-14). In the repeated terms of the covenant, Abraham was incorporated as a partner, a *causal* link in what God would provide (22:16-18).

*Israel's Future Realized **Through** Jesus the Messiah*

Romans 11:1-32 presents Paul's perspective on God's plan for the role of Abraham's seed in the present and the future. After Israel crucified her Messiah, God's rejection of Israel would be neither *total* (11:1-10) nor *final* (11:11-27). It is not *total* because there would always be a remnant of grace; Paul himself was an instance.

Further, Israel's rejection was not *final*. Rather the rejection was designed to prompt Israel to jealousy because, through it, salvation would come to the Gentiles (11:11). In addition, "if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what would their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (11:15). These two assertions prepare for the conclusion: "the certainty of the ultimate salvation of Israel"² (11:26, 27).

This conclusion is explained with two images: "the first fruits being holy" and "the root being holy" (11:16). While many commentators take the images as having the same influence on all the people, is it possible that the two images refer to distinct influences? Concerning the image of the root, "there is widespread agreement among commentators that it must refer to the patriarchs and that Paul's meaning is that the unbelieving majority of the Jews are hallowed by their relation to the patriarchs."³ Concerning the image of first fruits, "for Paul, Jesus Christ Himself is the ground of holiness alike of the Jewish Christians and of the patriarchs."⁴

From the two images, Paul first develops an allegory of the *olive tree* from the root (11:17-27). More specifically, the root is Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant was promised to Abraham and to his descendants (Gen. 15:18). So Abraham was blessed by the promises and then the blessed Abraham would mediate blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3b). The image portrays the place of being blessed on earth and the place of mediating God's blessings to others in history (11:17-24).

Strictly speaking it is not the nation Israel, but that remnant of Jewish believers, who are blessed and serve others mediating blessing to them. These natural olive branches are believers sharing the life of the root. After Messiah's first advent, wild olive branches (Gentile believers) are grafted in, contrary to nature, to be blessed and to share in the role of blessing others. "If the root signifies the patriarchs, then we may understand its fatness to signify the divine election in which alone their special worth consists."⁵

² C K Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper Row Publ., 1957) 216.

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* vol. 11 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1979) 565.

⁴ *ibid.* 564, 565.

⁵ *ibid.* 567.

However, this unnatural engrafting process is not permanent. “They are also to recognize that, if the unbelieving Jews desist from their unbelief, they will be restored – grafted back into that holy stock from which they have been broken off.”⁶

The image may be portrayed more completely. The olive trees are family trees – Abraham is natural and all other families are unnatural. Branches from the natural tree may be cut off because of unbelief, but later grafted back in when the branch comes to faith. Likewise, Gentile family trees may contain branches that are cut out of their natural tree when they come to faith. Then they are engrafted, contrary to nature, into Abraham’s olive tree. However, in history, the olive tree does not become wholly Gentile. Rather, the conclusion of the natural olive tree will involve all natural branches – “so all Israel will be saved” (11:26, 27). And the “all” whoever in particular are included; they are without exception Jewish.

This conclusion is also reached as a warning addressed to Gentiles. “This piece of Pauline apocalyptic ... is practical. For (that is, I have given you this allegory of the olive tree *because*), I do not wish you not to know (cf. 1:13) this divine mystery, lest you wise – in your own conceit” (9:25). This mystery “is that a partial hardening has fallen upon Israel, and will remain until the full number of Gentiles has come in; when this is done, all Israel will be saved”⁷ (9:26a)

Romans 11:26b, 27 “*kathōs gegraptes* introduces a composite OT quotation (Isa. 59:20, 21a) in confirmation of what has just been said.”⁸ Thus, the conclusion of Israel’s history is taken as fulfilled from the prophet Isaiah. From the context of Isaiah 59, a clarification of what God is doing comes to light:

“Then the LORD saw it (Israel’s history) and it displeased Him that there was no justice
He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor;
Therefore *His own arm* brought salvation for Him, and His own righteousness, it sustained Him.” (59:15b, 16)

That context clarifies the quote:

“The Redeemer (His own arm) will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob” (59:20)

Thus the Redeemer is Messiah who is the instrument *through* whom Israel will realize her future destiny.

Paul then alludes to Isaiah 59:21a, “As for Me” said the LORD, “This is My covenant with them” to which he adds “when I will take away their sins.” The addition may well allude to Jeremiah 31:34b which is the new covenant. Jesus is the mediator

⁶ *ibid.* 570.

⁷ Barrett, 222, 223.

⁸ Cranfield, 577.

(Heb. 9:15) *through* whom the covenant was ratified on the cross. It then follows that Jesus as mediator is the One *through* whom the covenant will be inaugurated, when “all Israel will be saved” in God’s mercy.

The Church’s Identity Realized in Jesus the Lord

In the epistle of Galatians, Paul reasons that the *Gospel is true*. In 3:1-29, it is true because it is based upon Old Testament Scripture. However, what the Scripture promises the Jews is not what it promises Gentiles. And writing to the Galatians, he is speaking to Gentiles. So he begins with this question (3:1-5):

How did *you* (Gentiles) receive the Holy Spirit?... by works of the law or by hearing of faith? (3:2, 5).

Two issues are striking in this question. First, the personal pronouns must be noted carefully. Here, the “*you*” refers to those to whom he is writing. It refers to the Galatians who are Gentiles. (3:14a). It is in distinction to “*we*” (3:14b) which refers to either Jews and Gentiles or to Jews alone. Context will be needed to clarify who Paul has reference to.

Second, the gift of the Holy Spirit is included in the Gospel, understood in the broadest sense. Thus the Gospel includes two purposes, both justification by faith (3:6-13) and inheritance (of the Spirit) by faith (3:15-29).

Believers in the church are justified by faith (3:6-13)

Justification by faith is derived from Abraham’s example (3:6-9) and from Christ’s provision (3:10-13). The comparison (*just as*, 3:6) introduced Abraham’s example. Abraham “believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (3:6 quoting Gen. 15:6). Then he draws two conclusions which follow his example:

first, “know that those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (3:7). They are called *sons* because they are descendants of Abraham (Jews) who share his faith.

second, the Gospel was preached in the promise given to Abraham, “in you all nations will be blessed. So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham” (3:8, 9), i.e., Gentiles.

Then Paul specifies that justification by faith not only *follows* Abraham’s example but is *based upon* Christ’s redemption from the law’s curse (3:10-13). The two features are derived from the ambiguity of the statement of the Gospel; “*in you* all nations will be blessed.” The “*in you*” can mean Abraham’s example of faith. The “*in you*” can also mean Abraham’s descendant through whom God provides redemption. This redemption is provided for “*us*,” both Jews and Gentiles whom all are condemned under sin. The transition (3:14) expresses the two purposes of that Gospel. The first specifies *that* the

blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles. The second purpose is *that* we (Jews and Gentiles) might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Believers in the church also receive inheritance (Holy Spirit) by faith (3:15-29)

Inheritance comes by the promises in the Abrahamic covenant (3:15-18). That covenant once ratified could neither be annulled nor added to by the Mosaic law given 430 years later (3:15, 17). Rather, those covenant promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed (3:16). In the interpretation of who the seed may be, it sounds like his reasoning is based on grammar. In fact it rests on the history of the covenant and how those addressed were willing to receive what was promised. Abraham appropriated the blessing when God called him to offer Isaac. Because Abraham obeyed that command, his presence was included in the restated promises as the *cause* for subsequent generations to receive the promises. No other subsequent descendant was willing to receive all that God promised in faith. Neither Moses nor David was completely willing at the time of crisis.

However, when Jesus came to the garden at the Mt. of Olives, He prayed:

“Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me, nevertheless not My will but Yours be done.” Luke 22:42

It is evident that the Son’s will was in tension in some sense with the Father’s. Yet He surrendered His will to the Father’s will.

That surrender in obedience resulted in Jesus’ death on the cross. Only then was Jesus inept to help himself and in the position where by faith He received the blessing of the Father in resurrection. As a result, before the Son’s ascension, He urged the disciples to wait for “the promise of the Father” which the Son would receive (Acts 1:4, 5). This would be the Father’s promised inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant. And based on His resurrection, He, too, became a *causal* link to others to receive the promise of the Father.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter announced that Jesus, exalted to the right hand of the Father, received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. The phenomena of the day of Pentecost was the result of the Son pouring out the Spirit (Acts 2:33). This promise is for (to) you Jews and for your children in Jerusalem or for those in dispersion, all of whom God would call (Acts 2:39).

In Galatians, Paul explained how Israel was prepared to receive her Messiah. The purpose of the law was because of transgressions until Abraham’s Seed would come to whom the promise was made (Ga. 3:19-25). The law did not contradict the promise but “confined all under sin that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). Before faith came, the law was Israel’s tutor. After faith came, we (Jews) no longer were under a tutor (Gal. 3:23-25).

Then Paul turned to the situation of the Gentiles, to “*you*” (Gal. 3:26-29). By faith, they were declared righteous as sons of God (Gal. 3:8, 9). As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27). “To be baptized *into Christ* is best understood as reflecting Paul’s conception of identification with Christ ... of putting on Christ depicts him as a garment to be worn, which likely denotes incorporation into Christ.”⁹ In this body, there are no distinctions in privilege as there had been in Israel under law (Gal. 3:28).

“The new status, described *en Christō*, is having been made *one*. This oneness pertains to all who are included within the sphere of Christ....”¹⁰ And that status is the status of Christ (Gal. 3:29). Two inferences follow. If you (Gentile believers) share Christ’s status then you are Abraham’s seed. And if you (Gentiles) *in Christ* are Abraham’s seed, then you are *heirs* according to the promise of the Abrahamic covenant. Thus all believers, Jews and Gentiles, have been “sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the *downpayment* of *our inheritance* until the redemption of the purchased possession,” (Eph. 1:13, 14).

Conclusion

The distinction between Israel and the church is clarified based on the Abrahamic covenant, of which Jesus is the Heir. The distinction rests on Jesus’ role in relation to Israel and to the church. Israel shares the full inheritance “rooted in” the Abrahamic covenant *through* “the first fruits” of their Messiah. Jesus is one of them, recipient of the promises as Abraham’s seed. They are one with Him, when He represented them and received the inheritance. Messiah will share Israel’s heritage with them, when “all Israel is saved” (Romans 11:26).

The church finds its identity, baptized *into* Christ. And *in* Christ, they share in His inheritance which He chooses to share with them (Acts 2:32, 33). Only *in* Him is the church Abraham’s seed. Only *in* Him is the church heirs to the Abrahamic covenant.

⁹ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 207.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 118.