THE PLACE OF ISRAEL

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Our topic has been announced as "The Place of Israel," and the topic that has been set for us is an object lesson in biblical hermeneutics as it's usually called in the principles of interpreting the Bible. But I would like to remind you right at the beginning that there are at least four ways in which the word "Israel," whose place we are to investigate, can be used.

One: Israel was that devious scoundrel, the second son of Isaac, whose first name was Jacob – meaning "he who deceived or he who struggles," who amply lived up to his name – but whom God renames "Israel," because having struggled with men all his life, he at last came to struggle with God for the blessing he needed (a blessing to which he was not entitled).

Two: Israel is the chosen people of the Old Testament days – the 12 tribes descended from the 12 sons of Jacob called the children of Israel, because Israel (or Jacob) was a common ancestor.

Three: Israel is the messianic community – the people of Jesus – the true descendents of Abraham because they share Abraham's faith. This includes Gentiles like most of us if we believe in Jesus, but excludes Jews who don't. When Paul ended his letter to the Galatians, "Peace and mercy upon the Israel of God," he was referring to believers in Jesus, whatever their ethnic origin. So Israel is the messianic community.

Four: Israel today, for many people if you read the newspapers, is the Israeli nation, promised a national home by the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and given it in 1948.

So Israel has four meaning. It means Jacob. It means Jews. It means Christians. And it means Israelis. And that is just the problem when you are asked who you are talking about.

I'm not going to refer much anymore to the first and the fourth meanings, though a little big at the end to the fourth, but to concentrate, how the Bible concentrates, on the second and the third.

What is the place of Israel in the purpose of God? And in particular at the end of the world (which is our theme on Sunday mornings)? But you cannot jump to the end unless you begin at the beginning. So the best way for us to handle this delicate and controversial theme this morning is to consider Israel past, present, and future and try and get a perspective on the whole of the biblical revelation.

So we begin firstly with Israel's past. I'll come to my text in a moment. The Old Testament Israel was the chosen people of God, sometimes called "the covenant people of God." God's covenant was given to Abraham and to Isaac his son and to Jacob his grandson, and the promise of the covenant was, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." It's quite true that after 400 years of dejected slavery God seems to have at least temporarily forgotten His covenant. But then we read at the beginning of Exodus that God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and as a result He rescued His people from their Egyptian slavery.

About three months later at Mt. Sinai, God said to the people through Moses, "I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. And now if you obey my word and if you keep my covenant, then out of all the nations of the world, you will be my treasured possession. And all the whole earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Now the people of Israel never forgot those promises and they never forgot that covenant, and the literature of Israel (which we call the Old Testament) is crammed full of expressions of wonder that God should have chosen them to be His nation out of all the nations of the world – that He should have entered into a covenant with them and made them His people and that He should have had mercy on them like that.

Let me give you one or two examples of this expression of wonder. Listen to five rhetorical questions from Moses:

- What other nation is so great as to have their God near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?

- What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws which I am setting before you today?

- Has anything so great as this ever happened before?

- Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire as you have done and lived after the experience?

- Has any God ever tried to take for Himself one nation out of another nation by His mighty hand and outstretched arms?

There are five rhetorical questions, all expecting the answer, "No," and if you want to look them up sometime, you will find them in Deuteronomy 4.

And Moses goes on, "The Lord didn't set His love upon you and choose you because you were more numerous than any other nation. The Lord set His love upon you because He loves you." That is Deut. 7. Then again, "He has revealed His words to Jacob, His laws and His decrees to Israel. He had done this for no other nation. They do not know His laws." Psalm 147.

I could go on. The Old Testament literature of Israel is full of expressions of wonder that God had made them His special people. It is a sense of unique revelation that permeates the whole of the Old Testament.

Now the text. Turn to the New Testament to Romans chapter 9, and although we have several texts, we are going to stick to Romans. At the beginning of chapter 9, the Apostle Paul lists 8 privileges that distinguish the people of Israel. We are talking about Israel in the past and her distinct privileges as the holy nation of God.

Romans 9, verse 4. They are Israelites and to them belong the following 8 things:

1. The sonship, because God adopted the nation to be His son.

2. The glory – the shining symbol of God's presence in the temple.

3. The covenants by which He pledged Himself to be their God.

4. The giving of the law, also called the oracles of God, because in the law He reveals His will.

5. The worship – both the sacrifices that preceded the Lord Jesus and the Psalter which we use in our worship today.

6. The promises, especially of the coming kingdom of the Messiah.

7. The patriarchs whose stories are recorded in the book of Genesis for our instruction.

8. Above all is stressed the human ancestry of Jesus Christ, who is the amazing expression of God over all, blessed forever.

Do you wonder that Paul says at the beginning of this chapter in verse 1, that he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for Israel according to the flesh, because with all these eight privileges, they did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah. Paul said he could wish that he could even be cursed and be cut off from Christ for the sake of his countrymen if only thereby they could be saved. You get a sense of his passionate love for the people of Israel.

There is no doubt that we need to conclude at this point by saying, "Away with anti-Semitism:" If there is anybody in church today who has any anti-Semitism feeling let us bow down in penitence. Away with anti-Semitism.

Now who, according to the New Testament perspective, is Israel today? And the answer we are going to see from the Bible is this extraordinary event – that true Israel today is neither Jews nor Israelis, but believers in the Messiah, even if they are gentiles. Now this seed began even in the Old Testament. We haven't time to look into it in detail.

I remind you of things already in the Old Testament. The physical descendent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not regarded as being sufficient to be a true member of the covenant. Of course, the people thought it was. They interpreted election as favoritism, but the prophets kept insisting to them that their choice by God to be the covenant people of God would not guarantee them immunity from the judgment of God. Perhaps the most striking example is in Amos when God said, "You are the only people that I have known," God said, and how the Jews felt absolutely secure in the election of God! They expected Amos to go on, "You are the only nation I have known and therefore I will protect you from every disaster." But Amos went on, "Therefore I will punish you for your iniquities, because of the greatness of your privileges." And the prophet tends more and more to draw a distinction between Israel as a whole as a defenseless nation and the Israelites' faithful remnant within the nation.

Then we get to John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet. He taught the positive counterpart. Listen carefully. John the Baptist taught that not only are there some Israelites who are <u>not</u> true Israel, but that there are some not Israelites who <u>are</u> true Israel. Because John the Baptist said to the people, "Don't say to yourselves 'We've got Abraham as our father.' I'll tell you, God is able to raise up children from Abraham out of these very stones."

God didn't raise up children to Abraham from stones, but He did from gentiles, who were rather like stones in a way. And Jesus stunned his contemporaries by saying that many are going to come from the North and the South and the East and the West, from all the gentile nations. They are going to sit down in a Messianic banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some of the citizens of the kingdom who are descended physically from Jacob are going to be excluded from the kingdom. So some of the Israelites are not true Israel and many of the gentiles who are not Israelites are the true Israel. It is the teaching of the Old Testament, it is the teaching of John the Baptist, it is the teaching of Jesus, but it was particularly the teaching of Paul, the apostle to the gentiles to whom God gave the fullness of the revelation of this amazing development. Turn back now to chapter 2 of Romans and let me read you the last few verses starting with verse 2B. It is an amazing statement that Paul makes. "He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly by descent from Jacob. Nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, that is by faith in Jesus. And real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal."

Then again in chapter 9, I'll give you another phrase – "Not all who are descendents of Israel belong to Israel." Paul says in another place in Philippians, "We are the true circumcision – we who follow Jesus, whether we are gentiles or Jews. We are the true circumcision who worship God by the spirit of God and put all our confidence in Christ Jesus and none in the flesh," (that is our physical descent. It is not a matter of physical descent. It is a matter of faith in Jesus. Peter says the same thing. With great audacity given to him by the Holy Spirit, he takes those expressions in Exodus 19, "You are a holy nation, a kingdom of priests,…" and he transfers them to the followers of Jesus. And he says, "You who follow Jesus, you are a holy nation, a special people and a royal priesthood and a holy nation." It's amazing what these New Testament writers are willing to do. The paradox of our position in this: True Jews today are Christians. May I say it again? The true Jews today are Christians. Or if you don't like that expression, try this one: "The followers of the Messiah are more truly the people of Israel than those people of Israel who reject Him."

Well, you may say, "How can you justify that identification?" The answer is, "In Christ." The logic is absolutely irresistible. God promised to bless the nation through the seed of Abraham. The seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ. If you look at his genealogy in Matthew and Luke, you will see that He is descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So God promised to bless the seed of Abraham. The seed of Abraham is Christ and therefore anybody who is in Christ receives the promised blessing. And we are in Christ not by birth, but by rebirth; not physically by descent, but spiritually by faith. Paul writes in Romans 4, "Abraham is the father of all who believe." Whether circumcised or uncircumcised, Abraham is my father. I'm not a Jew by descent from Jacob or Isaac or Abraham, but Abraham is my father. He is the father of believers, and if you and I are believers in Jesus, he is our father.

Again, in Galatians 3 we see that if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed and you are heirs according to Christ. Now that is why you see that those of us who believe in Jesus read the Old Testament scriptures as our scriptures. We sing the Old Testament Psalms. We claim the Old Testament promises as referring to us, because all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ and we are in Christ – therefore the promises belong to us. It is a tremendous truth.

What we have seen so far is this. In olden days, Israel was a physical designation and meant the descendants of Jacob. Today, Israel is a spiritual designation and means believers in Jesus, whether descendants from Jacob or not.

So this brings us to the third question about Israel's future. If Israel meant the descendants of Jacob in the Old Testament and means believers of Jesus in the New, must we conclude that God has no special future for Israel according to the flesh?

Well, it's funny you should ask that question because it's the very question that Paul is teaching. Turn to Romans 11, verse 1. "I ask then, has God rejected His people? Has He rejected the descendants of Jacob, the people of Israel according to the flesh?" That's what Paul asked. It's apparently what you are asking.

You see Paul's answer: "By no means." He gives two answers to the question and on both occasions he begins, "By no means." The first answer is in verse one: "I myself am an Israelite. Of course He hasn't rejected all His people. I am one of them," Paul says. And he goes on, "God has not rejected His people of faithful, Jewish descendants of Jacob and believers in the Jesus." All of the first followers of Jesus were like that. They were all Jewish by physical descent, and thank God there are many Hebrew Christians today – some members of our own church family.

Yes, but what about the other descendants of Jacob who are not believers in Jesus?

Now we come to the second answer and you will find it in verse 11. He asks, "I say then, the did not stumble so as to fall, did they?" Does this mean that the descendants of Jacob, the Jews who rejected Jesus, are going to reject him forever?

Paul says, "By no means." God's rejection of them is not final, because their rejection of the Christ is not final either. In order to illustrate that, he develops the picture that is familiar to all of us in Romans 11 about the two olive trees. The cultivated olive tree which is a symbol of physical descendents of Jacob and the wild olive tree that is the symbol of us gentiles coming from the gentile nations. He says in verse 17 that some of the branches of the cultivated olive tree, that is Jewish unbelievers, have been broken off. In their place a slip from a wild olive tree (that's us) has been grafted in to the olive tree. Gentiles have now been included in the children of Abraham by faith in Jesus. But he says, "One day the olive branches that have been broken off," that is the unbelieving Jews, "are going to be grafted back in again. Let me read you verses 24 onward.

> [24]For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?
>
> [25]For I do not want you, brethren, to be uniformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the gentiles has come in;
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> [26]and thus all Israel will be saved;…

That is the whole people of God's election will be gathered in. There is going to be a wide spread turning of Jews to Jesus. The hardening that is taking place now that makes them blind to their own Messiah is only temporary. The veil is going to be lifted. They are going to see and believe – maybe hundreds of thousands, maybe more – someday in the history are going to believe and to be grafted back in.

Now that leads me to the question that must be in some of your minds, "What about the promised land?" Is the setting up of the State of Israel a fulfillment of the prophecy? Well, I cannot go into this in a detail. I can only say this: Some people think so. Especially dispensationalists, as we call them. There may be some here. They say in effect that the prophets promised that the Jews would return to the promised land. They even delineate the boundaries that the Jews would occupy in the promised land. Those promises were not fulfilled in the Old Testament literally, so we look for a fulfillment in the future. It is a reasonable view to hold, and many do hold it. And we regard them with respect and love. Others, among whom I number myself, do not hold that view. I'll leave aside political questions that could occupy us for a long time, but I'll just mention to you that you need to think about political issues here. The risk of ignoring the justice of the Palestinians' cause is on the one hand, and on the other is the risk of encouraging further Jewish expansionism since the land promised to Abraham in the Old Testament included territory that belongs today to Jordan and to Lebanon and to Syria. So beware of what you are saying if you think all that belongs to the Jews forever.

1. The Old Testament promises about the Jews' return to the land are comforted by promises of the Jews' return to the Lord. It is hard to see how that secular, unbelieving State of Israel can possibly be a fulfillment of those prophecies.

2. The Old Testament promises about the land are nowhere repeated in the New Testament. The prophecy of Romans 11 is a prophecy that many many Jews will turn to Christ, but the land is not mentioned nor is Israel mentioned as a political entity. There is only one verse in the New Testament that has ever been regarded as a promise that the Jews will return to the land, and that is Luke 21:24 when Jesus says that Jerusalem is going to be trodden down by the gentiles until the times of the gentiles be fulfilled. That is an ambiguous verse, and it can be interpreted in two different ways. It could refer not to a period of gentile domination after which Jerusalem is going to be rebuilt, but the times of the gentiles could rather refer to the whole of the present world order until the end of history when Jesus will come again in power and great glory. But even that left aside, there is no other verse that repeats the promises of the Old Testament. So we need to be very cautious in simply jumping back to the Old Testament promises and ignoring how they are handled in the New.

3. The Old Testament promises according to the apostles are fulfilled in Christ and in the international community of Christ. The New Testament authors apply the promise of Abraham's seed to Jesus Christ. And they apply to Jesus Christ the promise of the land and all the land which is inherited, the land flowing with mild and honey, because it is in Him that our hunger is satisfied and our thirst is quenched. A return to Jewish nationalism would seem incompatible with this New Testament perspective of the international community of Jesus.

I'm sorry for this little parenthesis, especially if it has seemed controversial to some.

Let me conclude. We tried to get the biblical perspective of Israel. In the past, the chosen nation; in the present, the international messianic community of believers in Jesus; in the future, a growing community that will incorporate many more gentiles and many more Jews.

Let us end where Paul invites us to end in verse 22 of chapter 11 of Romans. He says, "Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness…"

The God of biblical revelation is a God of severity and kindness, a God of judgment and salvation. Note well the severity. The God of biblical revelation is a God of judgment. The history of Israel is a solemn warning against unfaithfulness. Verse 21: "If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you." Brothers and Sisters, beware. Take that warning to heart. Beware lest we forsake the Lord our God by our disobedience. But not only His severity. In particular His kindness. The whole history of Israel and the whole history of the world is the story of the patient, loving kindness of God. See how Paul emphasizes this in verses 30-32: "Just as you were once disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all."

God's merciful purpose, which is God's missionary purpose, has not come to an end. Religions of the world may threaten the spread of the gospel. Hinduism tries to absorb Christianity. Marxism tries to drive it underground. Islam becomes even more aggressive. Secularism permeates into the whole of our society. But, beloved, God's mercy is going to triumph in the end. There is a great future for believers in Jesus. The fullness of the Jews is going to be gathered in. The fullness of the gentiles is going to be gathered in. God is going to have mercy on the whole of His people.

When we wake up in Heaven, if by God's mercy and grace we shall, we are going to be utterly dumbfounded. We are going to find ourselves a part, not of a tiny little remnant, but of a great company so vast – so unimaginable – that in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham it will be like the stars in the night sky, the sand on the seashore, the grains of dust on the earth. It is going to be actually innumerable. Praise God for His mercy.

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