

THE CONTINUITY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS*

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The extraordinary history of the Jews down the ages together with the re-establishment of the state of Israel after immense suffering (seemingly fulfilling Biblical prophecy) has led many to think more deeply about the place of Israel and the Jew in God's purpose for the salvation of the world, and to ask the question as to the relationship of Israel to the Christian Church.

Two quite opposite theological points of view are united in stressing the discontinuity of the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. They are (a) dispensationalism and (b) the view that the Church as the New Israel has completely displaced Israel from its unique destiny as the Servant of the Lord to the world. I begin by summarising the two views.

(a) *Dispensationalism* goes back to J. N. Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren but now holds sway amongst most American fundamentalist churches. Most present day pre-millennialists are dispensationalists but that has not always been so.

Dispensationalism teaches that all Old Testament prophetic references to Israel, Zion and Jerusalem have no application at all to the Christian Church which is not the New Israel. Dispensationalists have always taught that God would one day re-establish the state of Israel and then after its near destruction by the world powers, during the seven year great tribulation, Christ would return literally to the Mount of Olives. Israel would then be converted to Him and He would rule the world through Israel for one thousand years.

According to dispensational belief, the Christian Church's existence is only an after thought, Israel having unexpectedly rejected its Messiah at His first coming. This meant a change of plan in which the heavenly gospel was preached to the Gentiles under an entirely different dispensation of grace.

The Christian Church's place in the conversion of Israel is merely one of a spectator watching God's different plans for Israel take place in fulfilment of prophecy. The Christian Church on earth won't even see the tribulation because it will be raptured to heaven before the tribulation starts.

Israel's destiny is a world wide earthly kingdom of God, whereas the Church's destiny is the Kingdom of *Heaven*.

(b) The other theology of *discontinuity* is the doctrine that the Church as the New Israel has completely displaced an unbelieving Israel which

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now has lost, for ever, its unique place in God's purposes for the world. All God's promises to Israel, Jerusalem and Zion have lost their literal or physical meaning and now only have a spiritual or heavenly meaning in their application to the Christian Church. Physical Israel's election is finished for ever.

A Brief Assessment

'Israel of God'¹ and 'Jew'² are terms applied by the New Testament to the Church and the individual Christian, whether they be ethnic Jews or Gentiles. The deeper meaning and significance of this is spelt out over and over again in the New Testament, where prophecies regarding Israel, Jerusalem and Zion in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets are seen as fulfilled in Christ and through Him to the New Testament people of God. This seems to knock out the dispensationalist view right away.

Superficial logic has continued to argue that there is no more uniqueness for the Jew and physical Israel. Since it is said Christ has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile,³ Israel's election is finished. But this is not the logic of the New Testament. Although there is only one way of salvation for both Jew and Gentile, the New Testament teaches that the Jewish people do still have a unique place in the *historical* working out of God's redemption of the world in Christ. Although the Old Testament Prophecies regarding Zion and Israel do have a spiritual meaning this does not mean they have lost their literal meaning. The resurrection of Jesus (in a 'spiritual body') as fulfilling the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets⁴ guarantees the prophecies continuing literal as well as 'spiritual' or 'Heavenly' application.

At the end of Romans 2, Paul argues that a true Jew is one who is one inwardly and circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit,⁵ but immediately following at the beginning of chapter 3, he asks the question 'What then, is the advantage of being a Jew?' Superficial logic would answer 'None at all', but Paul's answer is 'Much in every way!'⁶

His next question asks whether Jewish unbelief means that God's promises to them do not apply anymore. His answer is 'It does not mean this at all'⁷. He goes on to imply that God actually needs Jewish unrighteousness for His greater purposes of glory. He will therefore still keep His promises to them.⁸

Romans 9-11 is an expansion of this argument. God has actually hardened Jewish people so that his mercy might reach the Gentiles just as in time past He hardened non-Israelites (e.g. Pharaoh)⁹ in order to work deliverance for Israel. This process of election has continued down history with the ultimate purpose of blessing for all peoples (Jew and

1. Galatians 6:16.

2. Romans 2:29.

3. Ephesians 2:11-18.

4. Luke 24:27, 44-47.

5. Romans 2:25-29.

6. Romans 3:1-2.

7. Romans 3:3-4.

8. Romans 3:3-7.

9. Romans 9:14-18.

Gentile). The conclusion of Paul's argument is 'He has consigned all men to disobedience that He might have mercy on all.'¹⁰

Although Paul argues that God hardens because He needs men's sin to bring salvation from sin, the hardening is not permanent.¹¹ In Israel's case this means: 'As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and call are irrevocable'.¹² Their unbelief is actually 'on your account' — for the sake of the Church.

In what sense can unbelieving Israel still be considered 'The Servant of the Lord and the people of God?' In a mysterious yet wonderful and awesome way the History of the Jew (even in his unbelief) does bear witness to God and His grace. It shows the nature of human sin, the meaning of judgement and forgiveness, the nature of vicarious suffering, death and resurrection. The history of the Jew in a non-direct way therefore points to Christ Himself who is the fulfilment and hope of Israel. The climax of this, I believe, is seen in the holocaust and the re-birth of the state of Israel. A regathered Israel (even in its deafness and blindness) does bear testimony to the world of the faithfulness and ultimate victory of God's purposes in Christ. The conversion of Israel to Christ in the last days will be the consummation of Israel's testimony and will lead to life from the dead for the world. The Church, which will then in the one 'olive tree'¹³ be re-united with Israel in Christ, will be able to bring blessing to all the earth. This will not only be a radical conversion for Israel but also for the Church.

I would rather the Church did not use the non-biblical term 'New Israel' to describe itself because its implication is that physical Israel is now finished and replaced by the Church, as if the first olive tree has been chopped down and replaced by a new one (*Discontinuity*). The picture of Romans 11 is of the Church ingrafted through Christ into the *one* olive tree. Although the tree has lost some of its old branches they will be ingrafted again to the original tree. Through Christ then, the Church belongs to the 'Israel of God'¹⁴ (a New Testament term). It is not the 'New Israel.'

To understand more deeply the place of the people of God in the way of salvation let us start at the beginning and later expand on what has been said above.

The People of God in Creation

God created the world of nature (plants and animals) and created man in His image.¹⁵ All things were created through and for His beloved Son Jesus Christ.¹⁶ God's great purpose for man was that he should have fellowship with Christ being adopted by the Spirit of God into the family

10. Romans 11:30-32.

11. Romans 11:11-12.

12. Romans 11:28-29.

13. Romans 11:24.

14. Galatians 6:15-16.

15. Genesis 1:1-27.

16. Colossians 1:15-17.

of God. God satisfies man's needs freely and man is to respond in loving trust and obedience. That is to say man's basic relationship with God in Christ is one of grace and faith. Man is to be God's *servant* in the world having authority under God over all of nature. He is to explore it to the glory of God (pure science) and subdue it for the benefit of all (technology).

Man is to serve God as his son in union with the Eternal Son Jesus Christ. The people of God are called from the beginning to be *children* of God and *servants* of the Lord.

The Fall of the People of God

Man's fall was first to stop believing God's word¹⁷ and this led to his rebellion making himself his own god.¹⁸ The fall of man was the breaking of his relationship with God. He withdrew from His family and stopped serving Him. Unbelief and rebellion are the root cause of all human cruelty, violence, injustice and misery in the world. Until human beings are back in their proper place, suffering and pain affect not only mankind but God and nature as well.¹⁹

The Scope and Way of Salvation

It follows then that salvation will affect God, man and nature. God will begin to accomplish this purpose by forging again that which was begun at creation. He chooses or elects to have mercy on all mankind and then elects one people, and one piece of nature (the promised land) so that through them He might reach out to all the peoples of the world, and all the world of nature in new birth and new creation. To do this God will need to draw out from man and Satan the sting of sin and evil. As man struggles against God's purpose and His way of salvation, sin and evil will gather in momentum and God, in union with man, will bear it all in Himself, dying in our place. This climax of the struggle will take place in the midst of one people and in one land, but its influence will be felt amongst all peoples and all the lands of the world. In God's gracious electing purposes in history, He will use the sin of mankind, hardening some peoples in their sin and having mercy on others with the ultimate purpose of bringing His mercy to all the peoples of the world.

Election of the People of God

The story begins with the election of one man and one people namely Abraham and his descendants. God chooses or elects one land for this people (the promised land) and will fulfil His purposes in it. (It is significant, I believe, that this promised land lies at the junction of the three ancient continents of the world — Africa, Asia and Europe and therefore, in a real sense, can be considered the centre of the world.) However, there is to be an election within an election. The blessing is to come through one of Abraham's sons, Isaac and then a further election,

17. Genesis 3:1-5.

18. Genesis 3:5-7.

19. Genesis 6:5-6, 11-12 & Romans 8:22.

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as only one of Isaac's two sons (Jacob — renamed Israel) is chosen.²⁰ Israel is called by God to be His *son* and *servant*²¹ which was God's original purpose for all mankind. Of the twelve tribes of Israel, only one is chosen, namely Judah.

Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
but he chose the tribe of Judah,

Mount Zion, which he loved. (Psalm 78: 67-68. N.I.V.)

It was this tribe of Judah, the Jews, that rejected its Messiah, handing Him over to the Gentiles to be crucified. Yet, in this very rejection, God fulfils His promise to Abraham, that through His seed blessing would come to the whole world. Jesus is this seed (singular)²² and He is the elect one, fulfilling all of Israel's destiny. The process of election within an election among the people of God has brought the choice to just one Jew who was 'chosen before the foundation of the world'.²³ He is *the Son of God* and *the Servant of the Lord*, gathering up in Himself God's purposes for all Israel and all the peoples of the World.

The process of election and narrowing down is in God's purposes, but it is man who causes this narrowing down process through his struggle against God. (Israel means the one who struggles with God).

The Ministry of the People of God

God's call to His ancient people, as His son and servant, is to the three fold office of Prophet, Priest and King. The world needs a Word from God to enable it to understand God and His purposes. This prophetic word is to 'go out from Zion'²⁴ to all the earth. The world needs a priesthood to minister God's forgiveness through sacrifice and so the people of Israel are called to be 'priests of the Lord'.²⁵ The world needs rule by God to bring peace and justice. Israel is to be a 'crown of splendour in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of God'.²⁶ Israel itself as the Lord's anointed is given anointed prophets, priests and kings to enable it to understand its own mission in the world. and to point to the one Jew who was Himself *the Word of God, the Great High Priest and the King of Kings*. It is this ministry which is given to the New Testament people of God in very similar words.

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. (1 Peter 2: 9-10. N.I.V.)

The Struggle of the People of God

However, Israel struggles against God's purposes, preferring not to be

20. Romans 9:10-13.

21. Hosea 11 & Isaiah 49:3.

22. Galatians 3:16.

23. 1 Peter 1:20.

24. Isaiah 2:3.

25. Isaiah 61:6.

26. Isaiah 62:3.

the people of God, but to be like the other peoples of the world — worshipping their gods, trusting foreign military alliances and following all their abominable practices. But God does not let His people go and through their struggle, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus, He reveals Himself even more deeply in judgement and forgiveness. Even in Old Testament times God used the sin of Israel to reveal Himself. The prophetic writings are written in the context of a sinful people.

Before the people of God first entered the promised land, Moses explained to them certain principals of God's dealing with them.

(a) His judgement would mean the scattering of the people from the land.

Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods — gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "if only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!" — because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. (Deuteronomy 28:64-67. N.I.V.)

(b) His forgiveness would mean regathering to the land.

. . . . then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (Deuteronomy 30:3-5. N.I.V.)

These are not mere prophecies dealing with this or that event in Israel's history, but principals laid down in the book of the law. They have been dramatically and literally fulfilled throughout Israel's history, on several occasions, even up to our present century.

Even before they enter the promised land, God tells Moses that He knows what in fact they will do in disobedience.

Then the Lord appeared at the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood over the entrance to the Tent. And the Lord said to Moses: "You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them.

And when many disasters and difficulties come upon them, this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants. I know what they are disposed to do, even before I bring them into the land I promised them on oath." (Deuteronomy 31:15-16, 21. N.I.V.)

But however disobedient they will be, God will not abandon them

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forever, but finally restore them to their land and forgive them.

I would have destroyed them completely,
so that no one would remember them.
But I could not let their enemies boast
that they had defeated my people,
when it was I myself who had crushed them.
The Lord will rescue his people
when he sees that their strength is gone.
He will have mercy on those who serve him,
when he sees how helpless they are.
Then the Lord will ask his people,
'Where are those mighty gods you trusted?
You fed them with the fat of your sacrifices
and offered them wine to drink.
Let them come and help you now;
let them run to your rescue.
'I, and I alone, am God;
no other god is real.
I kill and I give life, I wound and I heal,
and no one can oppose what I do. (Deuteronomy 32:26-27, 36-39.

G.N.B.)

This process of scattering and regathering is likened to a wounding and healing, a killing and giving new life, and is reiterated over and over again throughout the Psalms and the Prophets. It bears witness to another great death and resurrection which fulfils Israel's destiny, spoken of in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets.

Another theme of the prophets is that when the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, loses the people of God it will become a wilderness, but on their return the desert will bloom again.

The Struggle Against the People of God

It is not only Israel that struggles against God. The Gentile nations rejection of God and His way of salvation is most dramatically seen in anti-semitism. The presence of the Jew with his amazing history has been a cause of superstitious fear in many people down the ages. The existence of the Jew is a constant reminder of the reality of God to mankind. Anti-God and anti-Christ forces express their hatred of God in persecution of His people, whether they be Jew or Christian. A Jew is a Jew by birth and upbringing, not choice, and therefore hatred of the Jew is often racial and religious. Hitler in his book 'Mein Kampf' (My struggle), saw the elimination of the Jew from the world as the final solution to the world's problems. Very similar language is used even today by many leaders of Islamic nations who have borrowed language from the Nazi era. Less vitriolic, but nonetheless real anti-semitism is now being used by the Soviet Union in its anti-Zionism, using classic anti-semitic propaganda.

A number of the Psalms (especially 44 and 69) interpret Jewish suffering as an indirect attack upon God ("It is for your sake we are being

killed all the time” — Psalm 44:22 and “The insults which are hurled at you fall on me” — Psalm 69:9).

The People of God and the Incarnation (Success out of Failure)

In their hearts the Jews felt that they had failed to bring salvation and new life to the world.

As a woman with child and about to give birth
writhes and cries out in her pain,
so were we in your presence, O Lord.

We were with child, we writhed in pain,
but we gave birth to wind.

We have not brought salvation to the earth;

we have not given birth to people of the world. (Isaiah 26:17, 18.

N.I.V.)

Like a woman in labour giving birth to nothing, so their struggles and suffering seemed in vain! Yet in the very next verses, the Lord re-assures them; they will live and He will not forget His purposes for them.

But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.

You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.

The earth will disclose the blood shed
upon her;

she will conceal her slain no longer.

In that day —

“Sing about a fruitful vineyard:

I, the Lord, watch over it;

I water it continually,

I guard it day and night

so that no-one may harm it.

I am not angry

. . . . In days to come Jacob will take root,

Israel will bud and blossom

and fill all the world with fruit. (Isaiah 26:19, 21; 27:1-4, 6. N.I.V.)

But how will Israel’s labour pains and struggles actually bear fruit? We turn to another prophet for a wonderful answer:—

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans
of Judah,

out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.

Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when *she who is in labour*
gives birth

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and the *rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.*

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the
Lord his God.

And they will live securely, for then his
greatness

will reach to the ends of the earth. (Micah 5:2-4. N.I.V.)

Mary's labour pains, the birth of Jesus, the restoration of Israel and the world-wide Kingdom of Jesus are brought together in these three verses from Micah. So Mary too, the humble Jewish girl and mother of our Lord has a great place in guaranteeing her people's destiny.

And Mary said:

"My soul praises the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me
blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things
for me —

Holy is his name . . .

. . . He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46-49, 54, 55. N.I.V.)

Mary and Israel are the womb in which the Saviour is born and as such have significance to the end of time.

The People of God — Death and Resurrection

From the human side, it is the rebellion of both Jew and Gentile against God that causes the narrowing down of the people of God to the remnant of Israel. There are then two causes of Jewish suffering — Jewish rebellion against God, inviting His judgement in scattering throughout the world and Gentile anti-semitism.

Again, this is wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus who received the judgement of God upon our sins in our place and received in Himself the evil attacks from men (both Jew and Gentile).

It is the many Old Testament promises of restoration, healing, and new life to Israel that the New Testament sees as speaking of Jesus's own resurrection. Both Paul and Jesus refer to the resurrection as taking place on the 'third day according to the Scriptures'.²⁷ This must be a direct reference to Hosea 6:1 & 2 which describes the healing and new life to come to Israel which has been wounded under the judgement of God.

27. Luke 24:46 & 1 Corinthians 15:4.

“Come, let us return to the Lord.
He has torn us to pieces but He will heal us;
He has injured us but He will bind up our wounds.
After two days He will revive us;
on *the third day* He will restore us,
that we may live in His presence.” (Hosea 6:1-2)

It is the interpretation of this point that, in his excellent book “Whose Promised Land”, Colin Chapman makes his most fundamental mistake. He says that because the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfils the destiny of Israel, that there is therefore no more unique place for Israel in God’s plan of salvation. But in fact the very reverse follows: If Jesus’s death is the fulfilment of the scattering of Israel (and in A.D. 70 they actually are scattered) then His resurrection means that one day they will be revived and restored. Jesus’s resurrection was a bodily resurrection; therefore the promises to Israel cannot be merely spiritualised. The scattering and regathering in Old Testament time was only a foretaste of their longest ever estrangement from their land after their rejection of Christ, and their final regathering to the Promised Land towards the end of time, before their conversion to Christ. The resurrection of Jesus was in a “spiritual body” which means that the wonderful destiny of Israel has both a spiritual and literal fulfilment. The Church shares in their spiritual fulfilment now, but when the promised day comes when “all Israel is saved” (Romans 11:26) then the literal and spiritual will be brought together in one.

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. 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!
. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world what will their acceptance be but *life from the dead*?
. I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:11, 12, 15, 25, 26. N.I.V.)

Note that Paul applies the concept of resurrection to the conversion of Israel. This cannot take place apart from Israel’s return to the Promised Land, because, as seen above, the land and the people of God are so bound together in God’s purposes. The redemption of nature is caught up with the redemption of man. Thus the Scriptures emphasise over and over again the return to the land after a time of great suffering.

It is this suffering of the Servant of the Lord which is the theme of Isaiah 52 and 53. The Servant Songs of Isaiah identify the Servant explicitly with Israel²⁸ and yet sometimes mysteriously they seem to point to one who transcends mere Israel.²⁹ In their deepest meaning they point to Jesus *the*

28. Isaiah 43:3.

29. Isaiah 49:6.

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suffering Servant of the Lord. This vicarious suffering of the People of God testifies to the nature of sin and the way in which their prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry will be accomplished. Thus the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus is bound up with the suffering and restoration of Israel. Our Lord's cry from Psalm 22 — "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" finds an echo in the Jewish cry "Where was God in the holocaust?" Both Jew and Gentile will be amazed when they see God's purposes throughout history finally revealed.

The Lord says,

"My servant will succeed in his task;
he will be highly honoured.

Many people were shocked when they saw him;
he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.

But now many nations will marvel at him
and kings will be speechless with amazement.

They will see and understand
something they had never known." (Isaiah 52:13-15. G.N.B.)

The climax of the song of the suffering Servant in Isaiah 52 & 53 is followed by Isaiah 54 — a song of restoration for Israel, from shame and suffering.

The Deaf and Blind Servant

It may well be asked how can Israel be a witness and servant to the Lord in their unbelief and continuing conscious rejection of Jesus as their Messiah. But it is Isaiah in the Servant Songs who says 'Who is more blind than my Servant and more deaf than the messenger I send'.³⁰ Indeed it is the very unbelief and unrighteousness of Israel that enables God to reveal Himself in them. This is Paul's point in Romans 3:3-5.

Israel's election as God's covenant people does not mean they make a conscious witness to God, but that in their history God bears witness to Himself — His grace, mercy, judgement and forgiveness. Even in Old Testament times the great prophetic writings could only have been written in the context of an unbelieving and stiff necked people. God needs the sin of man to fulfil His purposes and therefore in history works out his purposes of hardening and showing mercy.

God Hardens and Shows Mercy in Sovereign Grace to all Peoples

This is the theme of Romans 9 to 11:

"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, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. It is not as though God's word had

30. Isaiah 42:18-20.

failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring come.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah shall have a son. 'Not only that, but Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our ancestor Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad — in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls — she was told, 'The Older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.' 'What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?' But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:1-24. N.I.V.)

In order for God to redeem mankind from sin he needs the sin of man in order to eventually destroy it. God chose Israel and not the other nations (such as Egypt led by Pharaoh or Esau and his descendants) in order to eventually bring blessing and mercy to all. He needed the hardness of heart of Pharaoh to work his redemption on Israel. He even used Pharaoh's sin and 'hardened Pharaoh's heart'. But even within Israel he made a further election (an election within an election) until as we saw in the beginning God narrowed down His choice to Judah until he reached the real Elect One — Jesus Himself. Using the sin of man God, as it were, hardens the hearts of the wider Israel.

"Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: 'Your eyes have seen all the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials those miraculous signs and great wonders. *But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear* ' " (Deuteronomy 29:2-4 N.I.V.)

Also when Jesus taught in parables He explained the reason for the parables in this extraordinary way:

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“He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’ ” (Mark 4:11-12 N.I.V.)

God’s hardening and softening process works throughout history on both Jew and Gentile, so as to bring out of mankind the sting of sin and evil which He Himself will bear in Himself.

God’s ultimate purpose in leaving at first some, then later others as prisoners of their own disobedience is so that His mercy may reach to all mankind. The final purpose then of God hardening Esau and Pharaoh whilst being merciful to Israel, and then later hardening Israel and being merciful to the Gentiles is that His mercy might reach all. The conclusion of Paul’s argument, begun in Romans 9 (quoted above) is as follows:

“As for you Gentiles, you disobeyed God in the past; but now you have received God’s mercy because the Jews were disobedient. In the same way, because of the mercy that you have received, the Jews now disobey God, in order that they also may now receive God’s mercy. *For God has made all people prisoners of disobedience, so that he might show mercy to them all.*³¹ How great are God’s riches! How deep are his wisdom and knowledge! Who can explain his decisions? Who can understand his ways? As the scripture says, ‘Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who is able to give him advice? Who has ever given him anything, so that he had to pay it back?’ For all things were created by him, and all things exist through him and for him. To God be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:30-36. G.N.B.)

Conclusion — Israel and the Christian Church

The Christian Church is the People of God through its spiritual union with Jesus Christ as it bears conscious witness to Him. Israel retains its status as the people of God in its physical union with Christ and unconsciously bears testimony to Christ in its history. The Church, as the community of the children of God, shares in Israel’s ministry through Christ in being the Lord’s servant in the world. As such it may be called to share in the suffering of Christ (Mark 8:34-35 and Colossians 1:24) as it bears its kingly, priestly and prophetic ministry to mankind.

Through the Holy Spirit it takes the kingly authority of Jesus to proclaim the gospel; the priestly authority to pray for the forgiveness of men and the prophetic ministry to being the Word of God to bear upon the affairs of the nations.

In all this it must not forget that it has been grafted into the olive tree whose roots are God’s ancient people Israel. If it forgets this then its faith in Christ will be deficient and its theology shallow, having no real root. It

31. This does not mean every individual human being will be saved. It does mean that God’s mercy will reach all mankind. Similarly the New Testament hope that ‘all Israel will be saved’ does not mean that every individual Jew will be saved but that Israel as an entity will acknowledge Jesus as its Messiah.

will either ignore the Old Testament, or treat it as a mere picture book of exciting stories each with its own moral or lesson. Instead of its theology taking it ever deeper into the wonder of the grace of God in Christ, it will get stuck in a groove of pointless liberalism, other worldly pietism, or arid conservative scholasticism. Its testimony to the world will be weakened as it splits into numerous groups or denominations. This is the church as it is today. In Jewish eyes the 'Church' bears the guilt of many millions of Jews killed in Europe in the name of Christianity, even before the advent of Adolf Hitler.

The Church must see as a priority its mission to Israel to bear witness to Christ in love, prayer and repentance and be prepared to stand by God's ancient people who live in a hostile world that would snuff out their very existence.

Only in the re-union in Christ of the people of God of the flesh and the people of God of the Spirit will the Church be fully healed and be strong in the Spirit to bring blessing to all the earth.