

## Searching For Israel (Part Twelve): The Sign

by Charles Whitaker  
*Forerunner*, May 2005

*"I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctified them."  
(Ezekiel 20:12)*

Although God has made it crystal clear who make up the peoples of Israel today, most Israelites have not even a clue to their true identity. In spite of all the recent hubbub about knowing one's roots, few Europeans, Canadians, Australians, and Americans could tell you much about Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. Indoctrinated by secularist (read, atheist) schoolmasters, they accept the notion that their distant ancestors evolved into *homo sapiens* long ago and developed, through trial and error, the civilization we now call "the West." How handily—almost carelessly—they practice their faith in blind determinism, all the while scoffing at the idea of a sovereign God who rules history, and to whom they are responsible!

They dwell in the darkness of this ignorance because their forefathers long ago rejected the sign that pointed them to the God who, quite literally, promised Abraham the world. That sign is the Sabbath.

God commanded His people Israel to "remember the Sabbath day" (Exodus 20:8). A while after He issued this, the fourth commandment, He told the Israelites why the Sabbath was such an important institution. Exodus 31:13 and 17: "It is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. . . . It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever."

The Hebrew word translated *sign* means "mark" or "evidence." The Sabbath day is the mark God gave His people to identify them as His own. By it, the folk of Israel would know the Source of their sanctification.

To *sanctify* is "to set apart for holy service," or more basically, "to make holy." God's purpose for Israel from the start was to set it apart from *other* peoples by giving it His laws and His statutes. God has a special relationship with Israel. Speaking through the prophet Amos to "the whole family [i.e., all the tribes] which I brought up from the land of Egypt" (Amos 3:1), God reminds the people that, "you only have I known of all the families of the earth" (verse 2). God revealed His law *only* to Israel. When He did so, He made it clear that Israel would "be a special treasure to Me above all people, . . . a holy [sanctified, set apart] nation" (Exodus 19:5-6), *if* the people "obey My voice and keep My covenant" (verse 5). The theme is repeated in Deuteronomy 7:6: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, . . . [who] has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

God prefaces the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus 18 and 19 by commanding Israel to be *separate* from other nations. This meant acting in a way different from that of the Gentiles, not walking "in their ordinances." Leviticus 18:3-4:

According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not

do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances. . . .

In Leviticus 19:2, He makes His purpose clear: "You shall be holy [set apart], for I the Lord your God am holy." God's purpose, the intent behind all His laws, is to create a people *like* Himself (Genesis 1:26), a people sharing and reflecting His most salient attribute: holiness.<sup>2</sup>

### **Disobedience and Separation**

Obedience to God's law plays a crucial role in bringing about this sanctification. It is not that a people become sanctified (somehow, by God's grace) and, as a result, start obeying God's law. God's Word does not support the Protestant concept that sanctification imputed by God's grace mysteriously empowers one to obey His commandments. They have it backwards.

Rather, *obedience to the law causes sanctification*. Law-keeping and sanctification become intrinsically connected: To obey God's law is to be sanctified. *By its nature, law-keeping brings about sanctification*.

In a national context, God states that obeying His laws creates a people unlike others on the earth, a people set apart from others, a holy nation. National sanctification produces what Balaam saw in Israel: "A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations" (Numbers 23:9).

If commandment-*keeping* separates people from the nations while connecting them to God, disobedience of God's law has exactly the opposite effect. Commandment-*breaking* separates a people from God, and connects them to the ways of the nations. Individuals who disobey God's law become like the "world," the *kosmos* of the New Testament (I John 2:15).

Ezekiel 20 connects disobedience with *separation* from God. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God reiterates that He

gave [Israel] My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments . . . and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. (verses 12-13)

Verses 23-24 go on to indicate the consequence of Israel's refusal to become sanctified by obeying God's laws: God says He "lifted [His] hand in an oath, . . . that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths. . . ." If Israel insisted on acting like the nations of the world, God says He would physically place them among those nations; Israel would become separated from God and the land He promised them. They would become "sifted" (see Amos 9:9) among the Gentile nations.

Leviticus 18:24-30 outlines the inevitable separation that a nation (or an individual) will undergo as a result of commandment-breaking: "The land vomits out its inhabitants" (verse 25). This is the national consequence of breaking the commandments. God states the result to individuals in verse 29: "Whoever commits any of these abominations, the persons who commit them shall be cut off from among their people." Vomiting and cutting-off are both metaphors for separation.

Nationally and individually, commandment-breaking always yields the same ultimate punishment: *separation* from God. That separation may come slowly, as Ecclesiastes 8:11 points out, but always surely.

The history of the children of Israel proves the point. God wanted Israel to be a special, sanctified nation; a holy one. He promised to bestow incredible blessings on it *if* it acted to separate itself from the social and religious practices of other nations. *Israel failed as a nation because it failed to be holy!*

### **The Kingdom of Israel and the Sign**

I Kings 12:25-33 records the beginning of the Kingdom of Israel's apostasy. Fearing that he might eventually lose political control over the ten tribes because of their long-standing religious ties to Jerusalem, the capital of the Kingdom of Judah (verse 27), Jeroboam I instituted a state religion designed to meet his peoples' needs for convenience—and his own need for power. He built two shrines, one in Bethel, at the southern extremity of his kingdom, the other in Dan, near its northern boundary (verse 29). If not *de jure*, at least *de facto*, he exiled the Levites, the priestly tribe established by God, and installed in their place a priesthood of his own devising (verse 31). Finally, he moved the fall holy day season from the seventh month to the eighth, thereby effectively setting aside the Sabbath commandment, since the holy days are God's Sabbaths (see Leviticus 23:1-3, 23-44). All this "became a sin" for Israel (I Kings 12:30).

Jeroboam's apostasy, his movement to false religious practices, took deep root. In fact, the house of Israel *never* departed from the practices he established. II Kings 17:21-23 records this fact:

Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them commit a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight. . . .

Having abandoned the Sabbath, the God-given sign marking them as His people, the folk of the northern tribes eventually lost their identification. That is why most Israelites do not know who they are to this day. *The forefathers forsook the sign that denoted their connection to God.*

Take this line of thought to its logical conclusion: The Sabbath is a memorial to creation and, by extension, to the Creator God (see Exodus 20:11). Modern-day Israelites do not know who they are today because their forefathers, generations ago, abandoned this memorial to the Creator God. Therefore, modern-day Israelites have come to abandon *more* than the sign: *they have abandoned the God to whom the sign points.* They no longer know God.

This is not an overstatement. Make no mistake: Failure to recognize who Israel is *is* failure to recognize the God who made Israel! The distressing secularism running rampant in Israel today has its roots in Sabbath-breaking. The antidote for secularism in America is not an inane Constitutional amendment requiring the teaching of creationism (whatever that is) in the state schools. The panacea some offer, prayer in the public schools, will not do the trick. Increased Sunday church attendance will not stanch the flood of secularism; after all, most Sunday worshippers accept the doctrines of biologic and economic determinism (i.e., evolution and socialism, respectively) just as avowed atheists do. Attempting to unite a people with its God through these measures is surely akin to building a wall with "untempered mortar" (see Ezekiel 13:9-23). In the coming storm, such a wall will fall.

However, one will never find a Sabbath-keeper who is a secularist. For the Sabbath-keeper has maintained his link with the Creator God. Sabbath-keeping and secularism mix about as well as oil and water.

### **The Kingdom of Judah and the Sign**

For years, the folk of the Kingdom of Judah walked in the footsteps of their brethren in the Kingdom of Israel. However, a number of them then took a different path. The result of that change, of course, is in itself proof that God's Sabbath is a sign pointing to Him and His creation.

Jeremiah 17:19-27 records God's promise to a Sabbath-keeping people. Here, He warns Jerusalem's inhabitants to "bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; . . . nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers" (verses 21-22). If they heeded, God continues, "then shall enter the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, . . . accompanied by the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever" (verse 25). Conversely, Sabbath-breaking will have dire consequences: "But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, . . . then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched"<sup>3</sup> (verse 27).

The people of Judah did not heed God's warning and, as a result, "kings and princes" no longer sit "on the throne of David" in Jerusalem. God moved the Davidic monarchy northwest to the British Isles, and the people He moved to Babylon. Jerusalem burned.

Those who returned from Babylon after seventy years did not learn their lesson. Nehemiah must have stood aghast at the Sabbath-breaking he witnessed among post-exilic Jews. Nehemiah 13:15, 17-18 bears the record. Nehemiah

. . . saw in Judah some people treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. . . . "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster [i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem] on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

Both Ezra and Nehemiah worked assiduously to teach the people to keep holy God's Sabbath. It was during this time that the people of Judah took a different path than those of Israel. For, while Israel *never* (no, not to this day!) returned to the practice of Sabbath-keeping, the descendants of the tribe of Judah (with Levi) came to keep it—albeit not perfectly.<sup>4</sup> They kept it throughout the hideous Maccabean period and throughout the long Roman occupation later. They kept it after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They kept it in the Diaspora—during the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. They kept it whether they dwelt in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, or later, America. Many keep it to this day. Because they do, *they know who they are!* They know who their patriarchs are.

Like a neon sign, the mark of the Sabbath, identifying Jews as worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shines brightly through the ages, through the darkness of ghetto and oven, even

piercing the murky gloom of today's secularism and humanism. To a good extent, the experience of the Jews shows that God's mark, the Sabbath, does in fact identify a people as worshipping the God of the patriarchs.

Had the northern ten tribes "remember[ed] the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8) even half as well as the folk of Judah do, they would today have a fair idea of their roots. Having forsaken the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath, the peoples of the Kingdom of Israel came, over time, to forget the God of their fathers, as well as His revelation and His prophets.

"Beware," one of those prophets declares, "lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 6:12). Forgetting the God who separated them from the other nations, ten-tribed Israel, scattered and wandering, became separated from their God and ultimately grew to be *like* other nations. Becoming likethem, Israel became *lost* among them. Beware.

---

## Endnotes

1 See also Deuteronomy 14:2.

2 Sanctification is also the purpose behind God's often-denigrated *physical* laws. Consider, for example, the reason *why* God imposed the dietary law, as stated in Leviticus 11. God does not cite the maintenance of health as a reason to obey the dietary laws; the Scriptures do not specify that obedience of these laws will cause good health or prevent disease (though this is a secondary, albeit unmentioned, benefit). Rather, God concludes His dietary laws with a statement of His holiness and a command for His people to be like Him. Leviticus 11:44-45:

For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

3 For the fulfillment of this prophecy, see Jeremiah 39:8; II Chronicles 36:19.

4 After the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews' religious leaders became so zealous in their desire to observe the Sabbath properly that they made it a burden. They eventually lost perspective: Failing to grasp the spirit of the fourth commandment, they created hundreds of "do's and don'ts" to define its letter. By Christ's time, their fanaticism had grown to the point that the Sabbath had itself become an object of worship. Christ had to devote a fair portion of His ministry to teaching the people that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).