

Why Israel? (Part One)

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Before and during the holy days, particularly the spring festivals, we frequently delve into the story of the children of Israel. It is difficult to avoid since the holy days rest upon the events of Israel's history.

» Passover has its beginnings in the final plague on the Egyptians, in which the Angel of Death slew the firstborn of both Egypt and Israel unless the doorposts and lintels of their homes were smeared with lamb's blood. If the blood was there, the Angel would "pass over" that dwelling.

» The Days of Unleavened Bread commemorate Israel being freed from their bondage and leaving Egypt, striking out into the wilderness for the Promised Land. The time constraints were such that they left without allowing their dough to rise. Unleavened bread became a symbol of a life of freedom, unencumbered by the corruption of sin.

» Pentecost, too, has a traditional historical tie-in, as being the day God gave His law to Israel on Mount Sinai. While this cannot be scripturally verified, the giving of the law in Exodus 20 provides a necessary complement to the giving of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, another Pentecost.

Of course, Israel's history is not confined to the events that occurred on holy days. The Bible records the high and low points of Jacob's descendants for nearly two thousand years—from the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes themselves to the Jews of Palestine during the days of the apostles. The Old Testament details Israel's invasion of the Promised Land, the tumultuous period of the judges, the rise of an Israelite monarchy, the division into two kingdoms, the decline and fall of both Israel and Judah, and the return of the Judean exiles from Babylon. The New Testament picks up the story during Herod the Great's grisly reign and takes it through Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the Diaspora of the Jews.

God's Word provides an account of one people, descendants of one man. It paints a picture of a nation that has short peaks of goodness when they have righteous leaders, long downslides in which they flirt with or plunge into paganism, painful and violent falls, and a proclivity for landing themselves in captivity. There is a great deal to be learned from all of this, and God in His wisdom has left this record for our learning (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11).

Yet, in Matthew 21:42-43, Jesus says to the leaders of the Jews:

Did you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

Essentially, Jesus tells them that Israel had had its chance but had failed miserably. He would now create a nation that would be worthy of entering His Kingdom, a people who would produce the

fruits that prove they would follow His laws and keep His covenant. This is similar to what He, as the God of the Old Testament, had said to ancient Israel in II Kings 17, Isaiah 50, Jeremiah 3, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea 2, where He declares He was putting them away. No longer would He be Israel's Husband.

So, if God has rejected the children of Israel, what was their purpose? Was Israel God's failed trial run at ruling humans, or was there something more to it? Why did God choose Israel? What makes Israel so special? Where does Israel fit in the grand scheme of God's plan?

Good from Bad

We will begin to answer these questions with some good news. Paul writes in Romans 11:26-32:

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.

The good news comes in two parts. First, God has not put Israel so far away that it has no hope of salvation. Paul says plainly, "So all Israel will be saved." He is very positive that the vast majority of Israelites will enter God's Kingdom. Peter says in II Peter 3:9 that God "is not willing that any should perish but that all [all humanity, including Israel] should come to repentance."

Second, because of what Israel experienced—and yes, because they failed—the called of God, Christians, have been given the opportunity for salvation now as the firstfruits. God knew all along that Israel would fail; it was part of His plan to create a historical record of a physical people attempting to keep His covenant. Among other things, He desired a people—Israel—to show His regenerated children the absolute futility of life without Him, even if it is lived under the best circumstances.

God loves Israel, so He did not commit them to *eternal* disobedience and condemnation. Very few of them have lost their opportunity for salvation. He has simply put them aside for the time being. Other places in the Bible explain that God will open salvation to them later, when conditions will be even better for them (see Ezekiel 37:1-14; Revelation 20:12-13). As Paul says in Romans 11:31, the salvation of Christians will eventually work out for the benefit of the Israelites: They will also obtain mercy (see also verses 11-15, 23-25).

Nevertheless, due to their being "broken off" from the vine (verse 17), a place has been made for others to be "grafted in." We should note that the vine's roots and trunk, as it were, were never rejected—just some of the branches. This means that God's Kingdom is still in large part an Israelite Kingdom! It is still rooted in the Patriarchs, the prophets, the teachings and promises, the house of David, the Twelve Tribes, and the most important of all Israelites, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

No, Israel, though blinded to God's way for now, remains a vital part of God's plan of salvation!

Universal Blessing in Abraham

To understand fully what God has done, it is necessary to go back to the beginning to see His purposes in choosing Israel. Israel's beginning occurs, not with Jacob, but with the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's final remark in verse 3 is the most fundamental reason God chose Abraham, and thus Israel and his descendants: to bless mankind in the Person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the center, the focus, of everything. He is the end or the goal of the law (Romans 10:4), the One toward whom the whole Old Testament was written (Galatians 3:24; see Luke 24:44). As Paul puts it, to us He "is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11; see Ephesians 1:23).

Physically, Jesus had to descend from some line of humanity. Abraham, who was himself descended from those who had been faithful to God in earlier times, possessed special qualities that pleased Him. Therefore, He chose Abraham and his family, which later became known as Israel, to work through to bring the wonderful blessing of salvation to all mankind. God says of him:

For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him. (Genesis 18:19)

This man had a special relationship with God: He knew God, and God knew him. God says He had worked with Abraham to bring out the qualities that would allow the patriarch to command his descendants so that they would keep the way of the Lord. In other words, Abraham had such a force of godly character that he would pass down to his descendants an affinity for God's way (see the principle in Exodus 20:6). In Abraham, God created a people who had a special link to Him. God knew that, for the purpose He was working out, Abraham was the best candidate, later called "the father of us all" in the faith (Romans 4:16), from whom to build a model nation with certain desired qualities.

We should be careful not to take this idea too far. Abraham was not perfect; he sinned and his story reveals that he had to grow a great deal. Nevertheless, he was the only person whom God ever asked to sacrifice his only son, just as He did. If nothing else, this puts him at least one rung above the rest of us. Beyond that, his righteousness does not make his descendants one whit better than other people of the earth. Their prime advantage lies in the fact that, since God had a close relationship with Abraham, they hold a special place in God's heart (see Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

This is the beginning of Israel. For His purposes, and to produce an eventual blessing for all nations, God started with the best clay that He could mold.

God's Purposes

The events of Exodus 19 occur after the Israelites left Egypt more than four centuries later, just before God proposes His covenant with Israel. He sets out some reasons for doing so.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4-6)

This could be called the preface to the Old Covenant, as it presents in stark terms what the covenant is about. He lists its three main facets:

1. They were to obey His commands and keep His covenant. Recall that God chose Abraham because he would teach his children how to keep His way. The covenant set out the terms for their doing this. This was the Israelites' primary responsibility under the agreement.
2. They were to be a special treasure to Him—a people unlike all others in their relationship to God. The Israelites were to submit to God, and He in turn would help them, blessing and protecting them as only the great Creator God could. Thus, the covenant contained reciprocal responsibilities and benefits.
3. They were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This implies two additional concepts:
 - a. As a kingdom of priests, they were to fill the role of mediator or liaison between God and the other peoples of the earth. Just as He would work through the Levitical priesthood to the children of Israel, God would work through the people of Israel to the rest of the world.
 - b. As a holy nation, they would be set apart or separate from all other nations. He would require of them, as the people with and through whom He would work, that they be different, a cut above, of a higher standard. They had a responsibility to be a model for the Gentiles to observe and emulate.

Another major purpose, with some overlap to these, appears in Jeremiah 33:14-18:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah: In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." For thus says the Lord: "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually."

This passage's main ideas are that, first, God's plan is focused on Israel through the fulfillment of the promises, and second, that the Israelites are thus God's primary agents for bringing His plan to pass, particularly the house of David and its greatest scion, Jesus of Nazareth. God will sometimes use Gentiles, but he predominantly employs Israelites to drive affairs along in His plan.

Pushing the Nations

As mentioned previously, the central focus of the Old Testament is to chronicle the events that brought the world to the point that God in the flesh, the Christ, could be born. Obviously, the Israelites were instrumental in all of those events. However, it goes beyond intra-Israelite affairs. As sovereign over all, God maneuvers Israel into positions to prod history in the way He wants it to unfold. In ancient times, nearly every world empire had to deal with Israel or Judah at some point, and those dealings played significant roles in the development of God's plan.

For instance, when Jacob moved to live in Goshen, because of Joseph's governance, Egypt was well on its way to becoming its era's superpower, and Israelite labor built it into one. When the Israelites left, after God's ten plagues had devastated Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs became vulnerable, and it took several generations to reclaim empire status. During those years of Egyptian weakness, Israel had time to establish itself in the Promised Land.

Centuries later, Babylon wrestled with Egypt over Judah, finally destroying Jerusalem in 585 BC and taking many Jews into captivity. Besides the part played by Daniel, a Jew, in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the fall of Babylon, and the rise of Medo-Persia, the entire succession of events and empires set up conditions that were necessary to prevail for Jesus to be born in Judea according to biblical prophecy. These include, among many others, the building of a Temple, the settlement of Galilee by Jews, the overlordship of Judea by Rome, and a maniacal local king like Herod.

Despite having consigned Israel to disobedience, God has continued to use Israel and Judah to move along events in His plan. In fulfillment of His promises of prosperity and power to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He has allowed the descendants of Joseph, particularly, to rise into great nations (see Genesis 48:15-20; 49:22-26; Deuteronomy 33:13-17), and with their might and influence, the nations of Joseph have pushed other peoples of the world here and there to accomplish incremental steps in God's plan.

Perhaps most conspicuously, the tiny State of Israel, peopled in large part by the descendants of Judah, wields a disproportionate influence in world affairs. Even now, all eyes remain drawn to its ongoing squabble with the descendants of Ishmael and Esau, and the Bible predicts that Jerusalem will continue to be "a cup of drunkenness" and "a very heavy stone for all peoples" right through the time of the end (Zechariah 12:2-3). God says, "In that day I will make the governors of Judah like a firepan in the woodpile, and like a fiery torch in the sheaves; they shall devour all the surrounding peoples, . . . but Jerusalem shall be inhabited again in her own place" (verse 6). This is exactly what is happening as God works out matters to prepare for His Son's second coming in power and great glory to establish His Kingdom on earth.