

Why Israel? (Part Two)

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Most readers of the Bible, even those who are only mildly familiar with its content and themes, know that Israel plays a major part in God's dealings with humankind.

That relationship began about four thousand years ago, when God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to beget a people who in short order multiplied into a nation. Over the millennia, Israel's impact on the world has gone largely unacknowledged by both the great and small—and this lack of recognition continues even today. Of course, the best product of Israel was born more than two thousand years ago in Bethlehem of Judea and became our Messiah, Jesus Christ the Savior.

Because God had chosen Israel to represent Him to the peoples of the earth, He gave Israel every advantage. He started them with magnificent parentage through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Physically, when they came out of Egypt, they were a strong-bodied slave people, hardworking and accustomed to the rigors of service. When they entered the land of Canaan, God gave them abundance. The Promised Land is frequently described in Scripture as one "of milk and honey"—it was fertile and fruitful, temperate and well-watered.

God told them time and again that He would provide them with everything that they would need. He gave them the best laws and provided wise and God-fearing leaders. He promised to fight their wars, to protect them from illness, to bless their crops and herds, and to multiply them as the sand of the seashore. God offered them everything any people could ever want.

All they had to do was to obey Him and to keep the covenant to which they had both agreed (Exodus 24:1-8). Yet, they failed miserably in doing this.

Notice all their advantages: righteous ancestry, strength, health, abundance, a fertile land, plus all the wonderful blessings that God so generously promised—and still, they failed. They had everything going for them, but the biblical record is unambiguous: The Israelites failed to keep their bargain with God more often and for far longer than they succeeded.

God allowed this to occur for a specific reason. One day, God will thunder before all humanity, "Even though your representatives, Israel, had every advantage—the most and the best of everything I could offer—man still could not, would not, obey Me." At some point, Israel's 4,000-year history will be a lesson presented to all peoples to teach them how impossible it is for humanity, even with God's physical blessings, to have a relationship with God and be saved (see Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11).

Humanity, as God displays in the history of Israel, cannot solve its own problems. Even under a perfect setup, any nation—indeed any individual—would still fail without what God can and is eager to supply spiritually. The Bible explains that God "put away" Israel and called a new nation to represent Him to the world. This new nation, however, was not based on birth into a particular bloodline, but on personal and individual belief and devotion to God through His Son, Jesus Christ. To them, He proposes a New Covenant, based on even better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

Pure Stock?

The Old Testament speaks a great deal about bloodlines. Genealogies pop up here and there within its pages, culminating in the pedigrees of Jesus in Matthew 1 (legal through Joseph) and Luke 3 (physical through Mary). Genesis contains several, from Noah's to Nimrod's to Esau's, as well as the patriarchs'. Moses' line appears in Exodus 6, while Numbers and I Chronicles have extensive listings of Israelite tribal lines. Whole books, such as I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles, record ultimately the most important lineage, that of David's house. The Old Covenant seems to put heavy emphasis on unmingled Israelite genes. Again, God has His reasons.

After the exiles returned to Judah from Babylon, Ezra the scribe was forced to deal with the then-widespread problem of Jews intermarrying with the Gentile people of the land. Notice Ezra 9:2, which describes the situation:

For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.

Ezra solves this problem of intermarriage by decreeing:

You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives. (Ezra 10:10-11)

This breaking up of whole families, many of whom had perhaps been living happily together for many years, was a drastic but necessary step. Ezra, who seemed to have God-given insight into the divine plan, understood what had to be done and the reasons for it.

The spiritual reasons are, of course, the most important. God says many times in the Pentateuch that intermarriage with pagans is spiritually dangerous (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 7:1-4). It was far more likely that, rather than the heathen spouses being won over to the worship of Israel's God, they would influence their sons and daughters to worship idols. If this were to happen frequently, Israel would soon be entirely idolatrous.

Although there *is* a bit of physical purity involved in this, God's demands are *not* for reasons of racial superiority¹ but because He had a purpose for Israel—and the most important purpose is Jesus Christ. To fulfill the prophecies of the promised Seed, He had to be directly descended from Abraham through Judah, Jesse, and David, and because of a curse on Jeconiah (Jeremiah 22:24-30), He could not descend from that wicked king's bloodline.² Only these particular circumstances could fulfill the prophecies and establish His righteous claim as the Messiah. Thus, Ezra's action was taken in large part to preserve David's line in preparation for Jesus' birth.³

In addition, God wanted Israel to be a holy and separate nation (see Leviticus 19:1-2; Deuteronomy 14:2; 26:19; 28:9). The Israelites were to retain as many of their distinguishing traits and practices as He had given them at the beginning, and they could do this only as long as they remained separate from other nations. In this way, they could be the model nation, a people others would want to emulate, not because of any so-called racial purity or superiority, but because the true God was their God.

God Loves Israel

Deuteronomy 7:6-11 explains in God's own words why He chose Israel:

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

Since God is holy, the people He chooses for Himself must also be holy, a principle that continues under the New Covenant. As God lives by high standards, so must His people keep those same high standards as an example to the rest of the world. Just as a human government sends out ambassadors to other nations to represent it in its affairs within those nations, God chose Israel to represent Him. What were His reasons?

- » He chose Israel to be His own people, a special treasure for His own purposes.
- » He chose them to demonstrate His love for them. He simply loved them. When God loves someone, He puts a great deal of responsibility on him.
- » He chose them to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom He also had a special relationship.
- » He chose them to make a covenant with them, under which they were to keep His commandments and obey Him in everything. In return, He would bless them immensely.

God's choice of Israel was an act of love for them, even though He knew from the start that they would ultimately fail. God knew from the foundation of the world that all mankind would need a Savior (I Peter 1:19-20; Revelation 13:8), including Israelites. Yet, if any people were to succeed as God's model nation, it would be the children of Abraham. This is not because they were better, but because they of all people had a relationship with God, which had begun with Abraham. They had examples in their own ancestry that they could study to see that it could be done if they remained close to God.

To help them to succeed, God gave them His laws, another act of love. Moses writes:

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as

the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

Even in their laws they were to be a model nation for the rest of the world, not just for the Gentiles to notice, but to emulate. The Israelites should have made a great impression on the Canaanites, Philistines, Edomites, and all the nearby nations. This respect and admiration should have then spread beyond them to other nations.

Yet, because they failed to live by those good and righteous laws and to take advantage of God's nearness to them—in reality, they failed in just about everything He asked of them—their influence as a model nation rarely stretched beyond their borders. Too often, Israel was instead outright pagan!

A Missing Ingredient

The Israelites could have been the world's perpetual premier nation if they had done as God asked. But they failed, proving that no nation, no people—even with the righteous examples of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and with the great laws of God—could solve humanity's problems and live peaceful, abundant lives without a special ingredient only God can supply.

Men say, "With enough time and enough knowledge, we can solve any and every evil." But the record of humanity, foremost in Israel, has proved that it cannot be done. Even with God as their King, Israel could not succeed in this. Something was missing.

What was missing? *God's Holy Spirit!* It was evident, even during the days of the prophets, that the Old Covenant was insufficient, that its terms could not redeem a person from his sins or deliver eternal life. A new and better covenant was needed. Notice Jeremiah 31:31-33:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

God will make a New Covenant with Israel, one that will include an element whereby He can write His law on people's minds and hearts. By this means, His way of living will be their way too, and they will be faithful to Him.

Paul comments on this in Hebrews 8:7-8, adding that the failure of the Old Covenant lay in the Israelites themselves. They had hearts of stone on which God could not write His way of life. While that covenant was in force, He purposely withheld the vital, heart-softening ingredient, His Spirit, from them as a whole to depict to mankind that peace, prosperity, and redemption are impossible without a spiritual relationship with Him. He must be personally and individually involved in their daily lives.

One day, in the Millennium, He will give Israel that ability—that right heart—and allow them to succeed in the areas in which they failed. This is prophesied in Ezekiel 37:21-23, 26-28:

Thus says the Lord God: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. . . . Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."

Israel will then be given the New Covenant. They will be allowed wholesale access to God through His Holy Spirit, and they will keep His laws along with the statutes and the judgments. They will not just pay them lip-service. This time they will keep their covenant with God.

Moreover, the nations will notice when Israel finally does what it was chosen to do. The Gentiles will begin making the right connections. They will see that God has sanctified the Israelites by setting them apart, giving them His Spirit and His law, and blessing them abundantly for their obedience. They will say, "Maybe we should be doing this too!" and begin to fulfill Isaiah 2:1-4. Thus, during the Millennium, Israel will perform its original purpose as a model and mediatory nation for the rest of the world.

It will take time, maybe generations, but slowly, surely, the whole world will see in Israel, then part of God's church (see Galatians 6:16), how it should live under God. There will be conversions by the thousands—perhaps even by nations, as they realize what wonderful peace and prosperity can ensue when a nation obeys God and lives the way that He teaches!

At It Again

Ezekiel 44 takes place either during the Millennium or the Great White Throne Judgment. However, from certain details, it seems that God is referring to the actual ancient Israelites who failed Him under the Old Covenant.

Now say to the rebellious, to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: 'O house of Israel, let us have no more of all your abominations. When you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to defile it—My house—and when you offered My food, the fat and the blood, then they broke My covenant because of all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of My holy things, but you have set others to keep charge of My sanctuary for you. . . . And the Levites who went far from Me, when Israel went astray, who strayed away from Me after their idols, they shall bear their iniquity. Yet they shall be ministers in My sanctuary, as gatekeepers of the house and ministers of the house; they shall slay the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister to them. Because they ministered to them before their idols and caused the house of Israel to fall into iniquity, therefore I have raised My hand in an oath against them,' says the Lord God, 'that they shall bear their iniquity.'" (Ezekiel 44:6-8, 10-12)

It appears that, when the Israelites rise in the second resurrection, God will make them perform what they failed to do originally! He will give them a chance to repent of their unfaithfulness, to make up, as it were, for the sins of the past. They will know every time they lift a bullock onto the altar, every time they keep the gate, every time they make the showbread, every time they fulfill any of their responsibilities to God, that they failed in their first attempt to keep the terms of their covenant with God.

That is bearing iniquity! They will be reminded in every action that they have sinned and are a sinful people. It will be a hard lesson for Israel, but they will learn it well.

God says in Isaiah 43:21, "This people I have formed for Myself; they *shall* declare My praise." Finally! In the end, when God gives them the complete package of spiritual blessings, the Israelites will glorify God as He intended from the beginning, fulfilling their ultimate purpose.

Endnotes

1 See "Perfect in His Generations," *Forerunner*, February 2005, for a discussion of Genesis 6:9 and the Bible's approach to racial purity.

2 See "Jesus Disqualified?" *Forerunner*, August 1997, for a full explanation of this curse.

3 Even so, Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1 shows that He was Himself descended from at least three Gentiles: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. It is probably impossible to determine, but one or more of Judah's kings, as well as some of the uncrowned princes of Judah between the fall of Jerusalem and His birth, could have taken Gentile wives. Whatever the case, even Jesus was not of racially pure stock.