

Understanding the Foundations

Chapter 3

Who Is Israel and Who are We?

Throughout the Books of the Law, Genesis through Deuteronomy, you will see many phrases such as this:

Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. Exodus 31:16 (ESV)

I understand the word, “forever”. People change their minds but if God says “forever”, it is still in effect even after 4,000 years. However, as many of these verses state, this commandment is for “*the people of Israel.*” Therefore, who you understand “*Israel*” to be will determine how you will read not only this verse, but all of Scripture.

I was taught that God had “two peoples”, Israel and the Church. The two were separate and the Laws of the Old Testament only applied to Israel. God had one plan for Israel and a different plan for the Church. Strangely, however, these same preachers blurred the lines because they wanted to claim the promises of blessing found in the Old Testament even while they rejected the terms of the covenant that brought those blessings.

In this chapter, we will study the scriptures to see who is “Israel” and what was God’s plan for them. To do this, let’s examine the foundations of a familiar New Testament passage to see what it shows us.

1 Peter 2:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

This brief passage has incredibly deep foundations. The first line is actually what God spoke to the nation of Israel when they arrived at Mt. Sinai after leaving Egypt and crossing the Red Sea.

Exodus 19:4-6 (ESV)

⁴ *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.* ⁵ *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;* ⁶ *and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”*

So, it appears that Peter is equating the Church to the nation of Israel. If we continue reading, there are still more references in this passage linking the Church to Israel.

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Isaiah 9:2 (ESV)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Isaiah 12:3-5 (ESV)

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, **make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.** ⁵ "Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth.

However, it is verse 10 which holds the deepest and most complex link between the Church and Israel.

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This verse comes from an Old Testament passage that very few people have ever read. Even Jewish Rabbis avoid it because it raises questions they cannot answer. In over 40 years, I have never heard a single sermon on it... even though it is critical to understanding who we are.

Hosea 1:6-10 (ESV)

⁶ She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him [Hosea], "**Call her name No Mercy [Lo-Ruchamah], for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all.** ⁷ But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen." ⁸ When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹ And the LORD said, "Call his name **Not My People [Lo-'Ammi], for you are not my people, and I am not your God.**" ¹⁰ Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "**You are not my people,**" **it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."**

What Kind of Names Are Those?!

This passage is far more complex than we can cover in this chapter but, in case you are not familiar with the story behind it, here is a very short version. Following the reign of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two nations. The ten tribes in the northern half became what was called "The House of Israel" and the two tribes in the south became known as the

“House of Judah.” Neither nation remained faithful to the LORD and they worshiped other Gods even though they still gave lip-service to Him. The LORD called this “spiritual adultery” and He described the two nations as “sister whores.” [Jeremiah 3:8] The House of Israel, was so wicked that the LORD utterly divorced them and, without His protection, they were soon destroyed by the Assyrians. The people of the House of Israel were dispersed among the nations and totally lost their identity. The House of Judah also acted wickedly but, after 70 years of exile in Babylon, the LORD brought them back and reestablished them as a nation.

True prophets have a tough life and Hosea was no exception. To show the people how wicked their behavior was toward Him and the consequences that it would bring, God commanded Hosea to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him. The names of **“No Mercy”** and **“Not My People”** referred to the House of Israel. Since few of us understand the Hebrew laws concerning marriage, it is easy to miss the full horror of the situation. When God “divorced” the House of Israel He could never again re-marry them. [Deuteronomy 24:1-4] They could never again be “His People.” And yet, even amid the echoes of judgment, God promised that – somehow – they would again be His.

Hosea 2:23 (ESV)

...And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say, ‘You are my God.’”

The House of Israel was utterly destroyed but, even seeing this, the House of Judah did not repent of their sin. Yet even as judgement was falling on them, God made this promise of restoration through the prophet Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:1 (ESV)

*“At that time, declares the LORD, I will be the God of **all the clans of Israel**, and **they shall be my people.**”*

As the Kingdom of Judah was being destroyed by the Babylonians, restoration seemed impossible. Yet when God said, **“All,”** He was promising that He was more than able to restore them. **“All”** had to include even the ten clans of the House of Israel who had wallowed in the mire of idolatry for hundreds of years, been divorced by God and, by then, no longer even existed. If He could restore the House of Israel, He could certainly restore them! The Rabbis could not imagine how this could be possible but God’s plan of redemption was so deep that it even handled even this seemingly impossible situation. In essence, the ten northern tribes were dead yet God promised through the prophets that they would live again. Hundreds of years later, Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”* John 11:25 (ESV) **“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.** John 10:16 (ESV)

Who were these “other sheep?” Thousands of years before, the aged patriarch Jacob laid his hands on the heads of his son Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to pronounce his final blessing on them. Strangely, he crossed his hands so that his right hand was on the head of the younger son, Ephraim. As he blessed them he prophesied that Ephraim would be the greater of the two. He said that Ephraim would be the father of “a multitude of nations” or, literally, “the fullness of the Gentiles.” The tribe of Ephraim became the House of Israel. When they were part of the Nation of Israel, they were “His People” but, through their sin, they became “not His

people” and ultimately “not a people.” But when Jesus fulfilled the prophecies and called His other sheep “Not My People” to Himself – even I could answer that call! God’s plan of redemption is more incredible than we can possibly imagine.

We could look at dozens of other scriptures, but from just these you can see that the scriptures seem to be saying that we... the Church... are actually “Israel.” The Church is not a replacement for Israel nor is it a second people of God. Jesus said there will be **ONE** flock. If that is a radical concept for you, please hold on and take the time to test it against scripture.

Grafted In... But to what?

The word “gentile”, or “goyim” in Hebrew, simply means “nations.” Then, as now, there were only two groups of people in the world – “His” and “Not His.” As we read earlier, Israel was “His People” and everyone else was... well... everyone else! If someone wanted to come to God, they became Israelites. Ruth, who was from Moab, understood this when she declared:

*Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. **Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.*** Ruth 1:16 (ESV)

The apostle Paul’s primary ministry was to Gentiles who were the “other sheep” that Jesus spoke of. In Romans 11, Paul compares the process of a gentile becoming a Christian to a branch being cut from one tree and grafted into a different tree. This is a very long passage so I will shorten it for clarity. However, as always, please read the entire passage in context.

Romans 11:1-36 (ESV)

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! ... ¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them...

...if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you...

²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. ²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own



sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

There is a lot to think about in Paul's discussion but in verse 24, Paul says that when Jews believe in Jesus, they are **"grafted back into their own tree."** Looking at that from another angle, when we put our faith in Jesus, **we are grafted into their tree.** Like Ruth, we become part of Israel. One flock... One tree.

A New Set of Glasses

As I said at the start of this chapter, who you understand "Israel" to be will determine how you will see all of Scripture. Your understanding of that question is like wearing glasses that determine what you are able to see. For example, if I tried to read the Gospels in a "red-letter" Bible while wearing red glasses, I could see everything clearly except the words of Jesus.

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

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²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Since His words are written in red, they would be very difficult to see. When, as a young believer, I was taught that the Torah, the Laws of God for His people were only for the Jews in days before Jesus came. They gave me a set of glasses to read the scriptures with. Those glasses made it virtually impossible to see the things we have been examining. Now that I am daring to read the scriptures without those glasses, I am seeing things that I never saw before even though I have read the Bible from cover to cover many times.

Of course, after looking at things one way for over 40 years, it isn't always easy to adjust. At first, things looked totally different. However, the further I walk this road, the more I realize that now I am merely seeing how incredible the scriptures and God's plan of salvation truly are.

So Who Are We Then?

So, am I saying that we are Jews? No, not at all. I am neither a direct descendant of those living in Judea at the time of Jesus nor a follower of the religion of Judaism as it is taught today.

I am a Christian in its fullest sense. I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the Son of God, who was born of a virgin. I believe that He lived a totally sinless life and, in fulfillment of scripture He gave up His life willingly as a sacrifice so that I could be forgiven of my sins. I believe that God the Father raised Him from the dead on the third day and that He is seated at the right hand of the Father. I believe that salvation is a gift of God's grace and not the result of any merit on my part. I believe that He sent the Holy Spirit to live within us to teach us His ways and enable us to walk in them. I believe that, at the appointed time He will return to judge all who have ever lived and to establish His Kingdom on earth. I do not merely "believe" these things but I seek daily to live them out so that I can honor Him in all areas of my life.

The only thing that has changed, is that I have dared to believe that I can simply accept what scripture says without having to reinterpret it to make it agree with a set of man's doctrines... as the Pharisees did... thus stripping it of its power to redeem the world.

Proof Texts and Problems

Before we move forward, I want to show you one more scripture that demonstrates two very important points.

¹² Remember that you [gentiles] were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Ephesians 2:1-22 (ESV)

This passage very clearly states that we gentile believers in Jesus are fellow citizens of the commonwealth of Israel. Just as we have seen “ONE flock” and “ONE tree”, Paul states here that Jew and Gentile are now “ONE new man.” That’s fantastic. However, the main reason that I mention this passage is because right in the middle of it, there is a statement that seems to totally contradict what I am about to say. Did you catch it?

For He [Jesus] ... has broken down... the dividing wall... by abolishing the law...

That verse seems to say in very plain English that Jesus has abolished the Law. Therefore, my early teachers were right. Since Jesus did away with the Law of God it must have been a bad thing and there is no reason to study it now except out of historical curiosity. Of course, skeptics and atheists love this passage as well because it also sounds like Paul directly contradicts Jesus who said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law...” Matthew 5:17

This demonstrates what we discussed in Chapter 1, that we must understand scripture in context. But not merely the context of a paragraph or even within the context of the whole book. Rather, we must interpret every scripture within the context of the entire Bible.

Therefore, let's pause and take a few minutes to wrestle with this verse. Then we will have confidence as we move forward. As we have discussed before, translation is never easy and translations between vastly different cultures across thousands of years is even more difficult. One of the annoying things about Biblical Greek is that it doesn't have any punctuation. In our weird world of texting with gibberish such as “*c u l8r rofl ;)*” passing as communication, that may not sound like a big deal, but consider the comical example of two hungry kids shouting:

LET'S EAT GRANDMA!

Cannibals? No, just poor grammar. Try it again kids,

LET'S EAT, GRANDMA!

Much better! Even the lowly comma can save lives. So even the slightest change can totally alter the meaning of a sentence. Another example of this are the following two sentences that use the exact same words but have the exact opposite meaning... and result in this person's life!

I know that God is with us, but there is no way we can succeed.

There is no way we can succeed, but I know that God is with us.

Accurate translating is also much harder when you (and the people paying you) already know (or think you know) what a passage says. I am absolutely not a Biblical Greek scholar but we don't have to be to understand this seeming contradiction. Jesus clearly said that He had NOT come to abolish the Law and we hold that there are NO contradictions in scripture. We also note that Paul, the man writing this, says that he "*delights in the Law of God*" [Romans 7:22] and that we do not "*overthrow the Law*" but "*we uphold the Law.*" [Romans 3:31] Therefore, if Paul is not contradicting both Jesus and himself, we need to find a better understanding of this verse.

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ {by abolishing} the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two

The Greek word that is translated, "by abolishing" is *καταργήσας* or *katargēsas* which is Strongs word g[2673]. One meaning of this word is to "abolish" but the primary meaning is "making inoperative." However, even if we substitute that into the verse it still looks like Jesus made the Law "inoperative" which is pretty much the same thing as abolishing it.

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ {making inoperative} the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two

Way back when I was in high school, my English teacher said to not exceed eight words in a sentence because it can become confusing. Apparently, I didn't learn very well because that last sentence had 25 words. Paul (or at least the translators) must have totally skipped that class because the sentence we are examining has a whopping 67 words! And yes, it is confusing.

What exactly did Jesus "break down"? He broke down "the dividing wall of hostility." Did breaking down the dividing wall of hostility "make the Law inoperative?" One might think so if they assumed that it was the Law which created the dividing wall of hostility. After all, in Acts 10:28, Peter said to the Roman Centurion, "*You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation...*" That sounds pretty hostile!

While Peter said that it was "against the law," you will never find such a law in the scriptures. That was one of the ugly traditions that the religious leaders had substituted for God's Law. By

contrast, scripture said, *“Therefore you are to love the foreigner, since you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.”* Deuteronomy 10:19 (CJB) God’s whole purpose in forming the nation of Israel was to bless all the nations of the world. [Genesis 22:17-18] God told the people at Mount Sinai that they were to be “a royal priesthood” and “a holy nation.” To be “holy” means to be “set apart for a special purpose” and a priest mediates between God and man. Therefore, Israel was created to bless the entire world by being a living demonstration of God’s Laws to the nations.

One reason that Israel failed in that mission was that they began to despise the Gentiles. You can’t teach people about the love of God when you hate them. The walls of hostility that they built made the Law of God inoperative. Oh... wait a second... isn’t that exactly what this difficult verse is saying?

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Jesus broke down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles which had crippled the Law so that He could create one new man in place of the two! And that is exactly what Paul wrote in Galatians:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28 (ESV)

Whew! That was a lot of work... but it is so worth it! If we are to build our lives on scripture, we absolutely must understand what it is saying. In Paul’s letter to Timothy he said that we must learn to *“correctly handle the word of truth.”* 2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV) I want you to have the confidence that you can study these things out for yourself. I am certainly nothing special but, as James says, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”* James 1:5 (ESV)

So, What Does All This Mean?

At the start of this chapter, we noted that the Law of Moses was specifically directed to *“the people of Israel.”* Similarly, every verse in the Old Testament describes God’s dealings with the people of Israel. However, due to almost two thousand years of tradition, 99% of Christians redefine the meaning of the Old Testament verses that they want to keep to suit their purposes and totally ignore the rest. By doing so, they have effectively removed over 75% of the scriptures from their Bibles.

If you have taken this chapter to heart, your Bible may suddenly be four times larger than it was before. That is cause for great rejoicing. However, it can also trigger other emotions such as fear and despair as you realize that you have been ignoring and even teaching against God’s Law for His people. Nevertheless, do not be afraid... listen to the words of Nehemiah to a group of people who were in the same situation.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 (ESV)

¹ And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.

² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, **on the first day of the seventh month.** ³ And he read from it ... from early morning until midday... **the ears of all the people were attentive...**

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people... and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷ Also... the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law... ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, **“This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.**

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. **And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.**” ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, ... ¹² **And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.**

This small band of people had recently returned from 70 years of exile caused by the sin of their parents and grandparents. They had lived in a heathen land all their lives and most knew very little about the Laws of God. This gathering was on the Day of Trumpets which warns the people that the Day of Atonement (judgement) is only 10 days away. As they heard the words of the Law, they wept because they realized how sinful they were. Yet notice that Ezra and Nehemiah calmed them saying, **“And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** It brings God great joy when His people seek to learn and to walk in all His ways and He promises to establish them. As Paul wrote,

*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? **It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*** Romans 14:4 (ESV)

When we turn to the Father in humility and openness, we simply cannot fail.

What's Next?

Many people like to pluck nice sounding verses out of the Old Testament and talk about “claiming the promises of the covenant.” The problem is that they do not recognize that covenants are conditional. In the next chapter we will examine the covenant that God made with the people at Mount Sinai and the new covenant that He promised through the prophet Jeremiah.

A Final Word of Encouragement

If all of this is coming at you too quickly, do not be alarmed. I was a hard case and it took the Holy Spirit more than a year to convince me that what I was seeing was real. There were, of course, many forces working against me during that time. It is just like the spiritual warfare that breaks out when the Holy Spirit is drawing a person to accept Christ as their Savior. During my year of wrestling, it was a single, gentle word of encouragement that brought clarity. If you need someone to talk to, you can reach me at Foundations@HisWordInWood.com