

The biblical and theological question of the relationship between Israel and the church of Christ has been an important matter of debate in the Christian church throughout the centuries since the ascension of Christ. Christians of various stripes have described the historical and theological connection of the two concepts Israel and the Church by varying degrees of continuity or discontinuity. This paper shall offer an analysis of the question through a biblical-historical study of the terms “Israel” and the “church” in Scripture, and their theological implications. A careful study of these concepts in the Scriptures reveals that “Israel” and the “church” are not two distinct identities, but one continued idea which through the outworking of redemptive history undergoes change in its degree of revelation but not a change in definition.

The term *Israel* specifically derives from the name of Israel, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. This Israel is named Jacob at birth but God later changes his name to “Israel” in Genesis 32:28 as a sign of covenant blessing. This blessing is not new but hearkens back through Jacob's life, through his father the child of promise to Abraham, who from God first received the covenant promise in Genesis chapter 12. This promise is not simply or primarily based on heredity but on a generational covenant which must be applied and embraced by each successive generation. The way that God named Jacob “Israel” long after his natural birth, as well as God's preference for the younger brother Israel over his elder brother Esau, (not to mention the miraculous conception of his father Isaac), show that the promise is not simply or primarily an ethnic blessing inherited by blood, but a spiritual blessing communicated by God's Spirit to his elect.

Although being born into the covenant family was a great blessing indeed,

affording to every natural descendant of Abraham the manifest advantage of the knowledge of the true God and inclusion in the covenant family, this natural descent in itself was not enough to guarantee receipt of the blessing. As in the cases of Ishmael and Esau, disobedience to the terms of the covenant would mean that even a natural-born descendant of Abraham would be cut off from the promise. Indeed, the original promise God made to Abraham the grandfather of Israel included the provision that he would be a blessing to many nations, not only to his biological descendants. The repetition and restatement of this covenant promise to Jacob the grandson, (when God renamed him “Israel”) surely did not change the spiritual, global, and multi-ethnic aspects of the covenant as God originally gave it to Abraham.

As Israel begot descendants through his twelve sons the patriarchs, the whole extended family was called by the name “Israel” as a testimony to God's promise to Abraham through the line of his grandson Israel. This family of Israel grew into a nation which enjoyed the distinct advantage of the covenant that God made with Abraham. To Israel God gave his law, his prophets, the ordinances of the Mosaic law which pointed them to the Messiah and distinguished them from every other nation on earth. God performed wonders among Israel to strengthen their faith and confound their enemies. There are notable examples in the Old Testament when God brought those who were not biological descendants of Abraham into covenant relationship with him, like Ruth, Rahab, and the city of Nineveh in Jonah's day. Nevertheless salvation was largely limited to those who were by birth descended from Abraham and Israel.

The prophets are repleat with prophecies that the God of Israel would bless other

ethnic groups with the promise of salvation in accordance with the covenant he made with Abraham. Among others Isaiah (in chapter 2) speaks of the day when all nations of the earth would gather to worship the Lord at Mount Zion. From the first revelation of God's covenant to Abraham to the last words of the Old Testament there is a lingering expectation, then, of a further broadening of the extent of this gracious covenant in the degree of its distribution among nations other than ethnic Israel.

In the New Testament, the concept of *Israel* plays a prominent role as Christ and his apostles urge the physical descendants of Israel to have faith and repentance characterizing the blessed covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. The promises belong to them by birth in the sense that there is a special blessing attached to their station as the descendants of Abraham, but they must repent and believe in the Messiah to receive the promise. We do not see two promises, one ethnic received at birth and the other spiritual grasped by faith, but rather one and the same promise, which is of a spiritual nature. The blessing attributed to physical descent from Abraham consists only in the proximity and availability of the spiritual blessing, if the sons of Abraham will believe and obey. This faith must be placed in Jesus the Messiah, who is the “seed” of Abraham. John the Baptist warns unrepentant descendants of Abraham that God is able even from stones to raise up children for Abraham. In the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus warns the children of the kingdom that they will be shut out of the feast because they did not respond to the invitation; and others will be included who had previously been excluded.

In the epistle to the Galatians the apostle Paul discusses the question of whether it

was necessary for believers in Christ of Gentile extraction to submit to circumcision to be saved. He notes that God's covenant promise to Abraham, (which was continued through Israel his grandson), was fulfilled in Christ. It is those who believe in Christ of every nation and not only those of Israelite descent who are the true sons of Abraham, and heirs of the promise. It is not the blood line of Abraham which counts, but faith and repentance in Christ after the example of Abraham which distinguishes the true sons of the promise from the rest of humanity. It is in this context which the apostle prays for peace upon the "Israel of God." (6:16) In the context of the epistle this must be taken as referring to all the spiritual heirs of the covenant promise which God made to Abraham and confirmed to his grandson Israel. Indeed, the physical descendants of Abraham are in no place to have peace with God, unless they believe in the promised Messiah and repent of their sins. It is the spiritual seed of Abraham, namely all those of every nation who are in Christ, who have a right to peace with God. All others must be submitted to Christ or crushed by him in due time.

*Israel*, then, refers to those elect out of every nation who receive the spiritual blessing promised in God's covenant, which he had confirmed to Israel the grandson of Abraham. The widening and broadening of the covenant promise to every nation, as promised to Abraham and foretold by the prophets, finally found full expression in more than just a few unusual exceptions of faith and repentance among the nations. Now the gospel was going forth unto all the nations of the earth as God brought dead sinners to life to become heirs of his covenant promise to Abraham.

The term *church* in the Bible derives from the Greek term εκκλησια. This Greek

term first appears in Matthew 16:18 in the New Testament but its use was familiar to first century Jews from the popular Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. In the Septuagint the term first appears in Deuteronomy chapter 4. It is used to refer to the people of Israel in the context of their journey in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. It is used from that point through much of the Septuagint Old Testament in various instances to refer to God's covenant people. Also in Acts 7:38 Saint Stephen speaks of the *ἐκκλησία* in the wilderness to whom God spoke from Mount Sinai. The term could not, therefore, be seen as denoting something entirely new as used in the New Testament since the term would have been understood by Jesus' hearers in the context of God's covenant dealings with Israel throughout the generations extending from Abraham through Christ. This term was uniquely suitable for the believers in Christ after his advent because of its implications extending back through the people of God's covenant promise and the fact that it was not commonly used by the unbelieving Jews during the earthly ministry of Jesus and the apostles.

It would not be logical for us to suppose that Jesus and the apostles would choose a term so loaded with historical connotation if it were meant to denote an entirely new concept. That would be very confusing for the audience. Rather the usage of this term makes clear that the church that Jesus established and promised to build with his elect from every nation through his apostles (Matt 16) is essentially the same people as that which God led through the wilderness in Deuteronomy.

In the transition that God's plan makes from the pre-incarnate, Old Testament era to the era of the full revelation of Christ and his historical work as Mediator, the people

of God undergo some changes. There is a difference in the way that God administers the covenant in outward signs in the Old and New Testaments. But there is, as we have seen, an essential continuity which identifies the people of God in both dispensations as one people of God unified by faith. In the Old Testament, salvation is nearly, though not entirely, limited to the biological descendants of Abraham. However we have noted that the promise was not primarily or essentially an ethnic blessing, because only the faithful descendants of Abraham who followed in his footsteps in faith and repentance inherited the promise. In addition God had promised that the blessing would extend to many nations from the first promise to Abraham throughout the writings of the prophets.

In the Mosaic economy, God took the nation of Israel under his special care and gave his people laws and ordinances to point them to the Messiah and separate them from the other nations until the Messiah should be born. The church in the New Testament is not a new entity entirely, but a continuation of God's people in the Old Testament. The difference is not in identity, but in the clarity of revelation of God's redemptive plan. Whereas the saints of the Old Testament looked forward to Christ, the saints of the New Testament look back to his finished work. The types and shadows of the Mosaic economy have been removed because their prophetic purpose has been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The Church, then, or *ἐκκλησία*, is not distinct from Israel. Nor has the Church replaced Israel. Rather the Church is Israel and vice-versa. This was always the case from God's first promise to Abraham, through the Pentateuch and the prophets, and remains so in the New Testament. The changes that God's people undergo between the

Old and New Testaments are not in kind, but in the degree of clarity of revelation dependent on the outworking of God's redemptive plan to save a people for himself through human history.