

Defining Israel

Introduction

I state here five theses on how the Old and New Testaments use the term “Israel” *when referring to the people of God*. ~~If after you read this you don't think I'm a lunatic~~ please refer to the 34 page paper, “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ among the Gentiles” for a biblical defense of these “theses”. I am convinced that dispensationalists do not properly understand circumcision or the covenants God made with Israel and an effective approach to helping them is to discuss these subjects before Israel's relationship to the church or eschatology are considered. My goal with this two page paper is to get you to invest the time to read 34 more pages.

Five Theses

First - The expressions “the people of God” or “His people” or “My people” always refer to *covenant membership*, that is, the **only** way anyone, Jew or Gentile, can be considered as one of “God's People” is to be a member of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants (Old covenant era) or a member of the New Covenant (New Covenant era).

Second - In many places in the Old and New Testaments the term “Israel” is used to refer to “the people of God”. In those places it is referring to the members of either the Old Covenant (Abrahamic/Mosaic) or the New Covenant. In other words, in all those places “*Israel*” means “*The people of God by covenant*.” I refer to this use of the term Israel as “*covenantal Israel*”

Third - Covenantal Israel transcends ethnicity! i.e. Gentiles have always been members of covenantal Israel. During the Old Covenant they became members by professing Yahweh to be their God *and* being circumcised. During the New Covenant they become members by being circumcised in Christ, in the heart, by the Spirit.

Fourth - One can be Jewish, a physical descendant of Abraham, and not be a member of covenantal Israel. This occurs three ways: 1) reject circumcision (Gen. 17), 2) be cut off from “your people”, i.e. cut off from “[covenantal] Israel” (no longer a member of the covenant - declared by God to be “not My people”), 3) reject the Messiah, i.e. broken off branches of the tree in Romans 11, the slave who doesn't remain in the house forever in John 8.

Fifth - all the promises in Scripture (old or new covenants) are made to *covenantal Israel*. *The promises are inside the covenant* (Eph. 2:11-12). If a Jewish person is cut off from the covenant (old or new makes no difference) he has no promises and his standing before God is identical to a non-circumcised Gentile. He is Jewish but his circumcision has become un-circumcision (Rom. 2:25)!

Romans 9:6

What adjectives should be used in Romans 9:6 to distinguish between the two “Israels” in that text? I advocate [covenantal] Israel and [ethnic] Israel. The use of the expression [spiritual] Israel is unfortunate. It can't be defended very well exegetically (some from Romans 2), nor defined clearly from Scripture, nor is it easy to demonstrate that Paul thought in this way.

Romans 9:6 NKJV - “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all [covenantal] Israel who are of [ethnic] Israel”

Rom 9:6 ESV - “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to [covenantal] Israel”. The ESV inserts too much interpretation in the text and it makes the first “Israel” sound like Jacob, the individual. That may be correct but the first Israel could be referring collectively to [ethnic Israel]. Regardless of how it's understood this does not affect the conclusions stated above. The real issue is what adjective to put in front of the second “Israel” in the text. I believe the best term is [covenantal] Israel.

Addressing dispensationalism

A good way (best way?) to correct a dispensationalist's thinking is to bring to light his wrong assumptions *as to how the covenants relate to Israel*. Suspend the Gentile question for a moment and discuss the relationship of Jewish people, i.e. ethnic descendants of Abraham, to the covenants God made with Israel. That is, ethnic descendants of Abraham do not automatically become covenant members (part of covenantal Israel) - they must be circumcised. Nor do ethnic descendants *automatically* remain covenant members because of their ethnicity or physical circumcision, they can be cut off from the covenant for persistent idolatry (old era) or the rejection of the Messiah (new era). God “divorced” Old Covenant ethnic Israel and called her “not my people” - she remained Jewish but not part of [covenantal] Israel. Don't allow a dispensationalist to use the phrase “My peo-

ple” without insisting on a discussion on *covenant membership* - what it is and how one *becomes and remains* a member.

Most (all?) dispensationalists are operating with the assumption that *the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are still in effect for non-believing ethnic Jews*. However as a result of God establishing the New Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant community the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants were brought to an end. By this I do not mean that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant disappear and don't continue to receive their fulfillment in the New covenant. They do and all Jewish and Gentile salvation is a fulfilling of God's promise made to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant. But the *conditions* for membership in the Abrahamic Covenant *no longer define the community of people* called, “My People” and the relationship between God and “His people” is no longer based upon the Abrahamic covenant. His relationship to them is now governed by the provisions of the New Covenant he made with the house of Israel.

Proof that the Abrahamic covenant is ended is that New covenant Scripture abolishes circumcision in the flesh, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and that Gentiles [and Jews!] *are not required to be circumcised to become the people of God*. New covenant Scripture abolishes what was the one requirement for being a member of the Abrahamic covenant! (Gen. 17:14 with; Eph. 2:14-16, Gal. 3:22-25, 5:3, 6, 11-12, 6:14-15, 1 Cor. 7:18-19, Acts 15:22-29, 21:20-21, Col. 2:9-17).

Acts 21:20-21 is a watershed regarding the Abrahamic covenant and circumcision. I'm not sure if Paul actually told the Jews to not circumcise their children. However, I am sure that he told them that if they did it would have no effect on their child's relationship to God, *it would profit them nothing*. Their boys would not become one of God's people because they were circumcised according to the requirements of the Abrahamic Covenant! This infuriated the Jews who trusted in circumcision. The fact that the New Testament abolishes circumcision in the flesh **for ethnic Jews and Gentile proselytes** makes it clear that we cannot treat ethnic Jews today as if the Abrahamic covenant has continued unaltered in regard to them.¹ An ethnic Jew today cannot rightfully claim to be one of “God's people” based upon the Abrahamic covenant and neither should we be telling them that they hold this status before God. If the Abrahamic covenant

1. There are implications here regarding the paedobaptist misuse of the Abrahamic covenant to justify baptizing infants of believers.

is now fulfilled in the New covenant with Israel, and it is, then the “My people” status for Jews and Gentiles flows *only* from the New covenant. To be outside of the New covenant, whether Jew or Gentile, leaves one as “not My people”. Dispensationalists have failed to understand that *it is covenantal membership that conveys the special status of being “My people”, not ethnicity or physical descent* (this has always been the case in both Old or New covenant eras!).²

Replacement Theology?

How should we address the “charge” that we are guilty of this great crime called, “replacement theology”? The issue exists because dispensationalists insist that there is no difference between “ethnic Israel” and “covenantal Israel”. While ethnic Jews remain out side of Christ, outside of the New Covenant, they are not the people of God, they have no special status as “God's people” and as regards their standing before God they are as any other Gentile. Their physical circumcision remains un-circumcision, as any other Gentile (Romans 2:25-29). There is no distinction in God's sight between unbelieving Jew and Gentile. They can be grafted back in [to the new covenant], not by physical circumcision, but by circumcision in Christ through faith. Gentiles come into [covenantal] Israel the same way! The New Testament assembly (i.e. church) is the New Covenant community and this is covenantal Israel consisting of circumcised [in Christ] Jews and Gentiles in one body. This is why Paul can call this assembly of believing Jews and Gentiles the Israel of God.

Thus the issue is not really “does the church replace Israel?” The issues are two: 1) Regarding unbelieving Jews, is it biblical to consider them “the people of God” after Christ's coming, i.e. in covenantal relationship with God? If so, on what basis? based on which covenant? In danger of being repetitious, dispensationalists have failed to understand that *it is covenantal membership that conveys the special status of being “My people”, not ethnicity or physical descent*, and this has always been the case in both old and new covenant eras! 2) Regarding believing Jews, is it biblical to believe that they have promises which *their equally circumcised* (new covenant circumcision) Gentile brothers and sisters do not have? Check out the 34 pages?

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2. The Mosaic covenant is also ended because the Aaronic priesthood is ended.