



## The Future of Israel

### Review

The previous chapter examined Calvin's interpretation of Revelation 20. Like Augustine, Calvin was a postmillennialist and believed the 1,000-year messianic kingdom had already begun, now that the nations were becoming Christian nations. Those seated on thrones reigning with Christ were civil and church rulers who were to rule over Christ's kingdom on his behalf. He modeled this Christian theocracy on Israel's theocracy. The spiritual-civil covenant that God had with Israel had transferred to the Gentile Christian nations. Calvin saw the faithful Jewish kings as role models for how the Christian civil rulers in his day should govern the affairs of the church and the state. He believed the Christian civil rulers had a God-given duty to establish his messianic kingdom on this earth. Just as there was no religious freedom in Israel, there should be no religious freedom in the Christian nations. Those deemed heretics should be treated as criminals.

The Reformers revisited many Catholic doctrines that had evolved over the centuries, using the Scriptures as the sole authority to determine their truthfulness. Unfortunately, they did not revisit Augustine's flawed interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ. Because the Catholics and the Reformers both believed in the use of the sword to establish Christ's reign on this earth, many brutal wars resulted between Catholic and Protestant territories. These doctrines of a Christian theocracy changed dramatically when countries like the

United States set up truly secular states with religious groups free to establish their own beliefs and practices.

## Rejection of Israel

Modern amillennialists no longer believe in a Christian theocracy, but they continue to believe there is no future for the nation of Israel in God's plan of redemption. They claim that the promise to the Jews of an earthly messianic kingdom centered in Israel was a conditional covenant subject to Israel's faithfulness in receiving their Messiah when he came into the world. They believe that since the Jews rejected their Messiah, Christ rejected the nation of Israel and terminated the promises of a Jewish-led messianic kingdom on the earth. Therefore, Israel will not play a significant role in God's endgame. There will not be a 1,000-year messianic kingdom on this earth that revolves around Israel before the eternal kingdom. Paradise is never restored on this earth. A large number of Jews might repent in the future and join the church, but that simply means they are destined to inherit the eternal kingdom of heaven, like all believers.

## A Holy Nation

Many amillennialists believe that the church, as the body of Christ, is now the new "Israel" and, in effect, replaces the nation of Israel. They base this belief on the following teaching:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope . . . to an inheritance that is imperishable, . . . kept in heaven for you, . . . But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people for his own possession, . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (1 Peter 1:3–5; 2:9–10)

The amillennial interpretation of this text can be formulated as follows:

- The church as "God's people" = "a holy nation" as the new Israel

The new nation of Israel, whose citizens are made up of Jewish and Gentile believers, will inherit the imperishable kingdom of heaven—not the Jewish-led messianic kingdom on this earth.

In these verses, however, Peter is simply making an analogy between two types of God’s chosen people: (1) the nation of Israel as “God’s people,” when the Jews were faithful to their spiritual-civil covenant with God; and (2) the church as “God’s people,” when they, too, are faithful to their spiritual covenant with God.

When Peter referred to the believing church as “a chosen race,” he was not designating the body of Christ as a literal race. And when he referred to the church as “a holy nation,” he was not defining the church as a civil nation like Israel. The church is made up of people from all races and nations, and it does not have a civil covenant with God that involves an ethnic group within a nation with geographic boundaries.

The New Testament metaphorically compares the church to many things, such as a chosen nation, a city, a bride, a temple, a house, and even a human body with its many parts. Amillennialists are often accused of not taking the Scriptures literally. In this case, however, they are guilty of taking Peter’s description of the church as a holy nation far too literally. The idea that the church replaces the nation of Israel is not a valid deduction from these verses.

## Galatians

Amillennialists also claim that the church has become a new form of Israel based on Galatians 6:15–16:

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon *the Israel of God*.

Amillennialists assert that “the Israel of God” refers to the church, made up of Jewish and Gentile believers. Therefore, there is no future restoration of the kingdom to the civil nation of believing Israel. But this is an odd interpretation, for nowhere does the New Testament teach that the church is the new Israel. The church is always treated as

a spiritual body of believers in assembly, and Israel is always treated as a civil nation.

To understand the historical setting in which Paul wrote to the Galatians, it is important to remember the unique relationship the Jews had with the Romans. Unlike other pagan cultures the Romans had conquered and easily assimilated into their pagan Roman culture, the conquered Jews remained fiercely devoted to a monotheistic God and would riot if forced to worship the emperors or the Roman gods. As a result, the Romans wisely gave the Jewish people in Israel and those dispersed throughout the empire a pass—they were not forced to worship the emperor and the empire's pagan gods. The Jews were given an important cloak of immunity, as long as they could identify themselves as circumcised Jews.

Then entered Paul, convincing the Gentiles to believe in the Jewish Messiah from Galilee and not requiring them to be circumcised. They did not have to become Jews to join the Messiah's kingdom. This, obviously, left them outside this cloak of immunity and subjected them to great persecution when they refused to worship the emperor and the empire's pagan gods. Paul's letters contain numerous descriptions of the hardships the uncircumcised Gentile converts faced, as well as the hardships Paul faced for advocating such a doctrine.

The Judaizers, or the "circumcision party" as Paul referred to them (2:12), had infiltrated the church in Jerusalem and then began traveling around to the churches Paul had established in an attempt to persuade the Gentile converts to be circumcised. They offered a tempting proposition: be circumcised and then they, too, would fall under the Jewish cloak of immunity. In effect, they would be Jews in the eyes of the Romans and would no longer be persecuted. And the Jewish evangelists would no longer fear persecution for instigating this Gentile insubordination against the Romans. The "circumcision party" offered a compelling opportunity: be circumcised and everyone would be spared persecution by the Romans.

Paul resisted this temptation, however, and insisted that the Gentiles not be circumcised, even if this meant severe persecution:

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? . . . But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has

been removed. . . . It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only *in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.* (5:7–11, 6:12)

Paul strongly opposed the teachings of the “circumcision party” and told the Gentiles that they could become members of Christ’s kingdom without converting to Judaism and following its rules and regulations, particularly circumcision. He realized that following Jewish customs would be a serious impediment to Gentiles becoming Christians. Jews were circumcised as infants, but these Gentile converts would have to be circumcised as adults.

Paul recognized that once the converted Gentiles were circumcised to avoid persecution, they would begin following other Jewish laws and customs: “You observe days and months and seasons and years!” (4:10). And once they began to operate under Mosaic law, they would be obligated to follow the whole law:

“Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.” (5:2–3)

Many Gentile believers would be averse to changing their eating habits to follow Jewish dietary law. Imagine a Jewish evangelist like Paul going to the state of Louisiana and telling the heathens there that to become Christians, they would have to conform to Jewish dietary laws and could no longer eat crawfish, shrimp, crabs, oysters, seafood gumbo, red beans and rice (seasoned with ham), and many other beloved native foods. He would not attract many converts. Believe me, I know. I’m originally from Louisiana and continue to enjoy this cuisine.

The centerpiece of Paul’s teaching is that the new creation as children of God is attained not by birthright as a Jew or by conversion to Judaism. Rather, it is attained by simple faith in Christ, for both the circumcised Jews like Paul and the uncircumcised Gentiles in Galatia. Notice how Paul identified believing Jews like himself who adhere to this truth:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we [Jewish believers] know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we [Jewish believers] also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (2:15–16)

The key to understanding Paul's concluding remarks in his letter to the Galatians when he uses the phrase "the Israel of God" is to remember his definition of true Jewish believers like himself. Paul is wishing peace and mercy on both the uncircumcised Gentile believers who have accepted his gospel of justification by faith without being compelled to convert to Judaism, as well as the circumcised Jewish believers like himself, or "the Israel of God," who also understand that they are justified by faith, not as a result of their being circumcised as Jews and obeying the law. When reading Galatians, it is critical to distinguish when Paul is referring to Jewish believers like himself and when he is referring to uncircumcised Gentile believers. Let's read Galatians 2:15–16 and 6:15–16 again consecutively to grasp the meaning of Paul's use of the phrase "the Israel of God":

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we [Jewish believers] know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we [Jewish believers] also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. . . . For neither circumcision [as Jewish believers] counts for anything, nor uncircumcision [as Gentile believers], but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule [of justification by faith], peace and mercy be upon them [believing Gentiles], *and upon the Israel of God* [believing Jews].

The phrase "the Israel of God" clearly refers to believing Jews like Paul, Peter, James, Barnabas, and many other Jewish believers who knew that "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." The phrase "the Israel of God" does not refer to the church as a new form of Israel. Thus, the church, made up of circumcised and uncircumcised believers, does not become or replace the nation of Israel.

Jesus himself used a similar expression to describe the Jewish disciple Nathanael: “Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’” (John 1:47). A true Israelite would be a Jew with a sincere heart who believed in the God of Abraham. Nathanael was a physical *and* spiritual descendant of Abraham. Like Paul, he was a part of “the Israel of God” who understood that he was justified by faith.

In contrast to “the Israel of God” who understood justification by faith, Paul described the Judaizers as “false brothers” and the “circumcision party” who taught that works of the law were essential for justification (2:4, 12). They distorted the gospel of Christ and were “accursed” (1:7, 9). Paul wished they “would emasculate themselves,” or castrate themselves, for their distortion of the gospel of justification by faith (5:12).

Paul’s use of the phrase “the Israel of God” unquestionably refers to Jewish believers like himself who knew that it was circumcision of the heart that justified a person. Paul never forsook his heritage as a Jewish believer, and he repeatedly said that he was a believing Jew who had been justified by the grace of God and that he was a member of the true “Israel of God.” When amillennial theologians claim that Paul was describing the church as the new “Israel of God” that replaces Israel, they are completely missing the meaning of Paul’s teachings. One day the restored nation of Israel will play a strategic role during Christ’s reign over the nations.

Much of the confusion over this issue stems from the failure of amillennial theologians to understand and maintain a distinction between the Adamic order of being and the new order of being as children of God. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who believes in Christ and is justified by faith is born of God and becomes a new creation as a child of God. In this new order of being, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, just as there is no distinction between male and female:

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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. (Gal. 3:26–28)

A Gentile does not have to be circumcised or convert to Judaism to become a son of God and inherit eternal life in God's eternal kingdom of heaven. While we are on this earth operating in the Adamic order of being, however, the distinctions between Jew and Gentile remain, just as they do between male and female. The Jews, as an Adamic people, will continue to play a strategic role in God's plans to restore this Genesis creation to its Edenic condition in the messianic kingdom. God used the nation of Israel to bring the Messiah into this world, and someday God will use the *believing* nation of Israel again to bring Christ's messianic kingdom to this world, which leads to a restoration of the Adamic order of being during an age of righteous humanity.

Only after the millennium at the final resurrection when the sons of God inherit the Father's eternal kingdom will the distinctions between Jew and Gentile come to an end, just as they will between male and female. Until then, the distinctions remain, and they are highly relevant to God's plan of redemption.

### **Jesus Predicted the Restoration of Israel**

Even though the Jews of Jesus' day largely rejected Christ, Jesus predicted a future day of repentance and restoration for Israel:

See, your house [the temple] is left to you desolate [unbelieving Jews]. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord [believing Jews]." (Matt. 23:38–39)

As noted in chapter 18, "This Generation," the prophet Jeremiah linked this offspring of believing Jews given new hearts to the beginning of the messianic kingdom. Right before Christ ascended to heaven, he again confirmed there would be a future restoration of the nation of Israel in the messianic kingdom:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts 1:6–7)



The disciples knew their Scriptures. Now that he was resurrected, they legitimately asked him when he would liberate Israel and establish his messianic kingdom. Yes, in the future, the Jews will repent and believe in their Messiah. And, at a time determined by the Father, there will indeed be a restoration of the nation. The disciples will even serve as rulers over the twelve tribes of Israel.

## **Romans**

Let's examine Paul's letter to the Romans to see how he understood the future of Israel. Paul distinguished between two groups of people and a subgroup within each group:

- Ethnic Jews (believers and unbelievers)
- Gentiles (believers and unbelievers)

The Jewish and Gentile believers are the people of God destined for eternal life. The Jewish and Gentile unbelievers are not God's people and are destined for condemnation.

A major theme of the book of Romans is that God's methodology for justifying sinners and bringing them into his holy kingdom as his people is the same for Jews and for Gentiles. All Jews and all Gentiles are ungodly people before God and are justified before God solely by faith in Jesus Christ. It is God's grace alone that brings both Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ. This grace is determined by a sovereign God whose mind and will are unsearchable.

Once God has brought his predetermined number of Gentiles into his kingdom and the gift of faith finally comes to the Jews, the messianic kingdom that Isaiah and the prophets described will unfold. As we survey Romans, notice that Paul maintained a clear distinction between Jews and Gentiles and that the justification of the repentant Jews ultimately leads to the restoration of Israel:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (1:16-17)

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. (3:28–30)

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring [Jew and Gentile believers] that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. . . . That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law [believing Jews] but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham [believing Gentiles], who is the father of us all [Jew and Gentile]. (4:13, 16)

When it comes to salvation, Jews and Gentiles are all in the same boat. The boat contains two types of passengers, believing Jews justified by faith and believing Gentiles justified by faith. It is critical to note, however, that even though Paul said all people are in the same boat when it comes to being justified by faith, he continues to maintain a clear distinction between Jews and Gentiles as fellow passengers in that boat. Simply because Jews and Gentiles are both justified by faith does not mean that Jews cease to exist as a distinctive group with a specific eschatological future.

When the full number of Gentiles that God has chosen to enter his kingdom is reached, then we should expect that the natural heirs of the Jewish Messiah will respond en masse. Paul was certain of this, despite his great sorrow and anguish over the Jews' current hardness of heart:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! . . . For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? . . . For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. (11:1–31)

The Jews' rejection of their Messiah is not permanent, for the day is coming when the natural recipients of the Messiah will also receive God's mercy when they, too, are justified by faith in Christ. This eventual "calling of God" of the Jews is "irrevocable." It will happen even though most of the Jews of Paul's generation rejected their Messiah, had him crucified, and continued to be hostile to the gospel.

Paul further taught that their "inclusion" will lead to the realization of the messianic kingdom as described by the prophets:

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! . . . all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (11:11–12, 26–27)

God has an irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people. One day they will believe in Christ, and God will deliver them from sin, just as he has delivered believing Gentiles.

But does this repentance lead to a revival among the Jews whereby they are delivered from their bondage to sin and simply become a part of the church destined for heaven? Or does this revival have far greater geopolitical ramifications for this world whereby the Messiah from Zion delivers the nation of Israel itself from this fallen world? Paul did not directly answer these questions.

As addressed in chapter 20, "The Stealthy Restoration," there is an intentional stealthy nature about Christ's earthly kingdom in the New Testament. Paul and the Jewish apostles had to be careful in preaching a gospel throughout the Roman Empire that foretold an earthly messianic kingdom in which Rome would be subservient to the Jewish Messiah. But the prophets definitely taught that the Jewish repentance will one day lead to a real messianic kingdom on this earth.

The phrase "the Deliverer will come from Zion" is a subtle hyperlink to these messianic prophecies. Paul intended this phrase to be a window into the prophets' vision of the Son's messianic kingdom on

this earth. In the following passages, notice how Isaiah described the redemption of Israel as leading to the messianic kingdom on this earth:

“I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. . . . They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . . . They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, . . . The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox [restored Genesis creation], . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,” says the LORD [peace and prosperity in Jerusalem]. (Isa. 65:19–25)

The messianic kingdom established through Israel is also a major theme of the psalms. Notice in the following psalm that the eventual righteousness of the house of Israel is more than an inner spiritual reality. It also leads to an age of righteous humanity throughout the world when the Messiah finally judges the world:

The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel [Israel restored]. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God [a global redemption]. . . . He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity [the messianic kingdom realized]. (Ps. 98:2–9)

Paul taught, “Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!” (Rom. 11:12). Paul left it to the reader to combine his teachings with Isaiah and the prophets to determine what happens when the Jews finally repent and believe. According to the prophets, this “full inclusion” leads to the messianic kingdom when Christ “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity,” such that “all the ends of the earth” will experience salvation and restoration. When we examine the prophets, we can conclude that once the Jews finally repent en masse, the Messiah from Zion will deliver all mankind from Satan’s regime, and we will enter into the long-promised messianic kingdom on this earth. The Messiah will banish all ungodliness

in this world when he establishes an age of peace and righteousness for Israel and all nations.

Paul quoted Isaiah so extensively throughout his letter to the Romans that it seems he was writing an exposition on Isaiah. Here are a few other striking similarities between Isaiah and Romans:

**Isaiah taught how God has temporarily abandoned Israel:**

“For a brief moment I deserted you, . . . In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,’ says the LORD, your Redeemer.” (Isa. 54:7–8)

**Paul taught the same:**

“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. . . . as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion [to establish his kingdom].’” (Rom. 11:25–26)

**Isaiah taught that God’s love for Israel is irrevocable:**

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (Isa. 54:10)

**Paul taught the same:**

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! . . . God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. . . . For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Rom. 11:1–11, 29)

According to Isaiah and Paul, there should be no doubt that God will bring about this future period when the Jews repent and believe in their own Messiah. Once God delivers the Jews, “the Deliverer will come from Zion” and the messianic kingdom will begin. All the nations of the world will share in the abundance of Israel’s restoration.

Paul’s teachings can be outlined as follows. The Jews are the ethnic descendants of Abraham, and the Gentiles are not. The Jews are circumcised, and the Gentiles are not. The Jews were entrusted with the law and the temple and with bringing the Jewish Messiah into the world, and the Gentiles were not. Jesus is the Jewish sacrificial lamb; he is not the product of a pagan sacrificial system. Jesus is the seed of

Abraham and is the fulfillment of the Jewish religious system. Salvation is from the Jews.

The Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners and are justified by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ by the grace of God through his sovereign election. Justification by faith is the only way that all human beings (Jew and Gentile)—past, present, and future—can be reconciled to God the Father.

Once the complete number of Jews and Gentiles have been brought into his kingdom, “the Deliverer will come from Zion,” and Christ will establish his messianic kingdom on this earth. Isaiah taught that because of God’s character and promises, the messianic kingdom will most certainly occur. He even taught that it will be established quickly:

“Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? . . . Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth?” says the LORD; . . . “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; . . . that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance [in the restoration].” For thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.” (Isa. 66:8–12)

When the Jews repent, Israel and all nations will experience joy, abundance, and peace during the Messiah’s glorious reign over the world. But how can “a land be born in one day” and “a nation be brought forth in one moment”? The answers can be found in Revelation 20 and Matthew 19. When Satan is bound and Christ sits on his throne to govern the world, Christ will regenerate the earth to its Edenic condition in a single day. He will resurrect all the deceased Jewish saints at once, “in one moment,” at the first resurrection, and the nation of believing Israel will be reconstituted. That is how “all Israel will be saved.” Literally in one day all believing Jews since Abraham will come to life as a holy nation on the regenerated earth in the 1,000-year messianic kingdom!

## Summary

It is important to recognize the New Testament writers' ongoing distinction between Israel and the church. There are several instances when the church is compared to Israel, as the people of God, and both are referred to as "a holy nation." These comparisons, however, are only analogies between the church, a non-civil institution, and Israel, a civil nation. The church may be the current means by which God relates to this world, but that does not mean he will not use the believing nation of Israel once again to carry out his mission to deliver this world from Satan. In fact, the complete deliverance of this world from Satan's regime is tied to the period when the Jews ultimately repent and believe in their Messiah.

Just as we remain male and female when we believe in Christ, we also remain Jew and Gentile. And there is a great deal of prophetic truth built around these remaining distinctions. God used Israel to bring the Messiah into the world, and he will use the regenerated Jewish people and their nation again to bring blessings to all nations. Israel will indeed play a strategic role in God's endgame. Isaiah and Paul taught that God's promise to Israel of a messianic kingdom is an irrevocable covenant.