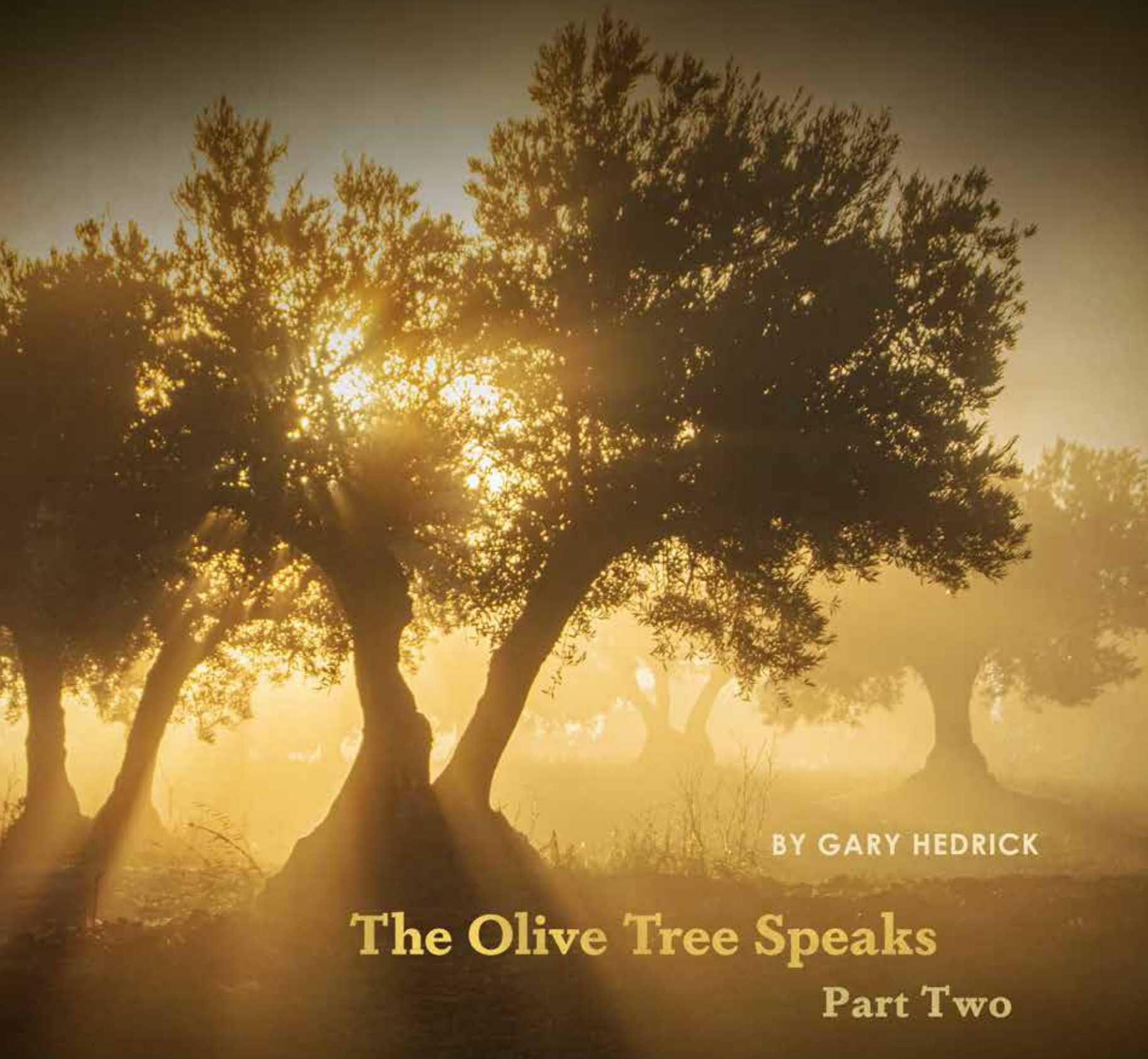




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Messianic Perspectives®

God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.



BY GARY HEDRICK

The Olive Tree Speaks

Part Two

The following is Part Two of our series, *The Olive Tree Speaks*. You'll find Part One in the January-February-March 2025 issue of *Messianic Perspectives*. Or you can scan this QR code and read it now in our archives at cjfm.org/paper.



When I was a young ministerial student, I remember reading a comment by Matthew Henry about the “church” in the Old Testament.¹ Many of us held this famous Presbyterian commentator in high regard, and we found his writings both inspiring and informative. I was mystified that he thought the Church could be found in the OT.

Later, we learned about the “continuity vs. discontinuity” debate among theologians. Covenant Theology criticized Dispensationalism for teaching that Israel and the Church are two distinct entities—distinct in identity but complementary in function.

Covenant theologians saw this distinction as problematic, arguing that it implied two “Peoples of God”—Israel in the Old Testament era and the Church in the New. To maintain continuity between the Testaments, they asserted that Israel and the Church are one entity, God’s covenant community, known by different names in different eras.

This is why Matthew Henry, a postmillennialist, saw “the Church” in the OT.² He viewed Israel as the covenant community chosen by God (“elect”) in the OT era. That same covenant community was known in the NT as the “Church,” the elect body of believers.

Nonetheless, he did not believe that Israel was pushed aside, replaced, or absorbed by the Church. He parted ways with many of his Covenant brethren when he embraced Israel’s future salvation and national restoration (Rom. 11:26). He affirmed Israel’s continuing relevance in God’s plan of the ages. He correctly said that Israel—even in her current state of unbelief—continues to be related to God by covenant.

¹ Matthew Henry (1662–1714) was a Presbyterian minister and author, best known for his comprehensive commentary, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, a multivolume work spanning some 6,000 pages in the original edition (1706).

² Postmillennialists teach that the Gospel will increasingly triumph throughout history, leading to a largely Christianized world during a future millennial age, after which Christ will return. Premillennialists, by way of contrast, believe the Lord will return before the Millennium. Amillennialists circumvent the issue by spiritualizing the millennial period and saying we’re in a spiritual kingdom now. They see the Kingdom as a present spiritual reign of Messiah (from Heaven, where He occupies the Davidic throne), not a future literal thousand-year rule on earth.

Israel Future

Matthew Henry recognized a future for national Israel. Commenting on Romans 11, he wrote:

And so all Israel shall be saved. . . . It seems more probable that the apostle means the Jews collectively; not that every individual will be converted, but that a national conversion will occur—the greater part of the nation. When this [national salvation of Israel] shall be, we know not. But it is plain that it shall be. As God had, in times past, left the Gentiles in unbelief, and now had visited them with the Gospel, so he would again show mercy to the Jews, and bring them in, as he had done the Gentiles.

The Gospel is the power of God to salvation, first to the Jew. Though for a long time they had been enemies to it, yet they should not always be so. They are still reckoned as a people in covenant, and God has not cast them off.

That’s about as close to the truth as a postmillennialist can get!

Interestingly, the Jewish acceptance of Jesus (when “all Israel” comes to faith) seems to be the event that triggers the Lord’s return to Planet Earth.³ He taught His disciples about this in Matthew 23. They were together on the Mount of Olives, gazing across a valley at the Temple Mount, when He addressed unbelieving Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!

“See! Your house is left to you desolate;

“For I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’” (vv. 37–39, emphasis added).

In Aramaic, His comment about the “House” (v. 38) would have sounded something like this: *Arē bētkhōn mishtevēq lekhōn hārēvā* (written in Jewish Aramaic script as חריבא לכוני ביתכון משתביק לכוני). The Aramaic expression *bētkhōn* (“your House”) is related to Hebrew *bētkhem* and is almost certainly a prophetic reference to the Temple and its desecration and destruction forty years later. Addressing the religious leaders of the nation, He called the Temple *their* house (“your House”). It was no longer God’s House. They had assumed ownership and were using it for their own nationalistic purposes.⁴

³ Nations aren’t saved in any spiritual sense; only people are. So, when we talk about “the salvation of national Israel,” we mean that most Israelis who are alive at that time will come to faith in Yeshua of Nazareth as their Savior and Messiah. There may be some holdouts, but not many. “And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26a).

⁴ Thanks to Aramaic scholar Michael Wechsler for his kind assistance in fine-tuning this paragraph.

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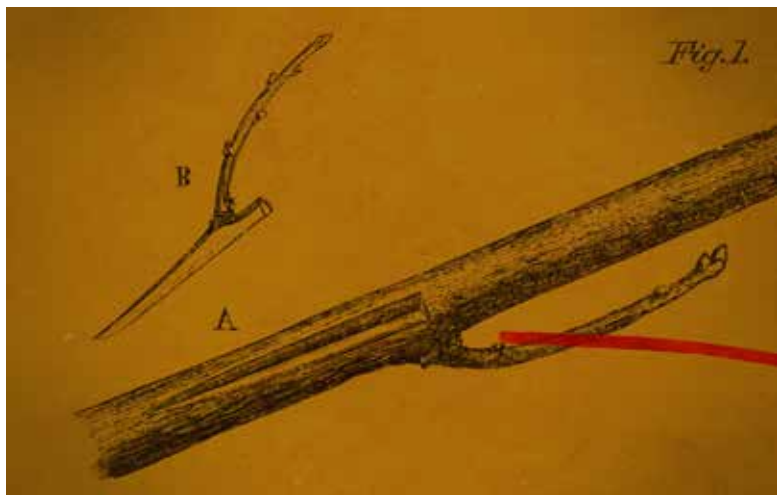
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Jesus, however, helps His hearers see beyond the looming judgment by pointing them to a more glorious Day when the People of Israel will acknowledge Him as their Savior and Messiah (v. 39). Like we said earlier, Paul tells us that those previously broken-off (disobedient, but now obedient) branches *will be grafted back into their own olive tree* (Rom. 11:23–24).

That's what Jesus was telling His disciples in Matthew 23—and Paul's Olive Tree in Romans 11 agrees. So, the NT branches are grafted back into the Olive Tree of Covenant Israel. This monumental event (when “all Israel” comes to faith) is what transforms Covenant Israel from being a patchwork of mostly non-believers to being composed mostly of Jesus-believers.



The natural Tree represents “Covenant Israel”—the OT People of Israel (*Am Yisra'el*), uniquely connected to God by a unilateral covenant. Unlike the Sinai Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant was not based on Israel's obedience, but solely on God's promise to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–6; 17:1–8).

While it may seem contradictory to say that Covenant Israel could consist largely of unbelievers (as in the present era), it makes sense when we recall that the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional.⁵

This is precisely what the Bible teaches. The LORD God will keep His promises, not because Israel deserves it, but rather “for [His] holy name's sake”:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went.

“And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,” says the Lord GOD, “when I am hallowed in you before their eyes.

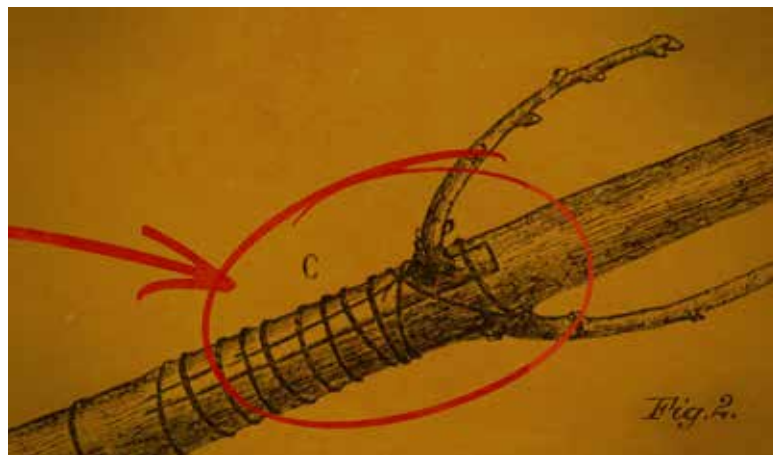
“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land”” (Ezek. 36:22–24, emphasis added).

⁵ More to the point, the Abrahamic promises follow Abraham's descendants through the line of his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (Israel). Remember that Abraham had another son, Ishmael, who was born before Isaac. In Genesis 17:20, God promises to bless Ishmael (Abraham's son by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian hand-maiden), multiplying him exceedingly, so that he will become the father of twelve princes (Gen. 25:12–13) and a great nation. Nonetheless, the Land and specific blessings associated with the Abrahamic Covenant are passed only through Isaac, Abraham's younger son by Sarah. Note that in Genesis 22:2, God refers to Isaac (who was by then a teenager) as Abraham's “only son,” even though Ishmael, his older brother, was already close to thirty years old. Isaac is recognized as the “only son” because he was the son of promise, born under virtually impossible circumstances in fulfillment of God's promise (18:9–14; 21:1–7). Ishmael was not.

This natural Tree (Covenant Israel) is the one that speaks to us. It helps us sort out the relationship between Israel and the Church. Are they one and the same? Or are they two different “Peoples of God”? If they are different, does one take precedence over the other? More importantly, does national Israel have a future, as far as God is concerned?

Another consideration is how we think about “the Church” in this whole conversation. According to Blaising and Bock, “One of the striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the Church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile Nations, Jews, and Gentile people. . . . The Church is precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this dispensation prior to the coming of Christ.”⁶

Paul tackles these issues, and more, in his tale of two trees in Romans 11. The two trees are the “natural” Olive Tree (vv. 21, 24) and the “wild” olive tree (vv. 17, 24).



Why “Israel” Cannot Be the Church

We must be consistent in our understanding of terms like “Israel.” We can't cherry-pick passages, saying that “Israel” refers to ethnic Israel (i.e., the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) in some verses and to spiritual Israel (the Church) in others. We can't switch definitions back and forth according to our personal doctrinal whims.

If we let the definition of “Israel” change from verse to verse, we could prove almost anything. But Romans 9–11 forms a cohesive unit, covering Israel's past, present, and future, and the term “Israel” (used twelve times) should be understood consistently unless Paul clearly signals otherwise.

For instance, Paul says, *For if [Israel's] being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?* (Rom. 11:15). Now think about that. Ask yourself: When was the Church ever “cast away”? The answer, of course, is never. In fact, Jesus himself said just the opposite: *“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out”* (John 6:37).

Furthermore, when was the Church ever “grafted in again” after having been broken off (v. 23)? Again, the answer is never.

What does this mean? Very simply, it means we can safely discard any viewpoint that redefines the term “Israel” in Romans 11 as “the Church.” “Israel” means Israel, the Jewish people, plain and simple.

⁶ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 49.

Defining Dispensationalism

One critic (who says he's a former dispensationalist) claims that the distinction between Israel and the Church is "fundamental" to what we believe. To us, he says, "everything depends on" this distinction. Here's what he says:

Fundamental to Dispensationalism is the idea that God has two different peoples and He pursues His purposes for them in alternating dispensations. Israel in the Old Testament period, the Church now, and in the millennium again He deals with Israel. So, [there are] two distinct peoples of God. **In Dispensationalism, everything depends on this distinction.** . . . This is why your Christian friends and other churches get so excited about **all the things going on in the Middle East because they think that the nation of Israel in the Middle East is one of the two peoples of God.** Now, my purpose in this hour is simply to show you that they are completely wrong.⁷

Strangely enough, this brother is right on two counts. First, he's right that we make a distinction between Israel and the Church, but it's not in the way he thinks. In supersessionist thought, that distinction almost always means that the Church has superseded Israel as the "People of God." This is known as Replacement Theology. In Dispensationalism, the distinction between Israel and the Church does *not* mean the Church has replaced Israel in the divine economy. In traditional Covenant Theology, it almost always *does*. That's the big difference.



Dr. Sam Waldron

⁷ "Are the Church and Israel Two Different Peoples of God?" by Samuel Waldron, a Reformed Baptist pastor and professor of Systematic Theology at Midwest Center for Theological Studies (MCTS) in Owensboro, Kentucky. The above quote is from James Arendt's summary of an hour-long presentation. A transcript of Waldron's full one-hour presentation can be accessed at Arendt's blogsite (deeptruths.com). Emphasis added.

Second, the professor is right when he points out that the dispensationalist framework is the one that best unpacks contemporary issues regarding Israel's future and draws our attention to "the things that are going on in the Middle East." We couldn't agree more! It's also true that non-millennarian congregations don't generally get very excited about end-time prophecy, as he suggests. In fact, generally, they know almost nothing about it.

Where he errs, however, is in his insistence that the teaching of two divergent "Peoples of God" is "the" central tenet of modern Dispensationalism. The distinction between Israel and the Church is only one of several core teachings of dispensational theology. Those distinctives are as follows:

1. **Distinct Dispensations**—God reveals His will in stages throughout history (e.g., Innocence, Law, Grace), with each dispensation featuring unique responsibilities and a testing of humanity. However, this tenet has sometimes been misconstrued to mean that there have been various plans of salvation throughout history. This is a grave error. Dispensationalists have always believed and taught that there is only one way of salvation—and that is, salvation by God's grace, applied by our faith.
2. **Consistent Hermeneutic**—Strong preference for literal-grammatical-historical interpretation, especially for Old Testament prophecies. Recognizes symbols and metaphors where they are obvious.
3. **Israel-Church Distinction**—Progressive Dispensationalists say that Israel and the Church are distinct entities forming a unified "People of God." Older dispensationalists made a more rigid distinction between the two entities. All forms of Dispensationalism, however, have taught that Israel will take center stage once again at the end of this age, when she comes to faith in Jesus and enters the Kingdom.
4. **Futurist Eschatology**—All forms of Dispensationalism are explicitly premillennial, anticipating the Messiah's literal return, just as He promised, prior to a future thousand-year reign on earth.
5. **Covenants and Promises**—Emphasizes the unconditional nature of God's promises to Israel, including Land, Seed, and Blessing (per the Abrahamic Covenant). Israel's status as Covenant People of God has never depended on her behavior, but rather on God's unilateral promise to Father Abraham.
6. **Kingdom Theology**—One of the more controversial teachings of Progressive Dispensationalism is that the Kingdom is seen as already inaugurated in Messiah's first coming, but not yet fulfilled, retaining a future, earthly aspect. Older dispensationalists say the Kingdom awaits the Second Coming.⁸

⁸ The reason many traditional dispensationalists have resisted the teaching that a "mystery" form of the Kingdom exists today is that it comes too close (in their view) to amillennial/covenant teaching. Amillennialists teach that the millennial kingdom described in Revelation 20 is not a literal future 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth, but rather a symbolic representation of His current reign from Heaven during the Church Age. They believe that the "kingdom" is a present spiritual reality, manifest in the rule of Christ over His church and in the hearts of believers, rather than a future political or national kingdom centered in Israel. Dispensationalists, of course, take exception to such notions.

The Church Derives Nourishment from Covenant Israel

Now, at last, we come to the heart of the matter. What is Paul's Olive Tree? Is it OT Israel or is it the NT Church? Has the Church replaced Israel in God's plans?

First, we must recognize that the Olive Tree, passing through these phases, doesn't change its character. It remains the same in both the first and last portraits.⁹ We can't say it starts out being one thing (Israel) and ends up being something else (the Church). It ends up in the same place from which it began—as “Israel, the People of God's Covenant” (*Yisra'el Am Berit Elohim*, ישראל עם ברית אלהים). This is what the Olive Tree is telling us here.

Even in the world of horticulture, we understand that this is true. When a branch is grafted (that is, cut and transplanted) from one tree or plant into another, the inserted branch (the “scion”) doesn't change the character of the larger tree (the “rootstock”). If you graft a pear branch into an apple tree, for instance, it's still an apple tree—and the apples won't taste like pears, contrary to a common misconception. The pear branch, however, will bear pears while the rest of the tree yields its apples.

Paul uses the analogy of the Olive Tree to explain this to the believers in Rome:

And since Abraham and the other patriarchs were holy, their descendants will also be holy—just as the entire batch of dough is holy because the portion given as an offering is holy. For if the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too (Rom. 11:16).¹⁰

There has always been only one way to achieve righteousness and God's acceptance—and that is by His grace, applied to our hearts by our faith (Hab. 2:4; Eph. 2:8). *The natural Tree (consisting of both Jews and engrafted Gentiles) derives its righteousness from being rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant—which is the basis for justification by faith* (see Romans 4:1–4).

However, some of the natural (Jewish) branches have been broken off (pruned) due to unbelief:

But some of these branches from Abraham's tree—some of the people of Israel—have been broken off. And you Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's special olive tree (v. 17, NLT).

So, again, Gentile believers have been grafted into that original Olive Tree (God's Covenant People), thereby becoming partakers in the Abrahamic Covenant. Does this make Gentile believers “spiritual Jews”? In a sense, yes, you could say that—with certain caveats.

⁹ See Part One of this article for a detailed explanation of the three portraits of the Olive Tree (four portraits if we include the “wild” tree) in Romans 11.

¹⁰ This passage is from the *New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007). It's a “thought-by-thought” rendering of the Bible, which makes it more of a commentary than a translation. In this section of Romans, the NLT translators did a superb job of objectively sorting out the various issues and relationships that Paul mentions. In verse 21, we have followed the KJV/NKJV rendering (“He may not spare you either”) because we believe it captures Paul's intent more accurately. There has always been only one way to achieve righteousness and God's acceptance—and that is by His grace, applied to our hearts by our faith (Hab. 2:4; Eph. 2:8). The natural Tree (consisting of both Jews and engrafted Gentiles) derives its righteousness from being rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant—which is the basis for justification by faith (Rom. 4:1–4).

Spiritual Israel

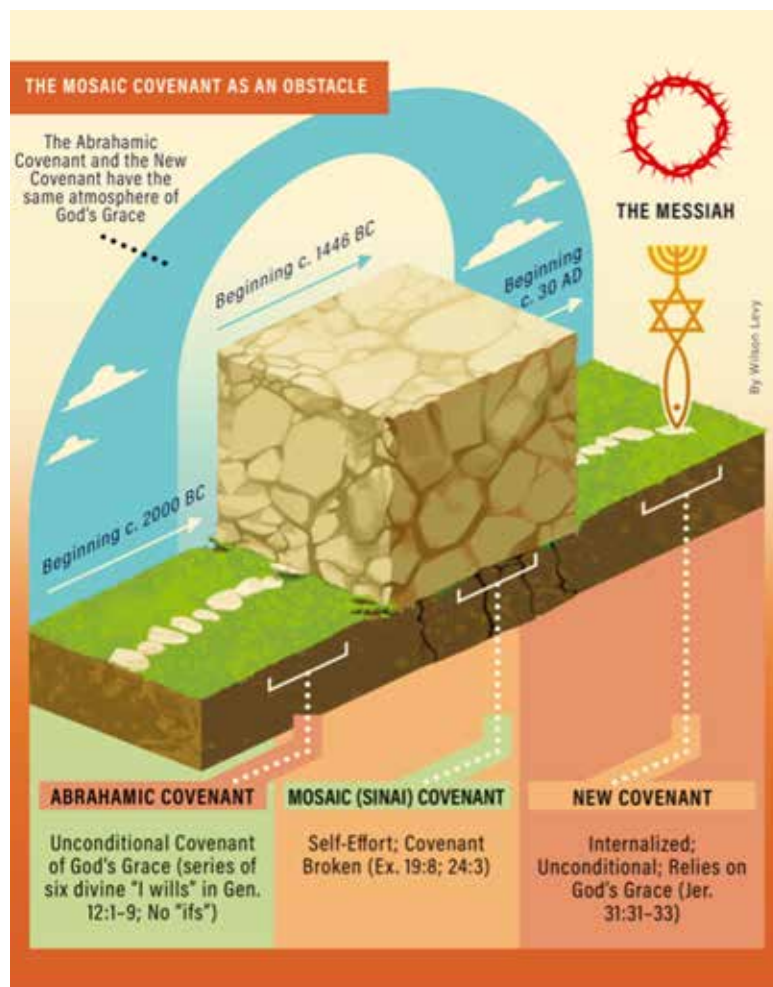
Paul affirms this concept of a “spiritual Israel” in Romans 4:11–12, where he declares that “Abraham is [spiritually] the father of all who believe” (see also Galatians 3:7–9). If you are a Gentile believer, Abraham is your spiritual father, and you derive spiritual nourishment and vitality from the Olive Tree of the original Covenant People of God. This much is true.

However, the teaching of a “spiritual Israel” can be misunderstood and misapplied. Replacement theologians, in fact, try to use it to support their view that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan.

When our supersessionist friends try to use Romans 4 as a proof text, though, they run into two problems. First, Paul's teaching in Romans 4 (about Abraham being our spiritual father) is a completely different discussion from the one in Romans 9, 10, and 11 about ethnic Israel's past, present, and future. *In fact, the word “Israel” appears nowhere in Romans 4.*

The second problem they have is that Paul's teaching is always consistent. He doesn't contradict himself. The Covenant view ignores his sweeping, cut-and-dried statement a few chapters later that “God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew” (11:2a). The Apostle comes right out and says it in no uncertain terms. There is no nuance, and nothing is subject to interpretation. So why would he come out a few verses later and contradict what he just said?

Again, covenantalists have difficulty with the concept of Israel's connection with God being based on the *unconditional* Abrahamic Covenant, rather than on the conditional, performance-based Sinai Covenant.



The supersessionist scenario doesn't hold up under the scrutiny of Paul's Olive Tree in Romans 11. Typically, they say that the rebellious, stiff-necked Jews rejected the Messiah in AD 30, so God rejected them and transferred Israel's blessings (but not the curses!) to the Church. In this way, they say, the Church has become a sort of "New Israel," and ethnic Israel has been set aside once and for all as far as God's plans are concerned.

Paul seems to have foreseen this danger, prompting him to issue a stern warning to Gentile believers who may have been thinking they were somehow superior to the Jewish people—perhaps viewing themselves as an enhanced version of "Israel." Here's how he puts the Gentile believers in their proper place:

*But you must not brag about being grafted in to **replace** the branches that were broken off. **You are just a branch, not the root** (Rom. 11:18 [NLT], emphasis added).*

WHAT IS THE "CHURCH"?

The English word "church" (from *kirk* in Old English) is believed to have come, originally, from the Greek word *kyriakon* (κυριακόν), or "of the Lord," which is related to *Kyrios* (Κύριος), meaning "Lord." "Church" originally referred to a building that was used for Christian worship. Later, it came to encompass the universal community of faith, spanning space and time.

In the English NT, "church" translates the Greek *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which literally means, "called out." In classical Greek, it described civic gatherings of citizens and other types of public assemblies.

In the Greek LXX, *ekklesia* frequently translates the Hebrew *qahal* (קהל). For instance, it designated "the day of the **assembly** (*ekklesia*)" for Israel (Deut. 9:10).

In the Hebrew NT, the word for a "church" or "congregation" is *kehilah* (קהילה), from *qahal* (see above). The same word is used in traditional Judaism to designate a local Jewish community.

Paul is the "apostle to the Gentiles," so it's not surprising that his ministry was geared to the NT *Kehilah*, which welcomed non-Jews with open arms (Acts 15:22–31). He describes the Church as a "mystery"; that is, it's a truth that was obscured in the OT but has been revealed and illuminated in the NT (Col. 1:26–27).

Paul's emphasis in his epistles is on a unified NT "body" of believers, both Jew and Gentile: "that He might reconcile them both [i.e., Jew and Gentile] to God in **one body** through the cross" (Eph. 2:16, emphasis added).

The NT "Church" is also described as "the Bride of Messiah" (John 3:29; Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). The Bridegroom is the Lamb of God, or Jesus. We believe the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (the wedding feast) will take place in Heaven while the Tribulation is running its course on earth (Rev. 19:7–16).

A parallel teaching in the OT is Israel as the "wife" of Jehovah (Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:19–20).

Dispensationalists believe the Church was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost (in either AD 30 or 33), when God breathed on her and gave her His stamp of approval as the NT expression of the People of God, on equal footing with the OT saints (Acts 2:1–4), but not superior to them.

Note the distinction. What's happening here is not "replacement." Rather, it's more a matter of "inclusion"—that is, including the Gentiles, alongside Israel, in God's plans. This is why supersessionists like the term "inclusion." However, their definition of "inclusion" is different from ours because it *excludes* the Jewish people unless they convert to their brand of Christianity. In some "Christian" circles, Jewish believers aren't allowed to retain their Jewish identity, or practice their culture, and still be included in the fold.¹¹

"Well," you may say, "those branches were broken off to make room for me."

Yes, but remember—those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in [Messiah], and you are there because you do believe. So don't think highly of yourself, but fear what could happen.

For if God did not spare the original branches, he may not spare you either (vv. 19–21 [NLT]).

"Neither Jew Nor Gentile"

Sometimes, amillennial writers criticize our view by saying it's wrong to differentiate between Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Messiah (the Church). But they're hard-pressed to explain the "natural" and "wild" branches in Romans 11 because that is precisely the distinction Paul makes. The natural branches are Jews, and the wild ones are Gentiles.

Nonetheless, Covenant writers say the terms "Jew" and "Gentile" are meaningless in the Church, so Jewish people should just convert to Christianity, assimilate into non-Jewish culture, and be done with the whole thing. They should forget about their Jewish heritage and embrace their new "Christian" identity. This is the thought process of some Covenant practitioners.

One of their proof texts is Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor [Gentile], there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in [Messiah] Jesus.*

So, then, there you have it. According to the Covenant viewpoint, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile" in the Church. Now we are "all one."

But hold on a quick second. It also says, "There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female." So then, applying the same hermeneutic consistently in Galatians 3:28, we could also say that once we're united in the Body of Messiah Jesus, *we no longer have a gender identity*. That is, we are "neither male nor female." How exactly does that work, I wonder?

Clearly, what Paul is telling the Galatians in this verse is that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing in the *Kehilah* (the Church). One group isn't "more saved" or "more spiritual" than the other. But we still retain our cultural identities as Jews and Gentiles, just like we retain our gender and our socio-economic status (slave or free).

¹¹ If they are bold enough to retain their cultural identity, Jewish believers are sometimes incorrectly accused of being "Judaizers" whose presence in the Church undermines the Gospel of grace. In Galatia, the "Judaizers" were Jewish believers in Jesus who insisted that non-Jews had to be circumcised (Gal. 5:2–3), follow dietary laws (2:12), and observe Jewish festivals (4:10) before they could be united by covenant with God. Traditional practices like these may be acceptable on a voluntary basis, but the Judaizers crossed over the line by making them a covenant requirement—an error which overlooks the very nature of the unconditional covenant with Abraham. Some of the Judaizers may have been Pharisees who were indoctrinated in both the written and Oral Law (Acts 15:5). The Oral Law introduces notions that are based on rabbinic tradition, rather than on the written, divinely inspired Word of God. Another form of "judaizing" is non-Jews adopting Jewish cultural practices and insisting that other non-Jews follow in lockstep.

Paul, in fact, makes an important point in Galatians 6:16 that *requires* a delineation between Jewish and Gentile believers. He mentions “the Israel of God”—that is, Jewish believers in Jesus. It’s a passing reference, with no explanation, perhaps reflecting his confidence that the Galatians would know who he’s talking about. Looking back from our vantage point 2,000 years later, we believe this “Israel of God” consists of the “natural” branches on the Olive Tree in the second portrait. These Jewish believers have a unique “dual status” as members of both the NT Kehilah and the OT Commonwealth of Israel.

If the Covenant writers are right, though, and “the Israel of God” is the Church, there’s another problem. It would make Galatians 6:16 the *only* instance in the New Testament where “Israel” doesn’t refer to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They’re plugging in a completely different meaning—one that goes against the grain of the 72 other NT passages where the term “Israel” appears. Whatever happened to the concern of our Covenant friends about continuity and consistency?

Can There Be Two “Peoples of God”?

This is a related issue where dispensationalists butt heads with covenantalists. In Covenant theology, there is only one seamless “People of God” from the OT to the NT. As we noted earlier, they say that “Israel” and the “Church” are essentially the same entity—one covenant-related “People of God” spanning the gamut of salvation history. They regard this as “continuity” between the OT and the NT.

At the same time, they allege that we advocate for two separate “Peoples of God,” each with its own mission and destiny. This, they say, disrupts the continuity of Paul’s argument.

On their supersessionist timeline, Israel was the People of God in the OT era. Then, when the Jewish authorities rejected Jesus’ Messianic claims during Passover week in AD 30, God responded by setting them aside as His People. That’s when they say He turned to the Gentiles and made the Church “New Israel”—the People of God in the NT era.

They want us to believe that this is how the Church has inherited Israel’s former place in God’s eternal plan. The promises and assurances that once belonged to the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, now belong to the predominantly Gentile Church.

Interestingly, though, they overlook the curses God pronounced on Israel. Our supersessionist friends are perfectly content to leave the curses with ethnic Israel!

To them, it’s an either/or proposition. The “People of God” must be either Israel or the Church. It cannot be both.

We reject this approach. Both Israel and the Church retain their individual identities and functions at various stages of God’s plan. At no point are they at odds, and one does not replace the other. Darrell Bock explains, “The Church is not a replacement of Israel but a participant in the inaugurated phase of the Kingdom. . . . The plan of God is not twofold but one unified movement toward the reign of Christ over all.”¹²

Bock further states, “There is one plan of God, not two. The distinction between Israel and the Church does not necessitate two peoples of God. Rather, it means that the one People of God exhibits diversity within unity. . . . The Church and Israel are distinct, but they are part of one people of God who share in the promises of the New Covenant.”¹³

God’s Mathematics

This is not the only instance where God’s mathematics transcends human calculations. A similar situation often arises in our conversations with Jewish traditionalists about the Tri-unity (the “Trinity”). The rabbis say it’s a clear-cut “either/or” proposition: Either God is One or He is Three. He can’t be both.

Yet we know that’s not true. God’s Oneness is compound, not simple. The Hebrew word *echad* illustrates this: when the spies returned from Canaan, they carried a single cluster (*echad*) of grapes—one cluster composed of many grapes (Num. 13:23). This is significant because that same Hebrew word (*echad*) is used in Deuteronomy 6:4 to describe the Unity of God. A compound Unity most certainly allows for God’s threefold nature.

If you want yet another example of divine mathematics, try explaining how Jesus fed thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish (Matt. 14:17–21)! When dinner was finished, the disciples went around cleaning up and collected twelve baskets of leftovers—all from five loaves and two fish! You see, some things are simply beyond human calculation, especially when God intervenes.

Once again, the Olive Tree speaks. Paul uses the tree analogy to show that there is only one “People of God,” but it exists as two distinct entities (Israel and the Church). God’s People are united through faith in the Messiah, not through ethnicity. Gentiles are grafted by faith into the Olive Tree that represents the Jewish people, *Am Yisra’el*.

Nonetheless, some of our critics continue to claim that the teaching of two “Peoples of God” is the main distinctive of Dispensationalism. They say this defines our movement. Some of these preachers, surprisingly, claim to be former dispensationalists. They should know better.

What many of us believe today is that there are two complementary entities (Israel and the Church) who function in unity as “the People of God.”

Historically, Dispensationalism, like other systems of theology, has grown and developed as a movement. When weaknesses have been detected, they have been corrected or adjusted.¹⁴

It’s true that some early dispensationalists taught that there are two distinct “Peoples of God,” each with its own calling and destiny. Some even suggested that there were two plans of salvation—one for the OT dispensation (Law) and another for the NT dispensation (grace). Others said there have been two “New Covenants”—again, one for Israel and another for the Church.

However, it has been a long time since these ideas enjoyed any appreciable support in our movement. So, this professor, whom we assume means well, is attacking a viewpoint that dates from nearly a century ago, and he makes it sound like it’s a problem today.

¹³ Ibid.

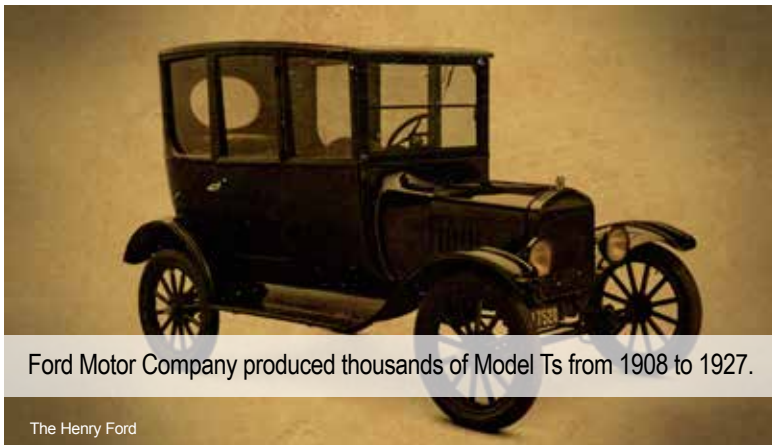
¹⁴ Much of the material in this section has been adapted from Michael Vlach’s book *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths: Revised and Updated* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2017), 20 (Kindle Edition).

¹² Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1992). See Chapter 1: “Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism.”

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH: VARIOUS VIEWS

Theological System	When Did the Church Begin?	Church's Relationship to Israel	Church's Participation in Israel's Promises	Future for Ethnic Israel as a Nation	Proponent(s)
Messianic Judaism	The Church was born at Pentecost (Acts 2), but as the continuation of Israel's faithful remnant.	The Church (Kehillah) is the remnant of Israel, now including Gentiles; Israel retains its national identity.	Yes—Gentiles are grafted in; Jewish believers remain part of Israel and inherit promises through Messiah.	Yes—National Israel will recognize Yeshua as Messiah at the end of the age and enter the Kingdom.	David H. Stern (editor of <i>The Complete Jewish Study Bible</i>), Arnold Fruchtenbaum
Classical Dispensationalism	The Church was born at Pentecost (Acts 2).	The Church and Israel are separate in origin, destiny, and purpose; the Church is a "parenthesis" in Israel's story.	The Church does not inherit or share in any of Israel's national promises, including the New Covenant.	Yes—National Israel will recognize Yeshua as Messiah at the end of the age and enter the Kingdom.	John Nelson Darby, Lewis Sperry Chafer, C.I. Scofield, Clarence Larkin
Revised Dispensationalism	The Church was born at Pentecost (Acts 2).	Israel and the Church are distinct; they share in mutual blessings, but not in the ultimate fulfillments.	The Church "partakes" in Israel's covenant blessings, but not in their ultimate fulfillment.	Yes—National Israel will recognize Yeshua as Messiah at the end of the age and enter the Kingdom.	Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord
Progressive Dispensationalism	The Church began at Pentecost (Acts 2) with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, marking a new phase in God's redemptive program—the formation of the Body of Christ, distinct from Israel yet integrally related to God's overall kingdom plan.	The Church is distinct from Israel but shares in the inaugurated (already/not yet) phase of the Kingdom and participates in God's unified, unfolding redemptive plan, which will culminate in the full restoration of Israel.	Bock writes, "The Church shares in the inaugurated fulfillment of the New Covenant, which was promised to Israel, but this does not nullify the future fulfillment of these promises with Israel as a nation."	Yes—At the end of the age, national Israel will recognize the returning Jesus as Messiah and participate, along with the Church, in Kingdom fulfillment.	Craig Blaising, Robert Saucy, Darrell Bock
Covenant Theology	The Church didn't start at Pentecost. It began in the OT with believers like Abraham, then continued into the NT as a continuation and expansion of the covenant community.	The Church is not a new entity, but rather the continuation of Israel as the covenant "People of God," effectively replacing Israel in that role.	The Church is the NT continuation of OT Israel; therefore, the Church has inherited the OT promises given to Abraham and his descendants via the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants.	No—The Church is the continuation or fulfillment of Israel and therefore CT does not expect a distinct national future for ethnic Israel as a political or territorial entity.	John Calvin, Louis Berkhof, Michael Horton, J.I. Packer
New Covenant Theology	Pentecost is not the birthday of the Church, but it's the day the Church was empowered and expanded with the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2).	Israel was an OT type of the Church; now fulfilled in the New Covenant community (the antitype).	Israel's promises are fulfilled in Christ and given to the Church (Jew and Gentile).	No—There's no distinct future for ethnic Israel beyond individual salvation in Christ; Jews convert and find inclusion as "Christians."	Tom Wells, Peter Gentry, Fred Zaspel, John Reisinger

That would be like me rolling out a Ford Model T and saying, "See? This is what a Ford looks like." It's unquestionably true that the Model T was what a Ford looked like a century ago—but it's not what a Ford looks like today.



Ford Motor Company produced thousands of Model Ts from 1908 to 1927.

The Henry Ford

Similarly, Dispensationalism has evolved since it was first popularized by Darby, Chafer, and Scofield in the early 20th century. Their groundbreaking ideas have been refined and adjusted by their successors in the scholarly community. Historically, all theological systems have undergone changes with the passage of time. Dispensationalism has been no exception.

One Natural Olive Tree, Not Two

Paul's Olive Tree metaphor emphasizes that there is only one "People of God," not two separate groups. This view is true to the metaphor. There is one natural Tree—representing Covenant Israel, rooted in the grace-based Abrahamic Covenant. Both OT Israel and the NT Church draw life from this single Tree. Though Israel and the Church remain distinct, they function together in unity (*echad*) as God's covenant people.

Craig Blaising explains the position of Progressive Dispensationalism:

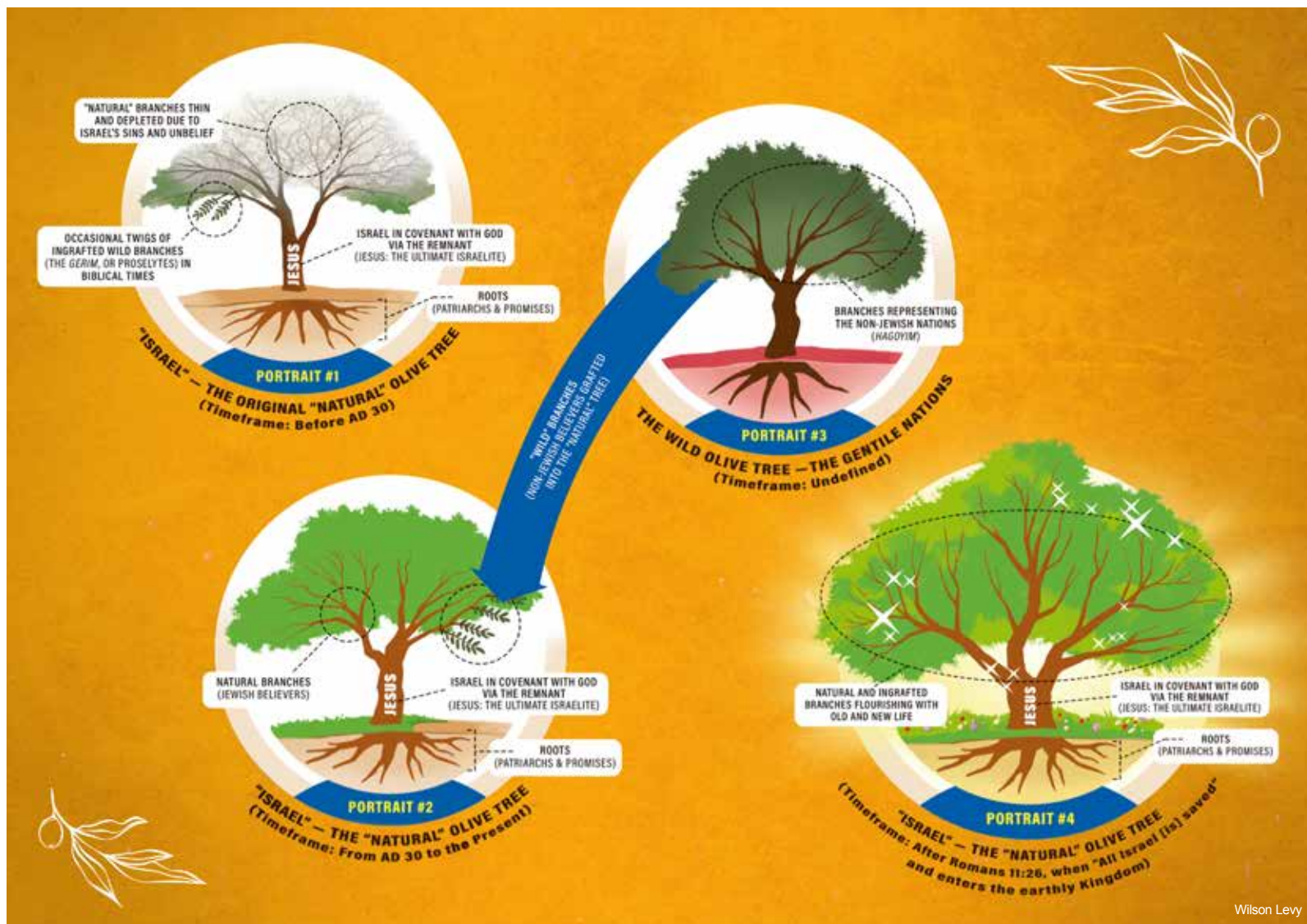
Progressive dispensationalists reject the two-people-of-God theory. We affirm that the Church is not a replacement for Israel but also that Israel is not a completely separate people of God with a separate destiny. . . . There is one people of God, united in Christ, participating in the New Covenant and the blessings of the Kingdom—though distinctions remain in roles and historical identity.¹⁵



What About the "Wild" Tree?

Yes, there is a second tree in Romans 11, but it's the "wild" tree (the Nations), not Israel. This tree contributes non-Jewish believers to the "natural" Tree, or Covenant Israel. The "natural" branches represent the Jewish people, while the "ingrafted" ("wild") branches represent Gentile believers who have come to faith in Messiah. They have been grafted into the "natural" Tree, or Covenant Israel. We can't say that one tree represents Israel, and the other one represents the Church. It doesn't fit Paul's metaphor of the Olive Tree.

¹⁵ Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question" in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, September 2001 (44/3), 435–50.



Wilson Levy

Israel's Hardening and Gentile Inclusion

Paul explains that yes, national Israel (via her leaders) rejected Messiah in the first century. God, in turn, "hardened" them for a time, allowing Gentiles to be grafted in, sharing in the "nourishing root of the Olive Tree" (vv. 17–18). Think of it—Gentile believers in our day (the Church) being spiritually nourished by ancient Covenant Israel!

Gentile believers, then, have been grafted into the Olive Tree of Israel. Spiritually speaking, we have left the "wild" (non-Jewish) tree. We are now attached to the "natural" Tree and are drawing our spiritual nourishment and vitality from that original (Jewish) Tree.

In this way, both Jewish and Gentile believers are united as the People of God through their faith in Jesus the Messiah, irrespective of ethnicity. In fact, it has always been this way—from the time of Abraham until the present day. There has never been another plan of salvation. There is only one New Covenant—which is, in essence, a restatement and expansion of the original Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant is primarily for Israel, but the Church shares in its blessings by being grafted into Covenant (believing) Israel by faith (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 10:15–17).

Even OT people who didn't know the name of Jesus nonetheless placed their faith and trust in Adonai (*HaShem*), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Phil. 2:9–10), and they were saved and secured on that basis. The Redemption that Messiah Jesus accomplished on Calvary was broad enough and powerful enough to include them.

Conclusion

In the end, Paul's Olive Tree metaphor in Romans 11 teaches us that God's covenant purposes for Israel and the Church are not competing, but complementary. There is only one "People of God," rooted in the grace-based Abrahamic Covenant, yet composed of two distinct but unified entities: Israel and the Church. This is what the Olive Tree tells us.

Gentile believers are graciously grafted into the covenant blessings of Israel, not replacing her, but joining her in the promises fulfilled in Messiah. God's faithfulness to Israel remains intact, and His future restoration of the Jewish people is assured. As we await the culmination of His plan, we are called to humility, gratitude, and reverence for the enduring covenant purposes of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



Dr. Gary Hedrick is president and CEO of CJF Ministries in San Antonio, TX.

Bible Questions & Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at garyh@cjfm.org, or mail it to 611 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78215.

You may see your question addressed in a future issue of *Messianic Perspectives*.

QUESTION: *In my English Bible, I've noticed that the name "LORD God" is sometimes used to refer to the Creator. However, there are other instances where Lord is spelled "Lord" (capitalized), and still other times, it's "lord" (lowercase "l"). I find this all very confusing. Could you provide some clarity?*

ANSWER: Yes, we can help you with this. It's just a matter of understanding some basic guidelines followed by the translators. For instance, English Bibles use LORD (all caps) to translate the Hebrew *YHWH* (Jehovah, יהוה, *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*), the covenant name of God in the OT. Its first occurrence is in Genesis 2:4. In the previous chapter, "God" is *Elohim* (אלהים) rather than *YHWH*.

"Lord" (capitalized) or "lord" (not capitalized) in English translates the Hebrew *Adon* (אדון) or *Adonai* (אדני) or (in the NT) the Greek *kyrios* (κύριος).

These terms do double duty. They can refer to either Lord (uppercase "L") or a human being (small "l"), depending on the context. When it's applied to a human, it's a term of dignity and respect—without ascribing deity. We know from the context (that is, how it's used) whether it's supposed to be an uppercase "L" or a lowercase "l." This is just one more reason we often say, "In Bible interpretation, context is king."

In the Bible, the term "lord" (with a lowercase "l") is used to refer to human beings in various contexts. Here are a few examples:

Genesis 18:12—Sarah refers to Abraham as "my lord" when speaking about him in a respectful manner.

1 Peter 3:6—This verse mentions Sarah calling Abraham "lord," again indicating a term of respect within a marital relationship. In British aristocracy, for instance, husbands and their wives have been sometimes betitled "lord" and "lady."

1 Samuel 25:24—Abigail refers to David as "my lord" (Heb., *'ādōnī*) when she seeks to intercede on behalf of her household.¹

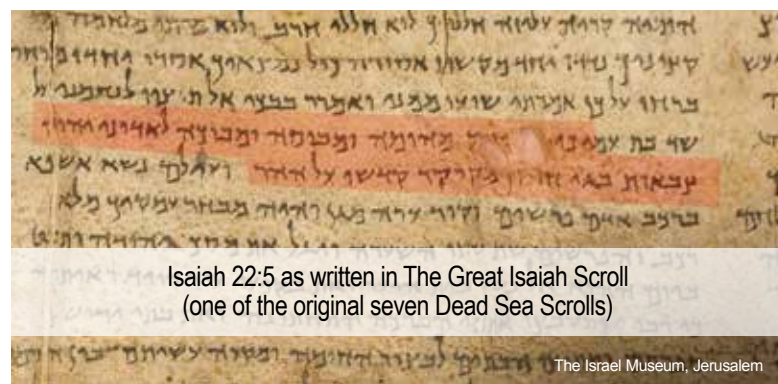
2 Samuel 14:4—A woman from Tekoa refers to King David as "my lord" when she approaches him with a plea.

¹ In some cases, differentiating between "Lord" and "lord" can put us at odds with Jewish translators. An example is in Psalm 110:1—*The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."* Here, the first "Lord" is translated from יהוה (*YHWH*), and the second "Lord" from אדני (*'ādōnī*), referring to David's Lord, which Christians render with a capital "L" because we believe it's a Messianic prophecy pointing to Yeshua of Nazareth. However, Jewish translators render the second *'ādōnī* as "lord" with a lowercase "l" because even though they might agree that David is talking here about the Messiah (who they agree would be descended from David), they don't see the Messiah as divine—hence, he is David's "lord" (lowercase "l").

In the OT, when you see the name "Lord God" or "LORD God," it typically translates the compound Hebrew name "*YHWH Elohim*." You will find an example of this in Genesis 2:4: *This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.*

Now, as if it's not already sufficiently complicated, there's yet another variation in some of our English Bibles (primarily the older KJV and the NKJV). The KJV and NKJV translators rendered the compound Hebrew name *YHWH Adonai* (יהוה אדני) as "Lord GOD" (with "GOD" in all caps). This approach was in deference to the Jewish practice of not pronouncing the Tetragrammaton (יהוה, *YHWH*) aloud when reading the Scriptures, and substituting "אדני" (*Adonai*) for it (which can mean either "Lord" or "lord," depending on the context). To differentiate between "יהוה" (*YHWH*) and "אדני" (*Adonai*) in translation, especially when they appear together, some translators have opted to render "יהוה" as "GOD" (in all caps) and "אדני" as "Lord" (capital "L"). Thus, when combined as "יהוה אדני" (*YHWH Adonai*), it becomes "Lord GOD" ("GOD" in all caps) in English. The NIV, on the other hand, translates *YHWH Adonai* as "Sovereign LORD" or "the LORD Almighty"—which conveys the right idea but deviates from the literal meaning of the Hebrew terms.

Examples of "Lord GOD" are found, among other places, in the Book of Isaiah: *Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand* . . . (40:10; see also 22:5, 12, 14, 15; 25:8; 28:16, 22, KJV and NKJV).



You may be thinking that it would have made things much simpler if the original Hebrew text had been written with capital letters where needed—and you're right! However, it wasn't. Hebrew is an abjad (the linguistic term), meaning it's written with consonants only, with no distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters. Consequently, we get help from the context. So, it's unavoidable that our translations are sometimes driven by our understanding of the text.

Fruit from the Harvest



by Violette Berger



Haredi Discipleship Ministry

Diann Parkas, CJFM representative (New Jersey), is a member of a team that reaches out and ministers to the Haredim (the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community). This year, the team is focused on discipling Haredi individuals who have prayed and received Yeshua (Jesus) as their promised Messiah, and with whom they have connections. It is important for those who are new to faith in Yeshua to be disciplined in their understanding of New Testament Scriptures and how to live as followers of the Messiah. Please pray for the spiritual growth of these new believers and for discernment and strength, especially for those new believers who still live in ultra-Orthodox communities. They will face consequences if and when their faith is revealed. Diann praises God for two new Haredi believers who agreed to participate in an intensive discipleship program this summer—a wonderful and strategic first-time step for the ministry. Diann will be involved and pray that nothing will interfere with this process.

Diann also praises God that several new Haredi believers desire to be baptized. This is a significant step for someone with this background, especially if they are still living in a Haredim community. Diann asks, “Please pray that proper arrangements can be made by the leading of the Holy Spirit so that these baptisms can be accomplished in the exact time and place that God Himself ordains.”

UNLV Outreach

Richard Hill, CJFM representative and pastor of Beth Yeshua Messianic Congregation (Las Vegas), praises the Lord that his campus ministry at the University of Las Vegas (UNLV) led 40 individuals to Jesus during the Spring semester. Although Richard’s wife, Oanh (who is Vietnamese), led many of those to His saving grace, Rich was blessed to have the privilege of leading a young Vietnamese student to the Lord. Rich also had the opportunity to have theological discussions with the Church of Christ Club on campus concerning their doctrinal differences. One of their members has agreed to meet one-on-one with Rich during the summer. Please pray for his salvation.

Rich was blessed that 86 people attended his congregation’s Passover Seder and that two individuals prayed to receive the Lord. The Messianic Passover Seder is an evangelistic outreach to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” to illustrate the foreshadowing of Jesus and to enlighten born-again believers about the Jewish roots of Christianity. Rich writes that financial gifts at the Passover Seder were sent to CJFM’s “Helping Hands Fund” to help Jewish individuals in Israel who have been affected by October 7 and the war in Gaza. If you would like to contribute, visit cjfm.org.

GOD’S Grace

Marcos and Deborah Morales, CJFM representatives (Argentina), write, “Many times in our service to the Lord, He gives us the grace to know His results.” Such was the case with Samantha. “After 17 years, we learned that Samantha had come to faith in Messiah Yeshua.” In 2007, Marcos and Deborah would hold their Shabbat meetings at a downtown hotel. Someone had sent them contact information for Samantha, a Jewish woman. Deborah called Samantha and invited her to their Shabbat meeting, also sharing that she is a Jewish believer in Jesus. This did not seem to deter her, and Samantha attended with her teenage granddaughter. She seemed attentive during the service, which included prayers and praise songs in Hebrew. And, as he usually does, Marcos closed with a sermon oriented toward salvation and a prayerful invitation to receive Yeshua as their personal Savior and Messiah. Samantha had tears in her eyes as she greeted Marcos and Deborah, who gifted her with a Spanish-Hebrew New Testament Bible with a green cover and then left. Shortly afterward, Deborah tried calling Samantha again but was told that she had passed away.

Recently, Deborah was walking their dogs at a dog park near their home and began chatting with a young woman there named Lorrie. During their conversation, Lorrie told her that her mother and aunt live in Eilat in Israel and that she had also lived there for a time. In turn, Deborah told her that she was Jewish and believed in Jesus, to which Lorrie responded that she had once attended a congregation with her grandmother, Samantha, who also, from that day on, began to believe in Jesus as her Savior. Lorrie said that she still has Samantha’s “green” Bible. She was amazed when Deborah told her that she and her husband, Marcos, were the leaders of *Beth Tefilah*, the congregation her grandmother attended for Shabbat. Deborah invited Lorrie to their upcoming Shabbat service, but she only said she would come sometime. Deborah and Lorrie met again while walking their dogs, and this time, it was in April of this year, the season of Passover. When Deborah asked Lorrie with whom she would be celebrating the Passover Seder, Lorrie replied that she doesn’t celebrate any “chagim” (holidays). So Deborah offered Lorrie some gefilte fish she had prepared and brought it and chocolate matzah to Lorrie’s home, along with a bag filled with CJFM calendars (gifts for Lorrie’s family, as she was planning a trip to Eilat soon) and also some Hebrew-Spanish evangelistic literature. Lorrie was moved to tears and said it reminded her of her family in Israel and her bubbe (grandmother) Samantha. Marcos and Deborah ask: “Please pray for Lorrie, her family in Eilat, and her cousins who are serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), that they may all come to faith in our beloved Messiah Yeshua, who gives us true freedom.”

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